# A Complicated Compassion:

# The Paradox of Sympathy in Mary Shelley's Fiction

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I, Shoshannah Bryn Jones Square, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

This study explores the formation and evolution of Mary Shelley's philosophy of sympathy, one which she continued to revise and refine throughout her lifetime. Her novels, journals, and letters reveal a persistent desire to understand what she perceived to be a deeply fraught emotion, a moral sentiment grounded in paradox. Engaging with the Moral Sense philosophy of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), David Hume (1711-1776), and Adam Smith (1723-1790), Shelley insists that sympathy lies at the very heart of our ethical being, encouraging recognition of and respect for the other. Yet, as she demonstrates in her fiction—from *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) to *Falkner* (1837)—when felt to excess, sympathy can mutate into an unnatural and harmful emotion capable of provoking antisocial, immoral, incestuous, and even suicidal behaviour. More than this, Shelley's investigation of sympathy exposes its serious limitations. Predicated on a similarity to self, sympathy, Shelley suggests, often fails when confronted with difference. Finally, through multiple perspectives, Shelley illustrates the complex and contradictory motivations behind sympathy, showing that it can arise from genuine benevolence, self-interest, or a combination of the two, an entangling of intentions that serves to further complicate this moral sentiment. Ultimately, Shelley's philosophy of sympathy acknowledges its shortcomings and potential dangers but nonetheless celebrates sympathy as a social virtue, as the locus of our moral selves.

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compassion and care have served as a constant inspiration and a perpetual support, and whose existence gave meaning to the writing of this thesis.

## Dedication

For my parents, Penny Jones Square and David Square, with the deepest love and gratitude

"Sympathy, the charm of life"

—Mary Shelley, *Lodore*

> The spirit of elder days found a dwelling here, and we delighted to trace its footsteps. If these feelings had not found an imaginary gratification, the appearance of the city had yet in itself sufficient beauty to obtain our admiration. The colleges are ancient and picturesque; the streets are almost magnificent; and the lovely Isis, which flows beside it through meadows of exquisite verdure, is spread forth into a placid expanse of waters, which reflects its majestic assemblage of towers, and spires, and domes, embosomed among aged trees.
>
> —Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

## Introduction:

## "[T]he only pleasure worth having in the world":

## The Centrality of Sympathy in Mary Shelley's Fiction[1]

> It is in the personal relationship, from me to the other, that the ethical 'event,' charity and mercy, generosity and obedience, lead beyond or rise above being.
>
> —Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other"[2]
>
> Love, or Benevolence, is the Foundation of all apprehended Excellence in social Virtues.
>
> —William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*[3]

In a letter to Jane Williams Hogg on June 5, 1828, Mary Shelley writes that "[s]ociety is nothing as an end, but as a means it is much—the means of allowing one to know the existence of human beings with whom one can sympathize" (*Selected Letters* 199). And on January 26, 1837, she admits to Edward John Trelawny that she "know[s] but one pleasure in the world—sympathy with another—or others"; the "the society of agreable [*sic*] . . . congenial-minded beings," she writes, "is the only pleasure worth having in the world" (301). In his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), the English philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), expresses the same sentiment, insisting that "in the main sum of happiness, there is scarce a single article but what derives itself from social love and depends immediately on the natural and kind

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[1] See Mary Shelley, *The Selected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 301.
[2] See Emmanuel Levinas, "Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other," *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 1998) 174.
[3] See William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. K. Codell Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 129.

affections" (205). "So insinuating are [the] pleasures of sympathy," he writes, "and so widely diffused through our whole lives, that there is hardly such a thing as satisfaction or contentment of which they make not an essential part" (204).[4] For Shelley, as for Shaftesbury, sympathy is at once moral and pleasurable: it is an act of recognition whereby we acknowledge "the existence" of others (as the narrator writes in Shelley's *Valperga* (1823), "to hope and fear for oneself alone often narrows the heart and understanding"—it is only when "we are animated by . . . feelings in unison with a multitude" that we learn to think outside ourselves), and it is an act of belonging whereby we connect with others, and which, according to Shelley, "is the only pleasure worth having in the world" (Shelley, *V* 129).[5] This assertion of the primacy and necessity of sympathy to both self and society pervades Shelley's personal writings and is the presiding theme of her fiction.

As this study will show, Shelley's understanding of sympathy was partially shaped by the Moral Sense philosophy of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), David Hume (1711-1776), and Adam Smith (1723-1790), whose ideas resonated with many of the imaginative writers of the Romantic era. Shelley's familiarity with the works of these eighteenth-century thinkers can be established when we consider what a prolific reader she was as well as her association with other writers of the period who were also engaging with Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith's philosophy. Most notably, Shelley read all of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-1797) writings, which were influenced by Smith's philosophical ideas concerning sympathy.[6] As Gary Kelly observes, Smith's *Theory of Moral*

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[4] Notably, according to M.A. Goldberg, Thomas Paine makes a similar claim about "the relationship between happiness and social virtues in *The Rights of Man*." According to Paine, nature "'has implanted in [man] a system of social affections, which, though not necessary to his existence, are essential to his happiness. There is no period in life when this love of society ceases to act. It begins and ends with our being.'" See Goldberg, "Moral and Myth in Mrs. Shelley's 'Frankenstein,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 8.1 (1959): 34.

[5] In his discussion of Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Goldberg comments that, in this novel, Shelley echoes the belief, as espoused by the Moral Sense philosophers and later by her father William Godwin, that "virtue is essentially social." See "Moral and Myth," 34, 34-5.

[6] Shelley read Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), *Letters from Norway* (1796), and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798) and her father William Godwin's edited *Posthumous Works of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) in 1814; she read Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of*

*Sentiments* (1759) provided Wollstonecraft "with a philosophy of moral self-consciousness, ethical conduct, [and] social sympathy" ("Introduction" xiii). Indeed, Wollstonecraft cites Smith several times in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and her novella, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), embraces Smith's theory that sympathy is the fundamental building block of society, an idea Shelley herself would later adopt and promulgate in her fiction.[7]

Moreover, in her journals, Shelley records that she read Hume's works first hand. In her reading list for 1817, she includes the first volume of Hume's *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1753-56), which contains his *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (1753-54), and in her reading list for 1818, she includes Hume's *Four Dissertations* (1757) (1: 101, 102). As will be discussed below, Shelley was also influenced by Hume's philosophical position on suicide, a subject her father William Godwin (1756-1836) also broaches in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793), which Shelley read in 1814.[8] Although Shelley does not mention having read the Moral Sense philosophy of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in her journals or letters, she would have been exposed to their ideas (and those of Hume and Smith) through her interactions with her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1792-1822) group of avant-garde writers, artists, editors, and publishers as well as with the radical publisher Joseph Johnson's famous literary circle, through which the popular theories and ideas of the time were disseminated and debated. Further, literary journals were becoming increasingly popular in this period, and as Jane

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*Woman* (1792) in 1816. See *Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814-1844*, Vol. 1: 1814-1822, eds. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 15, 33, 34, 38-9, 55, 85, 149.

[7] In one instance, Wollstonecraft quotes Smith directly: "'The charm of life,' says a grave philosophical reasoner, 'is sympathy; nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast,'" a view Wollstonecraft and Shelley advance in their writings. Wollstonecraft goes on to reference Smith on four other occasions in *Rights of Woman*. See "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, In a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke: Occasioned by His reflections on the Revolution in France and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, eds. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Broadview Press, 1997) 214.

[8] In her journal entry of October 19, 1814, Shelley writes that after completing *Political Justice*, she began Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), which had a profound influence on her writing of *Frankenstein* and *Falkner* (1837). See *Journals*, 37.

Stabler observes, "[e]ighteenth-century novels and essays" in such journals as the *Spectator* and *Rambler*, both of which Shelley read, "transmitted the discussions of Shaftesbury, Hume, and Hutcheson about social relationships through to a wider audience" (29).[9] As stated above, these debates, so broadly circulated, had a profound influence on other imaginative writers of the Romantic era such as William Wordsworth (1770-1830), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and P.B. Shelley, all of whose works Shelley read throughout her lifetime.[10] As R.S. White notes, although Romantic-era writers may not have been following "with close interest the philosophical niceties of social thinkers like Hutcheson and Smith," they "were aware of the broader psychological and political models" and "were reflecting them more or less consciously in their poems and novels" (49). It is "very clear," White contends, "that philosophy and certain kinds of novels from 1750 to 1800 ran alongside each other and worked mutually from a similar theory or model of social justice" (100). Such is the case for Shelley's novels, which perceptibly draw on Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith's moral theory of sympathy. In fact, as this study will illustrate, Shelley makes her novels the formal embodiments of her own theoretical understanding of sympathy.

## The Philosophical Context: Moral Sense Philosophy and Sympathy

It is therefore necessary to place Shelley's novels within the philosophical context provided by these Enlightenment thinkers. In her conviction that sympathy engenders ethical behaviour and elicits pleasure, Shelley's views closely align with those of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. These thinkers, countering Thomas Hobbes' belief, espoused in his *Leviathan* (1651), that we are inherently self-interested, argue that we are fundamentally benevolent and possess innate "disinterested Affections," which, they

[9] In her journal entry on Monday, December 4, 1817, Shelley notes that she "read several papers in the Spectator," and her reading list for 1817 includes *The Rambler*. See *Journals*, 1: 154, 198.
[10] According to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and P.B. Shelley, the poet can contribute to the betterment of humanity by cultivating sympathy through the creative imagination.

maintain, are integral to social relations (Hutcheson, *Essay* xii). In *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury asserts that our "natural affections" are "inwardly joined to us and implanted in our natures" and that these "natural affections," our inborn concern for the wellbeing of others, foster social harmony and so "lead to the good of the public" (196). Hutcheson similarly argues that the only explanation for "disinterested acts" of compassion, actions from which we do not receive self-benefit or reward, is our natural benevolence, our inherent desire for the good of others (*Essay* viii). According to Hutcheson, we possess an intrinsic "Moral Sense" through which "we perceive Virtue or Vice in ourselves, or others" as well as "a Publick Sense" (synonymous with sympathy), which he describes as "our Determination to be pleased with the Happiness of others, and to be uneasy at their Misery" (5). "This Sympathy with others," Hutcheson writes, "is the Effect of the Constitution of our Nature, and not brought upon ourselves by any Choice, with view to any Selfish Advantage" (14). And it is this inbuilt sympathy or "Publick Sense," Hutcheson maintains, that fosters social unity and order.

Hume, too, suggests that sympathy is inherent. For Hume, as for Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, our innate sympathy is crucial to social cohesion. "Sympathy," he asserts, "is a very powerful principle in human nature"; it is "that principle, which takes us . . . far out of ourselves" and allows us to experience another's happiness or sorrow (Norton, ed., *THN* 369, 370). "No quality in human nature," Hume writes, "is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than [this] propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own" (Selby-Bigge, ed., *THN* 316). According to Hume, this inborn ability to physically feel with another is the basis of morality, for it makes it possible for us to discern between right and wrong actions and so upholds the social good. Indeed, as Hume argues in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751):

> no qualities are more entitled to the general good-will and approbation of mankind, than beneficence and humanity, friendship and gratitude, natural affection and public spirit, or whatever proceeds from a tender sympathy with others, and a generous concern for our kind and species. (9)

Significantly, Hume maintains that these qualities "seem to *transfuse* themselves . . . into each beholder, and to call forth, in their own behalf, the same favorable and affectionate sentiments, which they exert on all around," anticipating Smith's claim that "[t]he passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be *transfused* from one man to another, instantaneously" (Hume, *Morals* 9; Smith, *TMS* 9, 5, my emphases). Hume, like Smith, is here describing a kind of emotional contagion.[11] As he writes in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), "[t]he passions are so *contagious*, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts" (Selby-Bigge, ed. 605, my emphasis). Hume continues to use the language of contagion when he writes that "[w]here friendship appears in very signal instances, my heart *catches* the same passion, and is warm'd by those warm sentiments, that display themselves before me" (605, my emphasis). Referring to sympathy as "the communication of passions," Hume again compares it to a form of emotional contagion: "So close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls," he claims, "that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree" (592). As he continues, "tho', on many occasions, my sympathy with him goes not so far as entirely to change my sentiment, and way of thinking; yet it seldom is so weak as not to disturb the easy

[11] Recent research on empathy in the field of neuroscience is investigating the process and effects of emotional contagion which, it is argued, allows people to "'feel themselves into' the emotional lives of others." As Elaine Hatfield, et al. note, "primitive emotional contagion" is described as "'the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally.'" See "Emotional Contagion and Empathy," *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, eds. Jean Decety and William Ickes (Cambridge, M: The MIT Press, 2011) 26, 19. For a related discussion, see Anna Gibbs' "After Affect," in which she looks at "corporeally based forms of imitation." See "After Affect: Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication," *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 186.

course of my thought, and give an authority to that opinion, which his recommended to me by his assent and approbation" (592). According to Mary Fairclough, sympathy for Hume "is not a passion, a feeling or an opinion in its own right, but rather, as the language of 'contagion' suggests, a medium for the transmission of energies, ideas and emotions within a collective" (3). Nancy Yousef argues something similar, noting that Hume "imagines intersubjective accessibility as a harmonious transmission of feeling—'all affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature'" (7). As Hume writes in his *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, which, as stated above, Shelley read in 1817, it is not "possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manner" (248). "The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures," he continues, "and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions" (248). Although Hume recognized that the communicable nature of sympathy could be harmful as well as beneficial, he finally insists, as Fairclough points out, "that though it has potentially coercive effects, sympathy is essentially an ethical force which proves a productive object of study in the exploration of the essential qualities of human nature" (2). As will be discussed below, Shelley uses her novels to explore the virtues and perils, both somatic and social, of emotional contagion.

Hume further complicates his conception of sympathy, much as Shelley does, by acknowledging that our "Self-Love,"[12] to use a phrase of Hutcheson's, may hinder our

[12] As we will see, Shelley uses this exact phrase twice in *Lodore*. In the first instance, the narrator writes that "self-love magnifies, and passion obscures, the glass through which we look upon others and ourselves." In the other instance, the wife of Lodore condemns him for his egoism: "You alone must reign, be feared, be thought of; all others are to be sacrificed, living victims, at the shrine of your self-love." See *L*, 123, 131. Godwin also uses this phrase in his *Enquiry*, in which he writes that "[t]he question of self-love and benevolence, is a question relative to the feelings and ideas by which we ought to be governed, on our intercourse with our fellow-men, or, in other words, in our moral conduct." See *Enquiry*, 180.

capacity to extend our sympathy to others (*Essay* vi).[13] Sympathy, according to Hume, "is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us, much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous" (*Morals* 45). As will be discussed in Chapter One in relation to *Frankenstein*, Hume (as well as Smith) maintains that, more often than not, sympathy is contingent upon a similarity to self. As he writes, "[t]he sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely" (Selby-Bigge, ed., *THN* 318). In Yousef's words, sympathy "entails a symmetrical relationship between one and another"; it "involve[s] the discovery of similitude" (3).[14] Significantly, as we will see in *Frankenstein*, Shelley herself exposes the limitations and attendant dangers that our natural tendency to sympathize more readily with those similar to ourselves poses (the crux of the novel being humanity's failure to sympathize with the "monstrous" creature).

Importantly, like Hume, Smith also argues that sympathy is often grounded in resemblance. In *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1763), for example, he suggests that "[t]hose persons most excite our compassion and are most apt to affect our sympathy who most resemble ourselves, and the greater the difference the less we are affected by them" (184). And in *Moral Sentiments* he contends that "[a]fter himself, the members of his own family . . . are naturally the objects of [an individual's] warmest affection" (220). "He is more habituated to sympathize with them," Smith continues, "and his sympathy with them is more

[13] Hutcheson argues that "[t]here are in Men Desires of the Happiness of others, when they do not conceive this Happiness as the Means of obtaining any sort of Happiness to themselves." According to him, "we could not from Self-Love desire the Happiness of others, but as conceiving it the Means of our own." See *An essay on the nature and conduct of the passions and affections. With illustrations on the moral sense. By Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Glascow; and Author of the Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (London, 1730) 20.

[14] According to Yousef, who chooses to use the word "intimacy" rather than "sympathy," "[t]he irresistible teleology associated with sympathy, which seems inevitably to lead to querulous demands for intersubjective symmetry—be it the perception of similarity, the impression of equality, or the expectation of reciprocity—inevitably passes over or discounts moments and modes of relational experience that fall short of the aim but are not, thereby, failures or breakdowns of relationship—or even, perhaps, ethical or epistemic failures." See *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013) 3.

precise and determinate than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer . . . to what he feels for himself" (220). According to Smith, however, the limits our natural desire for resemblance impose on our ability to sympathize can be mitigated through reading, for it exercises the imagination and so broadens our sympathies. As will be shown in the following chapter, this is precisely the argument Shelley makes in *Frankenstein*.[15]

However, for both Hume and Smith, sympathy remains an abiding force for the social good. Indeed, Hume insists that "a tendency to public good, and to the promoting of peace, harmony, and order in society, does always, by affecting the benevolent principles of our frame, engage us on the side of the social virtues" (*Morals* 45). "If we consider the principles" of human nature, writes Hume, "we must, *a priori*, conclude it impossible for such a creature as man to be totally indifferent to the well or ill-being of his fellow-creatures" (45). For both Shelley and Hume, then, although susceptible to selfish behaviour, we are ultimately governed by a natural regard for others, which is the key to social harmony. Similarly, for Smith, as he argues in *Moral Sentiments*, "[h]ow selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it" (3). Importantly, according to Smith, sympathy is elicited via the imagination: "it is by the imagination only," Smith argues, "that we can form any conception of" another's "sensations" (3). "By the imagination," he continues, "we place ourselves in [another's] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person" (3). As Jeanne M. Britton comments, according to Smith, "the imagination allows the sympathizer to fuse with the sufferer's body" (4-5). Smith is careful to note, however, that we do not feel *exactly*

[15] Julie Ann Carlson similarly argues that *Frankenstein* explores "the extent to which reading can humanize a creature." See *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007) 98.

what the other person feels but experience only what we ourselves would feel in the same situation: "It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of [the other], which our imaginations copy" (Smith, *TMS* 3).[16] Thus, while the "[s]ensations of each individual remain distinct," Britton writes, the "body of one delves, albeit figuratively, into that of the other" (5). And it is this capacity to feel with and for the other that fosters social relations.

For these eighteenth-century thinkers, then, as for Shelley, sympathy is the "founding principle of all human morality and social existence" (Csengei, *Sympathy* 51). As Yousef writes, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith "confidently adduce sympathy as the self-evident ground of social virtues, and the affective root of 'fellow feeling,' 'benevolence,' 'humanity'" (5). Yet, Shelley also saw sympathy as deeply complex, poised precariously as it is between self-regard and regard for others, between the conflicting motivations of selflessness and self-interest. Moreover, she was also aware of the unstable boundary between self and other, and, through her fiction, she asks what types of individuals are most vulnerable to losing themselves in their sympathetic encounters and how they might learn to preserve their selfhood in their sympathetic relationships. Unlike her contemporaries, then, Shelley did not wholly embrace the notion that sympathy was a purely positive, prosocial emotion but rather focused her attention on exploring its limitations, failings, contradictions, and dangers. For Shelley, sympathy was paradoxical at heart. Indeed, while she agreed that sympathy could benefit society by encouraging altruistic behaviour, which in turn would foster social cohesion, she also recognized that it could have adverse effects, leading to isolation, solipsism, incest, and even suicide.

[16] Britton similarly observes that Smith's "sympathizer never quite feels the same sensations of the sufferer: the sympathizer feels those sensations he would feel if he were placed in the situation of the sufferer, not the sensations that the sufferer actually feels. In making this distinction, and in prioritizing the role of the imagination in experiences of sympathy, the senses come to mark the distance between the sympathizer and the sufferer, the limit of sympathy's potential identification." See "Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.1 (2009): 4.

When experienced to an extreme degree, for example, sympathy, in Shelley's view, can mutate into an unnatural and dangerous emotion, having negative repercussions for sympathizer and sympathized alike. In *Matilda* (written in 1819, published in 1959), the eponymous heroine's father's sympathy for her is so extreme that it becomes incestuous, and this incestuous love brings about both his own and Matilda's death.[17] In her recognition of the dangers of excessive sympathy, Shelley again aligns with Shaftesbury, for according to him, "natural affections," his term for sympathy, "may, in particular cases, be excessive and in an unnatural degree, as when pity is so overcoming as to destroy its own end and prevent the succour and relief required or as when love to the offspring proves such a fondness as destroys the parent and consequently the offspring itself" (196). As will be shown, this is precisely the case in Shelley's *Matilda*, *Lodore* (1835), and *Falkner* (1837)—in each, both father and daughter are "destroyed" by the father's immoderate "natural affections," by his pathological sympathy.

Moreover, Shelley suggests that when sympathy becomes too extreme, it also becomes obsessive and exclusive and so affects the public good, for in fixating one's sympathy on a single person, one neglects the rest of society. Shaftesbury makes the same argument:

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[17] Importantly, I equate love and sympathy in this study as this is what Shelley herself does in her personal and fictional writings. Shelley's definition of love is in fact synonymous with that of sympathy. For Shelley, as described in *Falkner*, for instance, love is a harmony or conformity of emotion and intellect, a unity of hearts and minds, a "ming[ling] [of] thought and sensation." See "Falkner: A Novel," *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1996) 65. Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "sympathy" as a "conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament," a "harmony of disposition." See "Sympathy, n," *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): def. 3a. Hence, throughout this study, I will be using the terms "love" and "sympathy" interchangeably. Adela Pinch does something similar in *Strange Fits of Passion* (2005), in which she notes that her "practice" of treating "'passion,' 'emotion,' and 'feeling'" as nearly synonymous "reflects the fluidity these terms had" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Pinch writes, "for most writers, the many names for emotion travel as freely as emotions themselves" See *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 16.

> notwithstanding it may seem harsh to call that *unnatural* and vicious which is only an *extreme* of some natural and kind affection, yet it is most certain that, wherever any single good affection of this sort is over-great, it must be injurious to the rest and detract in some measure from their force and natural operation. For a creature possessed with such an *immoderate degree of passion* must of necessity allow too much to that one and too little to others of the same character and equally natural and useful as to their end. And this must necessarily be the occasion of partiality and injustice while only one duty or natural part is earnestly followed and other parts or duties neglected. (196, my emphases)

For both Shelley and Shaftesbury, then, sympathy is not always a virtue; as they suggest, when experienced to excess, it can result in asocial rather than prosocial behaviour.

Indeed, such extreme sympathy can have other adverse effects as well. As Shelley illustrates in her fiction, unfettered compassion can pose a profound threat to one's selfhood. If the sympathizer has not cultivated an independent identity, her very selfhood may be subsumed by the person on whom she confers her sympathy, which is the case for Matilda, Perdita in *The Last Man* (1826), and Ethel in *Lodore*. More troubling still, if the object of one's sympathy is lost, or if one's sympathy is not reciprocated, the desire to live may cease—when Perdita learns of her husband Raymond's betrayal, for example, she laments, "I have lost you, myself, my life" (Shelley, *LM* 124). In the face of such a loss or absence of sympathy, Shelley cautions, individuals may turn to suicide (Matilda, I will argue, commits active euthanasia after her father kills himself; Perdita drowns herself at sea after her husband Raymond dies; and Ethel comes close to death after her father dies in a duel). As Margaret Higonnet writes in her discussion of representations of female suicide in nineteenth-century literature, "the suicidal solution is linked to dissolution of the self. . . . The abandoned woman drowns, as it were, in her own emotions" ("Suicide" 106). "The heroine drifts into

destruction," Higonnet continues, "often literally carried by water [as in Perdita's case] that reflects the fluidity of her own identity" (114). Importantly, then, Shelley suggests that women are particularly vulnerable to sympathetic excess and its often fatal effects. According to her, such pathological sympathy would never arise in the first place if women were given the opportunity to develop independent identities—to define themselves outside the traditional classifications of daughter, wife, and mother.[18] If they were given this opportunity, a regard for the self would naturally arise, which itself would guard against emotional excess and the tendency to lose oneself in the other. Shaftesbury agrees, arguing that "self-passion" is necessary "to restrain" an individual "within due bounds" (197). Notably, the term "self-forgetfulness," which Shelley uses in reference to Ethel to describe the danger her extreme sympathy poses to her selfhood, is reminiscent of Shaftesbury's similar phrase "self-neglectful[ness]," which he considers not only dangerous but "vicious" (Shelley, *L* 376; Shaftesbury 197). As he writes:

> if a creature be self-neglectful and insensible of danger or if he want such a degree of passion in any kind as is useful to preserve, sustain or defend himself, this must certainly be esteemed vicious in regard of the design and end of nature. She herself discovers this in her known method and stated rule of operation. It is certain that her provisionary care and concern for the whole animal must at least be equal to her concern for a single part or member. . . . To be wanting . . . in those principal affections which respect the good of the whole constitution must be a vice and imperfection as great surely in the principal part, the soul or temper, as it is in any of those inferior and subordinate parts to want the self-preserving affections which are proper to them. (197)

[18] As Higonnet writes, "[b]ecause of their identity in gender with their mothers or because of social training, women have always tended to perceive themselves through their relationships to family rather than as isolated individuals." See "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century," *Poetics Today*, 6.1-2 (1995): 108.

According to Shaftesbury, concern for oneself is "necessary and essential to goodness" (197). As he explains, although "no creature can be called good or virtuous merely for possessing" what he calls "self affections" (akin to what Hutcheson calls "Self Love"), "yet, since it is impossible that the public good or good of the system can be preserved without them, it follows that a creature really wanting them is in reality wanting in some degree of goodness . . . and may thus be esteemed vicious and defective" (197). Shelley does not go as far as to say that a neglect of self for others is "vicious," but she does suggest that it is a defect, for such "self-forgetfulness" can make one vulnerable and may lead to self-destruction (as she demonstrates throughout her fiction).

**Sympathy and Suicide**

Suicide is thus a pivotal and recurrent theme in Shelley's novels, and one which, as shown above, she connects to sympathy. When an individual is deprived of sympathy, as in *Frankenstein*, the isolation that results breeds melancholy, which in turn gives rise to suicidal thoughts. In contrast, when an individual feels too much sympathy, as in *Matilda*, *The Last Man*, *Lodore*, and *Falkner*, the obsession is equally isolating, and when the sympathy is not returned, or when the object of that sympathy dies, the drive to suicide often follows. Notably, in her exploration of the link between sympathy and suicide, Shelley engages with late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates surrounding the suicide question in England. Although "suicide remained both sin and crime throughout the eighteenth century," as Janet Todd elucidates, "attitudes were modified long before," with secular approaches to the subject eventually "gaining strength" ("Introduction" xxiii). Hume, for example, a kind of eighteenth-century spokesperson for suicide rights, believed suicide to be "a native liberty" (*On Suicide* 5).[19] In his *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul* (1783), Hume

[19] Notably, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whom Shelley read (and whom Frankenstein's creature reads), writes in his autobiography that "suicide is an event of human nature, which, whatever may be said and done with respect to it, demands the sympathy of every man, and in every epoch must be discussed anew." See *The*

"examin[es] all the common arguments against Suicide" in order to show that it is free of "every imputation of guilt or blame" (5). "Has not every one," asks Hume, "the free disposal of his own life?" (5).[20] On the other side of the debate, the psychologist William Rowley, in his "Treatise on Female, Nervous, [and] Hysterical . . . Diseases" (1788), argues that suicide is a violation of "those obligations [one] owes to [one's] country, family, or friends," implying that the would-be suicide should live on for the sake of others (335). Godwin lies somewhere in the middle. Although sympathetic to Hume's position on suicide—he admits in *Political Justice* that there are situations in which suicide can be virtuous—Godwin insists that the prospect of future happiness and social utility should restrain the would-be suicide. In each of her novels, Shelley responds to these philosophical arguments concerning suicide and incorporates them into her discussion of sympathy.[21]

Shelley's fiction therefore reveals a sustained engagement with sympathy's failings as much as with its moral, social, and political strengths. As this study will show, Shelley was cognizant of sympathy's improving influence, of its potential to encourage benevolent behaviour and provoke positive social outcomes, but she was equally aware of its limitations and potential dangers, which she clearly portrays in her fiction. By tracing the evolution of Shelley's philosophy of sympathy, this study will highlight her unique perspective on what she perceived to be a very complicated emotion, one fraught with paradoxes. Shelley's readiness to examine sympathy with a more sceptical eye in an era in which it was so deeply

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*Autobiography of Goethe, Truth and Fiction: Relating to My Life*, vol. 2, trans. John Oxenford (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1883) 163.

[20] As will be discussed in the final chapter, Thomas More argues something similar in his *Utopia* (1516). Describing his ideal society, More writes that when "disease brings" unceasing "pain and trauma, the priests and magistrates [would] urge the sufferer, now unfit for the duties of life and become a *living burden* to himself as well as a distress to others, to cease fostering disease and plague and be willing to die, now that living is an anguish, and so liberate himself from a life as bitter as imprisonment or torture—or let others liberate him." See *Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2010) 91, my emphasis.

[21] Relevant critical works related to Romanticism and suicide include: Higonnet's "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century" (1995) (quoted above) and "Frames of Female Suicide" (2000); Elizabeth Dolan's *Seeing Suffering in Women's Literature of the Romantic Era* (2008); and Kelly McGuire's *Dying to be English: Suicide Narratives and National Identity, 1721-1814* (2012).

revered and her willingness to confront such taboo subjects as incest and suicide (both of which she associates with either a dearth or an excess of sympathy) speak to her originality. From *Frankenstein* to *Falkner,* Shelley develops her own sophisticated doctrine of sympathy, one which acknowledges sympathy's shortcomings while also endorsing its merits.

## The Literary Context: Shelley's Influences

Importantly, because Shelley's examination of this complicated emotion is so in-depth and wide-ranging, it both requires and deserves an attentiveness and rigour that can only be achieved by considering her on her own rather than as a member of a larger group. Although reference will be made to her influences, this is not a comparative work as that would divert focus away from Shelley and so dilute and weaken this study's argument that she was both a leading figure and an independent voice in the Romantic era's debates about sympathy and its effects on the individual and society. Shelley speaks with rich authority about the topic, and her novels are steeped in an awareness of the centrality of sympathy to the Romantic movement and to our wider lived experience. Although sympathy as a theme preoccupied many of Shelley's Romantic peers, she explored the subject in a much more sustained and comprehensive manner, devoting her entire writing life to deconstructing sympathy's complex web of meanings and associations.

Yet, while Shelley is the focal point of this study, it is important to acknowledge that she did not write in a vacuum; rather, she was part of an influential circle of creative writers, many of whose works also investigate sympathy from varying perspectives. This section will therefore briefly discuss some of the authors whose writings about sympathy may have shaped Shelley's own understanding of the emotion. Shelley's scepticism about sympathy, her recognition of its paradoxical nature, was, for instance, shared by Wollstonecraft. In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft alerts her readers to the egoistic tendency of sympathy (as Shelley does in her fiction), depicting a heroine who derives personal pleasure from her philanthropy. In

relieving the poor, the heroine feels "gratified, when, in consequence of [giving up her meal], she [is] pinched by hunger" (10). Wollstonecraft also warns of sympathy's threat to selfhood in *Mary* (another recurrent theme in Shelley's works), for the heroine neglects herself so she might alleviate the suffering of others, therefore standing in peril of losing herself in her sympathetic encounters. As the narrator writes: Mary "practised the most rigid economy, and had such power over her appetites and whims, that without any great effort she conquered them so entirely, that when her understanding or affections had an object, she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment" (14). Mary becomes so engrossed in her philanthropy that she seems to live only for others and not for herself, thereby running the risk of becoming a nonentity. As discussed above, this loss of self in the other is a principal theme in Shelley's novels.

The failure of sympathy, yet another central concern for Shelley, also preoccupied her mother. In *Mary*, the heroine sinks "into apathy" after having found her philanthropic "favors forgotten" by an impoverished family she has taken under her care (48). As Mary laments, "'[t]oo well have I loved my fellow creatures'" (48). "'I looked for some one to have pity on me,'" Mary continues, "'but found none!—The healing balm of sympathy is denied'" (48). This theme is also taken up in Wollstonecraft's final and unfinished fiction, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), in which the former prostitute Jemima—jailor of the madhouse-imprisoned Maria—recounts a life of suffering, deprived of "'any companions to alleviate it by sympathy'" (95-6). "'Who ever risked any thing for me?'" asks Jemima, "'Who ever acknowledged me to be a fellow-creature?'" (107). Without the sympathy of another, Jemima feels degraded, inhuman, comparing herself to "the filching cat, the ravenous dog, the dumb brute, who must bear all'" (95). In this way, she anticipates the myriad oppressed and persecuted characters (all denied basic sympathy) who populate Shelley's novels.

In *Caleb Williams* (1794), Godwin, too, stresses the failures and limits of sympathy. As the eponymous hero laments, "To me the whole world was as unhearing as the tempest, and as cold as the torpedo. Sympathy, the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life, was extinct" (308). Another concern regarding sympathy that is borne out in *Caleb Williams* is its potential to annihilate individuality; as the novel suggests, in encouraging imitation, sympathy reduces everything to sameness, conformity. Eric Daffron argues that "imitative sympathy in [*Caleb Williams*] typically serves the interests of the gentry by unifying the social through sympathy's power to consolidate opinion and by thwarting resistance" (213). The theme of doubling, so central to *Caleb Williams* (and to Shelley's *Frankenstein*), well expresses this notion of "imitative sympathy," of the merging of identities, of the dissolving of one self in another.

Both the doubling theme and the threat to selfhood posed by the sympathetic encounter are also key to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816), which P.B. Shelley read aloud to Shelley on August 26th, 1816 (Shelley, *Journals* 1:131). In this Gothic poem, the virtuous heroine Christabel and the fiendish Geraldine eventually become mirror images of one another, doubles, as a consequence of Christabel's "imitative sympathy." As Lucy Newlyn writes, "the power which Geraldine goes on exerting over [Christabel] is sustained by a steadily strengthening sympathetic identification. In the climax of Part 2, the innocent Gothic heroine is transformed, by the intensity of that identification, into the reflex of her experienced or demonic counterpart" (*Reading* 79). Christabel is so overcome by her identification with Geraldine that her own selfhood is finally subsumed by the woman she passively imitates. As Coleridge's speaker declares: "So deeply had she drunken in / That look, those shrunken serpent eyes, / That all her features were resigned / To this sole image in her mind: / And passively did imitate / That look of dull and treacherous hate! / And thus she stood, in dizzy trance, / Still picturing that look askance / With forced unconscious

sympathy" (lines 601-609). Like *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, *Christabel* is a Gothic tale, and like Shelley, Coleridge, in Newlyn's words, was well aware of the genre's association "in contemporary critical discourse with women writers, women readers, and excessive sympathetic identification" (79). As Newlyn notes, "Christabel is shown to be intoxicated, passively imitative, forced into unconscious sympathy, and finally overwhelmed" by her sympathetic encounter with Geraldine (79). This "climactic scene of 'Christabel,'" Newlyn continues, "dramatizes Coleridge's more generalized fears with respect to mimicry, doubling, and the eclipse of one identity by another" (79-80). "The 'forced unconscious sympathy' . . . results in a kind of specular doubling" (80). Anya Taylor writes that, after Christabel lies with Geraldine, "there seems to be no one left inside. The naked body, the blinking eyes, the vague smile, the leaking tears, the unquiet movements, and the baffled acquiescence suggest the draining of selfhood from the empty shell" (715). This process of "one person being absorbed and obliterated by another and then made to bear the imprint of the inner life of the other," depicted so vividly in *Christabel*, is re-enacted in Shelley's novels, most overtly in *Matilda* (712).

P.B. Shelley is another obvious influence. As with Shelley, much of her husband's writings reveal a fascination with the theme of sympathy. For P. B. Shelley, reading poetry is instrumental to the development of the imagination, which in turn fosters and expands the reader's sympathy, a belief Shelley shares and advances in all of her novels. But, also like his wife, P.B. Shelley was cognizant of the more negative aspects of sympathy. In *The Cenci* (1819), for example, a drama P.B. Shelley completed while Shelley was writing "The Fields of Fancy," the first draft of *Matilda*, Beatrice is raped by her father, the Count Cenci, a violation that leaves Beatrice alienated and longing for death. Like Matilda, she feels polluted by her father's incestuous act ("There creeps / A clinging, black, contaminating mist / About me. . . . it glues / My fingers and my limbs to one another, / And eats my sinews, and

dissolves / My flesh to a pollution, poisoning / The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!"), and like Matilda, she feels as if she is already dead ("I am dead! These putrefying limbs / Shut round the sepulchre the panting soul") (P.B. Shelley, *Cenci* 3.1.16-23). But while Matilda retains her sympathy even after her father's revelation of his incestuous love, Beatrice's sympathy is destroyed. As Katherine C. Hill-Miller writes, "Beatrice abhors and fears her father," and when "she has him murdered and feels no remorse, Beatrice's only fear as she awaits her own execution is that she might be reunited with her father after her death in some hellish afterworld" (102). In *The Cenci*, patriarchal tyranny obliterates the possibility of sympathy.

Where P.B. Shelley uses the theme of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci* to condemn the despotism of the patriarchy (as Todd writes, this form of incest suggests "patriarchal oppression through both class and gender on a personal and political plane"), in *Laon and Cythna* (1818), he uses sibling incest to represent both the ideal sympathetic relationship and, in Todd's words, "an escape from stifling social conventions" ("Introduction" xxii). As Alan Richardson writes, "[s]ince the happiest and most intense associations are those of childhood, a relationship modelled on that of siblings becomes the best foundation for a powerful sympathetic love" (744). However, as the poem shows, incest can only result in death. "The Romantic poet is drawn to mingle the two kinds of love [familial and erotic] by a fascination with the power of sympathy," Richardson comments, "but that power is broken by the unconscious horror of incest, and the fascination turns to guilt or revulsion shortly before or shortly after the union is consummated" (744). Richardson continues: "While quickening the sibling bond of childhood associations with the power of erotic passion seems to promise the most perfect sympathy, the resulting union cannot last" (744). Further, brother and sister eventually lose themselves in one another: Cythna changes her name to "Laone," and, in the act of consummation, the siblings become one self (Richardson 750). Ultimately, the siblings

are punished, "consigned to a grisly *liebestod*, immolation on a 'pyre of expiation' featuring 'snakes, and scorpions, and the fry / Of centipedes and worms'" (750). Although sibling love first appears the epitome of the sympathetic bond, when it becomes erotic, death soon follows. Moreover, what is supposed to foster community instead results in isolation, for the sympathy between brother and sister separates them from the rest of society, and eventually from life itself.

Shelley herself incorporates the theme of brother-sister incest into her works, and to a similar end. In her short story "The Brother and Sister" (1832), for example, she shows that sympathy, when shared too intimately between siblings, can, as in *Laon and Cythna*, transform into an isolating, antisocial, and even incestuous emotion. In this short story, the overly-sympathetic sister Flora is so devoted to her exiled brother Lorenzo that she bars herself from all love and sympathy, steadfast in her promise to her brother that she engage "herself by no vow for [the] five years" he is away: "her patience, her fortitude, and her obedience, were all offerings at the shrine of her beloved Lorenzo's desires" (183). "So constituted . . . were [Flora's] feelings," writes Shelley, "that the slightest wish ever remembered by her having been expressed by Lorenzo, held more weight with her than the most urgent prayers of another" (183). Consequently, Flora refuses the entreaties of Count Fabian, her exclusive sympathy for her brother initially blinding her to Fabian's goodness and humanity and alienating her from others. Sympathy, a typically prosocial emotion, is thus transformed into something prohibitive and confining as in *Laon and Cythna*.

Lord Byron's *Manfred*, written during the summer of 1816 (at the same time Shelley conceived of *Frankenstein*), is also concerned with sibling incest and the powerful sympathetic bond to which it gives rise. Having begun copying *Manfred* for Byron later that summer, Shelley was profoundly influenced by his work, which is evident not only in *Frankenstein* but in all of her novels, all of which include some kind of Byronic figure (Todd,

"Introduction" xxii). In this closet drama, Byron makes Manfred a likeness of himself and names his beloved "Astarte" (the name of an incestuous pagan goddess), thereby goading his contemporary readers, who would have been following the scandalous details of his life, to equate Manfred with Byron and Astarte with Byron's half-sister Augusta Leigh, with whom, so it was rumoured, he had had an incestuous relationship. In *Manfred*, as in P.B. Shelley's *Laon and Cythna*, sibling incest represents a revolutionary emancipation from societal conventions on the one hand and the dangers of solipsism on the other, for Manfred's relationship with Astarte merely reinforces his slavery to self—she becomes yet another aspect of him. In Bernard Jackson's words, Manfred "can only describe Astarte in relation to himself" (146). Gilbert and Gubar have argued that, "[f]or Milton, and therefore for Mary Shelley, who was trying to understand Milton, incest was an inescapable metaphor for the solipsistic fever of self-awareness that Matthew Arnold was later to call 'the dialogue of the mind with itself'" (Madwoman 229). This argument is equally befitting to Byron, whose self-obsessed protagonist eventually spirals into a suicidal solipsism. As Richardson comments, Manfred's "disastrous efforts to become truly sympathetic perversely result in a sense of lasting alienation from the rest of mankind" (751). "The romantic incest theme," he continues, "has come full circle: instead of accompanying the quest for perfect sympathy, it now becomes a symbol of alienation. The Byronic hero dissociates himself forever from society by breaking its fundamental law" (751). And ultimately, he severs himself from the world itself.

As these examples show, sympathy (and its relationship to social reform, morality, incest, and suicide) was a concern not only for Shelley but for many of her Romantic contemporaries. However, Shelley made this theme the prevailing subject of her oeuvre; she was so deeply immersed in the philosophical debates surrounding sympathy that we can see its profound impress in both her personal and fictional writings. Hence, it is essential that

Shelley be given her own voice in this study, that her singular impact on Romanticism not be obscured by comparison to other authors. By tracing the evolution of Shelley's philosophy of sympathy, this study will make clear her unique contribution to the Romantic movement. Her awareness of and attentiveness to sympathy's powerful influence on and significance to our private and social lives, articulated in all of her writings, marks her as a preeminent thinker on the subject. Moreover, our contemporary concerns with empathy and the humanities and with affect theory can be traced back to Shelley's lifelong work on sympathy, her definition of which is synonymous with our current understanding of empathy. In this way, this project explores the beginnings of the currently popular idea that studies in literary fiction are effectively training in sympathy, showing that this idea, now the basis of so many defences of the humanities, was one of the presiding concerns of Shelley's writings.

## The Critical Context

In its examination of sympathy and its connection to personal and social wellbeing as well as to, paradoxically, pathological emotional states, contagion, and suicide (as represented in Shelley's fiction), my project both departs from and builds upon several important critical works. Ildiko Csengei's *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (2012), which considers the "Janus-faced" nature of sensibility—it is, the author suggests, intimately tied to self-interest—through a range of eighteenth-century literary, philosophical, and medical writings, has direct bearing on this study (58). Csengei's article "Reading through the Tears of Henry Mackenzie's 'Man of Feeling'" (2008), in which she argues that "[e]xtreme sensibility is . . . a form of pathological dependence," is also relevant. But while Csengei suggests that the mutual dependence of self and other in the sympathetic process is what makes sensibility pathological, this study makes the case that the pathological bent of sympathy lies in its tendency to get out of hand, to contaminate the mind when displayed to an abnormal or unhealthy degree (962). Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy*

(2013), in which she posits the term "intimacy" as a replacement for what she refers to as the "conceptually unstable" term "sympathy" (in its eighteenth-century usage) is also pertinent to this study (4), as is Adela Pinch's *Strange Fits of Passion* (1996), in which she explores the Romantic era's preoccupation with errant emotion and asks "when it became productive to know feelings as difficult and wayward" (15). Fairclough's *The Romantic Crowd: Sympathy, Controversy and Print Culture* (2013) is important because of its focus on emotional contagion. According to Fairclough, in the Romantic era, sympathy was "understood as a disruptive social phenomenon which functioned to spread disorder and unrest between individuals and even across nations like a 'contagion'" (1). There are also several works that explore representations of suicide in Romantic-era literature that are particularly germane to this study: Deanna P. Koretsky's recent articles "*Habeas Corpus* and the Politics of Freedom: Slavery and Romantic Suicide" (2015) and "'Unhallowed Arts': *Frankenstein* and the Poetics of Suicide" (2015); Higgonet's "Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century" (1985) and "Frames of Female Suicide" (2000); Michelle Faubert's studies on suicide in Romantic literature, including "A Family Affair: Ennobling Suicide in Mary Shelley's *Matilda*" (2013) and "The Fictional Suicides of Mary Wollstonecraft" (2015); and *Literature Compass*'s recently published special issue on "Romanticism and Suicide" (2015), which includes papers from a panel at the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism's 2013 conference in Boston, Massachusetts entitled "Gesture, Exile, and Agency in Romantic Representations of Female Suicide." Although all of these works align with this study in one way or another, this study breaks new ground in its comprehensive investigation of sympathy in Shelley's fiction, in which sympathy's polyvalent effects are interrogated and finally shown to be profoundly paradoxical.

## Genre, Form, and Affect

Notably, Shelley's use of genre, whereby she blends various forms within and across each novel, reflects sympathy's indeterminateness: her novels and their presiding theme both refuse to adhere to a single meaning or definition. Although genre and form are not the focus of this study, they warrant mention here as they play an important role in reader-response (whether that be in hindering or enhancing the reader's immersive experience with the texts). *Frankenstein* is at once Gothic, horror, science, and philosophical fiction as well as an epistolary, mythic, and realist novel whereas *Matilda* is simultaneously a Gothic and epistolary novel, a fictional autobiography, and what Graham Allen calls a "psycho-biography" (*Critical* 41). *The Last Man* is a *roman à clef* as well as apocalyptic and historical fiction, while *Lodore* is at once a novel of sensibility, a novel of manners, a silver-fork novel, a social and educational novel, a romance, and a realist novel. Finally, *Falkner*, like *Lodore*, is a romance as well as an educational, realist, and social novel, and, according to Kate Ferguson Ellis, it can also be described as a "'Gothic melodrama'" (*Falkner* 156). Importantly, although the genres used within and across Shelley's novels vary, she is consistent in her use of the novel form itself, the defining characteristic of which, as Clara Reeve's definition of it in *The Progress of Romance* (1785) suggests, is its ability to elicit sympathy:

> The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, *until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own*. (111, my emphasis)

Further, as contemporary studies on the emotional and psychological effects of reading fiction have shown, fiction not only elicits sympathy in the reader but actually makes the

reader a more sympathetic person. As Keith Oatley, Professor Emeritus of Cognitive Psychology, has shown, fiction "can improve social abilities," "move us emotionally, and . . . prompt changes of selfhood" (*Dreams* ix). Fiction, writes Oatley, "prompts us towards emotions," "affords insights into ourselves and others," and has "worthwhile effects on readers" (7). Shelley, like her mother, was conscious of the potentially positive influence of "fictional worldmaking" on the reading public (Keen, "Temperaments" 298). Notably, although Wollstonecraft wrote two major and influential polemical works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her two novellas, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), are the "bookends of [her] life as a writer" (Johnson, "Mary Wollstonecraft's novels" 190). That Wollstonecraft commenced and concluded her writing career with the novel form suggests that she believed it to be the most effective means of advancing her ethical and political beliefs. Shelley also wrote in various forms, but her preference for the novel is evidenced by the fact that she wrote seven in her lifetime. Both mother and daughter, then, considered the novel form the most powerful vehicle for disseminating moral, political, and philosophical ideas precisely because of its capacity to engage and awaken the reader's sympathies.

Yet, in the Romantic era, the novel at first had a poor reputation for being "the lowest of literary forms"; as Fiona Robertson writes, "loose in structure, quotidian in its settings and references, epistolary and journalistic in its origins and compositional impetus, female in its readership and (often) authorship," it took some time before the novel finally achieved its "heightened aesthetic status" and its "salient social role" (287, 286). Notably, "from the 1780s women outnumbered men among identifiable authors," and they were also the most avid readers of novels; as John Barnard observes, "women readers made women writers" (Barnard 81-2). But novel-reading was "not thought conducive to moral welfare"; it was believed that reading novels was a dangerous activity (Robertson 287). Novels, writes Marina

Mackay, "were distinctively dangerous because distinctively realistic" (3). "[W]hile no one would be foolish enough to model his or her behaviour on the wildly implausible fictions of earlier times," she continues, "this new type of narrative fiction, with its complex characters, its recognizable settings, and its broadly credible sequence of events, might dupe the sequestered and susceptible into believing it a reliable guide to the world" (3).[22] And women were thought to be particularly susceptible because, as the erroneous argument went, they were more fanciful and emotional than men (287).

It was believed, for example, that sentimental novels encouraged women to be over-sexualized by representing scenes of amorous seduction, thereby inciting the passions and inflaming the senses. Wollstonecraft summarizes the harmful effects of the conventional sentimental novel on the female mind in *Rights of Woman*:

> [S]ubjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, [women] refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they plumb[e] into actual vice.
>
> These are the women who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retailed in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties. I do not mention the understanding, because never having been exercised, its slumbering energies rest inactive. (330)

In Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, the heroine's mother Eliza, deprived of an education that would teach her reason, and consequently, a slave to her senses, "indulges the caprices of fancy," reading sentimental novels that excite her passions (6). Although "chaste," Eliza "make[s]

[22] As will be discussed in Chapter 2, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) inspired a spate of suicides in imitation of the lovelorn hero, which speaks to the dangers of sympathizing too closely and undiscerningly with a fictional character.

amends for this seeming self-denial" by reading sentimental novels, dwelling "on the love-scenes," accompanying "the lovers to the lonely arbors," and "walk[ing] with them by the clear light of the moon," imagining herself to be the heroine within each tale (6, 7). Women like Eliza, writes Barbara Taylor, read "themselves into sexual scenarios played out between dashing gallants and swooning coquettes" and thus succumb "not just to the seductions of the text but to the images of femininity inscribed in them" (*Mary* 72). As Faubert explains, sentimental novels "hypocritically advanced the ideal of a woman who is so chaste that she is almost bodiless . . . but, in reality . . . foster[ed] sexual lust in their female readers" ("Footnotes" 80). Wollstonecraft remedies this problem by creating novels that engage her readers' minds as well as their emotions, novels that teach them to think *and* to feel (Kelly, "Introduction" xv). And Shelley follows in her mother's footsteps by writing novels of both "'thought and feeling,'" as a reviewer for *The Athenaeum* describes *Falkner* in 1837 (Lyle 181).

Moreover, like her mother, Shelley realized that if the novel, through its affective power, could influence the reader in a negative way, so too could it do so in a positive one. As Mackay comments, "the idea that novels teach by examples realistic enough to elicit the reader's identification was necessarily a double-edged affair: if fiction can make you a worse person, it can surely make you a better one" (4).[23] Indeed, the Romantic-era novel is "the product of a culture profoundly interested in the links between imagination and empathy" (4). And importantly, because novels were so widely read in the Romantic era, it was an effective means for Shelley to communicate her philosophical, ethical, and political ideas concerning sympathy.

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[23] Mackay notes that "back in 1750, Samuel Johnson . . . worried about how a novel can affect real-life behaviour because it seems to represent it so convincingly." "In the centuries that separate us from Johnson, many critics have . . . conceded his central point: that it is precisely because the novel is so intimately connected to real-world representation that it can do so much to shape the world it purports only to be describing." See Mackay, *The Cambridge Companion to The Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 15.

As Robertson explains, the growth of the publishing industry between 1780 and 1830, with the "building of the first hand-operated iron-frame printing press" and "the introduction of machine-made paper," allowed for the creation of "a mass market for fiction" (287). Moreover, the "demand for the novel further increased with the growth of the 'reading public,' estimated at 1,500,000 in 1780 and 7,000,000 in 1830" (287). And with the publication of the works of the Jacobin novelists in the 1790s, among whom were Wollstonecraft and Godwin, the novel came to be seen as a powerful medium for "advancing a radical critique of society" (289). It can therefore be argued that Shelley's decision to use the novel form was a conscious one, for as Mackay points out, "realism means more than just representing what 'really' is" (14). "[T]he novel may act upon us as all cultural texts do," she continues, "and thus potentially change the world in the act of describing it" (13). Citing the example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), in which Stowe declares that "there is 'one thing that every individual can do' to combat slavery: 'they can see to it that they feel right [...] See then to your sympathies in this matter!,'" Mackay notes that "novels are *doing* something by teaching [us] how to feel, and, in theory, when we 'feel right,' we act rightly" (14). Stowe's novel, writes Mackay, "is an extreme example of the novel managing our minds as it moves our emotions, controlling our consciousness and acting upon our behaviour, seeming merely to describe the world but in reality altering that world in ways that could never wholly have been desired or even imagined at the outset" (15). Shelley's devotion to the novel (as stated above, she wrote seven novels in her lifetime, within which the theme of novel-reading and its positive influence on the individual and society at large is ever-present) and her fascination with and fixation on the sympathy engendered through reading fiction suggests that her use of the form was deliberate.

In addition to the novel's depiction of reality, there are other means through which it elicits the reader's sympathy, the most important of which, it could be argued, is character.

As Mackay maintains, character is "needed in order to make the reader care about everything else" (76). The mechanics of fiction operate in such a way that the reader is brought into an imaginative engagement with the story world and the beings inhabiting that fictive world, allowing for the reader's "psychic participation" in the experience of another and thereby fostering fellow-feeling, a sympathetic identification that gives rise to "a sense of shared possibilities" (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 70; *Knowledge* 390). Fiction, writes Arnold Weinstein, "overwhelms us with the pulsating inner lives of its characters," and, in so doing, teaches us "about the depths and integrity of others" (*Recovering* 475). In being brought into the inner world of fictional characters, we "humanize" those characters "as we vicariously share their lives" (476). In this way, "we learn to endow others—not merely characters, but the manifold other opaque, living human beings who cross our path in the world (outside books) that we inhabit—with consciousness" (476). Fiction, in teaching us "to feel and feel *for*," moves us "from self to world" (Groes and Lewis 5, Weinstein, *Recovering* 476). Characterization is in fact one of Shelley's most effective literary techniques, through which she establishes an affective link between her readers and the fictional beings (many of whom are outsiders, outcasts, and exiles) within her novels and thereby seeks to encourage her readers to respond sympathetically to similar beings in the real world.

Shelley's inclusion of autobiographical material is another method through which she engages her readers' sympathies, a technique Wollstonecraft also utilized. As Wollstonecraft maintains in *Rights of Woman*, in order to describe well, one must have "forcibly felt . . . the charm which natural affections and unsophisticated feelings spread round the human character" (309). "It is this power of looking into the heart, and responsively vibrating with each emotion," Wollstonecraft writes, "that enables the poet to personify each passion" (309). According to Wollstonecraft, having "forcibly felt" many of the feelings described within her fiction, she can better "personify each passion" and, in so doing, engage the reader more

fully. Shelley, having experienced an inordinate amount of grief in her lifetime (her mother died of puerperal fever ten days after giving birth to her, her half-sister Fanny Imlay committed suicide, her first daughter died less than two weeks after being born, her daughter Clara died a little over a year after being born, her son William died at the age of three, and her husband died at the age of 29), was therefore able to more accurately and effectively (and affectively) represent the feelings of loss, depression, and loneliness in her characters. As will be shown in the subsequent chapters, Shelley, by imbuing her novels with emotions she has felt in her own life, enhances the reader's sympathetic response to her novels.

The various genres within and across Shelley's novels also affect the reader's sympathy. A reviewer for *The British Critic* (April 1818), for example, found *Frankenstein* "too grotesque and bizarre," the "horror" of the story preventing him from discerning any "principle, object, [or] moral" and so inhibiting his sympathy (qtd. in Lyle 169). According to Sir Walter Scott, however, the novel "'open[s] new trains and channels of thought, by placing men in supposed situations of an extraordinary and preternatural character, and then describing the mode of feeling and conduct which they are most likely to adopt'" (qtd. in Macdonald and Scherf, "Appendix D" 274). Noting both Shelley's ability to engage the reader and the importance of genre in achieving this (like his contemporaries, however, Scott believed P.B. Shelley to be the author of *Frankenstein*), Scott writes in "Remarks on *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus; a Novel*" in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (1818) that "'the author opens a sort of account-current with the reader, drawing upon him, in the first place, for credit to that degree of the marvellous which he purports to employ'" (275). Indeed, Scott argues that the reader becomes "'virtually bound'" to the story as a "'consequence'" of the novel's fantastical subject matter (275). Moreover, for Scott, that the characters "'conduct themselves'" "'according to the rules of probability, and the nature of the human heart'" even "'in the extraordinary circumstances in which they are placed'"

further captivates the reader (275). Scott admits that he was not only emotionally but physically affected by the novel, commenting on his corporeal reaction to it: "'The feeling with which we perused the unexpected and fearful, yet, allowing the possibility of the event, very natural conclusion of Frankenstein's experiment, shook a little even our firm nerves'" (276). That *Frankenstein* could shake "'even [Scott's] firm nerves'" speaks to its affective power.

In concluding his review, Scott again speaks to the novel's ability to call forth the reader's emotions: "'Upon the whole, the work impresses us with a high idea of the author's original genius and happy power of expression. . . . [W]e congratulate our readers upon a novel which excites new reflections and untried sources of emotion'" (277-278). P.B. Shelley similarly recognizes the emotive power of his wife's novel. Indeed, like Scott, he notes that the novel has an emotional *and* a physical impact on the reader. In a review in the *Athenaeum* (November 1832), he declares that the reader is "'led breathless with suspense and sympathy, and the heaping up of incident on incident, and the working out of passion'" (qtd. in Macdonald and Scherf, "Appendix D" 281). Indeed, for P.B. Shelley, the emotion *Frankenstein* evokes in the reader is the novel's cardinal achievement: "This novel rests its claim on being a source of powerful and profound emotion," he writes (282). As he continues,

> there is perhaps no reader, who can endure anything beside a new love-story, *who will not feel a responsive string touched in his inmost soul*. The sentiments are so affectionate and so innocent—the characters of the subordinate agents in this strange drama are clothed in the light of such a mild and gentle mind . . . the [pathos] is irresistible and deep. (282)

In *Characteristics,* Shaftesbury uses similar language when referring to the mechanism of sympathy: "Upon the whole," he argues, "it may be properly to be the same with the

affections or passions in an animal constitution as with the cords or strings of a musical instrument" (199). Hume also uses this metaphor to describe the workings of sympathy. "As in strings equally wound up," he writes, "the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature" (Selby-Bigge, ed., *THN* 576). As P.B. Shelley, Shaftesbury, and Hume point out, it is through the medium of sympathy that we experience and share in one another's feelings, whether that be in the real world or in the realm of fiction.

Significantly, for P.B. Shelley, the moral of *Frankenstein* concerns sympathy itself: "'Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn;—let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness'" (qtd. in Macdonald and Scherf, "Appendix D" 282). As will be discussed in Chapter One, it is precisely because the creature (a naturally benevolent being) is denied sympathy that he becomes monstrous. As he himself recognizes, "'I had feelings of affection,'" but "'they were requited by detestation and scorn'" (Shelley, *F* 176). "'If any being [had] felt emotions of benevolence towards me,'" the creature insists, "'I should [have] return[ed] them an hundred and an hundred fold'" (157). By melding realism with science fiction, Shelley is able to explicitly show what it is like for persecuted individuals to be "othered," for the creature, although un-real in his monstrosity, is an exteriorization of the very real, internal feelings experienced by individuals in Shelley's own society who face similar oppression. By representing the disastrous effects of ostracizing those unlike ourselves in a fictional world that is nevertheless recognizable to her readers while also including a fantastical element to engage their interest, Shelley achieves what the Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C.E) considers art's chief purpose, to "'delight *and* instruct'" (qtd. in Leitch *et al*. 123, my emphasis). Thus,

where for some readers *Frankenstein*'s genre impedes sympathetic response, for others, like Scott and P.B. Shelley, it enhances it. And since there were numerous positive reviews amid the vast array of reviews of *Frankenstein*—as D.L. MacDonald and Kathleen Scherf note, the novel was reviewed "in all the major literary magazines of the day"—it can be argued that Scott and P.B. Shelley's opinion was the more commonly held ("Appendix D" 273).

In addition to its genre, *Frankenstein*'s epistolary form and frame narratives also serve to influence the reader's sympathy. As Mackay writes, the epistolary form is profoundly personal, "aim[ing] to represent the operations of" each character's "mind as intimately and immediately as possible" (7). It is as if we are seeing into the characters' interior lives, gaining access to their psyches, which encourages us to care about them on a deeper and more meaningful level, and which in turn elicits our sympathy (notably, the epistolary form is also suspect as we are not given the perspectives of any other characters). The framed narrative form, or story within a story, however, can have the opposite effect, for "it typically works to leave us" in a state of uncertainty "about what has really happened, because, with no omniscient narrator, everything we learn comes mediated by speakers who have their own investments, their own limitations" (56).[24] Writing about *Frankenstein*, Robertson observes that the "interweaving of letters, reported oral confession, and interpolated tales . . . conducts a recognizable debate with the mechanics of authenticity, personal reflection, [and] social delineation" (294). The creature's tale, for example, is at a far remove by the time it reaches the reader, having been told first hand to Frankenstein who then tells it to Walton who then commits it to paper. When it comes to frame narratives, it is up to the reader to "judge the reliability of and relations among different scraps of evidence" (Mackay 58). And as will be discussed in Chapter One, we are given clues as to the reliability

[24] Charles Schug comments that *Frankenstein*'s structure "might be described as a box within a box or a series of concentric circles." "Perhaps the latter image is better," Schug continues, "since the monster's narrative at the very centre of the novel acts as a kind of vortex for the conflicts and dilemmas the novel embodies." See "The Romantic Form of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 17.4 (1977): 608.

of each character throughout the narrative—although Robert Walton presents Victor Frankenstein's tale sympathetically, for example, the reader is given intimations regarding his true character. Notably, Charles Schug has observed that *Frankenstein*'s "three narrators are in the same position that Shelley herself is in" (609). As Schug writes, "each of the narrators confronts events from a particular vantage point and a limited perspective," and "each tries to force the listener into participation in his vision, just as Shelley seeks to force the reader into participation in hers" (609). Finally, "each seeks to do internally in the novel what Shelley tries to do for the reader: to use narrative to establish a sense of order, of logic and rationality" (609). More than this, through each narrator, Shelley subtly directs the reader's sympathy, form therefore playing an integral role in shaping the reader's sympathetic response to the narrative and to the characters within it.

Unlike *Frankenstein, Matilda* was not read by Shelley's contemporaries, its subject matter, father-daughter incest, ensuring that it would not be published until the 20th century. As will be further explained in Chapter Two, although written in 1819, *Matilda* was not published until 1959 because Godwin found its subject "disgusting and detestable" (Jones 44).[25] When it was finally published, however, the reviewers were unbothered by the subject. Rather, they praised the novella's astute examination of the human psyche. Donald H. Reiman, for example, writes in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (April 1960) that "'[a]s a work of fiction *Mathilda* shows Mary Shelley to be scrupulously aware of the problems of realistic psychological motivation'" (qtd. in Lyle 184). "'This awareness,'" Reiman continues, "'is, indeed, the greatest virtue of the work'" (184). Other reviews focused

[25] Allen, however, argues that "[w]hatever we think of Godwin's response to the text . . . the idea that he suppressed it against Shelley's own wishes is not tenable." "As Bennett suggests," he continues, "there were very particular reasons why both Godwin and Shelley may have come to the mutual recognition that publication of *Matilda* might be a mistake. The most compelling of these is a fear of provoking into renewed life the spectre of public scandal which had been generated by Mary and Claire's association with P.B. Shelley and Byron and which hovered over Mary and Claire for the rest of their lives." Allen claims that, "[d]espite many claims to the contrary, it appears likely that Mary Shelley came to share her father's sense that *Matilda* was an unwise publication." See Allen, *Critical Issues: Mary Shelley* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 44, 45.

on the autobiographical elements of the novella. According to a reviewer for *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (March 1960), "'the autobiographical nature of the piece, with its implications about Mary's relations with her husband and father, justifies its publication'" (184). Another reviewer for the *Philological Quarterly* (April 1960) writes that "'[t]he first part is clearly based on Mary's interpretation of her father's feelings towards her, and is surely one of the first such psychological studies, just as *Frankenstein* was the first major work of science fiction'" (183). Yet, while *Matilda* does contain autobiographical elements, it is also an imaginative work of fiction that speaks to serious issues such as suicide, isolation, madness, incest, and patriarchal oppression, all common motifs in Gothic fiction (Allen similarly argues that *Matilda* "is a personal and yet highly philosophical and ethical text") (*Critical* 63). According to Kathleen A. Miller, "[w]ith its themes of alienation, entrapment, and unutterable personal secrets, Mathilda's story participates in many of the conventions of the female gothic form" (291). As Miller explains, "the appeal of the female gothic genre for women readers" is that the genre "not only exposes women's fears and anxieties, but works to combat them through creativity" (304). By again turning to the Gothic form, as she had in *Frankenstein*, Shelley seeks to reach a female readership as women were the most avid consumers of Gothic novels. And Shelley endeavours to garner sympathy from this female readership by presenting them with a heroine with whom they might identify. In *Matilda*, as in Shelley's other works, genre plays an integral role in reader response.

Kay J. Mussell, in "The Female Audience and the Gothic Novel" (1983), also observes that "the audience for the Gothic romance consist[ed] primarily of women," and she adds that "in most of the novels the female protagonist acts decisively to solve a serious problem" (57). As in *Matilda*, the "danger in [Gothic romances] is located in a specifically domestic context, and the heroine's motivation is the preservation of the family unit" (58). But where in the conventional Gothic romance the heroine's reward for preserving the

domestic is "the acquisition of a husband, home and children," in *Matilda,* the family unit is destroyed by the father's incestuous desire and subsequent suicide, after which the heroine herself commits active euthanasia (as this study will argue), hoping to be reunited with her father in death. In *Matilda*, then, Shelley subverts the female Gothic to show the fatal effects of women's isolated and claustrophobic existence: because the heroine is cut off from society and so denied the opportunity to interact with her fellow beings (just like the majority of women in Shelley's time), she has no one to whom to turn when her father commits suicide. Without the sympathy and support of another, Matilda, like Frankenstein's creature, is left alone and so longing for death. The Gothic form, then, for which the theme of isolation is central, is a fitting genre for Shelley's subject and serves to call attention to the sense of alienation that inevitably arises when women are confined to the domestic and deprived of a proper education. Further, because the form was so widely read by women, and because Shelley created a heroine with whom these female readers could easily sympathize, Shelley was able to more effectively and persuasively reach her audience and convey her feminist message.

In addition to genre, the form of *Matilda* also contributes to the reader's sympathetic and immersive experience with the novella. While in the first draft of *Matilda*, "The Fields of Fancy," the reader is distanced from the heroine because of its frame narrative form (typical in Gothic novels), in *Matilda*, "the reader meets [the heroine] without intervening characters or layers of narrative" (Miller 294). Written as a private letter to a friend, *Matilda* is epistolary in form, which, as discussed above in relation to *Frankenstein*, allows the reader to see into the character's internal life and so encourages a more compassionate response to that character. Writing on her deathbed, Matilda finds a voice through telling her story, becoming, in Miller's words, the "self-made . . . storyteller, performer, and even director" (296). As Miller suggests, the "repetition of 'I'" throughout the narrative shifts the reader's focus to

Matilda as narrative center," and the "use of first-person perspective" ensures that "the reader only hears Matilda's voice" (295). Further, although the narrative is addressed to Woodville, the heroine's poet-friend (and a fictional representation of P.B. Shelley), Matilda declares that she will "relate [her] tale" as if she is writing "for strangers" (Shelley, *M* 151). In having Matilda "relate" her tale as if she were writing to anyone, Shelley increases the possibility of readerly sympathy, for although the "you" to whom Matilda refers throughout her narrative is Woodville, his name is mentioned so infrequently that the reader may feel that Matilda is addressing her directly and may therefore be drawn into a deeper empathic relationship with her. As in *Frankenstein*, then, Shelley uses both genre and form in *Matilda* to influence the reader's emotional responsiveness to the narrative.

Although, unlike *Matilda*, *The Last Man* was read by Shelley's contemporaries, it was received poorly in her lifetime, partially because of the multitude of "last man" narratives that appeared in the nineteenth century, and partially because of the novel's genre and form. For a reviewer in *The Ladies' Monthly Museum* (March 1826), for example, *The Last Man*'s science fictional elements (it is not technically a science-fiction novel but contains aspects of the genre) thwarted any sympathetic engagement with the novel: "'We should be better pleased to see [the author] exercise her powers of intellect on subjects less removed from nature and probability,'" the reviewer insists (qtd. in Lyle 174). Another reviewer, writing for *The Literary Gazette* (February 1826), expresses disgust at the novel's "'sickening repetition of horrors,'" again reacting negatively to the novel's genre (174). And yet another reviewer in *The Monthly Review* (March 1826) refers to *The Last Man* as "'[t]he offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste'" (175). "'[T]he whole course of [the author's] ambition,'" the reviewer continues, "'has been to pourtray [*sic*] monsters which could have existed only in her own conceptions'" (175). As with *Frankenstein*, then, *The Last Man*'s fantastical and futuristic elements interfered with certain readers' sympathetic encounters

with the novel. This is not the case for all readers, though. According to a reviewer in *The Knickerbocker Magazine* (October 1833), Shelley "'has constructed a thrilling tale of much pathos, power, and horror'" (175). "'[T]here is genius in these volumes,'" the reviewer argues, "'and many a sad mind will be arrested by the sombre eloquences and forces of these paintings'" (175). Notably, "pathos" is defined in the *OED* as "an expression or utterance that evokes sadness or sympathy," and for this reviewer, the novel's pathos, its ability to elicit sympathy, is one of its key merits (def. 1). Moreover, according to this reviewer, the "horror" of the novel contributes to rather than frustrates emotional response. And while the novel may not have garnered interest for the majority of readers in Shelley's lifetime, a reviewer in *Choice* in 1966 notes that "'the theme of civilization wiped out save for a solitary individual is a modern one and hence, [is] likely to appeal to contemporary readers'" (qtd. in Lyle 176). This has proven true, for *The Last Man* has, "in recent years . . . begun to produce a body of critical interpretation which, in its variety and divergence, is second only to that produced by *Frankenstein*" (Allen, *Critical* 90). As Morton D. Paley affirms, *The Last Man* "has rightly become" Shelley's "most important work after *Frankenstein*" ("Introduction" xxiii). The novel, then, and its genre in particular, although producing varying responses in Shelley's contemporary readers, has managed to amass great interest from modern readers, many of whom are able to sympathize deeply with the novel's apocalyptic theme in the face of present-day environmental disasters, global terrorism, disease outbreaks, and other issues that threaten the existence of the human race.

Notably, although *The Last Man* contains science fictional elements, it is most commonly characterized as a *roman à clef*, which, as M.H. Abrams explains, "is a work of prose fiction in which the author expects the knowing reader to identify, despite their altered names, actual people of the time" (284). In *The Last Man*, for example, Lord Raymond is a fictional representation of Lord Byron, and Adrian of P.B. Shelley. As Allen writes, the novel

"has been read as . . . a deep outpouring of grief over the deaths of P.B. Shelley, Byron, and all the other losses Shelley had experienced in her still relatively short life" (*Critical* 90). One could argue that this type of novel serves to augment the reader's sympathy as the characters are based on real individuals. Further, as stated above, having personally experienced such profound loss, Shelley is able to more powerfully and affectively reproduce it in her writings. And given that Shelley's contemporary readers would have recognized the figures in *The Last Man* as Byron and P.B. Shelley, it is possible that a stronger emotional response may have arisen as a result of the authenticity of the characters and of the grief expressed.

In addition to genre, the complicated structure of the novel's frame narrative also has an effect on reader response. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, although narrated by Lionel Verney, the tale itself, which is set in the late twenty-first century, is actually a work of prophecy that has been discovered by an anonymous editor in 1818. As Anne Mellor explains, "[t]he innovative structure of the novel . . . establishes three simultaneous time-scapes (the classical era of Sibyl's oracle, the early nineteenth century in which the Author finds the sibylline leaves, and the late twenty-first century in which Verney's narrative is located)" ("Introduction" xxiv). To elaborate, an anonymous editor discovers the prophetic pages while visiting the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl and proceeds to edit the tale that is Lionel's story. Although it could be argued that this complex narrative construction might impede sympathy by distancing the reader, the fact that Lionel's tale is told in the first-person serves to obviate this potential narrative distancing and instead amplifies the reader's sympathetic engagement. In fact, Lionel often addresses the reader directly, such as when he declares, "'Patience, oh reader! whoever thou art, wherever thou dwellest . . . thou wilt read of the acts of the extinct race, and wilt ask wonderingly, if they, who suffered what thou findest recorded, were of frail flesh and soft organization life thyself" (Shelley, *LM* 399). This apostrophe, like the others in the narrative, asks the reader to

participate in the text, to act as Lionel's sympathetic listener and respond to his traumatic tale. Both genre and form, then, continue to prove important vehicles in Shelley's effort to evoke the reader's sympathy.

Importantly, the fact that Lionel's tale is a work of prophecy means that it will be read by his predecessors, by the people who inhabit the world of 1818 (the year in which the anonymous editor discovers the prophetic pages, "model[s]" them "into a consistent form," and "present[s]" them to the "public") (399, 6). Thus, although for Lionel "[p]osterity is no more," his tale will nevertheless be read—not by the humanity of the twenty-first century in which his tale is set but by that of the nineteenth century, by the humanity of the past, who might learn from his "story of adversity," one which speaks to and reinforces the primacy and necessity of human sympathy (322, 448). Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor agrees, noting that "the outside narrator discovers this script of literally performative language (the prophetic words of the Sibyl) and re-presents it . . . for an audience [Lionel] Verney supposes to be extinct" (769). Shelley's frame narrative is therefore her effort "to re-theatricalize, as sympathetic exchange, the relationship of text and audience" (771). According to Lawlor, "*The Last Man*'s frame functions to re-present the narrator's mediated version of the story, insisting that this tale of a dead-end history be opened back up to reader responsiveness, back to that most important of human feelings, sympathy" (769). "The value of the story," she continues, "now becomes the animation of the reader's sympathetic identification with Verney's" tale (769). For Shelley, then, genre and form are essential in the author's endeavour to engage the reader and enlist her sympathy.

Unlike *The Last Man*, *Lodore* received exclusively positive reviews (as Lisa Vargo observes, "[r]eviews of the novel were uniformly favourable") ("Introduction" 531). Most likely, Shelley's contemporary readers responded more positively to *Lodore* than to her previous novels because of its genre (a novel of manners), which they would have felt more

appropriate for a woman author. As a novel of manners, *Lodore* is "a realistic novel that focuses on the customs, conversation, and ways of thinking and valuing of the upper social class" (Abrams 200). It has also been described as a silver-fork novel, a form that "flourished during the 1820s and 1830s" (Vargo, "Lodore" 426). As Vargo explains, "the form served as a sort of conduct book for the newly rich" and "reflect[ed] the ascendency of middle-class ideology" ("Lodore" 426). Also called "silver-spoon" fiction, this genre "revelled in representations of the family relationships, financial fluctuations, [and] marital successes and failures of English high society" (Stafford, "Lodore" 182). According to Fiona Stafford, Shelley chose the form, in part, "to conform to the popular taste of the day" as "[t]he extreme difficulties that beset the contemporary book trade resulted in great pressure being put on writers to produce something saleable in order to be published at all" (183). However, Shelley subverts the conventionally conservative genre and adapts it to her political agenda, but in a way only discernible to the close reader. As with Jane Austen, it could be argued that in *Lodore*, as in her other novels, Shelley "enact[s] a 'sneaky feminism'" whereby "surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning" (qtd. in Looser 5; Newton 12). Although superficially a traditional novel about aristocrats and domestic life that reinforces bourgeois values, *Lodore* is in fact a powerfully feminist text that comments on the stifling lives women are forced to lead and on the necessity of female education.

More generally, as Betty T. Bennett has recognized, *Lodore* is "silver-fork novel transformed through a Romantic's vision" ("General Introduction" lvii). According to Bennett, "*Lodore* dissects aristocratic values to ultimately demonstrate that they are deleterious both personally and societally" (lvii). "In their stead," Bennett continues, "the novel proposes egalitarian educational paradigms for women *and* men, which would bring social justice as well as the spiritual and intellectual means by which to meet the challenges

life invariably brings" (lvii, my emphasis). As in *Matilda*, then, Shelley subverts conventional generic themes in order to both critique her society and present an alternative vision for her readers. And in her "adoption of the most popular contemporary genre of fiction," Shelley reaches the widest possible audience for her political message and so increases the possibility of sympathetic response in her readers (Stafford, "Lodore" 186-7).

Notably, the primary focus of the majority of reviews of *Lodore* is its affective rendering of feeling. Its ability to both represent emotion and evince it in the reader is its primary achievement, according to contemporary reviews. This is accomplished in part by Shelley's affecting writing style, in part by characterization (a reviewer for *The Literary Gazette* (March 1835) notes that "'Cornelia is a character for general sympathy; for how many must feel that they are wholly unappreciated, and wholly unknown!'"), and in part by genre and form (qtd. in Lyle 544). The reviewers of Shelley's day were particularly moved by her portraits of love, whether familial, romantic, or platonic. As a reviewer for *The Atlas* writes on May 10, 1835, "'the paramount spell of [*Lodore*] lies in its minute and faithful delineation of the feelings of love'" (qtd. in Lyle 179). Similarly, a reviewer for the *Morning Herald* (May 1835) insists that the novel "'deserves to be considered a work of deep feeling and delicate moral scrutiny,'" and a reviewer for the *Morning Post* (April 1835) writes that "'Love . . . in one or other of its glorious avatars is the pervading spirit, the genius, of the book'" (180). As these reviews suggest, *Lodore* is a deeply "'affecting tale,'" to quote from another review in the *Sunday Times* (April 1835), and because of this, it was able to both reach and influence a more expansive readership (181).

Although *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* were equally "affecting," their genres tended to distance some readers and so prevent those readers from engaging as fully and meaningfully with the narratives. In fact, this is precisely what a reviewer for the *Weekly Dispatch* (April 1835) asserts in reference to *Lodore*: "'*Frankenstein* was unbelievable, *The*

*Last Man* unpopular [as stated above, in part because of its science fictional elements] . . . but *Lodore* narrates 'the affairs of real life,'" and the characters, "'although highly interesting, do not outrage either nature or probability'" (181). Notably, Shelley's intention in *Lodore* is to both awaken sympathy in the reader and, as in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, to underscore the importance of sympathy to the wellbeing of both the individual and society, and she seeks to achieve this by not only writing about feeling but by imbuing the writing itself with feeling. As the contemporary reviews attest, this is precisely what she achieves. A reviewer for *Fraser's Magazine* (May 1835), for example, remarks upon the novel's "'boldness and *directness* in penetrating to the recesses and displaying the motives and workings of the heart—its feelings and passions'" (qtd. in Vargo, "Appendix E" 535). A reviewer for the *New Monthly Magazine* (June 1835) suggests something similar, observing that the novel is a "'romance of *sentiment*, not of *incident*'" (545). Through writing with and about feeling, Shelley successfully awakens it in her readers and so draws them into her narrative.

Although Shelley's final novel, *Falkner*, was not as successful as *Lodore*, it nevertheless "sold well and generated salutary notices" (Bunnell 276). A reviewer for *The Athenaeum* (February 1837), for example, writes that Shelley's novels in general never fail to "'appeal to our more generous sympathies'"; there is "'a constant display of the finer affections,'" the reviewer observes, "'which raise them above the common level of tales of every-day life'" (qtd. in Lyle 181). According to this reviewer, echoing the abovementioned reviewer of *Lodore*, Shelley's novels are "'stories of thought and feeling, rather than of manners and character,'" and "'the one before us [*Falkner*] is among the best, if not quite the best, of the number'" (181). A reviewer in *The Monthly Repository* (April 1837) similarly argues that *Falkner* is Shelley's "'finest work,'" possessing "'deep interest, and fine development of character'" (182). As with *Lodore*, it was *Falkner*'s genre (romance, realist,

and social novel) that contributed to the more favourable reviews from its contemporary readership.

However, other readers found the novel's focus on feelings "'tedious,'" as a reviewer for *The Examiner* (February 1837) contends (182). A reviewer for *The Weekly Chronicle* (February 1837) was even more disparaging, describing "'the plot and characters'" as "'[s]entiment run mad, and madness without a straight waistcoat'" (183). "'[A]ll common sense is entirely thrown overboard,'" this reviewer insists (183). Indeed, as Hill-Miller comments, "the sentimentality of *Falkner* has often presented an obstacle to modern readers" as well (165). Overall, though, *Falkner* was positively reviewed, and its "sentimentality," for the most part, served to enhance rather than diminish its readers' sympathy. As this section shows, Shelley utilized both genre and form to widen her readership and intensify her readers' emotional responses to her novels.

While genre certainly plays an important role in influencing reader response in Shelley's novels, narrative and character development are the fundamental components of her endeavour to both foster the reader's sympathy and highlight the necessity of sympathy to self and society. Close readings of Shelley's novels are therefore the foundation of this study. Ultimately, these close readings will reveal the variety of perspectives on sympathy that are presented in Shelley's novels. Importantly, because Shelley's philosophy of sympathy developed over her lifetime, the decision to discuss her novels chronologically was an obvious one. Interestingly, Shelley's lifelong engagement with sympathy mirrors the emotion itself—just as the emotion is protean in nature, its meanings and effects always in flux, shifting and changing, so Shelley's exploration of it fluctuates; there is a fluidity to her approach that allows for constant revision and redefinitions, an openness that yields new insights and discoveries. It is only by following her novels chronologically that one can see the true development of Shelley's theory of sympathy, which is not a steady, even

progression but rather remarkably unstable and changeable. Nevertheless, despite the modifications and transformations in Shelley's understanding of sympathy, there is a consistency in her determination to examine this emotion in all of its permutations, and when we come to her final novel, *Falkner*, we see a distinct acknowledgement of sympathy's complexity alongside an affirmation of its implicitly moral nature and therefore of its necessity to the ethical subject.

## Chapter Breakdowns:

### Shelley's Evolving Theory of Sympathy from *Frankenstein* to *Falkner*

Chapter One thus begins with Shelley's first novel, exploring the making of monstrosity in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). In *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury argues that "whoever is unsocial and voluntarily shuns society or commerce with the world must of necessity be morose and ill-natured" (215). "He, on the other side," Shaftesbury continues, "who is withheld [from socializing] by force or accident, finds in his temper the ill-effects of this restraint" (215). "The inclination [to participate in society], when suppressed, breeds discontent" (215). Victor Frankenstein and his creature fit these descriptions respectively. Obsessed with finding the source of life's generation, Frankenstein "voluntarily shuns society." As he admits, "[s]tudy . . . secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial" (Shelley, *F* 94). Consequently, he becomes solipsistic and melancholic, and when he succeeds in creating life, he further isolates himself from society and finally becomes suicidal. The creature, on the other hand, longs to take part in social existence but is debarred from doing so because of his monstrous exterior. As Edward T. Oakes writes, the creature "emerge[s] from his creator's laboratory already an inevitable outcast, abandoned in horror even by his own creator" (59). And so, like

Frankenstein, he ultimately longs for death.[26] Indeed, as Shaftesbury insists, "[s]uch . . . is man's natural share of . . . affection," or sympathy, "that he, of all other creatures, is plainly the least able to bear solitude" (215). According to Shelley, then, without sympathy, "the only pleasure worth having in the world," life is not worth living (Shelley, *Letters* 301).

The novel is therefore "framed by," in Koretsky's words, "a wish for reciprocal relationality" ("Unhallowed" 248).[27] Yet, such mutual sympathy is frustrated by the natural human tendency to seek likeness in others.[28] That is, because sympathy depends on a similarity to self, it often fails when confronted with difference. As Yousef writes, "identification is the irreducible sympathetic insight—the other is like me" (5). According to Shelley, however, this need for resemblance can be overcome through reading, an argument that, as stated above, Smith also makes. Shelley demonstrates this through the creature, whose reading teaches him to sympathize with those unlike himself. As Britton writes, "where sympathetic experiences may fail, narrative can succeed" (2). *Frankenstein,* according to Britton, "returns to the body, specifically the monstrous body, as an obstacle" for "experiences of sympathy" (13). "Where the body marks a limit of sympathy," she continues, "the written word, specifically the transcribed narrative, indicates sympathy's potential to overcome this barrier by means of novelistic generation" (13). In *Frankenstein,* then, Shelley shows how the natural limits of sympathy might be mitigated through reading. But in ending the novel with the creature promising to destroy himself, having never found the reciprocal feeling for which he has yearned, Shelley also reveals her deep scepticism:

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[26] Yet, as Koretsky observes, although "the creature is, like Frankenstein, suicidal, he is guided by a desire for companionship and a capacity for sympathy that is . . . almost completely lacking in Frankenstein." See "'Unhallowed Arts': *Frankenstein* and the Poetics of Suicide," *European Romantic Review,* 26.2 (2015): 252.
[27] The novel suggests, according to Koretsky, that "'selves' cannot exist without others, for Frankenstein's self-involvement is, by his own admission, his downfall." See "'Unhallowed,'" 251.
[28] Britton argues that the characters in *Frankenstein* "desperately seek but never find ideal sympathetic companionship, and the novel's plot 'repeatedly dramatizes the failure of social sympathy.'" See "Novelistic Sympathy," 1.

sympathy has ultimately failed; humanity remains prejudiced and incapable of sympathizing with the "other," and so the creature's only recourse is death.[29]

While in *Frankenstein* it is a lack of sympathy that brings about the desire for death, in *Matilda*, discussed in Chapter Two, it is an excess of sympathy that leads to suicidal behaviour. Matilda, despite her father's shocking revelation of his incestuous love for her and subsequent suicide (provoked by his abnormal and excessive sympathy), lives out the rest of her numbered days pining over him, barring herself from all sympathy and longing only for death, which she believes will reunite her with her father. Although Matilda is momentarily tempted by the "magnetic pull" of sympathy, to use a phrase from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), she eventually chooses death and, I argue, commits active euthanasia (308). Matilda's self-consuming sympathy for her father not only alienates her from all community and communal feeling, it ultimately becomes the agent of her death. Here, a surfeit of sympathy is shown to be as destructive as its absence.

Chapter Three is also concerned with the dangers of extreme or "distempered sympathy" (Shelley, *LM* 278). In *The Last* Man, several of the characters become "seized with irresistible sympathy," as if seized by illness (278). For example, Perdita's sympathy for her dead husband is so self-denying in its extremity that she mimics his state of being, telling her brother to "[l]ook on [her] as dead" (210). This seeming death is actualized when Perdita drowns herself at sea, becoming "the victim of too much loving" (216). Shelley also warns of the manipulation of public sympathy in *The Last Man*, in which a false prophet gains the sympathy of a desperate and dying humanity and bids his "spectators go home and die" (263). Such malignant influence, Shelley cautions, is made possible through the workings of

[29] As Faubert and Nicole Reynolds write, "A monstrous Eve to Victor's Adam, the creature will eventually follow Werther's example and destroy himself, sati-like, on Victor's funeral pyre." See "Introduction: Romanticism and Suicide," *Literature Compass* 12.12 (2015): 647. According to Koretsky, "[t]hrough the novel's suggestion of the creature's suicide, Mary Shelley finally submits the possibility that European culture needs to rethink its prevailing, and discriminatory, notions of who counts as a 'self.'" See "'Unhallowed,'" 256.

sympathy. Significantly, the effects of the plague in this novel mirror those produced by sympathetic excess (isolation, antisocial behaviour, and self-destruction). While the plague initially unites humanity in a community of suffering, as it spreads, it severs social and familial ties, "the fear of contagion . . . arm[ing] those nearest in blood against each other" (295). By comparing sympathy in its pathological form to the plague, Shelley highlights the disastrous effects this emotion, itself contagious, can have on the individual and the world at large.

Conversely, Shelley's penultimate novel *Lodore*, discussed in Chapter Four, offers an unequivocal affirmation of the moralizing potential of sympathy (although it does, like the works before it, nevertheless expose the limits our self-interest can impose on our ability to sympathize). The novel concludes with a celebration of Fanny Derham, a Wollstonecraftian figure if there ever were one, who is the embodiment of Shelley's ideal sympathy, one which is sincere and "self-sufficing" (*L* 322). Fanny's example, in Shelley's view, will "teach" the reader "what goodness and genius can achieve in palliating the woes of life" and how "the passions of our nature [may be] purified and ennobled by an undeviating observance of those moral laws on which all human excellence is founded—a love of truth in ourselves, and a sincere sympathy with our fellow-creatures" (448). Sympathy in *Lodore* is thus shown to be essential to morality.

In Shelley's final novel, *Falkner*, however, discussed in Chapter Five, Shelley again turns to the potentially harmful (and fatal) effects of sympathetic excess. Indeed, in *Falkner*, she shows that sympathy may even encourage immoral (rather than moral) behaviour, for it is the eponymous hero's "mad excess of love," his pathological sympathy, that causes him to commit a crime that results in his beloved's death (*Falkner* 295). In order to atone for this crime, Falkner turns to self-destruction. However, he is prevented from taking his own life by the enduring sympathy of his adopted daughter Elizabeth Raby. Falkner is therefore unable to

escape his suffering, borne of the guilt he feels, because of Elizabeth's sympathy—he is forced to live what he considers a miserable existence for the sake of another. Sympathy in *Falkner* therefore prolongs rather than relieves pain. That Shelley's final two novels present sympathy in such different lights indicates that she continued to grapple with the paradoxical nature of this emotion even in the final stages of her writing career.

Shelley's preoccupation with sympathy and its effects on both the individual and the wider world was lifelong. Ultimately, in a distinctly Romantic gesture, she refuses to provide a definitive answer. Like her fellow Romantics, Shelley understood the creative potential of uncertainty, for it lends itself to that endless conjecture Wollstonecraft praises in *Rights of Men* (1790): "the most improving exercise of the mind," Wollstonecraft asserts, "is the restless enquiries that hover on the boundary, or stretch over the dark abyss of uncertainty"; [t]hese lively conjectures," she continues, "are the breezes that preserve the still lake from stagnating" (50). In leaving the sympathy question open-ended, Shelley makes her most radical contribution.

## Chapter One:

## The Making of Monstrosity: The Failure of Sympathy

## in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

In the relationship of the self (the same) to the Other, the Other is distant, he is the stranger.

—Maurice Blanchot, *L'Ecriture du desastre*[30]

All that is external to me, is now strange henceforward. I have, in this world, neither neighbour, nor kinsmen, nor brothers. I am upon the earth as upon a strange planet.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary*[31]

Mary Shelley's lifelong preoccupation with sympathy and its social, political, and ethical effects (both positive and negative) begins with her first novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), the focus of which is the failure of sympathy. The novel, written when Shelley was only nineteen, ends in obscurity, in absence and separation, with Victor Frankenstein's forsaken creature "borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance" (Shelley, *F* 221). A perpetual stranger, exiled and alone, the creature, finding himself "unsympathized with," has nothing to "link" him "to the world" and so vows to destroy himself, to "extinguish the spark" of life his creator had "so negligently bestowed" (149, 151, 118). In *Frankenstein,* Shelley suggests that the making of monstrosity stems from an absence of sympathy. The creature Frankenstein creates is not born monstrous (he is born an innocent, wishing to give and receive sympathy). It is Frankenstein's abandonment and hatred of his creation and society's cruelty towards him (because of his "hideous" "aspect," the creature is unjustly persecuted and ostracized from the human world) that transform the naturally compassionate creature into a "monster" (99, 84). Because of his alterity, the

[30] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 18.
[31] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of a Solitary*, Trans. John Gould Fletcher (New York: Burt Franklin, 1927) 37.

creature is barred from the realm of sympathy; he is the quintessential "Other,"[32] a stranger, always outside humanity's circle of moral consideration.

Interestingly, in his largely autobiographical *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782), Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had an important influence on both Wollstonecraft and Shelley, and from whom the character of the creature is partially drawn, declares that his "body is nothing to [him] but an embarrassment, but an obstacle" (40). Like the creature, whose "hideous body consistently precludes sympathetic experience," Rousseau encounters a similar sense of isolation and alienation as a consequence of his physical self (Britton 2). For the creature and Rousseau, the body is the "obstacle" that stands between them and the sympathy of others. It is worth noting, however, that our perception of the creature is based on the accounts of the characters within the novel (characters who prove unable to sympathize with individuals unlike themselves, and therefore whose perceptions are potentially distorted and unreliable). Frankenstein tells us that the creature has "watery eyes," a "shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips," and Walton comments on his "long locks of ragged hair" (Shelley, *F* 83). Both men are appalled by his "gigantic stature" (he is eight feet tall) and his strangeness (Frankenstein declares that he has a "deformity of . . . aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity," and Walton observes that his "gigantic stature is uncouth and distorted in its proportions") (99, 217). Indeed, our first glimpse of the creature (through Walton's eyes) is as "[a] strange sight" (that is, unfamiliar) (58). Yet, Frankenstein and Walton's descriptions simply indicate the creature's otherness, not his monstrosity (it is only according to their perception and that of the other characters in the novel that the creature's otherness is conflated with monstrosity). Moreover, Walton admits that the creature has "*the shape of a man*, but" with an "apparently gigantic stature" (58, 99). If the

[32] In Shelley's *Valperga*, the witch Mandragola is similarly othered, described as "deformed"; "hardly human"; and "unlike humanity," "form[ing] a species apart." See *Valperga, or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 370.

creature has the shape of a human being, how monstrous can his form really be? Importantly, though, the characters in the novel do specifically refer to the creature as a "monster," but again, this epithet may only reflect his otherness. Frankenstein uses the term "monster" repeatedly: "I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created"; "The form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was for ever before my eyes"; "I lived in daily fear, lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness"; "Abhorred monster! Fiend thou art!" (84, 87, 112, 118). Even the creature, as a consequence of his ill treatment, comes to wonder whether he is in fact a monster: "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?"; "'Cursed creator!,'" he later says to Frankenstein, "'Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?" (136, 144). Pointing out humanity's "fatal prejudice," the creature observes: "my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster" (147). Felix, the son of the blind old man whom the creature befriends, is a perfect example of such prejudice; unable to see past the creature's hideous form, he cries: "'monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces—You are an ogre'" (157). The reader is therefore in an ideal position to sympathize with the creature; unable to physically see him, the reader encounters him free of prejudice (although, as discussed previously, and as will be discussed in further detail below, the characters' perceptions of the creature may nevertheless have an influence on how the reader responds to him).

As an outsider, Frankenstein's creature is denied the comforts of inclusion, companionship, and community; he is a stranger to sympathy, notions of family, home, belonging, and reciprocal feeling utterly foreign to him. In this way, the creature again recalls Rousseau in his *Reveries*, in which he writes: "I am nothing henceforward among men, and

that is all that I can be, having no more a real relation or a veritable companionship with them" (39). Existing in a state of radical otherness, in a state of unrelatable "strangeness," the creature, because "foreign, unfamiliar, uncommon, unusual," is denied what Wollstonecraft refers to as the "healing balm of sympathy" (*OED*, "Strangeness" def. 1a; Wollstonecraft, *Mary* 48). His "unearthly ugliness render[ing]" him "almost too horrible for human eyes," Frankenstein's creature is shunned and forever denied sympathy, which ultimately leads him to seek revenge and, finally, to contemplate suicide (Shelley, *F* 118). The real monstrosity in the novel, then, is humanity's inability to sympathize, which is the source of the creature's despair and consequent desire to die. As Shelley makes clear, this failure is due to the fact that a similarity to self is often a precondition for the activation of sympathetic feeling (an argument which, as discussed in the Introduction, has been made by Hume and Smith). This natural affinity for resemblance, Shelley cautions, can result in the marginalization and discrimination of those unlike ourselves. The final image of the creature "lost in darkness and distance," removed from all those necessary "ties of affection" and vanishing into obscurity, encapsulates this failure of sympathy in the novel (194).[33]

Importantly, however, Shelley insists that difference need not be a barrier to the sympathetic experience, for the creature is capable of extending his sympathy to individuals wholly unlike himself (the humans he encounters), and in ensuring that her readers' sympathies are aligned with the creature (and not with his more familiar human creator), Shelley shows her readers that a similarity between self and other is not necessary for sympathy to arise. Finally, following Smith, she argues that reading, which exercises the imagination and thereby develops one's sympathetic capacities, is key to overcoming barriers of difference, for it teaches individuals how to sympathize with others even when no

[33] The importance of being "linked by the affectionate ties of nature" is also a central concern in Shelley's *The Last Man*. See Shelley, *The Last Man*, Ed. Morton D. Paley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 76.

similitude exists (although the reader and Frankenstein's creature are physically different, for example, the reader nevertheless sympathizes with him).

Through the creature, the ostracized and orphaned "Other" who is "driven from the society and sympathy of [his] fellow creatures," Shelley destabilizes the view that sympathy is contingent upon likeness. As will be discussed below, traditional accounts of sympathy's mechanism privilege similitude, suggesting that the strength of an individual's sympathy is always subject to a similarity to self. But this is not the case for the creature. Although the individuals he encounters are "strangely unlike" him, he is nevertheless capable of sympathizing with them (142). Shelley therefore advances a theory of sympathy uninhibited by a reliance on resemblance, countering Hume and Smith's contention that sympathy hinges upon similitude, that likeness or proximity to self is integral to the sympathetic process.

Uttara Natarajan has also observed that "[t]he key factor in Hume's (and Smith's) argument for the imagination is contiguity, nearness, or resemblance," the "imagination enabling sympathy" ("Circle" 116). As she writes, "Hume's imagination perceives likeness" (116). "The origin of sympathy is imagination," she continues, which," according to Hume, "can conceive of others, because of their closeness to ourselves. The self is present most strongly to the imagination, others in proportion to their closeness to the self" (116). As quoted in the Introduction, Hume argues in his *Enquiry* that our sympathy for others "is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us, much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous" (45).[34] Similarly, in his *Treatise*, Hume observes that "[t]he stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person" (318). "The sentiments

[34] Shelley writes something similar in *Lodore*: "The evidence of the senses, and the ideas of our own minds are more forcibly present, than any notion we can form of others." See *Lodore*, ed. Lisa Vargo (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997) 209.

of others," he continues, "have little influence, when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely" (318). Commenting on the interconnection between "the transsubjective and the individual in Hume," Pinch notes that, according to Hume, "the force of sympathy begins with our 'idea of our own person'" (*Strange* 35). Sympathy for Hume, she continues, "is predicated on our perception of a resemblance between another person and our idea of ourselves: the more resemblance we perceive, the more conversion of idea to impression takes place" (35). In *Lectures,* also quoted in the Introduction, Smith makes an analogous argument: "Those persons most excite our compassion and are most apt to affect our sympathy who most resemble ourselves," he writes, "and the greater the difference the less we are affected by them" (184). Similarly, in *Moral Sentiments*, Smith contends that, "[a]fter himself, the members of his own family . . . are naturally the objects of [an individual's] warmest affection" (220). "He is more habituated to sympathize with them," Smith continues, "and his sympathy with them is more precise and determinate than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer . . . to what he feels for himself" (220). J.R. Weinstein observes that, for Smith, "both physical and psychological distance affect the ability of people to sympathize," citing Otteson, who refers to this as the "'familiarity principle'" (87). Yet, the constraints of distance (both metaphorical and literal) and difference, according to Smith, can be overcome through education (and reading in particular), through which one can become more familiar with the "shades and gradations of circumstance, character, and situation," with the "differences and distinctions," that are a necessary and inevitable part of human existence (*TMS* 228). As Weinstein elucidates, "for Smith, the ability to sympathize rests on either pre-existing commonalities or the ability to create commonalities by learning the contexts and perspectives of others" through education (specifically, a liberal arts education) (101). According to Smith, "education can be a substitute for familiarity when parties are so distant that we can feel no

affection for them" (106). In *Frankenstein*, Shelley investigates whether Smith's theory holds up when confronted with a being as categorically different as Frankenstein's creature.

Because of his monstrous form, the creature is relegated to the peripheries of society and confined to utter solitude, isolated from all communication and community. According to Smith, in such a situation, it is impossible for morality to develop:

> Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than the beauty and deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed within the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind. (*TMS* 111-12)[35]

For Smith, then, society acts as a mirror, reflecting ourselves back at ourselves, showing us the "propriety or impropriety" of our behaviour and actions (Hume makes a similar argument in his *Treatise*, observing that "the minds of men are mirrors to one another") (365). In short, moral conscience, in Smith's view, can only develop through our interactions with others.

G.W.F. Hegel, in his "Lectures on Fine Art," makes a similar argument in reference to identity formation. For Hegel, in order to develop a sense of self-awareness, the self needs to

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[35] Wollstonecraft argues something comparable in *Rights of Woman*: "The world cannot be seen by an unmoved spectator, we must mix with the throng, and feel as men feel before we can judge of their feelings." "If we mean . . . to live in the world and grow wiser and better, and not merely to enjoy the good things of life," she continues, "we must attain a knowledge of others at the same time that we become acquainted with ourselves." See *Rights of Woman*, 239-40, 240.

be confronted with an other. Identity is, in part, formed through our relations with others. That is, we become selves through a dialectical process, through our encounters with beings who are not ourselves. If Smith and Hegel are correct about the necessity of relationality in the formation and development of both morality and identity, then Frankenstein's creature is neither a moral being nor, for that matter, a self. Although he is an intelligent *observer* of human nature, the creature is never given the opportunity to interact with humanity. Koretsky thus argues that the creature *is not* in fact a subject since "sympathetic engagement" is fundamental to "the process of subject formation" ("'Unhallowed'" 251).[36] Yet, as Shelley makes clear throughout the novel, the creature is very much a subject (and a deeply moral one at that), capable of independent thought and strong sympathies. If he is forever alienated from human interaction and reciprocal feeling, how, then, does his subjectivity, his individual identity, develop, and how does his moral conscience come into being?

It is through his position as compassionate spectator (he secretly observes the domestic life of the De Lacey family from a hovel adjoining their home) as well as through his encounters with stories (he listens to the family read aloud and teaches himself to read) that the creature cultivates both a sense of self and a profound capacity for sympathy. While Smith believes that human interaction is a prerequisite for the unfolding of moral consciousness (and that reading literature, which exercises the imagination, can only *then* assist in the cultivation of sympathy for those unlike ourselves), Shelley here insists that morality can arise even in isolation—even in the absence of human communication. Importantly, however, as discussed in the Introduction, like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, Shelley also believed that we possess innate "disinterested Affections" (Hutcheson, *Essay* xii). That the creature himself clearly exhibits an inborn benevolence—he

[36] Koretsky goes on to argue, however, that the creature's "'friendship' with Frankenstein—their mutual mission of destruction—constitutes both as subjects of sorts within each other's relational spheres." See "'Unhallowed,'" 256.

compassionates with the De Lacey family even before he learns to read—is therefore proof of his humanity. As will be shown below, the creature's essential goodness grows and develops as he observes the De Lacey family, reading, interpreting, and imitating their behaviours and actions (imitation being a key factor in the sympathetic process) in an attempt to better understand their way of being (understanding being the crux of sympathy). Eventually, seeking nothing in return, he performs acts of kindness that are completely altruistic, not tainted by self-interest. His reading of Goethe, Milton, and Plutarch only heightens his sense of morality and simultaneously precipitates an existential crisis—"'My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?'"—which in turn leads to self-awareness, to an understanding that he is both "similar" to and "strangely unlike the beings concerning whom [he] read[s] and to whose conversation [he] [is] a listener" (Shelley, *F* 142-3, 142). Through the creature, then, Shelley shows that it is indeed "possible" for an individual to "grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species" yet still come to recognize "the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct." More than this, Shelley illustrates that, not only can powerful sympathies arise through *observing* humanity (the creature reads and learns from the De Laceys as he would a text) and from reading itself, but that sympathy need not depend on contiguity, for the creature extends his sympathy freely (and disinterestedly) to beings completely unlike himself (142).

But because humanity fails to return the creature's sympathy, he languishes in a state of unremitting alienation in which no interchange of feeling is possible and so inevitably becomes the monster he is falsely perceived to be. Despite developing into a moral subject, he is never treated as such. Consequently, he first turns to revenge and finally to suicide (through which he seeks to assert (and affirm) his selfhood—since the very act of self-destruction

implies the existence of a self in the first place).[37] In his interminable solitude and desire to destroy himself, the creature anticipates the eponymous heroine of Shelley's *Matilda*, who, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, is convinced she is "polluted by the unnatural love [she has] inspired"—her father's incestuous love for her (*M* 203). Feigning her own death, Matilda all but vanishes from the social world and eventually, I argue, commits active euthanasia. The creature's lamentation, "I was dependent on none, and related to none" is later echoed by Matilda: "an eternal barrier [has been set] between me and my fellow creatures. I [am] indeed fellow to no one," she mourns (*F* 142; *M* 196).[38] As Shelley shows in *Frankenstein*, although it is possible to become a moral and self-determining being in isolation, without reciprocation, without human interaction, life becomes unlivable. Utterly detached from society, the only solace the creature can imagine is in death.

*Frankenstein* therefore represents for its readers a world in which sympathy fails to facilitate a fuller understanding of difference, to bridge the gap between self and other. Distant and unfamiliar, the creature remains the marginalized "Other," abject and alone. Importantly, Frankenstein's creature could stand in for women as a whole, subjugated and oppressed within a patriarchal order (thus aligning the novel with Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and *Maria*) as he could for the African slaves still being held throughout the British Empire in the year of *Frankenstein*'s publication (Wollstonecraft repeatedly compares the state of women in eighteenth-century England to that of slaves in *Rights of Woman*). Just as the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, because female, must educate herself, so the creature, because "other," and because neglected by his creator and by society as whole, must, like

[37] There is of course an irony in the fact that the act of destroying oneself is also a means of asserting that self.
[38] Both the creature and Matilda are "outcast[s] from human feeling"—because of an external monstrousness in the case of the creature and a perceived internal monstrousness in the case of Matilda, who describes herself as a "monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love." Like the creature, Matilda is "excluded from all intercourse" and "struck off from humanity." See Shelley, *M*, 203, 203-4, 197, 196. Similarly, Manfred, who, like Matilda, is an outcast by choice, is equally estranged from human feeling, professing that there is neither "Father or mother, mistress, friend, or being, / With whom [he wears] the chain of human ties"—but with the mysterious addendum, "yet there was one—" See Byron, "Manfred," 2.2.99-104.

women, educate himself. And just as much of Wollstonecraft's heroine's self-education occurs during her ramblings in nature, so the creature's self-education takes place within the solitude of the natural world. Excluded from the social world, the creature is Shelley's nineteenth-century Caliban, deprived of, but desperately desiring, sympathetic companionship. Through the creature, Shelley seeks to reinvest the object with subjecthood, to remind the reader of the undeniable subjectivity of any objectified "other."[39] The characters within the fictional frame are unable to connect with this distant "other," but Shelley makes it possible for the reader to do so. And it is by means of the creature's "articulacy of feeling" that the reader is drawn into sympathetic identification with him and is thus able to feel what it is like to be defined as monstrous, as "other" (Mullan, *Sentiment* 25).[40]

However, because of the structure of the novel (as discussed in the Introduction, it is comprised of three frame narratives), the reader's sympathies are first focused on Frankenstein (since his narrative precedes the creature's). Before encountering Frankenstein, the reader is introduced to Robert Walton, a northern adventurer whose tale (occupying the fringes of the novel) includes his letters to his sister Mrs. Saville and his transcription of Frankenstein's narrative. Walton, desperate for the companionship of another, presents Frankenstein as a compassionate individual worthy of sympathy. In this way, the reader is initially encouraged to sympathize with Frankenstein. Walton's tale is both a prelude to and a foreshadowing of Frankenstein's narrative, for, like Frankenstein, Walton possesses an

[39] Gilbert and Gubar similarly argue that "the monster's narrative is" an "exploration of what it feels like to be . . . a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex." See *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 235.

[40] In a study arguing for the transportive agency of the sympathetic imagination, it is important to note the possible risks of a reader's over-investment in another's experience. Some may argue that, in engaging too closely with a fictional character, a reader's imagination might be stretched in an immoral direction. In identifying with Frankenstein's creature, for example, the reader, because so sympathetic to the creature's just cause, may fail to recognize the immoral nature of his acts of vengeance.

"ardent curiosity" and a vaulting ambition (Shelley, *F* 52).[41] The captain of a ship bound for the far north, Walton aspires to discover "unexplored regions"; sailing towards "'the land of mist and snow,'" a reference to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), Walton embarks on a "great enterprise" that steers him towards the realm of the mythical, towards the "country of eternal light" (56, 56, 53, 51).[42] These descriptive phrases cue the reader to the fantastical nature of the tale. It is in the mythologized "'land of mist and snow'" that the friendless Walton, who "desire[s] the company of a man who could sympathize with [him]," encounters the moribund Frankenstein, his Promethean counterpart, his Faustian doppelganger, the sympathetic companion he has sought (54).

In another echo of the *Ancient Mariner*, Walton's ship becomes "shut in" by ice, "surrounded" and "closed in . . . on all sides," and just as the metaphorical albatross manifests in the *Ancient Mariner,* so in *Frankenstein* a "strange sight" materializes, an "apparition" that "seem[s] to denote that" land is near (58). This "strange sight," this being of "gigantic stature," the reader later learns, is Frankenstein's creature, his own self-made albatross, whom Frankenstein is wildly pursuing (58). Prefiguring Frankenstein's vivification of his creature, Walton and his crew take the "wretched" Frankenstein, who has been stranded on "a scattered piece of ice" in his pursuit of his creature, aboard their ship and restore him "to animation" (208, 59). Shelley's choice of the word "animation" is significant, for it anticipates Frankenstein's "animation" of "lifeless matter" (79).[43] Reanimated, Frankenstein tells Walton his "'tale of horrors'" in the hope that he will learn from his example, that his "'strange and terrific story'" will deter Walton from embarking on a similar path (59, 199, 209).

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[41] In this way, Frankenstein and Walton are like other overreachers and knowledge-seekers such as Icarus, the Miltonic Eve and Satan, Faust, Macbeth, Caleb Williams, and Manfred.
[42] P.B. Shelley read Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" aloud to Shelley and Claire Clairmont in September 1814. See *Journals*, 1: 25-6.
[43] Koretsky notes that this recalls "Wollstonecraft's restoration by the Royal Humane Society." See "'Unhallowed,'" 250.

Importantly, as mentioned briefly above, the way in which Frankenstein describes the creature (as a "daemon," a "fiend," a "monster," an "enemy") influences the reader's perception, these scathing epithets serving to inhibit the reader's sympathy for him (60, 112, 86, 87). Moreover, because of Walton's effusive praise of Frankenstein, the reader has no reason to question the veracity of his tale. Indeed, Walton's admiration for Frankenstein veers on the obsessive, and he is portrayed as a doting lover. "I never saw a more interesting creature," writes the adoring Walton, and "if any one performs an act of kindness towards him, or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up . . . with a beam of benevolence and sweetness" (59).[44] Presented with such a glowing description of Frankenstein, the reader is initially predisposed in his favour. "I begin to love him as a brother," Walton declares, "and his constant and deep grief fills me with sympathy and compassion" (60). As Walton continues to enumerate Frankenstein's virtues, the reader cannot help but be affected, her sympathy easily enlisted: "He is so gentle, yet so wise; his mind is cultivated; and when he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled excellence" (61). The reader's opinion of Frankenstein, then, is initially guided by Walton, whose praise is profuse and persuasive. Emphasizing Frankenstein's sympathetic nature, Walton observes that "he is not so utterly occupied by his own misery, but that he interests himself deeply in the employment of others" (61). "[A]ll he does appears to spring solely from the interest he instinctively takes in the welfare of those who surround him," Walton insists (61). Importantly, however, given that Frankenstein not only refuses to show sympathy to the being he has created (his offspring) but also abandons him and then seeks to murder him, it is deeply ironic that Frankenstein is here presented by Walton as the ideal sympathizer. Koretsky notes that

[44] Koretsky rightly observes that, in fact, "at no point in the novel does Frankenstein demonstrate the 'benevolence and sweetness' . . . that Walton claims to see in him." See "'Unhallowed,'" 250.

Walton also misinterprets Frankenstein's gratitude; as she writes, "Even Frankenstein's apparent gratitude to Walton for saving him from death is a fundamental misreading on Walton's part—by this point in the novel, Frankenstein's only desire is to kill the creature and to die. . . . If Frankenstein is grateful to Walton for anything, it is for prolonging his life so that he may kill the creature" ("'Unhallowed'" 250). Nevertheless, Walton's praise of Frankenstein's seemingly sympathetic nature coupled with Frankenstein's own rehearsal of the anguish he has endured ("I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes") encourage the reader to sympathize with the tale that he is about to relate (Shelley, *F* 62).

Like his creature, Frankenstein is remarkably eloquent; recalling Coleridge's transfixing storyteller (the albatross-carrying mariner), Frankenstein mesmerizes his sympathetic auditor (and simultaneously the reader) with his tale.[45] But as Frankenstein's tale proceeds, the reader's sympathy begins to wane. Presenting himself as a Faustian figure, tirelessly pursuing the forbidden knowledge of the cause of life's generation, Frankenstein describes how he alienated himself from humanity: "Study . . . secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial" (94).[46] "[E]ngaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit," Frankenstein "forget[s] [his] friends" (81). As Koretsky observes, "Frankenstein's friendships . . . are entirely self-centred—he has friends when he needs them, but when occupied, he ignores them" ("'Unhallowed'" 251). Victor's complete isolation from the outside world, from any form of human interaction, anticipates the creature's (but where Victor's isolation is willing, the creature's is not). Frankenstein himself acknowledges that he was consumed by "gloomy and narrow reflections upon self," imprisoned in a solipsistic (and so uncommunicative) state (Shelley, *F* 67). By emphasizing Frankenstein's antisocial

[45] Frankenstein directly aligns himself with Coleridge's mariner when he asks himself, "'Could I enter into a festival [a marriage to Elizabeth Lavenza] with this deadly weight yet hanging round my neck, and bowing me to the ground.'" See *F*, 163.

[46] Manfred, like Frankenstein, "dive[s], / In lone wanderings, to the caves of death, / Searching its cause in its effect, and dr[a]w[s] / From wither'd bones, and skulls, and heap'd up dust, / Conclusions most forbidden." See Byron, "Manfred," 2.2.80-83.

behaviour, Shelley seeks to undermine any sympathetic response that might have been called forth by Walton's narrative, revealing a significant flaw in Walton's perception of Frankenstein (and in Frankenstein's perception of himself).

Moreover, as will be shown below, while the creature's acts of sympathy arise from genuine altruism, Frankenstein's are much more self-interested. In creating a "human being," Frankenstein does hope to bequeath to his species the gift of immortality—"if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time . . . renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption"; however, his chief concern is to acquire universal admiration (81). He longs to be "bless[ed]" as the "creator and source" of "[a] new species," one that "would owe [its] being to [him]" (80). Frankenstein's imagined act of benevolence (curing his species of mortality), then, is intricately tied to self-interest,[47] to the ambitious goal of becoming the creator of an entirely new species who would venerate him as a divine being.[48] Frankenstein's (delusive) desire for power and his excessive fixation on self are indicative of a deeply megalomaniacal disposition, and therefore, as the narrative proceeds, the reader's sympathy for him may continue to subside.

When he finally succeeds in "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (having neglected his friends and family in the process), Frankenstein immediately rejects his creation (a rejection based solely on the creature's outward appearance): "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room" (84). "[N]o mortal could support the horror of that countenance," he insists; "I dreaded to behold the monster" (84, 86). Importantly, earlier in the text, Shelley hints that Frankenstein can only relate to (and respect) individuals similar to himself, for he discounts the instructor M. Kempe because he is "a little squat man, with a gruff voice and repulsive countenance" (75). As Frankenstein openly

[47] In this way, *Frankenstein* introduces what would become Shelley's lifelong preoccupation with the paradoxical mechanisms and motives involved in acts of compassion.
[48] As we will see, in Shelley's final novel, *Falkner*, the eponymous hero, when seeking to do a good deed (adopting a young child as his own) is similarly motivated by a mixture of sympathy and self-interest.

admits, “the teacher, therefore, did not prepossess me in favour of his doctrine” (74-75). However, he will listen to M. Waldman because he is young and has “an aspect expressive of benevolence” (75). Shelley here shows that Frankenstein’s capacity to sympathize rests entirely upon appearance and similitude (described by Walton as “attractive and amiable,” with a “countenance” lit up “with a beam of benevolence and sweetness,” Victor can only sympathize with individuals of a similar mien) (60, 59). Disgusted by the appearance of his creature, proclaiming that “[a] mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch,” Frankenstein callously abandons the being he has brought to life (84). As sympathy entails moral responsibility, Frankenstein’s forsaking his creation is a failure of both sympathy and responsibility. As such, this act of desertion aligns him with those negligent mothers Wollstonecraft chastises in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Rights of Woman* for relinquishing their “duty” to their “offspring” (*Thoughts* 1). Wollstonecraft argues that although “it be the duty of every rational creature to attend to its offspring,” she is “sorry to observe, that reason and duty together have not so powerful an influence over human conduct” (1-2). In *Eminent Literary and Scientific Men,* Shelley similarly maintains that “[o]ur first duty is to render those to whom we gave birth, wise, virtuous, and happy,” condemning parents who abandon their offspring (qtd. in Marshall 188).[49] Similarly, Smith, also commenting on parental neglect, writes that “[a] parent without parental tenderness, a child devoid of all filial reverence, appear monsters, the objects, not of hatred only, but of horror” (*TMS* 221). According to Smith’s reasoning, then, Frankenstein himself, not his “hideous” creation, is the real monster (Shelley, *F* 86). In this way, Shelley continues to weaken the affective tie between the reader and Frankenstein.

[49] David Marshall observes that, “like Rousseau, who ‘neglected the first duty of man by abandoning his children’ . . . Victor abandons the monster,” and “the monster in turn,” Marshall continues, “is like Rousseau’s children, who in Mary Shelley’s imagination are ‘brutified by their situation, or depressed by the burden, ever weighing at the heart, that they have not inherited the commonest right of humanity, a parent’s care.’” See Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 188.

This tie is further attenuated when Frankenstein refuses to defend Justine Moritz (wrongly accused of murdering his brother William) in court. Although Victor is aware of her innocence (and suspects that the creature is the perpetrator), he allows her to be put to death without intervening. His egomania is never more evident than when he suggests that his own suffering rivals that of Justine's: "The poor victim, who on the morrow was to pass the dreary boundary between life and death, felt not as I did, such deep and bitter agony" (108). "I—I was a wretch," he continues, "and none ever conceived of the misery that I then endured" (110). The iterated "I's" are the marks of the supreme solipsist unable to see outside of himself. Like Werther, whose similar cry, "me! me! me!," displays the absolute self-centredness of the solipsist, Frankenstein is imprisoned within his own subjectivity, eventually (and inevitably) spiralling into madness and finally, like Werther, and like his creature, seeking self-destruction (an act that can be read as quintessentially solipsistic) (Goethe 51).[50] As he descends into madness, Frankenstein becomes caged within his own self-centred universe—a world defined and confined by self. Anticipating Matilda (and unwittingly mimicking his creature's existence), Frankenstein "shun[s] the face of man" (Shelley, *F* 111). "[S]olitude was my only consolation," Frankenstein declares, "deep, dark, death-like solitude" (111).[51] His isolation breeds madness, which in turn breeds violent and murderous thoughts: "My abhorrence of this fiend cannot be conceived. When I thought of him, I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed . . . my hatred and revenge burst all bounds of moderation" (112). This excessive hatred, these morbid meditations on murder, may further

[50] Suicide, as represented in Shelley's fiction, can be interpreted in several ways. As stated above, for the creature (and, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, for Matilda), it is an act of both self-assertion and liberation. For Frankenstein, it is yet another mark of his solipsism, his fixation on self. For Matilda's father, it is an escape from misery and a means of protecting his daughter from himself. For Perdita in *The Last Man*, it is a way to reunite with her dead husband. For Falkner, as will be discussed in the final chapter, it is a means of atonement (of making amends for the crime he has committed). Also important to note, suicide in Shelley's fiction is always connected to sympathy, for she shows that suicide can result from either a dearth or an excess of sympathy.

[51] This phrase, "death-like solitude," is repeated verbatim in *Matilda*. See *M*, 185.

estrange Frankenstein from the reader's sympathy, and although upon encountering the creature he is temporarily given to compassion, Frankenstein's malice quickly re-emerges.

When the creature requests that Frankenstein provide him with a female of the same species with whom he might "live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for [his] being," Frankenstein, initially "'moved'" by the creature's tale and "'the feelings . . . expressed" therein, agrees (156). The emotional intensity with which the creature's plea is charged is also conveyed to the reader, the abundance of exclamation points indicative of his mental anguish: "'Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!'" (157). However, Frankenstein's compassion is fleeting, for in a fit of madness, fearing the creature might relinquish his promise to live in peace and instead propagate a new species, "'a race of devils,'" and wreak havoc on the world, Frankenstein destroys his work before it is completed, thus depriving the creature of the potential (and requisite) sympathy of a fellow creature (a callous and deeply violent act that may further alienate him from the reader's sympathies) (174).[52]

Notably, had Frankenstein completed the female creature, she would have been, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, his sister and his mate, "since both [would] have [had] the same parent/creator" (*Madwoman* 228). The creature's desire for a "companion of the same species," a female creature with "the same defects" as his own, stems from his longing for society and sympathy (but, more importantly, it also springs from his realization that, because of his strangeness and distance, the human world will never show him sympathy). The creature's implicitly incestuous request for a "female to accompany [him] in [his] exile"

[52] Koretsky comments that "Frankenstein's destruction of the mate . . . indicates his failure to recognize [the] need for sympathetic engagement." See "'Unhallowed,'" 254. Macdonald and Scherf's observation that "[t]he monster's central complaint is that he is solitary" is also relevant here; as they write, the creature's desire for a mate "reflect[s] Godwin's conception of humanity as essentially social, a conception that is perhaps expressed most clearly in his condemnation of solitary confinement." See "Introduction," *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus,* by Mary Shelley (Peterborough: Broadview, 2012) 16.

makes it clear just how desperate he is—he must turn to incest (the ultimate relationship of similitude) in order to receive sympathy. Having been denied all other forms of sympathetic connection by the society of humans, the creature is forced to turn to the only society available to him, that of his own kin (Shelley, *F* 159). Yet, Frankenstein denies his creature even this. "Shall each man . . . find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have a mate, and I be alone?" asks the creature (176). "You can blast all my other passions," he continues, "but revenge remains" (176). His nobler passions "blasted" by Frankenstein's cruelty, the creature can only turn to negative passions to sustain him. However, as will be detailed below, while Frankenstein never relents in his hatred for and desire to destroy his creation, the creature finally forgives Frankenstein and even feels pity for him. By characterizing Frankenstein in this way (as selfish, antisocial, violent, unforgiving, and vengeful), Shelley seeks to redirect her reader's sympathy towards the creature.

Although the creature's tale is at a far remove by the time it reaches the reader, having been told firsthand to Frankenstein who then tells it to Walton who then commits it to paper, the first-person narration of the creature's narrative and the feeling with which it is suffused steer the reader's sympathy towards him. In this way, Shelley teaches her reader how to sympathize with a being unlike herself. *Frankenstein* is therefore anchored in an awareness of the role sympathy can play in shaping (and bettering) society. Yet, as the novel makes clear, Shelley takes issue with the blanket endorsements of sympathy that were so common in her time, for she recognized that sympathy often failed to connect individuals with distant and unfamiliar others, which she demonstrates through the example of the creature, to whom sympathy is forever denied. Consequently, it is the reader Shelley calls on to sympathize with the creature, and the creature's ability to awaken the reader's sympathy hinges upon the persuasive force of his narration, which, like Rousseau's autobiographical *Confessions*, is a narrative of self. Notably, Keith McDonald has argued that "the autobiographical trope is in

many ways an education"; thus, the creature, through telling his personal narrative, gives the reader an education in sympathy (76). Moreover, just as creation gives life and establishes identity, so the creative act of telling one's story is self-generating.[53] Through his Rousseauvian autobiographical confession, then, the creature tells himself into being, thereby transforming from object to subject (as we will see, this is also the case with the eponymous heroine of *Matilda*, who, having lost all sense of self in her pathological love for and devotion to her father, finally reclaims her selfhood as she pens her life story on her deathbed). And the eloquence, emotive power, and honesty with which the creature tells his tale of self serve to displace the reader's sympathy in his direction, and away from his creator.

Hume's observations on the affecting influence of eloquence are relevant here: "[n]othing is more capable of infusing any passion into the mind, than eloquence, by which objects are presented in their strongest and most lively colours" (*Treatise* 426). "[A]n orator," he writes, "excites the imagination, and gives force" to "ideas" and feelings (426-7).[54] Consider, for example, the creature's impassioned entreaty to Frankenstein. Having been abandoned by his creator and left to fend for and educate himself, only to be confronted by an unsympathetic, intolerant, and utterly hostile humanity, the creature pleads:

> 'How can I move thee? Will not entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion. Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?' (Shelley, *F* 119)[55]

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[53] In his *Reveries*, Rousseau insists that "speaking with [his] own soul" is "the only thing of which men cannot rob [him]," which is also the case for the creature. Moreover, and importantly, Rousseau describes the act of writing the self as a "redoubl[ing]" of "existence." See *Reveries*, 38, 41.

[54] Notably, Shelley warns of the dangers of such eloquence in *The Last Man*, in which a false prophet preys on the sympathy and vulnerability of his spectators.

[55] The monster's aloneness anticipates that of Matilda; as the heroine intones, "'I am alone—quite alone—in the world—the blight of misfortune has passed over me and withered me." See *M*, 151. Similarly, Beatrice in *Valperga* feels "[a]lone, deserted by God and man," "[a]lone, alone!" See *V*, 345.

The creature here becomes the Rousseauvian "Solitary Walker,"[56] the cursed Cain, the Romantic social outcast, condemned to perpetual solitude, exiled from all human intercourse and sympathy.[57] Marshall similarly observes that Shelley's "portrayal of the abandoned monster specifically evokes Rousseau's role as outcast, exile, and wanderer" (190). "We can read in the monster's eloquent lamentations and especially in the misfortunes of his life," Marshall continues, "a dramatization of the conditions and sentiments that Rousseau depicts in the *Reveries*" (190-91). Indeed, the echoes of Rousseau's *Reveries* are strong: "Here am I, then, alone upon the earth, writes Rousseau, "having no brother, or neighbour, or friend, or society but myself" (31). In his exile and aloneness, the creature also recalls Hume in his *Treatise*: "I am first affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy," he writes, "and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate" (Selby-Bigge, ed. 264).[58] These allusions serve to further underscore the creature's sense of alienation and isolation.

Importantly, the outpouring, poignancy, and almost palpability of emotion evident in the creature's plea to his creator affirm what John Mullan has referred to as the "communicative power of feeling," for Frankenstein *is*, although only temporarily, "'move[d]'" by his creature's words, finally agreeing to listen to his tale (16). "'For the first time,'" Frankenstein admits, "'I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness'" (Shelley, *F*

[56] In Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, the eponymous heroine is presented in a similar way (Wollstonecraft had a complicated relationship with Rousseau's ideas but was nevertheless deeply influenced by them), described as a "forlorn wanderer." See "Mary," *Mary Wollstonecraft: Mary and The Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 45.

[57] In his position as social outcast, Shelley's creature anticipates the siblings Perdita and Lionel of *The Last Man*; as Shelley writes, "they had no relation to take them by the hand; they were outcasts . . . unfriended beings." See *LM*, 13. Similarly, Matilda, a self-confessed "youthful Hermitess," is "'separated from her fellow creatures'" and is thus another example of a Shelleyan societal outcast. See *M*, 188, 185.

[58] Pinch has also commented on the links between Frankenstein's creature and Hume, noting "Hume's representation of himself as a *Frankenstein*-like monster fleeing society." See *Strange*, 31.

120).[59] The reader, simultaneously reading the creature's words, is similarly moved, able to feel the creature's misery through the transportive agency of the sympathetic imagination. By becoming immersed in the creature's narrative by "simulating [his] subjective experience" through the imagination, the reader comes to care about and feel for the creature (Kaufman and Libby 9). And thus, although Frankenstein's friendless, forlorn, and forsaken creature is deprived of those feeling and "responsive hearts" he so desires, the reader may serve as surrogate, functioning as his silent companion, providing the sympathetic responsiveness the characters in the novel will not (Mullan 62).[60]

As the novel progresses, then, Shelley seeks to transfer her reader's sympathy from Frankenstein to his creature in order to show that difference need not be a barrier to sympathizing (if the reader can identify with a fictional being unlike herself, she may also do so with a flesh-and-blood human being in the world outside the text). As Newlyn notes, in *Frankenstein*, "[t]he focus of sympathy shift[s]" from creator to creation (*Paradise Lost* 135). In this way, Shelley shows how a reader might switch from one sympathetic position to another, how an author's inclusion of varying perspectives can influence and alter a reader's sympathetic allegiances. How, then, does Shelley succeed in reorienting her reader's sympathy in *Frankenstein*? How does she negotiate and manipulate this important shift in sympathy from Frankenstein to his creature? As shown above, the creature's eloquence and the authenticity of his emotion are part of the equation. Marshall observes that the creature "understands his own investment in his powers of eloquence and persuasion; he realizes that his fate depends on his ability to move others through a recital of his autobiography" (194). Shelley's use of Rousseau's confessional mode is another method whereby she seeks to relocate her reader's sympathy, guiding it away from the creator and towards his creation.

[59] This is a recognition on Frankenstein's part of the moral responsibility that is tied to sympathy.
[60] This relationship between reader and textual being becomes a running theme in Shelley's later fiction.

Like Rousseau in his *Confessions* (in which he presents himself as he is, in "all the truth of nature," revealing that which is "vile and despicable" as well as that which is "virtuous and generous"), the creature acknowledges his sins along with his virtues, admitting his fallibility and, in so doing, securing the reader's sympathy (in the final chapter, we will see that the eponymous protagonist of *Falkner* is another Rousseauvian figure, confessing his crimes in a personal narrative to garner sympathy from his intended audience) (Rousseau, *Confessions* 3, 4).[61] Moreover, just as Rousseau addresses the reader directly throughout his *Confessions* in order to draw her into his narrative of self (in one instance he writes, "compassionate reader, sympathize with my affliction"), so the creature, albeit less explicitly, speaks to the reader in a similar manner (48). Although he is speaking to Frankenstein, the creature often addresses the indeterminate "you,"[62] a strategy that serves to build an affective affinity between him and the reader, and consequently, to steer her sympathy away from Frankenstein.[63]

The creature, attempting to appeal to Frankenstein's humanity, persuasively declares, "'I entreat *you* to hear me. . . . Let *your* compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when *you* have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as *you* shall judge that I deserve. But hear me'" (Shelley, *F* 118-119, my emphasis). The creature's habit of addressing the indeterminate "you," in which the subject is suspended in referential ambiguity, encourages a sympathetic kinship between reader and fictive character. In this way, the reader becomes a participant in the story, "'commiserat[ing]'" with the creature, compassionating with him, where Frankenstein will not.

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[61] Marshall observes that, "like Rousseau," the creature "seems to possess a naïve faith in the power of autobiography, in the effects of telling one's own story, as he reveals both his virtues and his crimes before the judgment of his creator." The creature, Marshall continues, believes "that everything depends on his ability to move the heart of his listener: to inflame his passions, to elicit his compassion. He understands that the story of his life depends on sympathy." See *Surprising*, 194, 195.

[62] Wollstonecraft also uses this method in *Maria*, the heroine of which uses the indefinite "you" throughout her narrative—most revealingly, in her memoir written for (and addressed to) her child.

[63] The character Lionel in Shelley's *The Last Man*, like Rousseau in his *Confessions*, frequently addresses the reader *directly*; as he declares in one instance, "Attend, O reader! while I narrate this tale of wonders!" See *LM*, 78.

Ironically, it is the monster (and not the man) who recognizes the essential link between sympathy and morality. Echoing the eighteenth-century Moral Sense philosophers discussed in the Introduction, the creature declares:

> 'If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion. . . . My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked in the chain of existence of events, from which I am now excluded.' (Shelley, *F* 158)[64]

However, like Shakespeare's social outcast Caliban, Frankenstein's creature, because of his outward form, is cut off from all fellow feeling. As the creature laments, "'I had feelings of affection,'" but "'they were requited by detestation and scorn'" (176).[65] "'If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me,'" the creature explains, still giving voice to the moral philosophy of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, "'I should return them an hundred and an hundred fold'" (157).[66] Shelley's creature here expresses well the theory that sympathy begets virtue. And in his affecting and rational articulation of the injustice he has suffered, in his moving rehearsal of his personal narrative, the creature further fosters sympathy in the reader, and, simultaneously, teaches her to feel for a being different from herself. In short, the creature demonstrates that sympathy is not contingent upon contiguity. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have shown, life narratives "demand that readers attend to histories, lives, and experiences often vastly different from their own" (1). In "attend[ing] to" the personal story of Shelley's persecuted creature, in engaging with his experience of

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[64] Another Shelleyan orphan, Lionel of *The Last Man*, also wishes to be "linked to the mechanism of society by a golden chain, and to enter into all the duties and affections of life." See *LM*, 78.

[65] In *The Last Man*, Shelley describes Perdita in similar terms: "all that was good in her seemed about to perish from want of the genial dew of affection." See *LM*, 16.

[66] In his *Reveries*, Rousseau writes: "The most sociable and loving of human beings [referring to himself] has been proscribed by unanimous agreement. They have sought in the refinements of their hatred whatever torment could be most cruel to my sensitive soul, and *they have violently broken all the links which attached me to them*. I would fain have loved men in despite of themselves; they have not been able to conceal themselves from my affection, except by ceasing to be men." See *Reveries*, 31 (my emphasis).

injustice, the reader is encouraged to imagine how similar injustice might be remedied in her own society (1).

It is by way of the beneficent De Lacey family that the creature first learns sympathy. Taking up abode in a hovel that adjoins the De Laceys' cottage, the creature is witness to familial love. While watching from a crevice in his hovel as the blind old father plays his musical instrument, the creature feels the first stirrings of sympathy. Seeing the daughter Agatha cry in response to her father's music and the old man "'rais[ing] her, and smil[ing] with . . . kindness and affection,'" the creature compassionates, feeling "'sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature'" that are "'a mixture of pain and pleasure'" (Shelley, *F* 126). So intense is the creature's sympathetic response to this scene of familial affection that he "'withdr[aws] from the window, unable to bear [the] emotions'" evoked (126).[67] Importantly, that the creature is able to sympathize with the De Laceys despite their physical difference from him, despite their "otherness," shows that similarity to self need not be a prerequisite for sympathy to arise. As the creature states, "'when [the De Laceys] were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys'" (Shelley, *F* 129).[68] Indeed, it is via his sympathetic encounters with the De Lacey family that the creature learns virtue, that he cultivates his humanity.[69] And it is the creature's sympathy for this family that inspires him to altruistic action.

In his observations of the De Lacey family, the creature learns that the cause of their unhappiness is poverty. Seeing that the children "'place food before the old man'" but reserve

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[67] In this way, Shelley again echoes the moral philosophy of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith. Hume, for example, maintains that sympathy "is a very powerful principle in human nature," taking us "far out of ourselves" and affording us the opportunity to experience another's happiness or sorrow. See *Treatise*, eds. Norton and Norton, 369, 370.

[68] Koretsky writes something similar: "Observing the De Laceys . . . the creature demonstrates what we might call true or disinterested sympathy, feeling what they feel without attention to himself." Koretsky argues that "[s]uch pure sympathy is outside the scope of most social theories of sympathy. For Hume and Smith, sympathy is limited to the experiences of self." See "'Unhallowed,'" 252.

[69] In *Cultivating Humanity* (1997), Marth Nussbaum argues that we can cultivate our humanity through a liberal arts education, that an education in the humanities can create good citizens of the world. See *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

"'none for themselves,'" the creature is "'sensibly'" "'moved'" by this "'trait of kindness'" (128). Having "'been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of [the family's] store for [his] own consumption,'" the creature, after discovering "'that in doing this [he] inflicted pain on the cottagers,'" seeks food elsewhere, satisfying himself "'with berries, nuts, and roots'" (128). Like Shelley's husband P.B. Shelley, the creature is a vegetarian, indicative of his gentle nature. Moreover, discerning from his position of compassionate spectator that one of De Lacey's son Felix's daily tasks is collecting firewood, the creature assumes it for him (and so mirrors the firewood-fetching Caliban). Under cover of night, expecting no recompense, the creature replenishes the family's store of firewood; it thus seems, "'to [Felix's] perpetual astonishment,'" that the task has been accomplished "'by an invisible hand'" (130). Notably, Shelley makes reference to Smith's "invisible hand" twice in this section of the novel, but with a significant variation. While Smith uses the phrase as a metaphor for the "unintended" benefit that each individual's self-interested "striving to better [her] condition" bestows on others, thereby "advancing the interest of society," in the case of the benevolent creature, his actions arise not from self-interest but from genuine altruism (Griswold 45).[70] The only motivating factor behind his acts of kindness is sympathy. In this way, the creature demonstrates the extent of his humanity, exhibiting that "disinterested benevolence" that William Hazlitt outlines in his *Essay on the Principles of Human Action and Some Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius* (1805) (3). As the creature tells Frankenstein, "'I cleared [the family's] path from the snow, and performed those offices that I had seen done by Felix. I afterwards found that these labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them . . . utter the words *good spirit,*

[70] Natarajan notes that Hazlitt's *Essay* "establishes that moral action is independent of self-interest, because it originates in the imagination, which takes us out of ourselves and into the feelings of others." "Where action originates in the imagination rather than in direct sensory knowledge (our knowledge of ourselves)," Natarajan continues, "that action—moral action, benevolence, or disinterestedness—is not reducible to self-interest; it is genuinely altruistic, other directed," which is precisely the case with Shelley's creature. See "Circle," 113.

*wonderful*'" (Shelley, *F* 131). Having cultivated his sympathy through observing the De Lacey family, the creature simultaneously develops a moral conscience. As stated above, although he possesses what Shaftesbury refers to as "natural affections" and what Hutcheson calls innate "disinterested Affections," the creature's humanity is enhanced as his essential goodness develops through this experience of compassionate spectatorship (Shaftesbury 196; Hutcheson, *Essay* xii).

In this way, the creature proves that, even in isolation, it is possible for an individual to learn to think outside herself and develop her ethical awareness, which, as discussed above, runs counter to Smith's argument. As Smith writes:

> In solitude we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves; we are apt to overrate the good offices we may have done, and the injuries we may have suffered; we are apt to be too much elated by our own good, and too much dejected by our bad fortune. . . . The man within the breast, the abstract ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator. (*TMS* 147)

Although the creature is compelled to live in complete solitude and is unable to participate in basic human communication and interaction, his sympathy is nonetheless activated and acted upon, and it is free from any desire to benefit the self. His actions are wholly other-directed; he is utterly selfless, not at all "apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to [himself]." His sympathy is not tethered to self-interest—it is genuinely disinterested.[71] Impelled to sympathize and act upon his sympathy of his own accord, the creature does not require "the presence of the real spectator" to awaken the "man within the breast" (his conscience). In other words, although social relations contribute to the awakening and strengthening of

[71] Koretsky suggests that the creature is only "able to sympathize self-lessly . . . because he does not yet possess understanding as a 'self.'" See "'Unhallowed,'" 252.

sympathy, they are not essential for its emergence and expansion (as the example of the creature shows).[72]

Importantly, the creature's sympathy grows and evolves as he learns to read. In this way, Shelley cleverly demonstrates the efficacy of literature through literature itself, constructing a character within her fiction who is himself a reader and who has been made more sympathetic through his reading. Indeed, as argued above, it is through his reading that the creature evolves into a fully individuated and wholly compassionate being. In exercising his imagination through reading, the creature, like the reader, stretches his sympathetic capacities and enlarges his moral consciousness.[73] Reading literature facilitates an imaginative leap between self and other, allowing us to re-see the world from another's perspective and so to reflect upon and sympathize with another's subjective life. As Jonathan B. Wight argues, it is "through [such] interior reflections," provoked by literature, that, according to Smith's ethical theory, "[m]oral conscience unfolds" (159). And just as the creature's reading unfolds his moral conscience, so the reader's ethical scope broadens through her emotional engagement with this wrongly persecuted being. In feeling for this fictional character, for this ostracized "other," the reader learns to feel for similar beings in the real world.

Having been introduced to language through listening to Felix teach French to his beloved Safie, the creature, as he "'improve[s] in speech,'" also learns the "'science of letters,'" the art of reading, and is thus well-prepared to delve into his self-education (Shelley, *F* 134). The efficacy of the creature's education recalls Rousseau's declaration in *Émile* that

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[72] Notably, although the creature lacks human companionship, he nevertheless achieves companionship through his reading. One could therefore argue that the creature does not experience complete solitude as reading itself becomes a form of companionship.

[73] Nussbaum argues that reading literature "is among the ways in which we constitute ourselves as moral, and thus as fully human, beings," for "as we read novels . . . we quite naturally assume the viewpoint of an affectionate and responsive social creature, who looks at all the scene before him with fond and sympathetic attention." See *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 346.

"[p]lants are fashioned by cultivation, man by education" (6). "All that we lack at birth," writes Rousseau, "is the gift of education" (6). Indeed, it is through his self-education that the creature is "fashioned" into a self-aware and morally-conscious being. His reading list is comprised of the first volume of Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).[74] The "'lofty sentiments and feelings'" expressed in *Werther*, which have "'for their object something out of self,'" accord with the creature's "'experience among [his] protectors,'" for his surreptitious acts of selflessness and generosity arise from his *own* "'lofty sentiments and feelings,'" from his genuine sympathy (Shelley, *F* 142). However, his reading of *Werther* also opens his eyes to his "otherness," to his fundamental difference from humanity:

> 'As I read . . . I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but . . . I was dependent on none, and related to none.' (142)

Because of his outward form, the exiled creature is cut off from all human contact, and because of the nature of his birth and his creator's abandonment of him, he is "dependent on" and "related to" no one, again echoing Rousseau in his *Reveries*, in which he asks, "But I, detached from . . . all, what am I in myself?"[75] Indeed, the creature's reading is so illuminative that, as mentioned above, it precipitates a similar existential crisis: "'My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? Whence did I come?

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[74] Shelley read Goethe's *Werther*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Plutarch's *Lives* in 1815 (the year before she started writing *Frankenstein*). See *Journals,* 88, 89, 91. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is also on Mary's—heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Mary*—reading list, as it is on Maria's—heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Maria*. See *Mary,* 8; *Maria,* 78. Rousseau describes reading Plutarch's *Lives* in his *Confessions,* noting that, in childhood, Plutarch became his "greatest favorite." See *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* Vol.1.1. Trans. W. Conyngham Mallory (New York: Brentano's, 1928) 10.

[75] In his sense of his own separateness from humanity, the creature recalls Byron's Manfred, whose "spirit" walks "not with the souls of men." See "Manfred," 2.2.51.

What was my destination?'" (Shelley, *F* 142-3).[76] Importantly, the creature's self-inquiry is indicative of his humanity, for such existential examination is a necessary and inescapable part of the human condition. Reading provokes self-reflection, critical contemplation, and connection-making between the story world and the reader's own life, and this is precisely the case for Shelley's creature. Through his reading, the creature questions both himself and the world around him. Aesthetic activity has the power to create intelligent and critically-aware individuals able to discern between right and wrong actions, individuals furnished with the imaginative and moral equipment necessary to make appropriate ethical judgments. It is by way of his reading that the creature metamorphoses into a morally-conscious being.

The creature's reading of Plutarch's *Lives*, for example, develops within him an "'ardour for virtue'" and an "'abhorrence for vice'" (143). But it is his reading of *Paradise Lost* that has the most powerful effect: it "'move[s]'" in the creature "'every feeling of wonder and awe'" (143-4). In reading *Paradise Lost*, the creature paradoxically likens himself to both Milton's Adam and the exiled Satan. Like Adam, he understands what it is like to be separate, divided from "'any other being in existence'"; however, while Adam is protected and educated by his creator, the creature is deserted by his (143). Consequently, like Satan, exiled from happiness and sympathy, the creature comes to resent the "'bliss'" of those beings fortunately "'linked in the chain of existence,'" the "'bitter gall of envy [rising] within [him]'" (158, 144). Yet, he later recognizes that even "'Satan had his companions, fellow-devils to admire and encourage him,'" whereas he is "'solitary and detested'" (144). Through his reading, the creature becomes increasingly aware of the injustice of his situation, of the immorality of his creator's abandonment of him and of humanity's refusal to show him

[76] Notably, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau dates his "uninterrupted knowledge of [himself]," his self awareness, to his first experience of reading. See *Confessions*, 8.

sympathy. And the reader, through the imaginative experience of "self-other merging," comes to further sympathize with the creature's suffering (Kaufman and Libby 2).

Thus, even as the ostracized creature spirals into vice after being rejected by the De Lacey family, the reader's sympathy may remain focused on this wrongly persecuted being. The reader, having undergone an "experiential merging with [this] protagonist," feels the creature's misery (via the sympathetic imagination) when, horrified by his outward appearance, the young cottagers force him away from their father as the creature is pleading for compassion and friendship (8). As Muriel Spark writes, "the reader's sympathy [is] transported" to, and remains fixed upon, "the Monster," who has "unfold[ed] the story of his struggles and development" (172). After being beaten by Felix and driven out of the cottage, the creature contemplates suicide: "'Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?'" (Shelley, *F* 149). In his despair, the creature anticipates Shelley's later suicidal characters: the heroine of *Matilda*, who asks the daring Humean question, "Why am I obliged to live?"; Perdita in *The Last Man*, who drowns herself at sea rather than leave the burial place of her husband; and the eponymous protagonist of *Falkner*, who makes more than one suicide attempt, to name only a few (Shelley, *M* 198). "'[D]riven from the society and sympathy of [his] fellow-creatures,'" the socially-alienated creature experiences the hitherto foreign "'feelings of revenge and hatred'" (Shelley, *F* 148, 151). "'I, like the arch fiend,'" the creature proclaims, echoing Milton's Satan, "'bore a hell within me'" (149). Denied the sympathy for which he longs, the creature, now mimicking the Miltonic Satan, "'declare[s] everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against'" his creator, who had sent him "'forth to this insupportable misery'" (149).[77] Yet, despite the creature's descent into sin,

[77] In his hatred of the human society from which he is unfairly exiled, but from which he still desires acceptance and sympathy, the creature again anticipates Lionel in Shelley's *The Last Man*; as Lionel—a self-professed "outcast"—declares, "I continued my war against civilization, and yet entertained a wish to belong to it." See *The LM*, 19.

despite his fall from innocence into guilt-ridden experience, the reader's sympathy for the creature persists, having been awakened and cultivated through his moving personal narrative of unjust persecution.

Therefore, when the heretofore innocent and Adamic creature temporarily takes on the role of Miltonic Satan, burning the De Laceys' cottage to the ground, the reader, having been immersed in his narrative and having "simulat[ed] [his] subjective experience" through the literary imagination, may understand and sympathizes with his act of desperation (Kaufman and Libby 9). And as the creature's series of crimes are disclosed to the reader, she, having developed an "affective attachment" to this wronged creature, is predisposed to, if not absolve him of his sins, at least understand them (Bugg 657). However, in the fictive world of the novel, the creature, wretched and "'miserably alone,'" barred from a social existence, is only met with persecution and injustice. As the creature comes to recognize, it is in vain that he seeks "'justice'" from any being who wears "'the human form'" (Shelley, *F* 152). Thus, proving that, like Milton's Satan, he too can "'work mischief,'" the creature murders Frankenstein's younger brother William, his "'heart swell[ing] with exultation and hellish triumph'" (155, 154). Like Shakespeare's morally transgressive Macbeth, whose conscience hovers "between fair and foul, foul and fair" until the "milk of human kindness," his humanity, is replaced with "gall," the creature oscillates between virtue and vice until the "'mildness of [his] nature [is] fled, and all within [him] [is] turned to gall and bitterness'" (Elliot 36; Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 1.5.15; Shelley, *F* 152). However, unlike Macbeth, the creature does not relinquish his humanity entirely, for his self-education and reading have instilled in him a sense of morality; his conscience still clings to him.

That the creature's moral consciousness remains intact, even as his sins accumulate, is clear in his willingness to forgive Frankenstein his sins—to forgive his desertion of him and his abdication of moral responsibility—if Frankenstein will create for him a "'companion . . .

of the same species,'" a female who will show him sympathy (157). Again articulating the theory of the eighteenth-century Moral Sense philosophers, the rational creature contends that, once provided with a companion, his "'evil passions will'" flee, "'for [he] shall'" be met "'with sympathy'" (157). Yet, as discussed above, the creature is ultimately denied "'the only benefit that [could] soften [his] heart, and render [him] harmless'" (the sympathy of another), the withholding of which triggers the unfolding of his sins (158). Witness to the destruction of his only possible friend and sympathizer, the anguished creature bemoans, "'Shall each man . . . find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn'" (176). The vice the creature now embraces is thus a corollary of humanity's refusal of sympathy. Had any compassion been extended to the creature, he would have remained virtuous. Here, the creature's confession again resembles Rousseau's, for as Rousseau proclaims, "[a] continual repetition of ill treatment rendered me callous; it seemed a kind of composition for my crimes," and "I looked forward to revenge" (*Confessions* 49). The creature, ill-treated and condemned to perpetual exile, also resorts to revenge, murdering both Frankenstein's friend Henry Clerval, the idealistic Shelleyan poet, and his betrothed, Elizabeth Lavenza.[78]

The murders of Clerval and Elizabeth, and the death of Frankenstein's father, which is precipitated by the news of the murders, similarly awaken Frankenstein "'to revenge,'" the remainder of his "'hideous narration'" therefore becoming a Godwinian tale of flight and pursuit, with the creature being hunted by his vengeful creator (Shelley, *F* 200). In his obsessive pursuit of his creation, Frankenstein becomes, like his creature, an exile, a solitary wanderer. And although Frankenstein is the hunter, it is the creature who possesses the real

[78] As other critics have pointed out, Henry Clerval is a portraiture of P.B. Shelley. Shelley also includes a fictive counterpart to P.B. Shelley in *The Last Man*, represented by Adrian, Earl of Windsor, a character "addicted to study, and imbued beyond his years with learning and talent," possessed of "vivacity, intelligence, and [an] active spirit of benevolence," and "imbued with the spirit of high philosophy." See *LM*, 20, 26. Similarly, in *Matilda*, P.B. Shelley can be seen in Woodville, the heroine's love interest.

power.[79] As one of the messages the creature leaves for his creator states, "'you live, and my power is complete'" (205). By leaving clues for his frantic pursuer to keep him on track, the creature succeeds in prolonging Frankenstein's suffering. Wholly transfixed by revenge, Frankenstein becomes as miserable and alone as his creature, separated from all human intercourse. And after three weeks of mad pursuit, Frankenstein is *literally* split from his creature (the only being with whom he has any connection), for the ice on which hunter and hunted are driving their sleds cracks, and "'a tumultuous sea roll[s] between [Frankenstein] and [his] enemy,'" leaving Frankenstein close to death, "'drifting on a scattered piece of ice,'" evocative of the unbridgeable distance between Victor (and all of humanity) and the creature (208). The image of Frankenstein drifting alone on a vast and empty ocean in a frozen world is a symbolic representation of his creature's own lonely and isolated existence. In this way, Frankenstein is made to feel the alienation, bleakness, and solitude to which he has condemned his creature; physically divided from one another and from humanity, creator and creation thus become, paradoxically, one and the same in their shared separateness.

However, Frankenstein does not recognize his commonality with his creature and remains vengeful and delusional until his death. Consequently, he may never regain the reader's sympathy. Importantly, although some might argue that Frankenstein's state of vengeful delusion, which isolates him as much as it victimizes his creature, *may* elicit the reader's sympathy, because the creature's fate is imposed upon him while Frankenstein's is of his own making, the creature may ultimately be more deserving of the reader's sympathy. Indeed, there is little remorse in Frankenstein's proclamation to Walton, whom he bids assume his "unfinished work," the "task of [the creature's] destruction": "'I feel myself justified in desiring the death of my adversary," he insists (216). Here, Frankenstein fully

[79] Bugg similarly notes that "Frankenstein and the Creature have switched positions in their power relationship: it is the Creature who guides Frankenstein in the northward journey." See "'Master,'" 665.

metamorphoses into Milton's implacable and eternally vengeful Satan, proving to be more monstrous than his creation in his failure to sympathize. Ironically, the creature abandons his guise of the Miltonic Satan and transforms into a humane and fully human being, afflicted by the very pangs of conscience that mark humanity, and so proving more human than his creator. Importantly, Shelley gives her creature the last word, overshadowing Frankenstein's deathbed-speech with her creature's moving lament.

Consumed by misery, guilt, and remorse, the creature, whom Walton finds mourning over Frankenstein's coffin, further demonstrates his humanity by compassionating with his creator, who has shown him nothing but hate: "'Oh, Frankenstein! Generous and self-devoted being! What does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst'" (217). In *Characteristics*, Shaftesbury writes that "[a] man who in a passion happens to kill his companion relents immediately on the sight of what he has done" (209-10). "His revenge is changed into pity," he continues, "and his hatred turned against himself. . . . . On this account he suffers agonies" (210). This is precisely the case for the creature, who again confirms his humanity in this way. Frankenstein, on the other hand, does not relent, and according to Shaftesbury, if an individual does "not . . . relent or suffer any real concern or shame, then, either he has no sense of the deformity of crime and injustice, no natural affection, and consequently no happiness or peace within, or, if he has any sense of moral worth or goodness, it must be a perplexed and contradictory kind" (210). "He must pursue an inconsistent notion," Shaftesbury goes on, "idolize some false species of virtue and affect as noble, gallant or worthy that which is irrational and absurd" (210). Once again, the creature proves fully human, while his creator proves monstrous in his lack of remorse.

Walton, like the reader, perceives the creature's humanity as well as the authenticity of emotion in his words: "'His voice seemed suffocated; and my first impulses, which had

suggested to me the duty of obeying the dying request of my friend . . . were now suspended by a mixture of curiosity and compassion'" (217). And like the reader, Walton is moved by the creature's words. Again echoing the theory of the eighteenth-century Moral Sense philosophers, the creature maintains that his "'heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy,'" and thus, "'when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred,'" his heart "'did not endure the violence of the change without torture'" (218). Although the creature despairs that "'[n]o sympathy may [he] ever find,'" the reader, affected by his personal narrative, may provide the sympathy the creature has been denied (219). Shelley has forged a sympathetic kinship between the reader and this fictive character, "call[ing] upon" her readers' "built-in capacity to feel with others" and thereby eliciting sympathy for her persecuted creature (Keen, "Empathy" 209). And because the creature is representative of any marginalized "other," Shelley simultaneously cultivates concern for similar persecuted beings in the real world, showing her readers that their sympathy can surpass boundaries of difference.

Importantly, when the creature condemns humanity for its sins, for its prejudice and failure to sympathize (once again using the indeterminate "you"), the reader feels as if the creature is speaking to her directly:

> 'I still desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me? Why do *you* not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do *you* not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child?'
>
> (Shelley, *F* 219-20, my emphasis)

At this point in the narrative, the creature has transformed into humanity's moral conscience; he is Smith's imaginatively-wrought "impartial spectator" made manifest.[80] Smith refers to the impartial spectator as "reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man

[80] See Smith's *Sentiments*.

within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct" (*TMS* 133). The "standard relative to which the rightness and wrongness of character and action is judged," Smith's "impartial spectator," writes Griswold, is "constitutive of the moral outlook" (38, 39). The "impartial spectator" is the figurative self that each individual bodies forth via her imagination in order that she might judge her actions as they would be seen by another.[81] The creature here clearly functions as humanity's Smithian "impartial spectator," judging the rightness and wrongness of its actions.

However, excluded from the realm of reciprocal feeling, the creature is unable to endure an existence of enforced solitude.[82] Seeking comfort in death—"'I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame. . . . I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me'"—the creature again anticipates Matilda, whose "only hope [is] death" (Shelley, *F* 220; *M* 195). "'[W]here can I find rest,'" asks the creature, "'but in death?'" (*F* 220).[83] Unlike his creator, who dies unrelenting in his hatred of the creature he abandons, calling upon Walton to "'thrust [his] sword into [the creature's] heart'" and assuring him that he "'will hover near, and direct the steel aright,'" the creature is self-condemnatory and penitent, and thus, wholly sympathetic (209). His final Wertherian yearning for death derives from his acute awareness of the injustices of a prejudiced society entirely hostile to his external monstrosity and from a recognition that life is nothing but misery if unattended by the sympathy of another. As Hume remarks, an individual "will be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy" (Selby-Bigge, ed., *THN* 363). Denied this,

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[81] As mentioned in a footnote above, Godwin uses this term when describing the sympathetic process: "We are able in imagination to go out of ourselves, and become impartial spectators of the system of which we are part." See *Enquiry*, 181.

[82] In *Valperga*, Beatrice, "[a]lone, alone!," similarly experiences the "pain of utter and forced solitude." See *V*, 345.

[83] In this way, the creature again recalls Rousseau in his *Reveries*, in which he laments, "All is ended for me upon the earth; none can now do me good or evil. There remains for me neither anything to hope for nor to fear in this world." See *Reveries*, 37.

the only solace the creature can imagine is in death, in the soothing forgetfulness of eternal rest; like Byron's Manfred, he longs for "Forgetfulness— / Of that which is within," "Oblivion, self-oblivion" (1.1.136-8). As Koretsky comments, "[t]he single most important lesson the creature" learns "is that he does not fit into the structures that govern social life, and that because of this, he has no choice but to die" ("'Unhallowed'" 252). The concluding sentence of *Frankenstein*, "[h]e was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance," suggests both the literal and figurative distance of the creature's lonely existence (Shelley, *F* 221). Literally "lost in [the] darkness and distance" of the frigid northern waters after leaping from Walton's ship, the creature, setting forth on his determined course of self-destruction, is also figuratively lost in the darkness of his own despair, a despair bred by discrimination at the hands of an unfeeling humanity. Because of his monstrous exterior, the creature is forced to distance himself from the human world until he achieves the ultimate distance of death.

Importantly, the creature's death can be read as an authorial invocation, a call for change. In longing for death, the creature is also longing for a world that might be, one populated by sympathetic individuals capable of accepting difference. As Koretsky observes, "What remains at the end of *Frankenstein*, which leaves almost every character dead, is a call to engage each other without prejudice, and the implicit question of what kind of world will make this possible" ("'Unhallowed'" 256). What will make this world possible, Shelley suggests, is a greater capacity for authentic sympathy, which, according to the doctrine she is developing, extends beyond sameness and nearness to self. It is Shelley's readers, through their sympathetic engagement with the unfamiliar creature, who may make such a world possible, one in which humanity's moral horizons are widened to include those who exhibit difference.

*Frankenstein*, then, like Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Wollstonecraft's *Mary* and *Maria,* is a revolutionary text, a novel of social criticism with political intent. Each of these novels seeks to navigate the social and political implications of sympathy's failure in society, the texts of daughter, father, and mother linked by their shared concern with sympathy and its role in shaping the social world. In *Frankenstein,* Shelley examines a world without sympathy from the perspective of a persecuted being physically different from humanity, a being with "watery eyes," a "shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips," described by his creator as having a "deformity of . . . aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity," (Shelley, *F* 83, 99). Shelley's "hideous progeny," because of his physical "deformity," inspires terror rather than sympathy in the beings within the fictional frame (Shelley, "Author's Introduction," *F* 5). However, those outside the narrative world, Shelley's readers, having attended closely to the creature's tale (told with eloquence, authentic feeling, and candour) and engaged with his experience, may be impelled to sympathize. As sympathetic hearers of the creature's confession, Shelley's readers become his confessors, holding the power to absolve him of his sins and bestow on him the sympathy he has sought.[84] Thus, although Marshall is correct in suggesting that, by the novel's end, the creature has "resigned himself to the impossibility of sympathy," Shelley has not (216). The final judgment, the decision to either "abandon" or to "commiserate" with Shelley's creature, lies with the reader (Shelley, *F* 119). Such sympathetic commiseration for Shelley's oppressed "other" can, in turn, effect real-world change, encouraging an ethic of compassion outside the novel's pages.

As Shelley's writing career progresses, her confidence in the power of sympathy to positively influence both self and society waxes and wanes as she grapples and seeks to come to terms with sympathy's contradictions and complications. As will be shown, through her

[84] Britton argues that, in *Frankenstein*, Shelley seeks to "transcend the immediacy of visually-based sympathy to explore the possibility of sympathy based on listening to narrative, on the prolonged, attentive engagement of the imagination." See "Novelistic Sympathy," 14.

fiction, Shelley presents multiple perspectives on the complexity of sympathetic engagement and, in so doing, provides a more nuanced encounter with it. By representing both the virtues and dangers of sympathy, Shelley reconfigures the debate to facilitate a fuller understanding of sympathy and how it affects both private and public lives. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley shows that a failure to sympathize with those unlike ourselves not only has devastating effects on the marginalized other but also diminishes the humanity of those who fail to extend moral concern beyond the familiar. In *Matilda*, as will be discussed in the following chapter, Shelley suggests that *too much* sympathy for those too much *like* ourselves can have similarly adverse effects on both the sympathizer and the sympathized.

## Chapter Two:

## Monstrous Feelings:

## Sympathetic Excess and Incest in *Matilda*[85]

> Why when fate drove me to become this outcast from human feeling; this monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love; why had she not from that fatal and most accursed moment, shrouded me in thick mists and placed real darkness between me and my fellows so that I might never more be seen?
>
> —Mary Shelley, *Matilda*[86]

In *Frankenstein*, Shelley exposes the limits of sympathy, its tendency to fail when confronted with difference; in *Matilda*, she continues her interrogation, alerting her readers to the dangers of extreme sympathy. Written in 1819 but not published until 1959,[87] *Matilda* shows how natural familial sympathy can be made monstrous by excess and lead to incest—in such a scenario, sympathy and shame become inextricable. Although her contemporaries heralded sympathy as the foundation of morality, as the source of social wellbeing, Shelley recognized that it was a much more complicated emotion, one fraught with contradictions, riddled with paradoxes, and replete with dangers. As she shows throughout her fictional works, sympathy *can* foster community and humanity; however, it can also encourage hermetic, solipsistic, misanthropic, and even suicidal behaviour. According to Shelley, sympathy, an emotion typically revered as the wellspring of the social good, has the potential to, paradoxically, provoke antisocial, and sometimes fatal, habits and actions. In

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[85] In her "Introductory Note" to *Matilda*, Pamela Clemit explains that, "although the heroine's name is spelled 'Mathilda' in rough draft and fair copy, Mary Shelley in her published remarks refers to the work's title as 'Matilda'"; thus, Clemit adopts this spelling, as do I. See *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Electronic Edition, Eds. Nora Crook and Pamela Clemit (Charlottesville: Pickering & Chatto, 2004) 2. Janet Todd also adopts the spelling "Matilda" in her edition, *Mary* and *Maria*. By Mary Wollstonecraft. *Matilda*. By Mary Shelley (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

[86] Shelley, *M*, 204

[87] *Matilda* was written in 1819 after the death of Mary Shelley's son William (William died in June 1819, less than a year after the death of her daughter Clara in September 1818). As stated in the Introduction, although written in 1819, *Matilda* was not published until 1959 because Godwin found "[t]he subject" of father-daughter incest "disgusting and detestable." See *Maria Gisborne & Edward E. Williams: Shelley's Friends, Their Journals and Letters*, Ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951) 44.

*Frankenstein*, it was a denial of sympathy that led to the creature's exile, isolation, and eventual desire for oblivion. Conversely, in *Matilda*, it is a surfeit of sympathy that separates the eponymous heroine and her father from society, resulting in delusive and reclusive behaviour and inciting each to suicide.

In this melancholic and "morbid tale," Shelley tackles two taboo subjects (incest and suicide) and shows their unlikely connection to sympathy, the emotion so often celebrated by her Romantic peers as the moral core of humanity (Nitchie 9).[88] The incest theme was commonplace in Romantic literature. As discussed in the Introduction, P.B. Shelley explores the theme of father-daughter incest in *The Cenci* and that of sibling incest in *Laon and Cythna*, and Byron considers sibling incest in *Manfred*.[89] While, as stated previously, sibling incest is typically representative of "an escape from stifling social conventions," father-daughter incest, as Todd explains, tends to be much more sinister, suggesting "patriarchal oppression through both class and gender on a personal and political plane" ("Introduction" xxii). In *Matilda*, Shelley does use the theme of father-daughter incest to condemn patriarchal oppression; however, her larger purpose is to caution her readers against the dangers of sympathetic excess. As she demonstrates, when our familial/familiar sympathy for our relatives becomes too immoderate (and exclusive), what was once a natural affinity may become an unnatural, incestuous attraction. Familial sympathy disfigured by excess can, Shelley warns, spiral into incest, the shame of which can, in turn, lead to suicide (which, as we will see, is the case for Matilda's father).

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[88] In his discussion of suicide in the eighteenth century, Georges Minois writes that "[i]n the collective conscience, suicide was as much of a taboo as incest." See *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 252.

[89] There have been a number of important studies that consider the topic of incest in Romantic-era writing, some of which were mentioned in the previous chapter: Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979); Richardson's "The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in English Romantic Poetry" (1985) and *The Neural Sublime* (2010); Ranita Chatterjee's "Mathilda: Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Ideologies of Incest" (1997); and Hill-Miller's *"My Hideous Progeny."*

Suicide, the other taboo subject Shelley explores, is connected to *both* an excess and an absence of sympathy. In *Frankenstein*, the creature, possessing an abundance of sympathy but finding it unrequited, turns to death as his only comfort. Matilda's father, as discussed below, is so overwhelmed by his excessive and abnormal sympathy for his daughter that he drowns himself at sea. Notably, Smith discusses sympathetic excess in *Moral Sentiments*, commenting that certain "domestic affections" may "offend by their excess, and others by their defect" (*TMS* 136). According to Smith, a parent's affection is "so strong, that it generally requires not to be excited, but to be moderated; and moralists seldom endeavour to teach us how to indulge, but generally how to restrain our fondness, our excessive attachment" (136). Similarly, after the loss of her father, Matilda, her sympathy equally excessive, finds "the spirit of existence dead within [her]," the "cold grave [holding] all [she] love[s]," and so embraces death as her sole respite from suffering (Shelley, *M* 185).[90] The only sympathy Matilda has ever known vanishes with her father's death, leaving her "forlorn and helpless," "cast . . . from" the human world, with "death . . . the only goal" she wishes to "attain" (199). While the conventional reading of *Matilda* is that the heroine dies "innocently"—that is, that she dies a natural death—I suggest that Matilda commits active euthanasia, achieving the "painless death" she so desires through her own machinations, her deep and debilitating sympathy for her father becoming the agent of her death (199).

In its depiction of its heroine's pursuit of suicide, part of which involves an attempted double suicide (as will be shown, Matilda entreats her poet-friend Woodville to enter a suicide pact with her), *Matilda* engages seriously with the contested and controversial subject of suicide, a topic that was being hotly debated by some of the major thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (as stated in the Introduction, Shelley responds in

[90] As stated in the Introduction, Shaftesbury argues something similar, maintaining that "natural affection may . . . be excessive and in an unnatural degree," such as "when love to the offspring proves such a fondness as destroys the parent and consequently the offspring itself." See *Characteristics*, 196.

particular to Hume's, Rowley's, and Godwin's arguments regarding the suicide question). At first glance, Matilda appears to be a Humean character, asserting her freedom and bodily autonomy by asking the daring question, "Why am I obliged to live?" (*M* 198).[91] Moreover, her very situation serves to render the anti-suicide arguments put forth by Rowley and Godwin null and void: as we will see, Matilda is a "solitary being" cut off from human contact and is thus free from what Rowley refers to as "those ties by which men are bound either by interest or affections," and as her "hope" and "expectation" reside only in death,[92] she has little possibility of future happiness and so remains unbound by Godwin's constraint against self-murder (Shelley, *M* 159; Rowley 334; Shelley, *M* 210). Faubert agrees that Matilda "owes no duty to her fellows because she has none" ("Family Affair" 126). Moreover, she argues that Matilda "is exempt from arguments against suicide" because, as Shelley continues to reiterate throughout the novella, she "believes herself already dead" (126). "Shelley shows that Matilda's [father] has killed everything in her that makes her 'consciousness of life' tolerable," Faubert contends (126-7). As she continues: "He thus kills her. . . . Indeed, Matilda is like the living dead" (127). Loosed from all human "ties" (she and Woodville part after her suicidal proposition), then, Matilda is beyond Rowleyan and Godwinian censure, their appeals to social duty holding no weight. Yet, *Matilda* is not a pro-suicide text. Although Shelley's heroine does at times give voice to Hume's philosophical ideas concerning suicide—as she declares, "I wish to die. I am quite weary of enduring the misery which hourly I do endure, and I will throw it off. What slave will not, if he may,

[91] In this we hear an echo of Hume's question, "Do you imagine that I repine at Providence or curse my creation, because I go out of life, and put a period to a being, which, were it to continue, would render me miserable?" "To you it belongs to repine at providence," he goes on, "who foolishly imagine that you have no such power, and who must still prolong a hated life, tho' loaded with pain and sickness, with shame and poverty." See Hume, *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul*, South Bend: Infomotions, Inc., 2001, *ProQuest ebrary*: 7.

[92] In Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal," the immortal protagonist Winzy, in a similar condition of exile from humanity, proclaims: "I have no beacon except the hope of death." See Shelley, "The Mortal Immortal: A Tale," *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*, ed. Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976) 229.

escape his chains?"—she does not function as a representative of suicide rights (Shelley, *M* 200).[93] In fact, as will be shown, Matilda stands as a warning against suicide, the siren call of which becomes all the more tempting when the individual is in the throes of extreme sympathy. While Rowley and Godwin suggest that it is sympathy that should curb the drive to suicide, that our love for our family and friends, our desire to contribute to social wellbeing—in short, our sympathy—should be enough to deter us from suicide, Shelley demonstrates that, in some instances, it is sympathy itself, when felt too intensely, that *provokes* the desire for self-destruction.

In *Matilda,* Shelley highlights the pathological nature of the sympathy between Matilda and her father, which they exhibit "to a degree" both "extreme [and] psychologically unhealthy," cautioning her readers about the risks of sympathetic excess, of an overinvestment in another's experience (*OED*, "Pathological" *colloq*. def. 4). In its natural form, sympathy is a prosocial emotion, what Smith calls a "moral sentiment." It is "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" that "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading," allowing for an imaginative immersion in the lives of others (Keen 208).[94] In *Moral Sentiments,* Smith, as stated in the Introduction, observes that, through sympathy, "[t]he passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously" (9). According to Smith, when we sympathize with another, "we place ourselves in [their] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his

[93] Matilda's words echo those of Frankenstein's creature, who declares, "I shall collect my funeral pile, and consume to ashes this miserable frame. . . . I shall die. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me. . . . Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" See *F*, 220. Matilda's words also anticipate those of Lionel Verney in *The Last Man*: after his sister Perdita drowns herself, Lionel admits that it is "better to die so, than to drag on long, miserable years of repining and inconsolable grief." See *LM*, 215.

[94] Although this is Suzanne Keen's definition of empathy, it is synonymous with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries' understanding of sympathy.

body, and become in some measure the same person" (3).[95] Hume writes something similar in his *Treatise*: "The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own; in which case," he continues, "they operate upon us, by opposing and encreasing [*sic*] our passions, in the very same manner, as they had been originally deriv'd from our own temper and disposition" (Selby-Bigge, ed., *THN* 593). It is through the medium of sympathy that emotions are transferred from one person to another, that the feelings of the other can be vicariously experienced by the spectator. If positive, these emotions may produce pleasure or enjoyment or encourage ethical habits and actions; however, if negative, they may produce distress, pain, anguish, or shame or incite unhealthy or immoral behaviour. Just as we can be affected (or infected) by another's positive emotions (whether it be through personal contact or reading), so too can we be affected/infected by their negative emotions.[96]

As discussed in the Introduction, Hume draws his reader's attention to the contagious nature of emotions in both his *Treatise* and his *Essays*. "The passions are so contagious," he writes in his *Treatise*, "that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts" (605).[97] Using the language of disease, he observes that an individual's "heart catches the same passion" as a friend's (605). It is this very aspect of sympathy (its ability to transmit the emotions of one person to another) that Shelley is interrogating in *Matilda*. In this way, she reframes the discussion of sympathy, reconfiguring the debate in order to facilitate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of sympathy's effects on both the individual and the wider world.

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[95] Csengei notes that Smith's theory implies that the sentiments of the other actually "have a physical impact on [the] body," and in this way, the other becomes, in a sense, "part of an extended self." See *Sympathy*, 52.

[96] As mentioned in the Introduction, Fairclough also explores the connection between sympathy and contagion, arguing that it "is not a passion, a feeling or an opinion in its own right, but rather, as the language of 'contagion' suggests, a medium for the transmission of energies, ideas and emotions within a collective." *The Romantic Crowd*, 2.

[97] Hume also writes that "[s]o close and intimate is the correspondence of human souls, that no sooner any person approaches me, than he diffuses on me all his opinions, and draws along my judgment in a greater or lesser degree." See *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 592.

Like a contagious disease, then, the unhealthy emotions of Matilda's father are transmitted to Matilda herself—she adopts his immense and immeasurable melancholy, his guilt, and later, his suicidal thoughts.[98] "[T]he diseased . . . state of [her father's] mind" not only affects but *infects* Matilda (she later describes her own "distempered mind"), her "soul corrupted to its core by a deadly cancer" until she imagines herself "a living pestilence" (Shelley, *M* 171, 187, 204).[99] Matilda's deep-seated and indiscriminate sympathy for her father allows his suffering to seep into her psyche, distorting her mind and shattering any possibility of future happiness. So deficient in subjecthood—as we will see, her very selfhood is dependent upon her father's—Matilda can only replicate her father's thoughts and actions, first assuming his grief, then his guilt, and finally, imitating his suicide. And since the reader is encouraged to occupy Matilda's being through reading, to adopt her perspective through the mechanism of sympathy, the reader's *own* being—if she is undiscerning in her sympathetic involvement—may also be threatened. In sympathizing with Matilda's "tragic history," with her "endurance of living anguish," the reader may be moved to sanction Matilda's self-inflicted death, and, Shelley warns, be more likely to imitate such an act in her own life (151, 198-99).[100]

Indeed, having read Goethe's *Werther* in 1815, Shelley would have been well aware of the spate of suicides it sparked in its readers (*Journals* 88).[101] As Tobin Siebers writes, "Goethe's readers were known to translate this novel into deadly practice," killing themselves

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[98] Smith observes that "[w]e blame the excessive fondness and anxiety of a parent, as something which may, in the end, prove hurtful to the child." See *TMS*, 137.

[99] Allen observes that *Matilda* "convey[s] not meaning but a pollution or contamination, a disturbing communication of negative feeling." See Allen, *Critical*, 47. Hill-Miller compares Matilda to Beatrice in *Valperga*: "before she dies, Beatrice has internalized male culture's definition of herself and her behaviour as monstrous." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 131-2.

[100] In *Frankenstein*, Shelley encourages the reader to sympathize with the creature to enable a deeper understanding of what it is like to be "other" and so implicitly endorses sympathy's potential to change the reader's mind for the better. In *Matilda*, however, Shelley encourages her readers to sympathize with her heroine in order to warn them of a potential danger of sympathy—the possibility of losing one's self in another when the emotional engagement is too extreme. Shelley's examination of the mechanism of sympathy, then, is not a simple endorsement but a thoughtful critique of its benefits, limitations, and dangers.

[101] As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the books Frankenstein's creature reads is Goethe's *Werther*.

in imitation of Goethe's lovelorn hero—hence the term the "Werther Effect," which, in Siebers' words, "denotes . . . the tendency of people to commit suicide under the compulsion of imitation rather than for individual motivations" (15). Commenting on the dangerous influence *Werther* had on its readers, Georges Minois posits that "Goethe may perhaps rightly be charged with having inspired romantic suicide" (266). As Minois writes, "[i]mitations of Werther's suicide soon followed" the novel's publication, and he cites specific examples of these suicides, such as when, in 1777, "a young Swede . . . killed himself with a pistol, a copy of *Werther* lying open at his side" (267). Indeed, as Madame de Stael declares, "'Werther . . . caused more suicides than the most beautiful woman in the world'" (qtd. in Minois 267).[102] Notably, suicide contagion, and the fear it elicits, has been discussed by sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, according to whom vulnerable people may be encouraged to commit suicide after reading about it; this is especially the case with texts that depict suicide sympathetically.[103] By underscoring the dangers of sympathetic excess throughout her novella, of a sympathy ungoverned by rational and independent thought and unrestrained by an individual's subjecthood, Shelley alerts her readers to the more threatening aspects of sympathy, drawing her readers into her heroine's life and experience only to show how perilous such sympathetic immersion can be. As the example of *Werther* attests, the perils can be lethal.

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[102] Minois rightly insists, however, that "Goethe had written a novel, not a defense of suicide," and he adds that "[t]o make him responsible for the voluntary death of impressionable young people was a charge leveled at literature as a whole." Defending Goethe, Minois writes that, "[f]or centuries, thousands of novels had recounted suicides without kindling the moralists' ire." "If the reactions to *Werther* were particularly lively," he continues, "it was because many felt that suicide had become a social phenomenon, a dangerous scourge not to be treated lightly." Goethe, "[c]oncerned about the supposed effects of his work . . . placed a quatrain at the head of book 2 in the 1775 edition of *Werther* that ended: 'Be a man, he said; do not follow my example.'" See *History of Suicide*, 268.

[103] See Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966).

As Matilda's narrative implies, our sympathy must be informed by reason and critical awareness and buttressed by an abiding sense of self, qualities the heroine lacks.[104] The deep and disturbing dependency and the unhealthy and parasitic sympathy that exists between Matilda and her father sap Matilda of strength, depleting her of any semblance of individual selfhood she might otherwise have had.[105] Consequently, when her father commits suicide, she follows suit, first feigning her own death (she convinces her relatives she has "destroyed [her]self") to escape the social world and finally committing active euthanasia (187). With no autonomous identity, Matilda cannot act, or live, for herself. Consequently, she yearns only to be "at peace in [her] quiet grave" (187, 208).[106]

*Matilda*, which displays the darker side of the human psyche, seeks to show that the heroine's desire for death, her drive to suicide, arises from an excess of sympathy. In this sorrow-filled narrative of loss and grief, familial feelings become overly familiar, with a father's innocent love for his daughter transforming into an incestuous and obsessive passion. After losing his wife Diana (she dies a few days after giving birth to her daughter), Matilda's father becomes consumed by grief and unable to remain in the country "where every thing breathes" the "spirit" of the one he has "lost for ever" (Shelley, *M* 156).[107] He therefore quits England, "break[ing] all ties" and leaving his daughter orphaned and bereft of parental love

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[104] Newlyn's discussion of Coleridge and reader-response is relevant here: "what limits," Newlyn asks, can "be set to the confluence of writer and reader, once the process of sympathetic identification" begins? The "persistence" of these questions "reminds us that the collapsing of divisions between separate identities is a source of anxiety." This is why, although "he celebrated the power of sympathy between author and reader," Coleridge "evolved defence mechanisms that kept the authorial imagination some-what aloof." "Coleridge's ideal reader," Newlyn explains, "is someone always on the alert." His "allegiance was to a model of reading which preserved the reader at a distance from the poet." As *Matilda* shows, Shelley's ideal reader has much in common with Coleridge's. See *Reading*, 70, 70, 70, 71.

[105] As discussed in the Introduction, the threat to selfhood posed by the sympathetic encounter is central to Coleridge's *Christabel*.

[106] Matilda's desire for the "peace" of the "grave" is reminiscent of the same sentiment Shelley's mother expressed in a letter to Gilbert Imlay on October 10, 1795. As Wollstonecraft writes, "Let my wrongs sleep with me! Soon, very soon, shall I be at peace. When you receive this, my burning head will be cold. . . . I go to find comfort." See *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 326.

[107] As stated previously, Shelley's mother died of puerperal fever ten days after giving birth to her daughter. Significantly, the vast majority of Shelleyan characters are motherless or orphaned (Frankenstein's creature, Lionel Verney and his sister Idris in *The Last Man*, Euthanasia in *Valperga*, for example).

(155, 156). When he returns sixteen years later, the domestic bliss experienced by father and daughter is short-lived. Plagued by inexplicable "paroxisms [*sic*] of passion" (evidence of "the diseased . . . state of his mind"), Matilda's father "shun[s]" her, refusing to unveil his "secret grief" (165, 171).[108] "[B]eware! Be silent! Do not urge me to *your* destruction. . . . One word I might speak and then you would be implicated in *my* destruction," Matilda's father warns when she begs to learn the cause of his sorrow (172, my emphasis). But Matilda does not heed his request: "I said to myself, let him receive sympathy and these struggles will cease. . . . I gained the secret and we were both lost for ever" (169). As Susan Allen Ford argues, where Matilda's father "sees articulation as a deadly and powerful temptation," Matilda "sees [it] as an unburdening, an opportunity for connection through love's healing power" (66). Ultimately, Matilda's father is proven right, the revelation of his incestuous love, of his "unlawful and monstrous passion," precipitating the deaths of father and daughter alike (Shelley, *M* 177).[109]

Paradoxically, the force that unleashes her father's confession of his "guilty love" is Matilda's assiduous sympathy (179).[110] Her conviction that her father's suffering will be subdued once he speaks his sorrow to a sympathetic listener drives Matilda to pry the secret from her father's unwilling lips (as he cries, "'why, cruel girl, do you drive me on: you will repent and I shall die'") (172).[111] In her sympathy, Matilda therefore becomes, in a sense, complicit in her father's suicide, for she demands that he utter the words he does not wish to

[108] In his "secret grief" and desire for death, Matilda's father, like so many of Shelley's characters (see Lord Raymond in *The Last Man*, for example), is representative of the Byronic hero.
[109] Clemit similarly argues that "Mathilda's trenchant advocacy of frankness and sincerity leads to disaster." See "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*: Mary Shelley's Changing Conception of her Novella," *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000) 73.
[110] Ford writes that Matilda's "tale is a redaction of the banishment from Eden, a fall due to sympathy, to the desire for knowledge, to speech." See "'A name more dear,'" 53.
[111] Here the reader hears an echo of Malcolm's warning to Macbeth, "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak / Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break." See William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Ed. Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 4.3.210-11.

speak—"'My daughter, I love you!'"—the words he knows will destroy them both (173).[112] Sympathy, traditionally lauded for its remedial power, here becomes an agent of destruction (Matilda's ardent sympathy for her father, her persistent, and naïve,[113] attempts to gain her father's dark secret that it might alleviate his suffering, and her father's excessive and unnatural sympathy for her, are mutually destructive).[114]

Domestic ties in *Matilda* are therefore shown to be suffocating and, eventually, fatal.[115] The relationship between Matilda and her father will admit no outside party, and as Kate Ferguson Ellis comments, neither Matilda nor her father "can control the excessive dependency they unleash upon one another" (228). "[N]o other human being," Ellis continues, "no matter how loving, can enter this dyad" (228). The sympathy between Matilda and her father is so fervent and exclusive that it mutates into a monstrous aberration. Although sympathy in its natural form is a moral emotion, encouraging social harmony and altruistic behaviour, when exhibited to excess, it changes shape, transforming into a diseased, destructive, and, as we will see, deadly emotion—what Matilda herself calls a "killing emotion" (Shelley, *M* 210). Such "distempered sympathy," Shelley warns, can lead only to the grave (*LM* 278).[116] As a consequence of their emotional dependency and intemperate

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[112] Matilda's "frantic curiosity," her desire to sympathize with as well as to know the cause of her father's grief, aligns her with Godwin's ever-curious Caleb Williams. It is both Matilda's sympathy and her curiosity that force her father's horrid confession of incestuous desire. See Shelley, *M*, 172.

[113] Matilda's naivety with respect to her father's incestuous feelings for her is a matter of debate. Her reading of Alfieri's *Myrrha*, for example, shows that she is familiar with incest. As Matilda recalls, while "in company with several other persons," she "chanced to say that [she] thought Myrrha the best of Alfieri's tragedies" (in which Myrrha falls in love with her father, Cinyras), a comment that would suggest her awareness of the possibility of incest. See Shelley, *M*, 165. Hill-Miller also comments on this, writing that "Mathilda repeatedly threads her conversations with her father with references to literary works about father-daughter incest—a pattern of allusion that serves as appropriate foreshadowing for Mathilda's own situation, but that also reveals Mathilda's preoccupation with incestuous emotions." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 112.

[114] In *Falkner*, sympathy is presented as equally destructive. As we will see, Elizabeth Raby's sympathy for her adopted father is the very cause of his unremitting suffering—he longs to die (and thereby forget his pain), but he is consistently prevented from doing so because of Elizabeth's unrelenting sympathy. Moreover, Elizabeth herself suffers as a consequence of her sympathy for Falkner, becoming ill because of the anxiety he unintentionally causes her.

[115] Ford comments that *Matilda* "demonstrates the fragility of the domestic, its liability to disruption and dissolution." See "'A name more dear,'" 69.

[116] As quoted in the Introduction, Richardson argues that "[i]n each case" of brother-sister incest in English Romantic poetry, "death invariably cuts their union short." See "The Dangers of Sympathy," 744.

feelings, of their immoderate and incestuous sympathy, which annihilates all sense of self, Matilda and her father are left to dwell in morbid despair, tottering on the edge of self-destruction until each succumbs to suicide's siren call, the "magnetic pull of sympathy" failing to hold them to the land of the living (Godwin, *Caleb Williams* 308).

In *Matilda,* then, what was once a natural affinity—the sympathy between a father and daughter—becomes an unnatural, incestuous attraction, one that leads to the suicides of both Matilda and her father. Incest, for Shelley, is thus sympathy misshapen. So disfigured by excess and so deformed by the father's incestuous desire, the sympathy between Matilda and her father becomes a monstrosity, "repulsively unnatural, an abomination . . . outrageously or offensively wrong" (*OED*, "Monstrosity" def. 2a). As Matilda's father declares, his innocent love has been marred, distorted by "the foul deformity of sin" (Shelley, *M* 177). This distortion of sympathy stems in part, Shelley suggests, from our desire to find our likeness in others; we look for and crave correspondence, a similarity in the people with whom we share our lives. As P.B. Shelley writes in his essay "On Love," "[w]e are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness" (473).[117] Because our family members resemble us, it is therefore natural that we sympathize with them more easily, an argument advanced by Hume in his *Enquiry* (as discussed in the previous chapters), in which he states that our "sympathy with persons remote from us, [is] much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous" (45). Also cited in previous chapters, Smith similarly argues that an individual's sympathy for "the members of his own family" is "more precise and determinate than it can be with the greater part of other people. It approaches nearer . . . to what he feels for himself" (*TMS* 22). However, because the sympathy between Matilda and her father is so unbridled, so excessive in its

[117] As discussed previously, P.B. Shelley's ideal of mutual love is represented by brother-sister love, demonstrated most fully in *Laon and Cythna* (later *The Revolt of Islam*, published in 1818). This is also true for Byron as expressed in *Manfred*.

intensity, exclusivity, and reclusive nature, it transgresses the bounds of natural, familial love. Consequently, as Ellis argues, Matilda and her father's "'family' feelings" soon "become monsters in whose presence they cannot be" (228). And the shame Matilda and her father feel because of this monstrous sympathy eventually incites each to suicide. According to Shelley, in its immoderate manifestation, sympathy may precipitate self-destruction.

In *Matilda*, as in her other works, Shelley therefore alerts her readers to the darker side of sympathy. Many characters in Shelley's fiction who are the victims of excessive sympathy either become reclusive introverts who long for but do not receive the fellow feeling they crave, self-centred and self-consuming solipsists who intentionally shun the social world, or life-draining parasites who "twine their tendrils" around their beloved, afflicted by a fierce and dangerous dependency and a love so excessive that it verges on the pathological (P.B. Shelley, *Alastor* 444). When Matilda's father loses his wife, to whom he also had a pathological attachment, he initially becomes inwardly-directed, reverting into himself and sinking into a Wertherian solipsism,[118] "exist[ing] . . . for himself only"; like Frankenstein's creature, he becomes a Rousseauvian "Solitary Walker," exiled from all sympathy (Shelley, *M* 156).[119] However, when he reunites with Matilda sixteen years later, his inwardness turns outward: he becomes other-directed, devoting his entire being to his daughter, deifying her ("[y]ou appeared as the deity of a lovely region," a "ministering Angel," he proclaims), and developing an obsessive, and fatal, emotional attachment to her (as he admits in a letter to Matilda, which we later learn is a suicide note, "when I saw you become the object of another's love," the "fiends awoke within me," his love for his daughter

[118] In this way, Matilda's father recalls the solipsistic Frankenstein (and both of them recall Werther). In a similar vein, P.B. Shelley writes in his "Preface" to Alastor that the poet-figure's "self-centred seclusion" drives him to his "speedy ruin." See "Preface," 703.

[119] Rousseau, *Reveries*. Kelly notes that in his *Reveries* (1782), Rousseau "connected psychological conflict and social alienation in an individual such as himself to the corrupt and unjust state of modern society, culture, and government." "By doing so," Kelly continues, Rousseau "enabled middle-class people to understand themselves as revolutionary subjects who were, inevitably, 'solitary walkers' unable to find happiness or a place in what they perceived to be the decadent and corrupt system of 'things as they are.'" See "Introduction," xii-xiii.

becoming a kind of mania, a "violent disorder") (178, 179, 172). Similarly, Matilda retreats into the recesses of her "own deep mind" during her father's long absence, only to cling to him too closely upon his return (P.B. Shelley, *Alastor* line 298). Cut off from the social world during her father's sixteen-year absence, Matilda learns to "reconcile" herself "to solitude," her aunt, with whom she lives in Loch Lomond, "prevent[ing] all intercourse between [her] and the peasantry" (Shelley, *M* 157, 158). In her lone wanderings and solitary musings, Matilda makes her father "the idol of [her] imagination," perpetually playing out the scene of recognition and reunion in her mind (159). It is not until her father's return that Matilda leaves the safe, silent seclusion of solitude, her sheltered dreamscape, and "beg[i]n[s] to live" again; as she writes, "I felt as if I were recreated" (161). Deifying her father, as he does her, Matilda soon develops a "deep and exclusive affection" for him, confessing that "[i]t was a subject of regret to [her] whenever [they] were visited by a third party" (179, 163). The sympathy between Matilda and her father is so excessive and all-consuming, so unnatural, that neither can live without the other (Matilda writes, "when the only affection I was permitted to cherish was blasted my existence was extinguished with it") (156). As Shelley shows, without a healthy level of restraint, the worlds of self and other collapse into one another, leaving each bereft of an autonomous being. Matilda and her father, pent up in their shared, sheltered world, sequestered from all human interaction, cannot survive separation; thus, when one commits suicide, the other follows suit.

Unaided by an independent and self-sufficient identity, Matilda loses her very selfhood in the insular world of her father and becomes wholly dependent on him for love and support, as he does on her—the existence of one is predicated upon the other.[120] This mutually pathological (and parasitic) dependency is made all the more dangerous by the fact

[120] Ford observes that "the sheltered security of [the] relationship" between fathers and daughters in the novels she explores (Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, Mary Darby Robinson's *The False Friend*, and Shelley's *Matilda*) "masks a dark emotional imprisonment," with the father possessing a pernicious ability to "redefine and then nullify the daughter's incipient selfhood." See "'A name more dear,'" 54, 54-55.

that it exists between a father and daughter. As discussed above, we have an innate tendency to sympathize with (and so love) those who are similar to us. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley laments that, more often than not, sympathy depends on proximity. Ultimately, she shows that this natural affinity for resemblance results in the rejection, marginalization, and discrimination of those unlike ourselves, in the denial of sympathy to those who exhibit difference.[121] In *Matilda*, however, the focus is not the discrimination bred by our desire to find our likeness in others but rather the moral and mental confusion borne of too much sympathy for those too much like ourselves. As Shelley demonstrates so well in many of her novels (but most explicitly in *Matilda*), in "thirst[ing] after [our] likeness," we run the risk of sympathizing too exclusively or immoderately with our kin (P.B. Shelley, "On Love" 473). In his discussion of *Frankenstein*, Marshall notes that "sympathy and incest seem to be associated with the fear of too much sameness and not enough difference," an argument that is also fitting for *Matilda* (212). The fact that Matilda bears physical and emotional resemblance to her father and her deceased mother intensifies Matilda's father's sympathy for her—as Hume and Smith have suggested, sympathy is enhanced by similitude, magnified by proximity. Although Matilda's father realizes the illicit and abnormal nature of his love for his daughter, he cannot subdue his incestuous, and tumultuous, feelings; as he mourns, "[w]ith every effort to cast it off, this love clings closer, this guilty love more unnatural than hate" (79).[122] Having isolated themselves from the outside world, Matilda and her father become imprisoned, confined by their paralyzing dependency upon one another. Ultimately, the relationship proves suffocating, both metaphorically and literally in the case of the father,

[121] Because of his "hideous deformity" of "aspect," Frankenstein's creature finds himself "unsympathized with." See Shelley, *F*, 221. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley suggests ways that we might transcend difference through sympathy, which, as the creature's example shows so well, can be cultivated through reading and education, through exercising the imagination.

[122] According to Marshall, we "discover in the scene of sympathy a scene of dangerous or at least ambivalent eroticism." See *Surprising*, 213.

who drowns himself because of his incestuous love for Matilda.[123] Bereft of any support but that provided by one another, Matilda and her father have no one to whom they can turn when their relationship is destroyed by Matilda's father's revelation of his "guilty love." Their only refuge from the suffering that ensues is the silent comfort of the grave, the soothing forgetfulness of eternal rest.

Like the creature in *Frankenstein*, who longs for the "extinct[ion]" of those "burning miseries" that have plagued his existence, and like Byron's suicidal Manfred, who seeks "Oblivion, self-oblivion," Matilda and her father come to yearn for death alone (their "only hope [is] death"), each setting forth on a fateful course to self-destruction (Shelley, *F* 221; Byron, *Manfred* 1.1.138; Shelley, *M* 195).[124] Significantly, Shelley herself grappled with suicidal thoughts in her own life.[125] In her journal entry of October 21, 1822 (after the death of P.B. Shelley) Shelley writes: "When in utter solitude I weep to think how alone I am. . . . I am perfectly unfit for any society. . . . No one seems to understand or sympathize with me"; "[s]ince my child [Percy Florence] not only forces me to live," Shelley continues, "but debars me from the utter solitude in which I would fain immure myself, I must endeavour to change my mood" (2: 441).[126] Having no one to "understand or sympathize with [her]," Shelley tires of life but chooses to live on for her child (she later writes on September 3, 1824, "I have my lovely boy—without him I could not live") (2: 483).[127] In so doing, Shelley adheres to

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[123] Carlson argues that *Matilda* "is a truly striking investigation of the lethal and incestuous nature of family ties." Familial relationships in Shelley's novels, writes Carlson, often "bind persons so closely that they can neither move nor breathe. Many go under." See Carlson, *England's First Family of Writers*, 107.

[124] Wollstonecraft expresses a similar yearning for death in a letter to her sister Everina Wollstonecraft on November 17, 1786, in which she writes: "I long for my eternal rest." See *Collected Letters*, 90.

[125] Shelley had a particularly close connection to the topic of suicide: as stated above, her mother made two suicide attempts in her lifetime. Moreover, her half-sister Fanny Imlay committed suicide, as did P.B. Shelley's former wife Harriet Westbrook.

[126] Consider the similar wording in *Matilda*: "I was impressed more strongly with the withering fear that I was in truth . . . only fit for death," 204.

[127] In a letter to Gilbert Imlay on April 7, 1795, Wollstonecraft similarly writes: "But for the little girl [Fanny Imlay, her daughter with Imlay], I could almost wish that it [Wollstonecraft's heart] should cease to beat, to be no more alive to the anguish of disappointment." In another letter to Imlay, this time on September 6, 1795, Wollstonecraft writes: "How often, passing through the rocks, I have thought, 'But for this child, I would lay my head on one of them, and never open my eyes again!'" Wollstonecraft would make a second suicide attempt, by

Godwin's belief, as espoused in *Political Justice*, that "the would-be suicide [should] consider the net pain caused by life or suicide" as well as the possibility of future happiness or usefulness (Todd, "Introduction" xxiii). The heroine of Shelley's *Matilda,* however, adopts a different approach to suicide, embracing Hume's belief that "both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence, when it becomes a burthen"—Shelley is careful to make clear, however, that her heroine's suicide is not a rebellious assertion of bodily autonomy but a desperate attempt, provoked by her excessive sympathy, to reunite with father, to regain the sympathy that was lost with his death (*Suicide* 9). Where Shelley lives on for another, Matilda commits active euthanasia, finding her life a burden and so "go[ing] from this world where [her father] is no longer," hoping to "meet him in another" (Shelley, *M* 210). Both Shelley and her heroine ponder death in the face of "utter solitude" and unimaginable suffering, becoming swayed by suicidal thoughts when sympathy ceases (149).[128]

For both Shelley and her heroine, one way to stave off such fatal musings is through writing, an act intrinsically tied to sympathy. We communicate and connect through writing, and even when the form is as private as a journal, the sense of an imagined, and sympathetic, reader pervades the process of creation.[129] Shelley therefore used writing as a therapeutic tool, seeking to alleviate her suffering by sharing, by "giv[ing] words to," her "thoughts & feelings" (2: 429).[130] As she declares in her journal of October 2, 1822, "Literary labours, the

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jumping off Putney Bridge, in October of this year. See *Collected Letters*, 286. In *Maria*, the suicidal mother (Maria) declares, "The conflict is over!—I will live for my child!" See *Maria*, 177.

[128] On January 30, 1825, Shelley describes "the bitter loss of sympathy & love for [her] fellow creatures." See *Journals*, 489.

[129] This is very much the case for Lionel in *The Last Man*—being the last man on earth, the only companionship he can find is through the act of writing, through imagining a sympathetic listener/reader.

[130] William D. Brewer notes that "[t]he therapeutic value of oral and written self-expression is a recurrent theme in Mary Shelley's works." According to him, "while Mary Shelley presents characters who are skeptical about the therapeutic value of verbal self-expression, she acknowledges the human need to put suffering into words, and the short-term relief that words can provide." "Moreover," Brewer continues, "Shelley suggests that in the case of extreme trauma[,] writing is sometimes more viable than speaking as a form of language therapy." See "Mary Shelley on the Therapeutic Value of Language," *PLL* 30.4 (1996): 387, 387, 387-88.

improvement of my mind, & the enlargement of my ideas are the only occupations to elevate me from lethargy," and on October 21, 1822 she observes: "when I wrote Matilda, miserable as I was, the inspiration was sufficient to quell my wretchedness temporarily" (2: 431-2, 442).[131] Similarly, the heroine of *Matilda* allows "complaint and sorrow" to "shape themselves into words" as she writes her autobiography on her deathbed (*M* 198). Both Shelley and her heroine aspire to mitigate the melancholy of mortal life through writing, speaking sorrow that it might be subdued. But for Shelley, "double sorrow comes" when she "feel[s] that [P.B.] Shelley no longer reads & approves of what [she] writes" (*Journals* 2: 483). "Composition is delightful," she proclaims, "but if you do not expect the sympathy of your fellow creatures in what you write, the pleasure of writing is of short duration" (2: 483). As Mary Jean Corbett observes, "Shelley finds self-expression without the possibility of response from another a futile exercise"; "the death of the beloved reader," Corbett continues, "makes the effort to textualize her experience seem to her a vain endeavour" (85). Yet, as Margaret Atwood has suggested, "our existence in language is dialogic, double-voiced," and so Shelley's readers, whether real or imagined, may function as the sympathetic recipients of her "thoughts & feelings," serving as stand-ins for P.B. Shelley (Grace 197). The sympathy that vanished with P.B. Shelley's death is reanimated by the reader.

In *Matilda*, written four years before the death of Shelley's husband, the heroine addresses her tale to the quixotic poet Woodville (a fictional representation of P.B. Shelley) but declares that she will "relate [her] tale" as if she is writing "for strangers," implying that she writes for any reader, thereby enhancing the novel's potential to generate sympathy (Shelley, *M* 151). As will be shown, Matilda's "thoughts & feelings" eerily anticipate those articulated by her author in the years after P.B. Shelley's death. For example, confessing her

[131] As Hill-Miller writes, "Mary Shelley herself was acutely aware of the extent to which writing *Mathilda* was a restorative act." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 101.

desire for death, Matilda states: "Never for one moment when most placid did I cease to pray for death. I could be found in no state of mind which I would not willingly have exchanged for nothingness" (2: 189).[132] Although Matilda believes "that by suicide [she] should violate a divine law of nature," during periods of despair, she doubts "the existence of all duty and the reality of crime" (2: 189).[133] Similarly, on October 26, 1824, Shelley writes: "and where shall I be next year. . . . If a sibyl said—in my grave she were the foreteller of joy" (*Journals* 2: 485-6).[134] "I never, in all my woes," Shelley continues, "understood the feelings that led to suicide till now—When the blank grave appears a rest after this troubled dream" (2: 486). Shelley's fictional work of 1819 therefore chillingly prophesizes her later lived experience. Significantly, as Barbara Jane O'Sullivan has pointed out, the theme of prophecy is ever-present in Shelley's writings.[135] "[T]he Cassandra figure," writes O'Sullivan, "is a pervasive image" in Shelley's novels, and Shelley "felt a strong personal identification with Cassandra at certain times in her life" (140).[136] But while in *Matilda* the heroine succumbs to suicide's seduction, in Shelley's own life, she chose to endure, living for her son and producing an impressive body of work through which she has continued to live. Where Shelley succeeds in tempering her more destructive emotions after the death of her husband and in cultivating a life-sustaining sympathy for her only surviving child, her heroine "yields to [the] overwhelming flood of sorrow," to use a phrase from one of Wollstonecraft's letters, her

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[132] On September 3, 1824, Shelley writes: "I have little enjoyment—no hope—I have given myself ten years more life—God grant that they may not be augmented—I should be glad that they were curtailed. . . . I pray that I may die." See *Journals*, 483, 484. Wollstonecraft, while grappling with her own suicidal thoughts, wrote to Imlay on June 12, 1795, "I have looked at the sea, and at my child, hardly daring to own to myself the secret wish, that it might become our tomb; and that the heart, still so alive to anguish, might there be quieted by death." See *Collected Letters*, 297.

[133] In "The Mortal Immortal," the immortal protagonist Winzy asks himself "whether suicide would be a crime in one to whom thus only the portals of the other world could be opened"; "[t]hus I have lived on for many a year," he writes, "alone, and weary of myself—desirous of death, yet never dying—a mortal immortal." See "The Mortal Immortal," 230.

[134] Interestingly, Shelley's *The Last Man* opens within the "gloomy cavern of the Cumaean Sibyl," in which the "Sibylline leaves"—Lionel Verney's tale—are discovered. See *LM*, 3, 5.

[135] There are prophet figures in both *Valperga* and *The Last Man*, for example.

[136] According to Elizabeth Sunstein, "Muriel Spark has justly observed that Shelley is a genuine prophetic novelist who anticipated 'the ultimate conclusions to which the ideas of her epoch were headed.'" See *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1989) 4.

abnormal emotional attachment to her father and lack of any other sympathetic relationship drawing her to her death (*Collected Letters* 324).

The mournful speaker of John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is similarly drawn to death; as he opines, "I have been half in love with easeful Death, / Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme, / To take into the air my quiet breath" (lines 52-4). "Now more than ever seems it rich to die," he continues, "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" (55-6). Matilda, too, longs for "a painless death," confessing her fondness for fatality, her amorous attachment to death—as she proclaims, "[i]n truth I am in love with death" (Shelley, *M* 199, 208). Having inhabited a living death[137] for most of her short life, precariously perched between this world and the next, Matilda mourns her present existence—plagued as it has been by pain and suffering—convinced she is "only fit for death" (204).[138] Like the immortal protagonist Winzy in Shelley's short story "The Mortal Immortal," who wishes "for the peace of the grave! the deep silence of the iron-bound tomb!," Matilda yearns for the cessation of life (229).

The traumatic event that triggers Matilda's impulse to suicide is the suicide of her father, which inevitably results in the loss of his sympathy. Deprived of those "ties of affection," to borrow a phrase from *Frankenstein,* so vital to our lived experience, Matilda shuns society and seeks "a death-like solitude" (Shelley, *F* 194; *M* 185).[139] Convinced she is "polluted by the unnatural love [she has] inspired," that she is "a creature cursed and set apart by nature," a "monster with whom none might mingle in converse"[140] (her shame disfiguring

[137] After attempting suicide for the second time by jumping off Putney Bridge, and being rescued, Wollstonecraft writes: "If I am condemned to live longer, it is a living death." See *Collected Letters,* 327.
[138] This recalls the quotation from Shelley's journal: "I am perfectly unfit for any society." See *Journals,* 441.
[139] After the death of his wife Bertha, the immortal protagonist of Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal" writes: "I wept to feel that I had lost all that really bound me to humanity"; soon after, he tries to destroy himself. See "The Mortal Immortal," 229. The importance of being "linked by the affectionate ties of nature" is also a central concern in Shelley's *The Last Man*. See *LM,* 76.
[140] In Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal," the immortal protagonist Winzy and his wife Bertha are "universally shunned," and Winzy, like the creature in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is "regarded with horror and detestation." See "The Mortal Immortal," 227.

her and so aligning her with the creature), Matilda feigns her own death and retreats to the countryside of northern England, shutting "herself up from the whole world" and "liv[ing] only with the departed" (*M* 203, 203-4, 187, 195).[141] As Carlson observes, Matilda "is alive but does not exist" (108). Once situated in her "solitary house on a wide plain near no other habitation," Matilda is free to "wander far without molestation from the sight of" another; the "dreary heath" to which Matilda escapes shields her from humanity, allowing her to sustain the ruse of her simulated suicide (Shelley, *M* 188). As Matilda writes, "I live in a lone cottage on a solitary, wide heath: no voice of life reaches me," her external surroundings, silent, secluded, and desolate as they are, protecting her from unwanted social interaction and mimicking the ceaseless solitude of death itself (151).[142]

Yet, after two years of isolation, during which time she never "cease[s] to pray for death," Matilda begins "to wish for sympathy" (189, 190). As she writes, "I . . . wish[ed] to knit my soul to some one"; "I . . . did not go to seek sympathy," she continues, "but there on my solitary heath, under my lowly roof where all around was desert, it came to me as a sun beam in winter to adorn while it helps dissolve the drifted snow" (190).[143] But the arrival of this wished-for sympathy in the form of the idealistic poet Woodville only reminds Matilda of her illimitable exile from human feeling, of the "eternal barrier between [her] and [her] fellow creatures," her suicidal thoughts swiftly resurfacing (190). In Woodville's company, Matilda "feel[s] a transient sympathy" only to "awaken from the delusion, again to know that all . . . [was] nothing" (196). "[A]lthough the spirit of friendship soothed me for a while it could not restore me," Matilda admits, "[t]he spirit of existence . . . dead within [her]" (190).

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[141] On December 3, 1824, Shelley writes: "I find myself alone—deserted by the few I knew—disdained—insulted"; she goes on to assert that she feels "utterly disjoined from [her] species." And on January 30, 1825, Shelley declares, "I am an outcast—So be it!" See *Journals,* 487, 488, 489. In a letter to her sister Everina Wollstonecraft on November 17, 1786, Wollstonecraft similarly laments, "I am an exile." See *Collected Letters,* 90-91.

[142] In *Valperga*, Beatrice feels that she has become "an outcast, a poor lonely shrub on a bleak heath." See *V,* 344.

[143] On October 26, 1824, Shelley writes: "I live in a desart—its barren sands feed my hour-glass and they come out fruitless as they went in." See *Journals,* 484.

Woodville perceives Matilda's proximity to death: "your pulses beat and you breathe," Woodville observes, "yet you seem already to belong to another world; and sometimes . . . when you touch my hand I am surprised to find your hand warm when all the fire seems extinct within you" (195, 197). Entreating her to let "complaint and sorrow . . . shape themselves into words," to articulate her grief that she might "enter again the pale of human sympathy," Woodville endeavours to coax Matilda back to the land of the living (198, 197).[144] But Matilda remains undeterred by Woodville's overtures; although she finds "it sweet to utter [her] words to human ears" and "pour forth [her] bitter complaints," to a sympathetic audience, Matilda soon becomes tormented by Woodville's "intense sympathy" (198, 199). "It is a strange circumstance," writes Matilda, "but it often occurs that blessings by their use turn to curses; and that I who in solitude had desired sympathy as the only relief I could enjoy should now find it an additional torture to me" (199). Convinced that she "bear[s] no affinity to man or woman" (as Shelley is careful to emphasize throughout her works, affinity lies at the heart of sympathy), that she is "struck off from humanity" because "poisoned" by her father's "unlawful and detestable passion," by his sinful sympathy, Matilda remains bent on self-destruction (196).

Acutely aware that her "wounds" are "far too deep" "for any cure" but death, Matilda, her "soul sink[ing] beneath [the] endurance of living anguish," longs for death alone—it is the only "goal" she wishes to "attain" (198-99, 199). With no possibility of future happiness—as she maintains, "I never more could love or hope"—Matilda can only glide "on towards death," her hopeless condition exemplifying what Godwin in *Political Justice* refers to as an existence that "exclude[s] the possibility of future life, vigour and usefulness" (Shelley, *M* 202, 189; Godwin 88).[145] Moreover, Matilda has lost her capacity for sympathy,

[144] Shaftesbury comments on the "enlivening joy" we feel "when, after a time of solitude and long absence, the heart is opened, the mind disburdened and the secrets of the breast unfolded to a bosom friend." See *Characteristics*, 216. However, Matilda is only temporarily comforted by the "disburdening" of her sorrows.
[145] Similarly, in *Valperga*, Beatrice feels "hopeless of future good." See *V*, 344.

and she is convinced that no living being will ever be able to sympathize with her. Imagining herself "like another Cain" with "a mark set on [her] forehead to show mankind that there [is] a barrier between [her] and them," Matilda others herself, wrongly perceiving herself as "a pariah" (Shelley, *M* 204). No longer able to recognize her affinity with the human world (and assuming that world will see her as a monstrous aberration, "a wretch on whom Nature had set her ban"), Matilda is ultimately dispossessed of sympathy (196). Her situation is reminiscent of the creature's in *Frankenstein* except that in Matilda's case she wilfully enacts her own exile, proclaiming herself a monster, while the creature is forced into exile by the human society that wrongly perceives him as monstrous. Tired of "submitting to the hard task of enduring the crawling hours and minutes," of "bearing the load of time that weigh[s] miserably upon her" (and looking forward to a heavenly reunion with her father), Matilda embraces death as the only solution to the absence of sympathy in her life and proposes a suicide pact with Woodville (189).

The debate that ensues, with Matilda arguing for and Woodville against suicide, recalls that between Werther (suicide's impassioned advocate) and Arthur (suicide's determined detractor) in Goethe's *Werther*. In Goethe's novel, Werther insists that suicide is "the greatest of endeavours" while his friend Arthur argues that it "cannot be considered as anything but a weakness" since "it is easier to die than to endure a harrowing life with fortitude" (62, 61). Although Matilda does not make the claim that suicide is "the greatest of endeavours," she does believe it has the power to restore her happiness: "when we awaken [in death] what joy will be ours to find all our sorrows and fears past," she professes, her "cheek flushed with pleasure at the imagination of death" (Shelley, *M* 201).[146] Presenting her friend with laudanum (the drink with which Shelley's mother attempted one of her suicides),

[146] On October 26, 1824, Shelley declares that "the blank grave" would be "preferable to this monotony of heaviness." See *Journals*, 486.

Matilda proclaims: "Look, I am prepared; there is the death draught, let us drink together and willingly and joyfully quit this hated round of daily life" (200). But Woodville, a perpetual optimist and dutiful philanthropist, rejects the laudanum and resists the suicidal drive, advocating a Godwinian endurance in the face of suffering and choosing to dedicate his life to "the good of others," to observing the doctrine of sympathy espoused by his human counterpart, P.B. Shelley (202).[147] "[I]f I can influence but one solitary individual, so as in any way to lead him from ill to good," Woodville asserts, "that will be a joy to repay me for all my sufferings" (202). For Woodville, who has never experienced the deep and damaging trauma that Matilda has been forced to endure, sympathy is still possible; although he has lost his fiancée, he has not been "polluted" by "unnatural love" (203). As Rajan writes, where Woodville's grief is "conventional," Matilda's is "abjected," "invested with the powers of horror" ("Melancholy" 43-44). It is Matilda's father's revelation of his "guilty love" and subsequent suicide that destroy her, infecting her with that "guilty love" and making her feel inhuman, monstrous; consequently, she "abjects herself from a society in which she cannot participate" (44). Set apart from society and unable to experience sympathy, the only comfort Matilda can imagine is in death.

Matilda is therefore unmoved by Woodville's position, recognizing the unfairness of facing a life of unremitting torment, a life eclipsed by a "gloom that nought could dissipate or overcome," because of a duty to society (Shelley, *M* 189). She chooses death over a life unattended by love and sympathy. Having failed in her suicidal solicitations of Woodville, her last recourse to sympathetic companionship, Matilda opts for euthanasia. It is her active

[147] In his *Defence of Poetry*, P.B. Shelley clearly outlines his doctrine of sympathy: "The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own." "A man, to be greatly good," he continues, "must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of the moral good is the imagination." See "A Defence of Poetry," *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 682. Shelley's writings reveal that she had a fraught relationship with this doctrine of sympathy, which she both celebrated and challenged in her works.

choice to spend the night unsheltered on the barren heath exposed to the "chill" of the late September night, "careless of bodily inconvenience," that precipitates her death (206).[148] As Matilda herself states, "I particularly mark this night, for it was that which has hurried on the last scene of my tragedy, which else might have dwindled on through long years of listless sorrow" (206).[149] By intentionally making herself vulnerable to the harsh forces of nature, Matilda, consumed by grief, causes the consumption that finally secures her death.[150] Becoming lost in reverie, imagining her reunion with her father upon her death, when "the mark of misery [will] have faded from [her] brow, and [she] should raise [her] eyes fearlessly to meet his, which ever beamed with the soft lustre of innocent love," Matilda loses her way (205). "I looked around me and saw no object that told me where I was; I had lost myself, and in vain attempted to find my path," Matilda writes (206). The darkened and silent scene in which Matilda finds herself prefigures her impending death, with everything "veiled in the deep obscurity of blackest night" and "no sound to be heard" (206). Amid this death-like darkness, surrounded by the silence of a nocturnal natural world, Matilda achieves a quiet placidity and perceives "intimations of immortality," to borrow a phrase from the title of Wordsworth's poem. As Matilda recalls, "[t]here was a wondrous silence in the air that calmed my senses yet which enlivened my soul, my mind hurried from image to image and

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[148] Hill-Miller compares Matilda's situation to that of Clarice in Shelley's short story "The Mourner": "[c]onsumed with guilt at having caused her father's death, and bereft of her father's affection, Clarice, like Mathilda, becomes a social outcast." Moreover, "Clarice's act of parricide makes her hunger after 'self-destruction.'" "As the narrator puts it," Hill-Miller continues, "'without positively attempting her life, [Clarice] did many things that tended to abridge it and to produce mortal disease.'" "Eventually, like Mathilda, Clarice succeeds in ending her life and achieves peace by reuniting with her father in dream. She refuses 'all medical attendance.'" See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 129.

[149] Hill-Miller suggests something similar: "Mathilda has been wandering the woods as she daydreams; she cannot find her way home and becomes soaked in a rainstorm; the resulting illness leads to her death." Importantly, Hill-Miller also deems Matilda's death a "suicide": "Mathilda can be purged of the incestuous guilt associated with being a female, but only if she dies." "From this point of view," Hill-Miller continues, "Mathilda's suicide parallels the fate of Frankenstein's tormented creature. Like the creature, Mathilda eradicates her 'filthy materiality' by killing herself; like the creature, Matilda punishes herself for the crime of femaleness by self-annihilation." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 125, 125-6, 126.

[150] In Shelley's "The Mortal Immortal," the immortal protagonist Winzy, too, plans to "yield" his "body, too tenacious a cage for a soul which thirsts for freedom, to the destructive elements of air and water" in an effort to destroy himself. See "The Mortal Immortal," 230.

seemed to grasp eternity" (206). After undergoing her soul-enlivening yet, paradoxically, physically-deteriorating night on the heath, Matilda awakens to rain, recalling the spiritual transformation experienced by Coleridge's Mariner: released from the burden of guilt after he "bless[es]" the water snakes "unaware," the Mariner similarly awakens to rain (4.287). For the Mariner, the breaking of the curse means that he is no longer tethered to the albatross; for Matilda, it means that she is no longer tied to a life bereft of sympathy. Her "limbs . . . stiff" from the wet "chill of the night"—anticipating the rigor mortis of death—Matilda *does*, in a sense, die in her sleep, for, after she returns to her solitary cottage, her servant discovers her "almost lifeless" (Shelley, *M* 206). Soon after, Matilda recognizes the symptoms of consumption and, realizing that death is close at hand, rejoices in her approaching demise.

Having "grown old in grief," her "steps . . . feeble like those of age," Matilda "wait[s] in quiet expectation for the closing hours of [her] life," the natural course of which she has intentionally halted (208).[151] As she proclaims, "[h]aving passed little more than twenty years upon the earth I am more fit for my narrow grave than many are when they reach the *natural* term of their lives" (208, my emphasis). The "task" Matilda has "almost fulfilled" is the precipitation of her own death, *unnatural* because brought about by Matilda's own fatal designs, yet *natural* because effected with the aid of, and within, nature itself.

It is in death that Matilda finally finds peace: "I feel death to be near at hand and I am calm. I no longer despair, but look on all around me with placid affection," Matilda avows (208).[152] With death "near at hand," Matilda is "calm," "peace[ful]," and "without pain," the "lulling medicine" of the natural world proving more powerful than any opiate (208, 187).

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[151] Shelley similarly felt she had grown "old with grief"; as she writes on October 26, 1824, "I feel as an old woman might feel numbering her past conquests—I am young still—though age creeps on apace—but I may not love—any but the dead." See *Journals*, 485.

[152] In a letter to her friend and publisher Joseph Johnson on December 5, 1786, Wollstonecraft writes of her approaching death in a similar vein: "it is with pleasure that I observe my declining health, and cherish the hope that I am hastening to the Land where all these cares will be forgotten." See *Collected Letters*, 96. Similarly, the heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Mary* is comforted by the thought that "she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*." See Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, 62.

Like the speaker in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," who wishes to "leave [this] world," where "to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs," Matilda longs to "cast off the load of tears and misery under which [she] labour[s]," hoping to "find light after [she has] passed the dark valley" (Keats 19, 27-8; Shelley, *M* 201).[153] In Shelley's text and Keats' poem, the natural world serves as a soothing soporific, easing pain and bringing peace.[154]

Matilda's suicide, like her father's, is a corollary of excessive sympathy, of a sympathy that nearly divests her of selfhood. But the fact that Matilda writes her autobiography as death hovers near saves her from complete self-annihilation, for, through writing, she finally asserts her selfhood as that very self slips into oblivion.[155] Writing, then, in Mark Sandy's words, "acts as a defence against, and encounter with, the final silence of death" (1). By making her life manifest in writing, Matilda ensures a posthumous existence, whereby she will live on in the hearts and minds of her readers. She survives as a warning, cautioning her readers against the dangers of sympathetic excess. Although sympathizing can lead to altruism and social cohesion, Shelley shows that it can also lead to a loss of self in the other, an adoption of their negative emotions, or an imitation of their unhealthy behaviour, as is the case with Matilda. Because Matilda is emotionally, and pathologically, dependent upon her father, having been raised in isolation, she is never given the opportunity to develop an

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[153] In a letter to Imlay on October 10, 1795, Wollstonecraft declares: "I go to find comfort, and my only fear is, that my poor body will be insulted by an endeavour to recal [*sic*] my hated existence. But I shall plunge into the Thames where there is least chance of my being snatched from the death I seek." See *Collected Letters*, 326-7.

[154] Higonnet notes that the "search for an easeful death leaves its trace on the literature written by nineteenth-century women." "Of course," Higonnet continues, "in their representations of female suicide, these writers address many of the same social and psychological issues that preoccupy men. The tension between free will and social determinism, between autonomous affirmation of identity and the breakdown of identity remain central, no matter what the sex of the writer." "Nonetheless," Higonnet argues, "there are curious differences: women tend to treat the suicides of their own sex as if they were somehow not definitive, and they tend to minimize the physical anguish of death." See "Suicide," 114.

[155] Higonnet argues that suicide itself is "the essential autobiographical act," for, according to her, it "provokes narrative, both a narrative inscribed by the actor as subject, and those stories devised around the suicide as enigmatic object of interpretation." The "gesture of self-destruction," writes Higonnet, "makes a person into both subject and object of action." Higonnet argues that suicide can therefore be a means "of constructing a female identity"—there is a "linkage," she suggests, "between suicide and the literary construction of an autonomous female subject." See "Frames," 229, 230. In the previous chapter, I argue something similar in reference to Frankenstein's creature, suggesting that, in destroying the self, the individual is simultaneously asserting her selfhood.

individual sense of self. Consequently, she falls prey to the more dangerous aspects of sympathy. The best defense against succumbing to such a self-less and self-destructive sympathy, Shelley therefore implies, is the cultivation of an independent identity. Shelley herself is proof of this. Although her journal entries suggest that she did identify with her heroine, she ultimately resists the temptation of suicide, using her writing to sustain her and affirm her subjecthood.

Shelley's determination to live is indicative of her fortitude and her profound sympathy. Like the compassionate poet Woodville in *Matilda,* Shelley chooses to live for the sake of another (her son, Percy Florence). Although Shelley was never able to wholly overcome the anguish of losing her husband, her journal entries reveal moments of contentment, glimpses of happiness. In her penultimate journal entry of April 16, 1744, for example, Shelley writes: "Here—here—I am placid now, & the days go by—I am happy in Percy's society & heath" (573). For Shelley, the presence of sympathy, its "magnetic pull," ultimately overpowers the siren call of suicide.

As will be discussed in the following chapter, Shelley continues to explore the dangers of sympathetic excess in *The Last Man,* in which, as in *Matilda,* an overabundance of sympathy proves fatal, with several characters in the novel becoming the "victim[s] of too much loving" (*LM* 216). Significantly, the effects of the plague in *The Last Man* mirror those that result from sympathetic excess (isolation, antisocial behaviour, and self-destruction—the same negative effects discussed in this chapter). While the plague initially unites humanity in a community of suffering, as it spreads, it severs social and familial ties, "the fear of contagion . . . arm[ing] those nearest in blood against each other" (295). As Chapter Three will show, by comparing sympathy in its pathological form to the plague, Shelley highlights the disastrous effects this emotion, itself contagious (as this chapter has illustrated), can have on the individual and the world at large. Throughout Shelley's writing career, then, sympathy

remains a central theme, and although she continues to question its role in personal and public life and expose its more adverse (and potentially dangerous) qualities, she never wholly abandons it.

## Chapter Three:

## "At last the victim of too much loving":

## Dangerous and "Distempered Sympathy" in *The Last Man*[156]

> The human mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manner, and communicating to each other their vices as well as virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition, which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions. . . . If we run over the globe, or revolve all the annals of history, we shall discover everywhere signs of a sympathy or contagion of manners.
>
> —David Hume, "Of National Characters"[157]

> Elimination of the self is in itself no virtue. To give up life or the right to satisfaction is not a moral requirement. If self-effacement were virtuous in itself, suicide would be the climax of moral living.
>
> —Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*[158]

### Disease and Contagion:

### The Surprising Relationship between Sympathy and the Plague

In Shelley's apocalyptic novel *The Last Man*, an "invincible monster," a "fiend more cruel than a tempest," wreaks havoc on humanity (Shelley, *LM* 221). The plague, figured as a monstrous and demonic "enemy of the human race," leaves humankind all but extinct (175).[159] The "sole survivor," Lionel Verney, is left to bequeath the tale of humanity's

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[156] Shelley, *LM*, 216, 278. Shelley, having lost her husband, P.B. Shelley, in July 1822 and her friend, Lord Byron, in April 1824, writes in her often-quoted journal entry of May 14, 1824: "The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me." See *Journals*, 476-7. Hill-Miller notes that Shelley "casts herself as Lionel Verney, the last man alive on earth, who is slowly robbed of all possessions and relationships, first by political instability, and then by PLAGUE." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 132-3, 133.

[157] Hume, *Essays*, 248.

[158] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955) 398.

[159] Frankenstein's creature is described in similar terms. According to Victor, the creature is "a monster," a "devil," a "fiend," and because humanity treats him with such cruelty, the creature finally "declare[s] everlasting war against [his] species." Both the plague and the creature, then, are represented as dangerous and destructive forces, fiendish adversaries of human society. Moreover, just as humanity avoids all contact with the creature, as if his "hideous" "deformity of . . . aspect" were a communicable disease, so the characters in *The Last Man* seek to quarantine themselves from the plague. However, where the plague is an inanimate natural force, the creature is a sentient being whose persecution and exile ultimately result in his desire for death. Had the human world

destruction to posterity (449, 467). Lionel, however, is well aware of the futility of his task, for "[p]osterity is no more"—he remains alone "in a voiceless, empty world," "unseen, unmarked, unheard" (322, 330, 429).[160] He therefore dedicates his tale to "the illustrious dead," recognizing the dark irony of writing a book that no one will read (466).[161] The world Lionel inhabits, then, is a representation of Shelley's vision of a world devoid of communal and reciprocal feeling, a world bereft of sympathy. As Lionel laments, "Without love, without sympathy, without communion with any," "Why did I continue to live—why not throw off the weary weight of time, and with my own hand, let out the fluttering prisoner from my agonized breast?" (463-4).[162] *The Last Man*, then, like *Frankenstein*, is an assertion of the necessity of sympathy to human existence—its absence signals the death of humanity itself. Yet, as will be shown, through the act of writing, Lionel is able to revive the sympathy he has lost, to re-live his past and temporarily reanimate the dead through the creative imagination.[163] Ultimately, Shelley heralds sympathy as a vital principle, a life-preserving force that sustains Lionel as he wanders the earth alone, the "sole survivor of [his] species" (449).

However, throughout the novel, Shelley is deeply critical of the potentially adverse effects of sympathy, of its pathological and contagious qualities, which she compares to those of the plague. For example, as she shows in *Matilda* (discussed in Chapter Two), when exhibited "to a degree considered extreme or psychologically unhealthy," sympathy, a

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shown him sympathy, the creature, naturally compassionate, would have ended his "war against [his] species." See Shelley, *F*, 118, 99, 112, 149, 99.

[160] According to Mellor, "[e]xplicit in Mary Shelley's account of the last man is the assertion that her tale has no living readership, no audience." "Shelley's novel," writes Mellor, "posits the end of writing." See "Introduction," *The Last Man*, ed. Hugh J. Luke, Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) xiv, xv. This study will seek to overturn this argument.

[161] According to Carlson, *The Last Man* "connects the question of remains to writing, for what remains to and of the last man is his memoirs, *The Last Man*." See *England's First Family of Writers*, 186.

[162] In his suicidal despair, Lionel recalls Frankenstein's creature and Matilda, both of whom long for death in the face of utter solitude.

[163] In *Matilda*, writing is similarly celebrated for its capacity to reanimate the self. This also recalls Rousseau's assertion in his *Reveries* that writing the self is a way of "redoubl[ing] . . . existence," a quotation cited previously in Chapter One. See *Reveries*, 40-41.

naturally prosocial and community-enhancing emotion, can mutate into a kind of disease, a malady of the mind, the symptoms of which are often fatal (*OED*, "Pathological" *colloq*. def. 4). To be excessively sympathetic, Shelley suggests, is indicative of "an abnormal psychological . . . state" (*OED*, "Psychopathology" def. 2).[164] In *The Last Man*, Perdita Verney (sister of Lionel, wife of Lord Raymond) and the Greek princess Evadne Zaimi (lover of Raymond) are both pathologically dependent on one man, their monomaniacal sympathy—their "exaggerated or fanatical enthusiasm for or devotion to one" person—eventually leading to their deaths (*OED*, "Monomania" def. 2). Through these female characters, Shelley reveals the risks of such immoderate and obsessive sympathy, which often gives rise to psychotic, antisocial, and suicidal behaviour.[165]

But as this chapter will illustrate, Shelley not only cautions against sympathetic excess in *The Last Man* (as she does in *Matilda*), she also discloses the dangers of sympathetic contagion, showing how sympathy can spread like an infectious disease and so influence the masses (both positively *and* negatively), and how it can, when evoked through the arts (theatre in particular) magnify rather than alleviate painful emotions. Moreover, in addition to exposing sympathy's more threatening aspects, Shelley brings to light its very real limitations. As demonstrated in the previous chapters on *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, because sympathy depends upon likeness, it often fails when confronted with difference. In *The Last Man*, although the English sympathize with their fellow Englishmen, for example, they view

[164] By presenting sympathy in this way, Shelley shows herself to be an important theorizer of psychological health and disease. Through her fiction, she illustrates that unrestrained sympathy is a sign of a psychological disorder (of a dis-eased mind). It is also significant that Shelley formulated this theory at a time when men dominated the fields of medicine and psychology. In its focus on Shelley's representation of sympathy (in its pathological form) as a psychological disease, this study contributes to a roster of critical works that have expanded our knowledge of Romanticism and disease, whether mental, emotional, or physical. In *William & Dorothy Wordsworth: "All in Each Other"* (2013), for example, Newlyn incorporates a discussion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' understanding of homesickness (or nostalgia) as a medical disease. Michelle Faubert's writings on the history of psychology and Romantic-era literature, such as *Rhyming Reason: The Poetry of Romantic-Era Psychologists* (2009) and "Psychology and the Formation of the Female Character in Wollstonecraft's Fiction" (2014), are also of relevance. Other notable works include Jeremy Davies' *Bodily Pain in Romantic Literature* (2014) and Clark Lawlor's *Consumption and Literature* (2006).

[165] As we saw in the previous chapter, this was very much the case for Matilda and her father.

the sufferings of those outside England with cold detachment. As Lionel writes, they talk of Thrace and Macedonia "as they would a lunar territory, which, unknown to them, presented no distinct idea or interest to their minds" (221). Here, Shelley again laments that sympathy is too often predicated on similitude and nearness to self, that the circle of one's moral concern is often circumscribed by a need for familiarity.

Smith writes of a similar situation in *Moral Sentiments*: "Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity" (132). According to Smith, "[h]e would . . . first of all express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man" (132). But "when all this fine philosophy was over," Smith continues, and "when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business of his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity as if no such accident had happened" (132). Indeed, Smith insists that "[t]he most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance" (132). "If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep to-night; but," Smith goes on, "provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him than this paltry misfortune of his own" (132). Hume makes an analogous claim in his *Treatise*: "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger," he insists (*Treatise*, Selby-Bigge, ed. 265). As this study has shown, Shelley's understanding of human nature and sympathy is informed, at least in part, by Smith and Hume. Yet, she dissents from them by revealing the error of their

assertion that sympathy is contingent upon similarity. For Shelley, sympathy must involve, in Levinas' words, a "shattering of indifference" and an assumption of responsibility for the other ("Preface" viii). In her later novels (*Lodore* and *Falkner*), as in *Frankenstein*, Shelley illustrates the fallacy of the notion that sympathy depends on similitude by depicting characters who extend their sympathy in equal measure to blood relations and non-blood relations, friends and strangers alike.[166] In *The Last Man*, however, Shelley is still grappling with the apparent limitations of sympathy and so highlights rather than overturns them. This novel challenges the widely held belief in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that sympathy was a purely positive, prosocial emotion. By examining its dangers as well as its limits, Shelley illustrates the profoundly complicated nature of this emotion, so essential to humanity and so far-reaching in its effects.

Yet, although *The Last Man* is Shelley's most thorough and extensive exploration of sympathy's darker side, like her other novels, it also celebrates sympathy's power to contribute to both personal and public wellbeing. Through Lionel, Shelley shows the beneficial influence sympathy can have on the individual, and through Adrian, Earl of Windsor (yet another distinct portraiture of P.B. Shelley), she reveals the positive effect it can have on humanity at large. Lionel, uneducated, an orphan and an outcast "war[ring] against civilization"—though, like Frankenstein's creature, "wish[ing] to belong to it"—is ultimately "softened and humanized" by Adrian's sympathy and instruction (Shelley, *LM* 18, 19, 32). As Lionel writes, "my heart, my savage revengeful heart, felt the influence of sweet benignity sink upon it" (26). The compassion of another coupled with the cultivation of his sympathy through reading engenders a complete revolution in Lionel's character. "I now began to be

[166] In *Falkner*, for example, Shelley shows that the sympathetic bond between Falkner and his adopted daughter Elizabeth is as strong as (if not stronger) than that between blood relations. "[B]lood," this novel suggests, need not always call "to blood." See *Falkner*, 238.

human," Lionel declares (29).[167] But Adrian's influence is more sweeping than this. "Matur[ing] his views for the reform of the English government, and the improvement of the people," Adrian announces his "intention of using his influence to diminish the power of the aristocracy, to effect a greater equalization of wealth and privilege, and to introduce a perfect system of republican government into England" (44). By extending his benevolence and desire for good beyond his circle of friends and family, Adrian seeks to change the very structure of society.

However, Adrian's "plans for the improvement of mankind" are initially thwarted by his "excess of sensibility," for he is "devoted, even as a victim to sacrifice, to his love for Evadne" (43, 25-6, 43). Indeed, "[h]is life [is] swallowed up in the existence of his beloved; and his heart beat[s] only in unison with the pulsations that vivif[y] hers" (33). As Lionel discloses to the reader, Adrian "weep[s] over" the letters he writes to Evadne, "merely from the excess of emotion they" awaken "in his heart" (34). When he learns that his love is unreciprocated, his "health [is] shaken by misery, and then his intellect yield[s] to the same tyranny"; overcome by this "incurable disorder," Adrian spirals into madness (46-40). Like the lovelorn and languishing woman of sensibility so often depicted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, Adrian becomes an invalid, physically debilitated by his "excess of emotion": he "lay stretched on a bed of sickness," writes Lionel, "his cheeks glowing with the hues of fever" (71).[168] Tormented by madness and illness—Lionel comments that "Daedalus never wound so inextricable an error round Minotaur, as madness had woven

[167] This echoes P.B. Shelley's assertion in his "Speculations on Morals" that, in Koretsky's words, "sympathy belongs to a broader program of socialization that is cultivated by reading 'the highest specimens of poetry and philosophy.'" P.B. Shelley, according to Koretsky, was "interested in textually-mediated encounters" since "the process by which one is constituted [as] a sympathetic, and therefore not only moral but *highly civilized* being, is tied directly to reading." See "'Unhallowed,'" 247, 247-8. This also recalls the humanizing effect of the creature's reading in *Frankenstein*.

[168] Wollstonecraft rails against these women of sensibility in *Rights of Woman*: "Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling." See *Rights of Woman*, 177.

about [Adrian's] imprisoned reason"—Adrian quits the world to live "in seclusion" (70, 47). His excessive and unrequited sympathy for Evadne therefore impedes his altruistic plans for the advancement of humanity, causing him to alienate himself from the world, inciting him to madness, and finally, bringing him to the brink of death.

However, Adrian is eventually nursed to health by the attentive care of Lionel, Idris (Adrian's sister, Lionel's beloved), and the Countess of Windsor (Adrian's mother). Surrounded by his friends and family, Adrian is cured of the nearly fatal effects of his pathological sympathy and re-dedicates "all of intellect and strength that remains to [him] . . . [to] the task . . . of bestowing blessings on [his] fellow-men" (76). When the plague reaches London and Ryland, the Lord Protector, renounces his post, Adrian is able to "put [his] theories into practice" and endeavour to "help [his] suffering fellow-creatures" (242). As he declares, "I can bring patience, and sympathy, and such aid as art affords, to the bed of disease" (247). "Congratulate me, then," he says to Lionel, "that I have found fitting scope for my powers. . . . To England and to Englishmen I dedicate myself" (248). Therefore, although the "excess of [Adrian's] sensibility" temporarily delays the enactment of his "virtuous action[s]," once that malady of the mind has been warded off by the compassion of loved ones and by his own intellect and self-command, Adrian is able to use his innately sympathetic nature—Lionel notes that Adrian's "soul [is] sympathy"—for the betterment of humanity (248, 45).

This chapter will therefore illustrate Shelley's complex understanding of sympathy, an emotion at once socializing and alienating. While in its natural form sympathy has the potential to enrich, ennoble, humanize, and unite, Shelley shows in this novel that in its pathological form it can disrupt and divide communities, negatively influence and incite disorder among crowds, and provoke individuals to madness, misanthropy, reclusiveness, and

suicide.[169] By showing the surprising yet revealing relationship between sympathy and the plague in *The Last Man*, Shelley changes our perception of this very paradoxical emotion, which, when exhibited to excess, exploited to unethical ends, evoked through art, or denied to those different to or distant from ourselves, can, in some instances, manifest as a dangerously contagious disease of the mind. Ultimately, however, Shelley reaffirms the necessity of sympathy to humanity, for it is the sympathy Lionel achieves through writing his narrative (whereby he is able to converse with the dead and reanimate those he has lost) that finally sustains him; his very survival is intimately and inextricably tied to the presence of sympathy.

## "The Lost Perdita":

## Self-less and Self-Destructive Sympathy[170]

Before Shelley acknowledges the primacy of human sympathy, she first explores the very real threats it can pose to individuals and to the world at large. Through the character of Perdita especially, Shelley shows that a surplus of sympathy can result in a forgetfulness of self, which in turn can lead to a literal annihilation of self. Shelley alerts the reader to the fanciful bent of Perdita's mind early on in the novel, which, Shelley suggests, predisposes her to the malady of the mind that is sympathetic excess (since her imagination elevates and exaggerates her feelings).[171] As Lionel notes, "[t]he same peculiarities of character" that "rendered [Perdita] peculiarly susceptible of pleasurable emotion" made "her sorrows agonies," for "her fancy magnified them," and "love envenomed the heart-piercing sting" (129). Lionel describes how, in Perdita's youth, "her active fancy wove a thousand combinations," and how "she lost herself delightedly in [her] self-created wanderings, and

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[169] Fairclough's discussion of sympathy's potential to provoke social disorder is relevant here. As she explains, her book "explores the ways in which, from the mid eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century, sympathy is understood as enabling collective, contagious and inexplicable forms of communication." Comparing Hume and De Quincey's understanding of sympathy's mechanism, she notes that "[w]hile Hume displays an indulgent attitude towards the 'contagion' of sympathetic communication, De Quincey condemns sympathy for enabling the mindless actions of the 'mob.'" See *The Romantic Crowd*, 2.

[170] See Shelley, *LM*, 139.

[171] In his *Treatise*, Hume observes: "'Tis remarkable, that lively passions commonly attend a lively imagination." See *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 427.

returned with unwilling spirit to the dull detail of common life" (16).[172] However, although Perdita's "vivid imagination" makes her more vulnerable to emotional extremes, she possesses a fierce independence and self-sufficiency, which, it would seem, might check her more fervent emotions. As Lionel writes, "Perdita was all-sufficient to herself," and "[a]ll the time she could command she spent in solitude" (91, 16, 15).[173] Indeed, "even in joy, [Perdita] fle[es] to loneliness, and [can] go on from day to day, neither expressing her emotions, nor seeking a fellow-feeling in another mind" (17).[174] Shelley is careful to emphasize Perdita's self-reliance, her capacity to live contentedly in her own thoughts, in order to impress upon the reader how completely she loses herself in her love for Raymond (once she devotes herself entirely to him, her ability to live in and for herself comes to a devastating end).

As Shelley shows, Perdita's love for Raymond, her unrestrained sympathy for him, becomes a kind of servitude, which slowly depletes her of selfhood.[175] Raymond's "kingdom," writes Lionel, "was the heart of Perdita, his subjects her thoughts; by her he was loved, respected as a superior being, obeyed, waited on" (91). "She erected a temple for him in the depth of her being," he continues, "and each faculty was a priestess vowed to his service" (92). Raymond therefore becomes the sole focus of Perdita's thoughts; it is not her own happiness but that of Raymond that becomes "the chief object of her life, the crown of

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[172] Critics have compared Perdita to Shelley herself. Mellor, for example, writes that Perdita "shares Mary Shelley's pale face, outward reserve, overactive imagination, and intense but repressed feelings." See "Introduction," xi. Sunstein notes that Perdita, one of Shelley's "self-referential heroines," is, like Shelley, "withdrawn and diffident due to a solitary, loveless childhood, and both needs approval and is too proud and stubborn to court favor." See *Romance and Reality*, 34. Perdita also recalls Matilda, who describes herself thus: "I was a solitary being, and from my infant years . . . I had been a dreamer. I brought Rosalind and Miranda and the lady of Comus to life to be my companions, or on my isle acted over their parts imagining myself to be in their situations. Then I wandered from the fancies of others and formed affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain." See *M*, 159.

[173] In this way, Perdita anticipates Fanny Derham of *Lodore*, whose father seeks "to guard [her] from all weakness, to make her complete in herself, and to render her independent and self-sufficing," and Elizabeth Raby of *Falkner*, who, even at the age of sixteen, is "[s]elf-possessed and vigilant," forever taking care of her suicidal adopted father. See *L*, 322; *Falkner*, 63.

[174] Perdita again recalls Matilda here, who lives in "perfect solitude" and "wish[e]s for no friend"—although, as with Perdita, this changes. See *M*, 198.

[175] This brings to mind Wollstonecraft's observation in *Rights of Woman* that "to their senses, are women made slaves." See *Rights of Woman*, 178.

her enjoyment" (100). She even believes that "all she possesse[s] in the world, except him, might well be spared, nay, given with delight, a propitiatory offering, to secure that supreme good she retain[s] in him," and "[s]oon she imagine[s], that fate demand[s] this sacrifice from her, as a mark she [is] devoted to [him]" (103). Perdita's "whole existence" is therefore "one sacrifice to [Raymond]"; she martyrs herself for him, loses herself in him, and later becomes his willing victim (118).[176] According to Shelley, such self-effacement is far from virtuous—to relinquish one's personhood is to remove oneself from life itself; as Heschel writes, the "[e]limination of the self is in itself no virtue. . . . If self-effacement were virtuous in itself, suicide would be the climax of moral living." In forfeiting her autonomy, Perdita willingly relinquishes her life.

Entranced and seduced by the "dazzling unreality of passion," Perdita surrenders herself to Raymond, who "instil[s] into her *his own* hopes and desires" (118, 104, my emphasis). "Most men," Lionel comments, "ruthlessly destroy the sacred veil, with which the female heart is wont to adorn the idol of its affections. Not so Raymond; he was an enchanter, whose reign was for ever undiminished; a king whose power never was suspended" (118). Perdita's life, then, is no longer her own; rather, it becomes a mere "consecrat[ion] to [Raymond]" (120).[177] All trace of her former independence, her love of solitude, and her self-sufficiency having vanished, Perdita succumbs to a total abnegation of self (120). Thus, when she learns of Raymond's infidelity (he has a secret affair with Evadne), she laments, "I have

[176] Notably, as discussed above, this same language of sacrifice, martyrdom, victimhood, and self-abnegation is used to describe Adrian's love for Evadne (he is "devoted, even as a victim to sacrifice, to his love for Evadne"; "[h]is life [is] swallowed up in the existence of his beloved; and his heart beat[s] only in unison with the pulsations that vivif[y] hers"). As we will see below, it is also used to describe Evadne's love for Raymond and Raymond's for Evadne: in the delirium of her death, Evadne cries, "Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim!—By my death I purchase thee . . . I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me"; Raymond then "martyr[s]" himself for her, intentionally seeking out his own death by entering the pestilence-ridden city of Constantinople. See *LM*, 43, 33, 181, 199.

[177] In *Lodore*, the narrator writes of Ethel's relationship to her father: "Ethel had not only consecrated her heart to her father, but his society was a habit with her, and, until now, she had never even thought how she could endure existence without the supporting influence of his affection." See *L*, 165.

lost you, myself, my life" (124).[178] The tale of Perdita, then, is a tale of self-destruction (both literally and metaphorically, as we will see).

There is a danger, Shelley warns, in devoting oneself too completely to another, for, more often than not, it results in a forfeiture of selfhood, in a morbid forgetfulness of self.[179] As the narrator writes:

> The very heart and soul of Raymond and Perdita had mingled, even as two mountain brooks that join in their descent, and murmuring and sparkling flow over shining pebbles . . . but let one desert its primal course, or be damned up by choaking [*sic*] obstruction, and the other shrinks in its altered banks. (130)[180]

When Raymond conducts his affair with Evadne, he bids "an eternal farewell to open-hearted converse, and entire sympathy with the companion of his life" (122). His act of betrayal leaves Perdita longing to "close her eyes, never more to open them again" as she languishes in a living death: "I will appear to live," she proclaims, "while I am—dead" (142, 134). "[I]t is not a common infidelity at which I repine," Perdita writes in her letter to Raymond, but "the disunion of an whole which may not have parts" (142). That is, when the whole that Perdita and Raymond comprise is broken by his inconstancy, it is not divided into two separate and self-sustaining entities; rather, the whole is utterly dissolved, leaving Perdita and Raymond, who had lived as "one heart, one hope, one life"—their identities having collapsed into one another—empty vessels, self-less (126).

However, while Raymond is able to reassert his former identity through his military career (he goes to fight for the liberation of the Greeks), Perdita is confined to domesticity; as she laments, "Would that I also had a career! Would that I could freight some untried bark

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[178] Notably, references to Perdita's experience of loss and to her being lost abound in the text: "the lost Perdita"; "lost as I am"; "I could not see her thus lost"; "the loss of Perdita, lost." See *LM*, 139, 143, 149, 215.
[179] In *Lodore*, Ethel exhibits a similar "self-forgetfulness." See *Lodore*, 238.
[180] In *Falkner*, the narrator describes the relationship between Falkner and his adopted daughter Elizabeth in similar terms: "Their hearts had united; they had mingled thought and sensation." See *Falkner*, 65.

with all my hopes, energies, and desires, and launch it forth into the ocean of life" (163). Here, Shelley follows closely in her mother's feminist footsteps, suggesting that sympathetic excess is often compounded by the claustrophobic and limited lives women were forced to lead in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Without the distractions of an education or career, Shelley suggests, women cannot help but become fixated on their romantic attachments, cannot help but overindulge in sympathy. As Wollstonecraft writes in her *Rights of Woman*, "only taught to look for happiness in love, [women] refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion"; if they were allowed "to share the advantages of education and government with man," Wollstonecraft asserts, women would "grow wiser and become free" (330, 310).[181] Lionel, who is often regarded as a fictional representation of Shelley herself, clearly agrees.[182] In an endeavour to raise Perdita's spirits and divert her attention away from Raymond, he encourages her to read: "[i]t was the pleasure I took in literature, the discipline of mind I found arise from it, that made me eager to lead Perdita to the same pursuits" (158). Although uneducated, "intellectual activity" had "always been [Perdita's] characteristic," and soon, she "half" forgets "her sorrows in occupation" (158).[183] In an experience similar to that of the creature in *Frankenstein*, Perdita comes to question her very identity through reading:

> [Perdita] was still questioning herself and her author, moulding every idea in a thousand ways, ardently desirous for the discovery of truth in every sentence. She sought to improve her understanding; mechanically her heart and dispositions became soft and gentle under this benign discipline. After awhile, she discovered that amidst all her newly acquired knowledge, her own character, which formerly she fancied that

[181] Mellor writes that the "female characters in *The Last Man* register [Shelley's] perception that the social roles assigned by her culture to women cripple and destroy them." See "Introduction," xi.
[182] Anne McWhir, for example, writes that Lionel is "Mary Shelley's alter ego." See "Introduction," *The Last Man* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1996) xvii.
[183] As will be discussed below, Lionel, the outside narrator, and Shelley herself also find comfort in writing. The therapeutic nature of writing is a common theme in Shelley's letters, journals, and fictional works.

> she thoroughly understood, became the first in rank among the terrae incognitae, the pathless wilds of a country that had no chart. Erringly and strangely she began the task of self-examination with self-condemnation. And then again she became aware of her own excellencies, and began to balance with juster scales the shades of good and evil. (159)[184]

The "benign discipline" of reading encourages Perdita to reflect on, question, and finally improve herself. She learns to "soften" her emotions, which are prone to excess, and to exist apart from Raymond. Moreover, she learns to extend her sympathy beyond her husband.

Before Raymond's betrayal, Perdita had admitted that "the rest of the world was nothing to [her]"; "all other men," she tells Raymond, "I never considered nor felt what they were" (142).[185] It is only through reading and education, through which she learns to immerse herself in the lives of others and to re-cultivate her sense of individual selfhood, that Perdita is able to temper her sympathy for Raymond and extend it to others. As Lionel observes, where Perdita had formerly neglected her family and friends, "[s]he now took pleasure in my society; towards Idris she felt and displayed a full and affectionate sense of her worth—she restored to her child in abundant measure her tenderness and care" (159). However, her reformation through reading ends prematurely when news arrives of Raymond's capture and possible death, destroying the independence Perdita had been reclaiming. "Each hour was counted, and '*He suffers*' was the burthen of all [Perdita's] thoughts," writes Lionel (169). Through her sympathy for her husband, which now reasserts itself with redoubled force, Perdita seeks to imitate the tortures she imagines he is suffering in prison: "She abstained from food; she lay on the bare earth, and, by such mimickry [*sic*] of his enforced torments,

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[184] Through his reading, Frankenstein's creature, like Perdita, questions both himself and the world around him: See *F*, 142, 142-3.

[185] As discussed in the Introduction, Shaftesbury observes that "a creature possessed with . . . an immoderate degree of passion must of necessity allow too much to that one [individual] and too little to others," which is precisely the case with Perdita. See *Characteristics*, 196.

endeavoured to hold communion with his distant pain" (169). We can read Perdita's actions as a form of what Anna Gibbs calls "mimetic communication" (186). According to Gibbs, "'mimetic communication' or mimesis" refers to "corporeally based forms of imitation" (186). "At their most primitive," Gibbs explains, "these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the 'synchrony of facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person,' producing a tendency for those involved 'to converge emotionally'" (186). So powerful is Perdita's sympathy for Raymond that she mimics his actions even when he is not physically in her presence. Finally, any sympathy but that felt for Raymond is completely forgotten, and Perdita relapses into an all-consuming, self-less, and self-destructive sympathy, failing to see that "[t]o give up life or the right to satisfaction is not a moral requirement" but rather no virtue at all.

Indeed, upon Raymond's release, Perdita's subjection to him becomes absolute: "Now she sedulously put herself out of the question, sacrificing even her anxiety and health and welfare to her resolve not to oppose any of his desires" (Shelley, *LM* 175). Her selfhood, her own thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and desires, are completely effaced; Perdita becomes a cipher, a nonentity, a mere reflection of Raymond. In Mellor's words, "Perdita can conceive of her self only as a part of her husband's self" (xi). As Lionel perceives, "she, even as a mirror, changed as he changed" (Shelley, *LM* 185). Thus, when Raymond dies (he is killed when he rides his horse into the abandoned and pestilence-ridden city of Constantinople and is crushed by its falling ruins), Perdita must also die. No longer an independent being, Perdita can only mimic Raymond's actions. As she says to Lionel: "'Look on me as dead; and if death be a mere change of state, I am dead'" (210). As Carlson writes, "Perdita attempts to commemorate Raymond "by communing *as* the dead with the dead" (187). Indeed, Perdita's sole desire is to remain in Athens, where she will live out her remaining days in ceaseless solitude, "watch[ing]" her husband's "tomb" until she might "speedily rejoin him in his

blessed repose" (212).[186] Perdita, her sense of self contingent upon, bound up with, Raymond, figuratively dies with him.

For Lionel, Perdita's plan to "leave the society of loving friends" for "the company of the dead" is "methodized madness," a "strange and romantic scheme"—borne of her "disturbed imagination"—which will only compound her "passionate grief" (it is also an act of profound selfishness as Perdita demands that Lionel take her daughter Clara back to England with him) (215, 212, 210, 210). In an act of deception, Lionel pretends to assent to his sister's "wild scheme" and gives her a "composing draught" (laudanum) on the pretence that he is concerned about "the feverish glow in her cheek" (213). Perdita had earlier warned Lionel of her "fixed resolve": "drag me away—I return; confine me, imprison me, still I escape" (212). When Perdita discovers the lie and finds herself aboard a ship to England, she ties a shawl around her waist, which she attaches to the window of her cabin, "clench[es] a "slip of paper" in her hand reading, "'To Athens,'" and drowns herself, the shawl ensuring her body will be found (215).[187] As Carlson suggests, "[i]mplicit in" Perdita's act is the "view that . . . the precondition for enjoying a sense of neighborship with the dead is being dead" (188). Because Perdita's entire existence has been dependent upon Raymond's—as Lionel writes, "[t]he treasure which she possessed in the affections of Raymond, was more necessary to her being, than the life-blood that animated her veins"—his death inevitably precipitates her suicide (121).[188]

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[186] As discussed in the previous chapter, Matilda similarly wishes to live out her numbered days in interminable solitude, waiting until she might reunite with her father in death. Also like Perdita, Matilda eventually turns to self-destruction to speed up the process.

[187] As cited in the Introduction, Higonnet, writing about representations of female suicide in the nineteenth century, observes that "the suicidal solution is linked to dissolution of the self. . . . The abandoned woman drowns, as it were, in her own emotions." The heroines, writes Higonnet, drift "into destruction, often carried by water that reflects the fluidity of [their] identit[ies]." See "Suicide," 106, 114.

[188] Mellor suggests that "Perdita's suicide by drowning imaginatively realizes Mary Shelley's own guilt-ridden desire to rejoin her dead husband in a final act of atonement." See "Introduction," xi. Higonnet notes that the "insistent representation of women—rather than men—who commit suicide for love complements the familiar assumption that woman lives for love, man for himself. If Brutus commits suicide for the nation, Portia commits suicide in order not to live without Brutus." See "Suicide," 108.

Thus, Perdita's monomaniacal sympathy for Raymond robs her of her selfhood, making her at once self-less and wholly selfish, "preferr[ing]" the "rocky grave of Raymond" to the living, breathing human world and cruelly leaving "poor Clara [her daughter] quite an orphan" (215, 216). Finally, her "distempered sympathy" makes her literally self-less, for it drives her to suicide (278). As Lionel perceives, Perdita dies "the victim of too much loving, [of] too constant an attachment to the perishable and lost" (216).[189] Through the character of Perdita, then, Shelley highlights the dangers of sympathetic excess, which, as she shows, can lead to isolating, psychotic, misanthropic, and self-destructive behaviour. As we will see, Raymond's other love interest, Evadne, follows a similarly fatal course.

## "[T]he strange link that enchains me to her":
## The Extreme and Enslaving Sympathy of Raymond and Evadne[190]

After leaving England years before, having realized Raymond did not reciprocate her love, Evadne returns (unbeknownst to her former friends). The scene of Raymond and Evadne's reunion is meant to invoke the reader's sympathy. Shelley's emphasis on Evadne's state of misery and penury, which elicits Raymond's pity and compassion, is designed to evoke an emotional response from the reader as well (scenes of this sort are staples in the literature of sensibility, which takes emotion, rather than action, as its primary focus). But it is precisely Raymond's sympathy for Evadne, his expression of "the deepest spirit of compassion and affection," that leads to his infidelity, and finally, to his separation from Perdita (110). In this way, Shelley shows that sympathy, in some instances, can actually result in unethical behaviour. In sympathizing too passionately with Evadne, Raymond betrays his wife—the being who had "adorned and dignified [his] life" and "linked him to

[189] According to Mellor, Perdita's suicide "embodies [Shelley's] recognition that the gender-determined role of devoted wife within the bourgeois family is inherently suicidal." "[T]he wife," she explains, "submerges her identity into that of her husband, sacrificing her self to his welfare." See "Introduction," xi.
[190] See Shelley, *The Last Man*, 188.

other men"—a betrayal that eventually gives rise to the deaths of Evadne, Raymond himself, and Perdita (153).

Raymond becomes reacquainted with Evadne through one of his "beneficial schemes" as Lord Protector, the creation of a national gallery (106). Among the hundreds of potential designs, he chooses one submitted by an anonymous artist whom he eventually learns is Evadne. When he visits the Greek princess (still unaware of her identity), the scene of "[p]overty, dirt, and squalid misery" strike "him to the heart," awakening what becomes a deep and enduring sympathy (108, 109). Upon recognition of Evadne, Raymond's "manner change[s] from polite beneficence to the warmest protestations of kindness and sympathy," familiarity increasing his compassion (110). As is often the case in this novel, sympathy for strangers proves "much fainter" than that for those "near and contiguous" (Hume, *Morals* 45). At the "sight of [Evadne], in her present situation," Raymond experiences a physical response to her suffering, his sympathy manifesting as a painful corporeal reaction—he is "struck . . . to the heart," and he feels as if "an arrow" has passed "into his soul" (Shelley, *LM* 109, 110). He is thus moved to comfort and console her, and to relieve her suffering. But the awakening of this active and ardent sympathy only leads to devastation and death.

The tale of Evadne's fall, of her descent into poverty and misery, serves to solidify Raymond's sympathy for her. Yet, Evadne does not tell Raymond the whole story, neglecting the truth in order to gain his compassion and avoid his censure. She tells Raymond how her father, having squandered his fortune and ruined his reputation, persuaded her to marry a wealthy Greek merchant from Constantinople (her father dies soon thereafter). The war between Greece and Turkey, however, brings about her husband's bankruptcy (so Evadne tells Raymond), and they are forced to flee Constantinople for England. Her husband, "reduce[d] to a state bordering on insanity," "commit[s] suicide" only a few months after their arrival, leaving Evadne destitute (111). What Evadne leaves out of her narrative, what

she deliberately "conceal[s] from Raymond," is that she was "the cause of her husband's utter ruin" (114). As the narrator explains, Evadne, after her marriage to the Greek merchant, turned to ambition, aspiring to "the title of Princess of Wallachia" (113). Her "intrigues with Russia for the furtherance of her object, excited the jealousy of the Porte [the central government of the Ottoman Empire], and the animosity of the Greek government. She was considered a traitor to both, the ruin of her husband followed," and "they avoided death by a timely flight" (114). Although Evadne claims that it is her pride that prevents her from applying "for succour to the rich Greeks" in England, in truth, "repulse and denial, as to a criminal convicted of the worst crimes"—that is, "of bringing the scythe of foreign despotism to cut away the new springing of liberties of her country"—"would have followed her application to any among the Greeks" (111, 114). Well aware of Raymond's own susceptibility to pride, Evadne presents herself in a similar light, manipulating his sympathy through deception: "you also have pride and resolution," she declares; "do not then wonder that my pride is tameless, my resolution unalterable" (112). Emphasizing her degraded state and thereby playing on Raymond's sympathy, Evadne asks, "Shall the daughter of the noble, though prodigal Zaimi, appear a beggar before her compeers or inferiors[?]"; "I [would] rather die," she insists, "than be a mark for scorn" (111, 112). Although Evadne eventually "relate[s]" to Raymond "the whole of her story," she only does so after she has secured his sympathy (116). In this way, Raymond's sympathy is led astray, transferred from his wife to Evadne, and this is achieved, in part, through Evadne's calculated manipulation of his emotions. Through the example of Raymond and Evadne, Shelley demonstrates how easily our sympathies can be misguided.

But Raymond himself is equally responsible: his "passions," the "violent" nature of which the narrator continues to reiterate, often obtain "mastery over him," and, consequently, he easily succumbs to an immoderate and immoral (because it causes him to betray his wife

and abandon his daughter) sympathy for Evadne (44-45).[191] He visits her frequently, and "his presence transform[s]" her "abode of penury" into "a temple redolent with sweets, radiant with heaven's own light; he part[akes] of her delirium" (116). Through the mechanism of sympathy, Raymond catches (like a contagious disease) Perdita's delirium.[192] As the narrator writes, "[t]hey built a wall between them and the world," within which was "reckless blindness, deluding joy" (116-7, 117). When Perdita learns of the affair, however, the fantasy is shattered, and Raymond, tormented by the knowledge of the irreparable damage he has done to his relationship with his wife, is hurled into a state of madness. He "was all nerve," and his "passions, always his masters, acquired fresh strength"—his "sensitive mind . . . was stung to madness," writes Lionel (127). After a month, he "lift[s] his head from above the vapours of fever and passion into the still atmosphere of calm reflection," believing that this separation from Evadne has freed him of her "power" (128). "[I] [am] no longer her slave," he thinks, "no longer her lover: [I] [will] never see her more" (128). Yet, in the very next moment his "fancy conjure[s] up the miserable abode of the Greek girl," and "[c]ompassion swell[s] in his breast" (128). Raymond's fervent and unfettered sympathy for Evadne therefore leads him to deceive Perdita a second time. In this way, Shelley shows that, when misguided, sympathy has the potential to provoke unethical behaviour.

Evadne's sympathy for Raymond is equal in its intensity and excess, her love for him so vehement that she attempts suicide through starvation in response to his neglect. When Raymond returns to her, he finds her on the verge of death, "stretched speechless, almost lifeless on her wretched bed" (132).[193] Raymond surmises that Evadne, finding "herself

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[191] Hume's observation that "the stronger the passion is, the greater is the commotion" is relevant here (as elsewhere in the text). See *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 593.

[192] This recalls Hume's assertion, cited in previous chapters, that "[t]he passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts." "Where friendship appears in very signal instances," Hume continues, "my heart *catches* the same passion." See *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 605, my emphasis.

[193] In this way, Evadne is like Adrian, who previously "lay stretched on a bed of sickness" in response to his unrequited love for her. See *LM*, 71.

forsaken by him," had "lost the heart to pursue her usual avocations" (132). "[F]amine," he conjectures, was "welcomed as the kind of porter to the gates of death, within whose opening folds she should now, without sin, quickly repose" (132). Like Perdita's sympathy for Raymond and Adrian's for Evadne, then, Evadne's sympathy for Raymond is pathological, threatening her very life (as with Frankenstein's creature, death becomes her only desire when she believes that her sympathy is unreciprocated). Also like Perdita and Adrian, Evadne idolizes her beloved: Raymond is "the hero of her imagination, the image carved by love in the unchanged texture of her heart" (113).[194] She had left England when she realized that Raymond did not return her love (at which point he was choosing between his ambitious plans for the crown, which required him to marry the Countess of Windsor's daughter Idris, and his love for Perdita). When Evadne learns of Raymond's marriage to Perdita, "[t]he glory of life" leaves her, and "the roseate halo of love, which had imbued every object with its own colour, fade[s]" (113). Upon returning to England, the only "consolation" she finds in her state of penury is the knowledge that she "live[s] in the same country, breathe[s] the same air as Raymond" (114). When her husband commits suicide, "the tide of love resume[s] its ancient flow," "delug[ing] her soul with its tumultuous waves," and Evadne gives "herself up a prey to its uncontrollable power" (114). Wholly engrossed by her compulsive, obsessive, and suicidal sympathy for Raymond, Evadne holds to her death-wish even after she recovers. Although she determines to live—she knows that "the reflection that he had occasioned her death, would pursue Raymond through life"—Evadne remains tormented by "[c]onflicting passions, long-cherished love, and self-inflicted disappointment," which make "her regard

[194] In Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, the heroine's overactive imagination proves deluding and dangerous; her "fancy" finding "a basis to erect its model of perfection on," Maria imagines that a man who is actually tyrannical and villainous—he later imprisons her in a madhouse—is "her hero" and "invest[s] [him] with more than mortal beauty." Like Shelley, Wollstonecraft warns of the delusive nature of an overactive imagination, which itself leads to emotional extremes. See *Maria*, 120. Matilda similarly idolizes the object of her sympathy (her father): in her lone wanderings and solitary musings, Matilda makes her father "the idol of [her] imagination." And Matilda's father idolizes her in turn: "[y]ou appeared as the deity of a lovely region," a "ministering Angel," he tells his daughter. See *M*, 159, 178.

death alone as sufficient refuge for her woe" (146). Like Frankenstein's creature and Matilda before her, Evadne looks forward to the forgetfulness of death.

After Evadne quits England forever, Raymond follows suit, returning to Greece to participate in the fight for independence. Having separated from Perdita, Raymond renounces the Protectorate, declaring, "I cannot rule myself. My passions are my masters; my smallest impulse my tyrant" (152). A slave to his passions, it is no wonder that Raymond becomes a slave to his sympathy for Evadne. Indeed, the tie between Raymond and Evadne is so indissoluble that he willingly follows her to the grave, obeying her command that he join her in death, which she communicates to Lionel when he finds her dying on a deserted battlefield in Kishan. Lionel describes how, "[i]n wild delirium," Evadne had "called upon the name of Raymond" and "in a sepulchral voice" had "murmured:—'This is the end of love!—Yet not the end!'" (181). As Lionel relates, "frenzy lent [Evadne] strength as she cast her arm up to heaven," declaring:

> 'there is the end! there we meet again. Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim!—By my death I purchase thee—lo! the instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors. I dared, I conquered them all, till now! I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me—Fire, and war, and plague unite for thy destruction—O Raymond, there is no safety for thee!" (181)

Referring to herself as Raymond's "victim"—like Perdita, she becomes a "victim of too much loving"—Evadne, using the language of commerce, insists that, through her death, she rightfully "purchase[s]" Raymond's life. She sells herself "to death," abdicating her life—one in which any union with Raymond is impossible—so that she may "meet" him "again" in

another.[195] In her final moments, as she "rave[s] of her speedy meeting with her beloved in the grave, of his death nigh at hand," it is as if she is communicating with Raymond telepathically, for, even before learning of Evadne's dying words from Lionel, Raymond declares that he "'seem[s] . . . to be entering a darksome gulph'" (181, 184). The sympathetic link between Raymond and Evadne is so strong, so binding, that they appear capable of sharing their thoughts "independently of the recognized channels of sense" (Shelley, *LM* 181, 184; *OED* "Telepathy"). Their extreme sympathy, Shelley suggests, gifts them with the power of telepathy.

Thus, although Lionel describes Evadne's proclamations as "the ravings of a maniac," Raymond, usually immune to superstition, insists that Evadne "has said nothing but what [he] knew before'" (184).[196] Echoing her words, Raymond himself raves, "'Fire, the sword, and plague! They may all be found in yonder city [Constantinople],'" and "'on my head alone may they fall!'" (184-5). He then proceeds, like a suicide, to get his affairs in order before the fatal deed: "'you will become the last resource of Perdita,'" he says to Lionel, "'her protector and consoler'"; "'[t]o you, Lionel,'" he continues, "'I entrust your sister and her child'" (186, 188).[197] Just as Evadne is Raymond's victim (as Perdita will similarly be), so Raymond becomes Evadne's, her "'last words . . . the seal upon the warrant of [his] death'" (187).[198] Aware of the devastation such knowledge would cause Perdita, Raymond entreats Lionel to

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[195] In this way, Evadne recalls Matilda, who, as discussed in the previous chapter, commits active euthanasia, "go[ing] from this world where [her father] is no longer," hoping to "meet him in another." See Shelley, *M* 210.
[196] Lionel comments on Raymond's hypocrisy, lamenting that "[r]eason came unavailing to such high-wrought feelings." "Alas, for human reason! He accused the Greeks of superstition," cries Lionel, "what name did he give to the faith he lent to the predictions of Evadne?" See *LM*, 195.
[197] In willingly leaving his daughter Clara in order to seek out his own death, Raymond anticipates Perdita's subsequent suicide and abandonment of Clara.
[198] Carlson makes a similar argument in reference to *Matilda*: "Technically, the 'crime' that the text investigates is hearing—in fact, demanding that one hear—a word that, once spoken, changes one's world and, especially, one's sense of the possibility of ever relating to others." "After all," Carlson continues "the passion between father and daughter is never expressed physically; in addition, the text goes out of its way to portray Mathilda as virtually bodiless. . . . Instead, what enters is a word; this is the 'poison' that is 'poured' into her ears and that immediately changes all her 'blood' into a 'cold fountain of bitterness corrupted in its very source' such that it 'no longer [. . .] supports life.'" "In other words, a word—and the text reiterates this struggle over 'the word'—can change one's life or even end life as one knows it." See *England's First Family of Writers*, 111.

"'[n]ever mention to her the fatal name of Evadne'" (188). "'She would doubly sorrow," he acknowledges, "'over the strange link that enchains me to her, *making my spirit obey her dying voice*, following her, as it is about to do, to the unknown country'" (188, my emphasis).[199] The "strange link" that "enchains" Raymond to Evadne is his extreme sympathy for her, and it is that which "make[s] [his] spirit obey her dying voice" and follow her to the grave.

Raymond therefore enters the plague-infested city of Constantinople with the intention of dying, deliberately seeking out his own death; as he declares, "'I am about to die. . . . Evadne [has] pronounced my death'" (194). Killed by the falling ruins of the pestilence-ridden city, Raymond "martyr[s]" himself for Evadne; he "undergoe[s] death . . . through [his] devotion to" her (Shelley, *LM* 199; *OED* "Martyr" def. 2a). Like Matilda, then, Raymond intentionally exposes himself to potentially fatal forces in order to bring about his own death and re-join his beloved. Indeed, Lionel later admits that "[s]uch was his choice: he expected to die" (Shelley, *LM* 204). The sympathetic tie that binds Evadne and Raymond is thus unbreakable; in their deaths, their union is eternalized. Interestingly, their mutual deaths achieve that which Evadne had hoped her design for the National Gallery would: "[Evadne] looked forward to the accomplishment of a work of hers, which, immortalized in stone, would go down to posterity stamped with the name of Raymond" (115). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus writes that "[a]n act like [suicide] is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art," attributing the act of self-destruction to the creation of a "great work of art" (12). This aestheticization of suicide is relevant here, for the deaths of Evadne and Raymond are represented, in a sense, as poetic, romantic, melodramatic, even beautiful (Evadne's is especially theatrical). In the end, Evadne's

[199] Peter Melville suggests that what "Raymond contracts upon hearing the news of Evadne's death is not the plague but an incurable sadness that regrettably steers him toward the self-fulfillment of Evadne's prophecy-curse." See "The Problem of Immunity in 'The Last Man,'" *Studies in English Literature* 47.4 (2007): 839.

"accomplishment," the "work of hers" that "immortalize[s]" her relationship with Raymond, is not her design for the National Gallery but her very death, which instigates Raymond's own dramatic act of self-destruction.

But the eternal union of Evadne and Raymond in death is complicated by Perdita's suicide, which is equally aestheticized and theatrical (Perdita plans her death meticulously in order to ensure that she will be found holding the slip of paper reading "To Athens"). Like Raymond, she martyrs herself for love, hoping to "speedily rejoin him in his blessed repose" (Shelley, *LM* 212). Buried "beside her beloved," the "tomb . . . inscribed with the united names of Raymond and Perdita," Perdita accomplishes her goal (215). However, this becomes problematic when we consider that Evadne and Raymond believe they have been eternally united in death. This entanglement of sympathies, in which each party in the love triangle exhibits their sympathy to "a degree considered extreme or psychologically unhealthy," Shelley suggests, has repercussions even after death (*OED*, "Pathological," *colloq*. def. 4). As Shelley demonstrates through the entwined relationships of Evadne, Raymond, and Perdita, when we share in the lives of others through sympathy, if we do not retain a sense of our own individuality, of our own separateness, the consequences can be devastating. Raymond, "extreme in all things,"[200] cannot control his passions, and his sympathy for his devoted wife is therefore easily displaced by his more fervent sympathy for Evadne (149). Evadne, actuated by "the great energy of her passions," is equally a slave to her emotions, unable to sustain herself without the love of Raymond (116). And Perdita, "peculiarly susceptible" to "emotion," her "faculties . . . palsied" by her husband's betrayal and her "mind prey[ing] upon itself almost to madness," is finally consumed by her sympathy for Raymond (129, 133, 157). The excessive sympathy felt by these three characters, the text

[200] In *Lodore*, Henry Fitzhenry, another Byronic hero, is described in precisely the same way: "Extreme in all things, Lodore began more than ever to doat upon [Ethel] and to bind up his life in her." See *L*, 133.

implies, is the agent of their deaths, and the reader is left wondering whether the tragedy will continue even in the afterlife.

Sympathy in *The Last Man* is therefore represented as a potentially dangerous and deadly emotion, a disease of the mind that torments and disturbs; when uncontrolled by a firm sense of individual selfhood, sympathy can escalate to alarming extremes and can often lead to death, as is the case with Perdita, Evadne, and Raymond. But, according to Shelley, this is not the only threat sympathy poses. In this novel, Shelley is also concerned with the manipulation of sympathy on a larger scale. Because sympathy can spread like a contagious disease, it has the potential to influence the masses (both positively *and* negatively). Through the portrayal of false prophets who play on public sympathy, Shelley illustrates how easily such sympathy can be manipulated to immoral and fatal ends.

**Sympathy and Persuasion**

The false prophets who take advantage of a desperate and dying humanity in *The Last Man* expertly exploit the fears of the public, the people soon "becom[ing] fit instruments to be played upon by" these "maniac[s]" (263).[201] As Lionel writes:

> The spirit of superstition had birth, from the wreck of our hopes, and antics wild and dangerous were played on the great theatre, while the remaining particle of futurity dwindled into a point in the eyes of the prognosticators. Weak-spirited women died of fear as they listened to their denunciations; men of robust form and seeming strength fell into idiocy and madness, racked by the dread of coming eternity. (262)

A man who has lost his wife and infant to the plague becomes "wild with . . . grief, his diseased fancy" convincing him that he has been "sent by heaven to preach the end of time to the world" (263). With impassioned and persuasive language, he bids "his spectators go

[201] As stated previously, Fairclough argues that, "during the Romantic period, sympathy was understood as a disruptive social phenomenon which functioned to spread disorder and unrest between individuals and even across nations like a 'contagion.'" See *The Romantic Crowd*, 1.

home and die" (263). "'Haste, my friends,'" he cries, "'apparel yourselves in the court-dress of death'"; "'husbands, protectors no more, lead on the partners of your death!'" (264). This false prophet "paint[s] the horrors of the time" with such "terrific words" and "minute detail" that "groans and even shrieks burst from the crowd" (264). The "maniac" plays on the emotions of his spectators so adeptly that he causes an actual physical reaction in them, showing sympathy's effect on both mind and body. Moreover, he tells "heart-breaking tales of the snapping of dear affinities—the gasping horror of despair over the deathbed of the last beloved," tales to which he knows his susceptible spectators will relate and which will thus appeal to and arouse their deepest sympathies (264). As Shelley here warns, sympathy, a naturally benevolent force, can be manipulated and used as a coercive tool. Rather than an agent of positive change, sympathy here becomes an agent of corruption, contaminating the minds of the spectators and spreading from person to person like an infectious disease.

The malign influence of sympathy is displayed most explicitly in the character of the "impostor," a "self-erected prophet" who rises to power in Paris and incites division among the small remnant of humanity that remains (375). In an echo of P.B. Shelley, Lionel observes that, "[d]uring the whole progress of the plague, the teachers of religion were in possession of great power; a power of good, if rightly directed, or of incalculable mischief, if fanaticism or intolerance guided their efforts" (375). The impostor's "fanatical party," "the Elect," expel the non-believers from the Tuileries, "refus[ing] to admit any into the palace who [does] not first abjure obedience to all except God, and his delegate on earth" (376). Motivated by ambition, the impostor imagines that, if "a few survived [the plague], so that a new race should spring up, he, by holding tight the reins of belief, might be a prophet, nay a deity" (386). Like Frankenstein, this impostor aspires to usurp the power of God, and he seeks to do so by capitalizing on the overwrought emotions of the small group of people who still endure. As Lionel writes, "such was the power of his assertions, however false, yet

vehemently iterated, over the ready credulity of the ignorant and fearful, that they seldom failed in drawing over to their party some from among" the non-believers (385-6). He is able to persuade a vulnerable humanity that by submitting to him, they will "escape . . . the plague," find "salvation [for] their children," and participate in the "rise of a new race of men" (387). One of Lionel's former acquaintances, Juliet, becomes "easy prey" to the fanatical party, her "sensibility and acute fears render[ing] her accessible to every impulse," and "her love for her child [making] her eager to cling to the merest straw held out to save him" (388). It is Juliet's sympathy (her profound love for her child) that makes her susceptible to the impostor's treachery. She is deluded, blinded by her sympathy.

In this way, Shelley shows how easily one's sympathy can be manipulated, played upon to unethical or fatal ends. As Marshall writes, "spectators [can] be deceived by hypocrites," by "masters of a semiotics of the passions who . . . know how to imitate the exterior signs and symptoms of feelings and thus trick beholders into taking their presentations of self at face value" (181). Adrian (the Lord Protector at the time), opposing the impostor and actuated by a "spirit of benevolence," survives an assassination attempt by one of the impostor's adherents (Shelley, *LM* 405). Although Adrian considers abandoning "the deluded crowd"—the misguided followers of the impostor—"leaving them a miserable prey to their passions, and to the worse tyrant who excited them," he resolves to open their eyes to the deception (405). However, the plague finally "destroy[s] the illusion" for Adrian, "invading the congregation of the elect, and showering promiscuous death among them," and thereby bringing an end to the "impostor's grand hold upon [their] minds" (406). His artifice revealed, the impostor destroys himself, escaping punishment through suicide. This section of *The Last Man* serves to underscore the coercive effects sympathy can have when wielded by those motivated by self-interest. Like Hume and Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), Shelley recognized that, in Fairclough's words, "sympathy [was] not just an individualized

phenomenon but a collective one" (1). As "a medium for the transmission of energies, ideas and emotions within a collective," sympathy has the power to bring about wide-reaching change both for the betterment and detriment of humankind (3).

**Imitative and "Irresistible Sympathy": The Dangers of Mimesis**

The sympathy evoked by art is another concern that Shelley engages with in this novel. As Shelley shows, rather than providing an escape from the dread reality or a healing catharsis, a purification of those painful emotions that plague the remnants of humanity, the theatre only magnifies the misery of the spectators:

> Comedy brought with it too great a contrast to the inner despair: when such were attempted, it was not infrequent for a comedian, in the midst of the laughter occasioned by his disproportioned buffoonery, to find a word or thought in his part that jarred with his own sense of wretchedness, and burst from mimic merriment into sobs and tears, while the spectators, seized with irresistible sympathy, wept, and the pantomimic revelry was changed to a real exhibition of tragic passion. (Shelley, *LM* 278)

Rather than an escape, then, the theatre intensifies the already overwrought emotions of the spectators, "awaken[ing] [a] distempered sympathy" in the crowd (278). Describing his experience watching *Macbeth* at Drury Lane Theatre, Lionel observes that "the first actor of the age was there to exert his powers to drug with irreflection the auditors" (281). Yet, the play has the opposite effect, arousing frenzied and agonizing emotions.

Initially, Lionel assumes that the "wildness and supernatural machinery of Macbeth, was a pledge that it could contain little directly connected with [his] present circumstances" (281). Arriving during the scene in the witches' cave, the unreality of the situation allows his "imagination to revel, without fear of contradiction, or reproof from reason or the heart" (282). When Macbeth enters, the audience "sympathize[s] in his wonder and his daring," and

they give themselves "up with [their] whole souls to the influence of scenic delusion" (282). Lionel temporarily feels "the beneficial result of such excitement, in a renewal of those pleasing flights of fancy to which [he] had long been a stranger" (282). However, when the scene switches, and the fantastical is replaced by the realistic, a devastating change occurs in the audience:

> A shudder like the swift passing of an electric shock ran through the house, when Rosse exclaimed, in answer to 'Stands Scotland where it did?'
>
> Alas, poor country;
>
> Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot
>
> Be called our mother, but our grave: where nothing,
>
> But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
>
> Where sights, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air,
>
> Are made, not marked; where the violent sorrow seems
>
> A modern extasy [*sic*]: the dead man's knell
>
> Is there scarce asked, for who; and good men's lives
>
> Expire before the flowers in their caps,
>
> Dying, or ere they sicken. (282)

These words recall the spectators to their own "violent sorrow," to the state of their country, "[w]here sights, and groans, and shrieks" similarly "rent the air," and which itself has become a vast grave, "a wide, wide tomb" (248). Lionel's reaction accords with that of his peers: "Each word struck the sense, as our life's passing bell; we feared to look at each other, but bent our gaze on the stage" (282). The actor playing the part of Ross becomes "aware of the dangerous ground he" treads, and he is "afraid to speak, trembling from apprehension of a burst of grief from the audience" (282, 282-3). The actor's show "of terror" increases that of the audience, and they gasp "with him, each neck . . . stretched out, each face chang[ing] with

the actor's changes" in imitative sympathy, or in what Gibbs calls "mimetic communication" (Shelley, *LM* 283; Gibbs 186). When the man playing Macduff, "unobservant of the high wrought sympathy of the house," cries "with well acted passion":

> 'All my pretty ones?
> Did you say all?—O hell kite! All?
> What? all my pretty chickens, and their dam,
> At one fell swoop!,'

the audience, reminded of their comparable sufferings, of the deaths of so many loved ones, is overcome with heartrending emotion (Shelley, *LM* 283). As Lionel recalls, "[a] pang of tameless grief wrenched every heart, a burst of despair was echoed from every lip.—I had entered into the universal feeling—I had been absorbed by the terrors of Rosse—I re-echoed the cry of Macduff" (283). He thus "rush[es] out as from an hell of torture" (283). In this scene, then, the restorative power of art, its capacity to heal through sympathy, is subverted by the intrusion of deathly reality. As Lionel describes it, "nature [had] overpowered art" in this instance (278). Here, the imitative sympathy inspired by art is shown to be deeply destructive, heightening rather than purifying painful emotions. However, as will be illustrated below, Shelley does not deny the restorative aspects of art (and the sympathy it inevitably evokes), for it is Lionel's creation of his "journal of death," through which he re-lives his past and communes with and memorializes his loved ones, that ultimately sustains him, and which finally saves him from the temptation of self-destruction (267).

### Relative Sympathy: Rejecting the Other for the Familial and Familiar[202]

But before turning to Shelley's depiction of the positive aspects of sympathy (as represented through the characters of Lionel and Adrian), it is necessary first to delve more

[202] Melville uses a similar phrase, "relative compassion," in his article, arguing that "[c]ompassion for others" in *The Last Man* "ultimately remains relative—conditioned, at least in part, by familial and racial identification." See "The Problem of Immunity," 835.

deeply into her profound critique of this complicated emotion, for Shelley not only exposes the dangers of sympathizing, she also illustrates its limitations (in this respect, *The Last Man* hearkens back to *Frankenstein*). As stated above, the sympathy of the English only goes so far: they can sympathize with the sufferings of their fellow countrymen, but they are indifferent to that of those in distant lands. Only Adrian and Lionel seem capable of extending their sympathy to people outside England. Adrian, after joining Raymond to fight for the Greek cause, insists it must remembered that, although "the Greeks do well to defend their privilege unto death," the "Turks are men" (161). "[E]ach fibre, each limb," he asserts "is as feeling as our own, and every spasm, be it mental or bodily, is as truly felt in a Turk's heart and brain, as in a Greek's" (161). But while Adrian is capable of feeling a genuine sympathy for those different and distant from himself, Lionel can only sympathize with the Greeks once they have become familiar to him. He acknowledges that "[he] could not reflect without extreme pain on the desolation this evil [the plague] would cause in Greece," but the text makes it clear that Lionel's compassion exists only because he has previously "trod [Greece's] soil," which has made "[t]he faces of many of the inhabitants . . . *familiar* to [him]" (221, my emphasis). For Lionel, as for the majority of the characters in the novel, familiarity is a prerequisite for sympathy (as is the case for the characters in *Frankenstein*). Because he feels connected to the Greeks through his personal relationships—the victims in Greece are "the admirers, friends, fellow soldiers of Raymond, families that had welcomed Perdita to Greece, and lamented with her the loss of her lord"—the "moving incidents" of the "death of only sons; of wives and husbands most devoted; of the rending of ties twisted with the heart's fibres, of friend losing friend," are strongly impressed upon him, "painted in [his] mind" (223). Lionel's "knowledge of [these] persons," his familiarity with them, excites and strengthens his sympathy as he imagines them being "swept away" to join Raymond and Perdita in death (223). Thus, while in life the division caused by difference seems to persist,

Lionel recognizes that, in the end, we will all "dwell" together "in the undistinguishing tomb" (223). In *The Last Man*, Shelley therefore laments that it takes "[d]eath," the great equalizer, to "level all men" (244). Although Lionel does sympathize with the suffering of the Greeks, Shelley shows that a familial connection (his relationship to Raymond, his brother-in-law, and Perdita, his sister) is necessary for his compassion to be awakened.

Indeed, Lionel is as prone to prejudicial attitudes and behaviour as his fellow Englishmen, which is most clearly portrayed in the scene in which "a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease," "clasp[s]" Lionel's leg in a desperate plea for pity (336). Significantly, Lionel responds not with understanding and compassion but with "mixed horror and impatience," and in striving to "disengage [himself]" from the dying man's "convulsive grasp," he falls "on the sufferer," who winds "his naked festering arms" around him in a morbid embrace (336). Their faces "close" together, the dying man's "breath, death-laden, enter[s] [Lionel's] vitals" (337). Instead of comforting the man as he "writhe[s]" in "agony," Lionel "spr[i]ng[s] up, thr[o]w[s] the wretch from [him]," flees to his family, and leaves the man to die alone (337). In Melville's words, Lionel responds with "an aggressive and brutal rejection of the black man's body" (835). Part of the reason Lionel refuses this man's wordless entreaties for sympathy, as Melville also points out, is that he is seeking his dying son Alfred (who has contracted the plague). "Concern for the well-being of the son," writes Melville, "renders Lionel incapable of compassion for the other" (835). Here, Lionel "experiences a lapse in precisely the kind of sympathy towards sufferers that he routinely preaches to others," his "allegiance to blood relations" triumphing over his sympathy for the other (835). The black man therefore exists for Lionel not as a human being, not as an autonomous subject, but as a mere object, a barrier that temporarily prevents him from reaching and so comforting his dying son.

According to Mellor (and she makes a convincing case), this episode suggests that "if one were forced to embrace the Other rather than permitted to define it exclusively as 'foreign' and 'diseased,' one might escape this socially constructed plague," for it is through "Lionel's unwilling but powerful embrace of the racial other" that "[he] both contracts and, recovering, becomes immune to the plague" ("Introduction" xxiv). Although it is tempting to read this scene as Mellor does, the fact that the plague Shelley imagines is not spread through direct contact (as Melville has observed, it "'depend[s] upon the air'") severely undermines her argument (831). "[T]here is ostensibly no possibility in the novel," writes Melville, "for direct infection" (831). Adrian, for example, tends to the sick without contracting the disease (Clara and Lionel also do so). As Lionel tells a group of villagers who, fearing contagion, have abandoned a man dying of the plague, "the Earl himself, now Lord Protector, visits daily, not only those probably infected by this disease, but the hospitals and pest houses, going near, and even touching the sick . . . yet he was never in better health" (Shelley, *LM* 259). "'You labour under an entire mistake as to the nature of the plague,'" he insists (259). Indeed, although Lionel enters the cottage in which the man has died, which is "filled" with "a pernicious effluvia," he does not become infected with the disease (259). This is also the case for Martha, an old woman who "enter[s] the cottages of the sick" and "relieve[s] their wants with her own hand" (271). According to the textual evidence, then, it is unlikely (if not impossible) that Lionel contracts the plague from the dying black man. He therefore does not "escape" the plague (i.e., recover from and become immune to it) through his "unwilling . . . embrace of the racial other." Moreover, as Melville contends, if we were "to insist that Lionel is directly infected with the plague" at some point within this episode, "then who can say for sure whether the infection passes from the mouth of the black man" or from his son Alfred's "cold little mouth," which Lionel "kisse[s]" after learning from Clara that he has died from the plague (Melville 836; Shelley, *LM* 337). Ultimately, when considered in light of the novel

as a whole, this scene seems to be commenting on, and criticizing, the tendency of the familial/familiar to take precedence over the unfamiliar rather than signalling the possibility of an acceptance and "genuine reception of the other" (Melville 830). In this episode, Shelley reiterates her concern that sympathy too often depends on familiarity and on a similarity to self.

Lionel's callous and preferential behaviour, Shelley suggests, stems from his primary desire to "secure the health of [his] own family" (Shelley, *LM* 260). According to Melville, because "the black man's embrace on the threshold of the Verney family home impedes Lionel's desire to attend to his son," it "represents a threat to family unity"—the man exists, for Lionel, "in opposition to the family circle" since he "obstruct[s] Lionel's access to it" (835). The illness of Lionel's son therefore takes priority over the moral obligation to attend to the suffering other. Although this seems only natural (that is, to put one's family first), when we consider that the failure of sympathy for those distant to and different from ourselves is one of the novel's principle concerns (as it was *Frankenstein*'s), it would seem that this episode functions to highlight (and criticize) rather than justify this issue. As Melville states, here, "[c]ompassion for others ultimately remains relative—conditioned, at least in part, by familial and racial identification" (835).[203] This deeply unsettling scene thus emphasizes the problematical nature of sympathy: because it often depends on familiarity (and similarity), it can be severely limited in its scope (qtd. in Melville 829).

The scene in which Adrian appeals to the wealthy to "give up their pleasure-grounds to the agriculturalist" and "diminish sensibly the number of horses kept for the purposes of luxury" also speaks to the limits of sympathy (Shelley, *LM* 236). In a sentence heavy with irony, Lionel writes: "to the honour of the English be it recorded, that, although natural

[203] Melville writes that the black man, "[p]reventing Lionel from attending to this family crisis . . . is putatively unfamilial, a stranger in another man's land." See "The Problem of Immunity," 836.

disinclination made them delay awhile, yet *when the misery of their fellow-creatures became glaring*, an enthusiastic generosity inspired their decrees" (236-7, my emphasis). In this episode, the wealthy are only moved to help the poor when their suffering becomes obvious, obtrusively conspicuous. According to Shelley, sympathy also depends on proximity—when the suffering is distant and remote, it is easily, and frequently, ignored (this recalls the inability of the English to sympathize with the sorrows of those outside England). Both literal distance (geographical) and figural distance (that is, the feeling of distance that arises when someone is unlike oneself) therefore serve to shorten the reach of sympathy.

**Adrian and Lionel: Widening the Reach of Sympathy**

However, Shelley shows that there are ways to extend sympathy's scope. As touched on earlier (with reference to Adrian, Lionel, and Perdita), in this novel, as in Shelley's other works, reading and education are heralded as the most effective tools for cultivating sympathy, for both individuals and society as a whole.[204] Adrian, for example, arguably the most sympathetic and altruistic character in *The Last Man*, is "addicted to study," "deep[ly] read and imbued with the spirit of high philosophy," and it is implied that it is his education that fosters his humanity and impels his "active spirit of benevolence" (21, 26). Importantly, Adrian's affection and instruction save Lionel from plunging into a "sea of evil," the positive influence of reading and Adrian's abiding sympathy softening and subduing his "wild thoughts," which were previously "unchecked by moral considerations" (19, 25-26, 19). Before his transformative encounter with Adrian, through which Lionel feels himself "as much changed as if [he] had transmigrated into another form, whose fresh sensorium and mechanism of nerves had altered the reflection of the apparent universe," Lionel (an orphan) is "friendless" and uneducated, describing himself as "uncouth as a savage" (32, 14).

[204] This is an overarching theme in all of Shelley's novels. Beginning with *Frankenstein*, in which the creature's naturally compassionate nature (and his ability to sympathize with those unlike himself) is refined through his encounters with literature, Shelley continues to reiterate the social value of literature throughout her lifetime.

"[R]ough in element and unlearned," Lionel compares himself to the animals he tends (14). Deprived of the affections of a sympathetic parent and denied the benefits of an education, Lionel admits that his "mind was in danger of degenerating into that which informs brute nature" (14, 18). It is only through Adrian's sympathy and instruction, coupled with the "benign discipline" of reading, that Lionel's latent humanity (or what Shaftesbury would call his "natural affections") is revived (Shelley, *LM* 159; Shaftesbury 196).

Indeed, Lionel is so completely altered by his educative experience that he feels as if he is "born anew" (29). An "earnest love of knowledge" now awakened in him, Lionel "pass[es] [his] days and nights in reading and study" (31). "Poetry and its creations, philosophy and its researches and classifications, alike awoke the sleeping ideas in my mind, and gave me new ones," Lionel writes (31). "[S]oftened and humanized" by his friendship with Adrian (through which he receives the benefits of another's sympathy) and his transformational and edifying encounters with literature and philosophy, Lionel determines to "become wise and good" (32, 29). While he had earlier believed power to derive from strength, he now sees it as arising from sympathy: as he proclaims, "'Thus,' I thought, 'is power! Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious, and daring; but kind, compassionate and soft'" (29). As in *Frankenstein*, Shelley here celebrates the humanizing and socializing influence of reading and education. "I now began to be human," Lionel writes, and he exalts in the "new sympathies and pleasures" he acquires through his reading (29, 157). "I found another and a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures," Lionel declares, and "my point of sight was extended, and the inclinations and capacities of all human beings became deeply interesting to me" (157). Through "the hereditary bond of friendship" by which he is "unite[d]" to Adrian (and through which he receives the sympathy for which he has always longed) and the enriching and ennobling experience of reading, then, Lionel "enter[s] . . . the

pale of human sympathy," to use a phrase from *Matilda*, and learns to expand his own sympathy and extend it to others (26, 197).

In this way, Shelley advances the social worth of literature, through which Lionel, "[t]he orphan and neglected son of Verney," becomes "linked to the mechanism of society by a golden chain" (78). Now "wedded to literature," Lionel proclaims that "in the present stage of the world, no man's faculties [can] be developed, no man's moral principle be enlarged and liberal, without an extensive acquaintance with books" (157). By exercising the imagination, which allows for an immersion in the lives of others, reading literature cultivates sympathy and encourages moral behaviour in real-world relations, a notion (as we have seen) that is advanced in *Frankenstein*, in which the creature's compassion is developed through his encounters with literature. According to Shelley (and her belief aligns with that of Smith in his *Moral Sentiments*, also discussed in previous chapters), the sympathy that is awakened through reading is an eminently moral sentiment that binds society together in what Nussbaum calls "a network of mutual concern" (*Knowledge* 345). This understanding of sympathy as a powerful, socially-binding, and morally-enriching force informs Shelley's works, and it is a central concern in *The Last Man*, in which Lionel, having imbibed a love of literature from Adrian, begins "to be human" and comes to participate in and contribute to the social world.

Adrian's "excess of sensibility," then, his extreme sympathy, is efficacious, serving to re-awaken and cultivate Lionel's humanity (Shelley, *LM* 25-6). But Adrian's positive influence is much wider than this: his sympathy has sway not only over the individual but over the masses. As Lionel writes, Adrian's "spirit of benevolence" gives "a tone of irresistible persuasion to his intercourse with others, so that he seem[s] like an inspired musician, who [strikes], with unerring skill, the 'lyre of mind,' and produce[s] thence divine harmony" (26). However, as stated above, that same "excess of sensibility" that enables

Adrian to move hearts and minds, to change people for the better, nearly brings about his own death, for "[h]is life" becomes "swallowed up in the existence of his beloved [Evadne]" (33). "[D]evoted, even as a victim to sacrifice, to his love for Evadne," Adrian is "no longer the lord of his own soul" (43). When Adrian discovers that his love is unreciprocated, his "excess of emotion" drives him to madness, and he is soon consumed by an "incurable disorder" (34, 40). Consequently, his "plans for the improvement of mankind" are suspended (43). Overcome by his "distempered sympathy," Adrian lives in isolation, "plucking flowers" in an echo of Shakespeare's mad and grief-stricken Ophelia, "his person wasted to a shadow" (278, 70). As stated earlier, Shelley here represents Adrian as a conventional female of sensibility, a "decaying sentimental heroine" (Johnson, *Cambridge* 196). Like the traditional woman of sensibility, Adrian succumbs to a nearly fatal illness because of his excessive and ungovernable emotion. As Lionel laments, "he lay stretched on a bed of sickness, his cheeks glowing with the hues of fever, his eyes half closed, his breath irregular and difficult" (Shelley, *LM* 71). In this moribund state, Adrian is a perfect portrayal of the female of sensibility (vehemently condemned by Shelley's feminist mother, Wollstonecraft), whose body is so fine that it is almost non-existent, forever on the verge of disintegration, perpetually approaching suicide. Although such bodily dissolution was perversely celebrated in traditional novels of sensibility, Shelley is clearly criticizing it here. Adrian's "excess of sensibility" is represented as a defect, not a virtue, for it diverts him from his altruistic plans, causes him to isolate himself from the social world, incites him to madness, and nearly brings about his death (25-6).

However, Shelley shows that such an "excess of emotion" can be harnessed for the better under the right circumstances (34). Through the care and compassion of loved ones, and through the influence of his cultivated mind, Adrian is nursed to health and cured of the deleterious effects of his pathological sympathy. Adrian's convalescence brings with it the

return of his "benevolent" and philanthropic "visions," and having earlier "matured his views for the reform of the English government, and the improvement of the people," Adrian re-dedicates himself to the cause (45, 44). It is Adrian's innate sympathy, Shelley implies, which is naturally attended by a sense of responsibility, that aids in his recovery and enables him to serve his fellow humans, believing he "ma[k]e[s] a part of a great whole . . . own[ing] affinity not only with mankind, but all nature" (45). As he cries, "[h]is voice trembl[ing] . . . his fragile person . . . bent . . . with excess of emotion":

> 'Oh, that death and sickness were banished from our earthly home! that tyranny, hatred, and fear could no longer make their lair in the human heart! that each man might find a brother in his fellow. . . . The choice is with us; let us will it, and our habitation becomes a paradise. For the will of man is omnipotent, blunting the arrows of death, soothing the bed of disease, and wiping away the tears of agony. And what is each human being worth, if he do not put forth his strength to aid his fellow-creatures? My soul is a fading spark, my nature frail as a spent wave; but I dedicate all of intellect and strength that remains to me, to that one work, and take upon me the task, as far as I am able, of bestowing blessings on my fellow-men!' (76)

Because Adrian has learned to impart his sympathy to the wider world through his encounters with literature (most often, "books [are] his only companions"), he is able to replace his monomaniacal sympathy for Evadne with a universal, panoptic sympathy for the entirety of the human race (91).

Adrian, assuming the role of Protectorate after Ryland relinquishes his position, is thereby able to "put [his] theories into practice, and . . . bring about [the] reformation and change" for which he has so long desired (95). "'What may not the forces, never before united, of liberty and peace achieve in this dwelling of man?,'" he asks Ryland (219). Although Adrian's idealism seems naïve in the face of the plague, he is able to achieve far

more than the pragmatic Ryland, who deserts his position and family in a vain endeavour to escape the disease. Adrian, determined to comfort the sick and dying, asserts: "'We must remain; and do our best to help our suffering fellow-creatures'" (242). "'I can bring patience, and sympathy, and such aid as art affords, to the bed of disease,'" he insists (247). Although he can no longer institute the wider reform for which he had earlier hoped, he can at least "'enchain the plague in limits, and set a term to the misery it would occasion'" (247). Recalling Woodville in *Matilda* (another portraiture of P.B. Shelley), Adrian proclaims: "'If I can save one of her [England's] mighty spirits from the deadly shaft; if I can ward disease from one of her smiling cottages, I shall not have lived in vain'" (247).[205] Actuated by an enduring and all-encompassing sympathy, Adrian "spring[s]" to the "highest pitch of virtuous action" and "sacrifice[s] himself for the public good" (251, 248). Thus, instead of becoming "a victim to sacrifice, to his love for Evadne," instead of, like Evadne, Raymond, and Perdita, becoming "a victim of too much loving," Adrian devotes himself to humanity and, in so doing, contributes to the comfort and wellbeing of his fellow beings (43, 216).[206] This, the text implies, is part of the reason he is able to survive the plague; his sympathy, now tempered and extended to the masses rather than pathologically fixated on a single person (to the point of self-dissolution), revives and sustains him.[207] As Lionel comments, "I was struck by the improvement that appeared in the health of Adrian. He was no longer bent to the ground" (250). "Order, comfort, and even health, rose under his influence, as from the touch of a magician's wand" (251). (Here, sympathy's contagious quality is harnessed for the

[205] Explaining to Matilda why he will not join her in a suicide pact, Woodville insists: "If I can influence but one solitary individual, so as in any way to lead him from ill to good, that will be a joy to repay me for all my sufferings." See *M*, 202.
[206] As Mellor writes, "[l]ike 'an angel of peace,'" Adrian "reunites and governs his countrymen." See "Introduction," viii.
[207] Again, as Shaftesbury contends, an individual with an "immoderate degree of passion" for a single person "must of necessity allow too much to that one and too little to others of the same character and equally natural and useful as to their end. And this must necessarily be the occasion of partiality and injustice while only one duty or natural part is earnestly followed and other parts or duties neglected, which should accompany it and perhaps take place and be preferred." See *Characteristics*, 196.

better, again speaking to its paradoxical nature.) Sympathy, Shelley here suggests, possesses a renovating and restorative power; it is only when distorted by excess (or limited to those who are near and familiar) that it loses its remedial influence and instead transforms into an antisocial emotion whose effects, as discussed above, can be disastrous and often fatal.

Through the character of Adrian, then, Shelley shows how one can contract the disease of the mind that is sympathetic excess, nearly die from it, and, ultimately, overcome it. Although Adrian is still endowed with an ardent and enthusiastic sympathy, he learns to bestow it upon humanity at large rather than on a single individual. In this way, he utilizes his sympathy (no longer pathological but universal) for the public good. Indeed, it is suggested that sympathy itself can help protect individuals from the plague, which, Adrian firmly believes (and the text seems to support his view), can be contracted psychosomatically (that is, that negative emotions such as fear and despair make people more vulnerable to the plague). As Lionel writes, "[Adrian] knew that fear and melancholy forebodings were powerful assistants to disease; that desponding and brooding care rendered the physical nature of man peculiarly susceptible of infection" (250). Therefore, Adrian, believing in the medicinal properties of sympathy, uses it as a means of staving off the melancholy and despondency to which humanity is prone and thereby protecting it from the plague. Melville has made a similar observation, arguing that "despair is encoded both in the cause and effects of infection in *The Last Man*" (839). According to Melville, despair "is the plague's most effective vehicle of transmission and among its most telling symptoms" (839). Since the more debilitating emotions such as fear, melancholy, and despair can increase the individual's susceptibility to the disease, then, Adrian turns to the positive and sociable emotions (sympathy in particular) to ward off the plague. It is thus Adrian's "conviction that it [is] only through the benevolent and social virtues that any safety [is] to be hoped for the remnant of mankind" (Shelley, *LM* 307). This explains why Adrian insists, in response to Lionel's

concern that he is "devot[ing] [himself] to an early death" by assuming the role of Protectorate, that he "could easily prove . . . that in the midst of contagion [he] [would] have a better chance of life than [Lionel]" (255). Having enlarged his sympathy and extended its reach, Adrian has secured himself, as much as possible, against the disease, the cultivation of his mind protecting his body from the plague. As will be discussed below, Lionel, Adrian's fervent follower and devotee, develops a similarly comprehensive and cosmic approach to sympathy, achieved through writing his narrative, which he dedicates to all of humanity (to the "illustrious dead"), and through which he is able to reanimate and so communicate with those he has lost (466). Sympathy, reawakened through the creative imagination, therefore lies at the heart of Lionel's survival.

The positive effects of Adrian's all-inclusive sympathy are felt in other ways as well. When a band of Americans and Irish arrive in England and are on the verge of fighting the army of Englishmen gathered by Adrian and Lionel, Adrian "dashe[s] between the conflicting bands," crying, "'Not one of these must perish!'" (301). Walking unharmed through firing bullets as if shielded by his sympathy, Adrian approaches the men who have already been killed and declares: "'these are your bothers, commit not fratricide. . . . Lay down your arms, fellow men! brethren! Pardon, succour, and brotherly love await your repentance. You are dear to us, because you wear the frail shape of humanity'" (301-302). Adrian, aware of the power of sympathy to unite, encourages the men from each side to bind the wounds of the fallen: "'[L]et each man be brother, guardian, and stay to the other,'" he professes (302). As Adrian speaks, he kneels "on the ground," raising "a dying man in his arms (302). "[S]o still had either [side] become," Lionel relates, that the man's "moans were distinctly heard, and every heart, late fiercely bent on universal massacre, now beat anxiously in hope and fear for the fate of this one man," who finally "heave[s] a deep sigh" and expires (302, 303). Moved by Adrian's infectious sympathy, the two sides throw down their arms:

> the veterans wept, and our party held out their hands to their foes, while the gush of love and deepest amity filled every heart. The two forces mingling, unarmed and hand in hand, talking only how each might assist the other, the adversaries conjoined; each repenting, the one side their former cruelties, the other their late violence, they obeyed the orders of the General to proceed towards London. (303).

In this scene, sympathy is able to pacify and finally unify two opposing sides on the very brink of war. Adrian's sympathizing influence, so persuasive and contagious, is shown to have more power than the weapons wielded by the conflicting armies.

As Adrian continues to exert his sympathy for the betterment of the human race, his health simultaneously improves: "He seemed born anew, and virtue, more potent than Medean alchemy, endued him with health and strength" (303). When he visits his sister Idris, she "hardly recognize[s] the fragile being, whose form had seemed to bend even to the summer breeze, in the energetic man, whose very excess of sensibility rendered him more capable of fulfilling his station of pilot in storm-tossed England" (303). This again speaks to the renovating power of sympathy. Adrian, previously on the brink of death as a result of his extreme sympathy for Evadne, is, paradoxically, cured of (and immunized against) its pathological effects through the very same emotion that brought about his nearly-fatal illness. When consumed by his monomaniacal (and suicidal) sympathy for Evadne, Adrian had sacrificed his very selfhood, devoted himself to her to the point of self-destruction. His sympathetic encounter with Evadne therefore becomes an act of self-forgetting whereby he loses himself in his beloved. However, once Adrian learns to retain his individual identity, to hold tenaciously to his sense of self in the sympathetic experience, his health improves, and he no longer hovers between life and death.

Although Adrian's sympathy is still extreme in nature, then, he learns to utilize it for the public good, to extend it to a wide range of individuals and not limit it to a single person,

and to uphold rather than abandon his own identity in the sympathetic process. It is important to note here that Shelley is not condemning the tendency to sympathize with a single person (this is something Shelley advocates for in her works). The danger, according to Shelley, arises when that sympathy becomes pathological and thereby threatens the individual's very selfhood, which is the case for Perdita, Evadne, and Raymond. As Shelley illustrates throughout her fiction, unregulated sympathy can have a deeply negative affect on one's selfhood. If the sympathizer does not maintain an autonomous identity in the sympathetic encounter, his or her sense of self may be lost in the other. Further, if the object of one's sympathy is lost or if one's sympathy is not shared, as is the case with Adrian (and with Frankenstein's creature), suicidal thoughts may arise. According to Shelley, in order to avoid falling prey to such a self-less and self-destructive sympathy, it is essential to safeguard one's individual selfhood. Once Adrian learns to do this, he is able to eliminate the potentially adverse effects of his excessive sympathy and reap its benefits, its improving and invigorating influence nourishing him and "endu[ing] him with health and strength" (Shelley, *LM* 303). Further still, he is able to share the advantages of his sympathy with his fellow beings: by sympathizing with the remnants of the human race and instilling hope in them, Adrian helps stave off their despair, thereby protecting them, for as long as possible, from the plague.

As stated above, Lionel imitates Adrian's universal approach to sympathy, and in so doing, he prolongs his life and becomes "the last man." After the death of Raymond in Constantinople, for whom Lionel had felt "deep admiration" and the "truest affection," Lionel nearly succumbs to despair, "yield[ing] to the grateful sensation of utter forgetfulness" (203, 201). In sleep, his "diseased fancy" imprisons him in a "tortur[ous]" "night-mare," and it is only "with . . . strong effort" that he is able to "thr[o]w off sleep" and recall "reason to her wonted functions" (202). As Melville observes, "Lionel effectively resists the toxic

vapors of both his waking and his dreaming lives [he is sleeping within the plague-infested city of Constantinople, and he dreams of a "giant phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence" (*LM* 202)] and in the process becomes Shelley's champion of hope in the face of immanent disaster" (839-40). It is Lionel's concern for his sister Perdita (his sympathy for her), that rallies him to action: "My first thought was Perdita," writes Lionel, "to her I must return; her I must support, drawing such food from despair as might best sustain her wounded heart; recalling her from the wild excesses of grief" (Shelley, *LM* 202). Rather than surrendering to "the killing torpor of grief," as Perdita does, Lionel looks outside and beyond himself and extends his sympathy to others, assuming the moral obligation that sympathy entails (203). In so doing, he is able to resist the plague and extend his own life.

The key to Lionel's survival, then, is his sympathy, which he has cultivated through his relationship with Adrian and his imaginative encounters with literature. In one of his many apostrophes to the reader, Lionel proclaims:

> were I to tell all of anguish and pain that I witnessed, of the despairing moans of age, and the more terrible smiles of infancy in the bosom of horror, my reader, his limbs quivering and his hair on end, would wonder how I did not, seized with sudden frenzy, dash myself from some precipice, and so close my eyes for ever on the sad end of the world. But the powers of love, poetry, and creative fancy will dwell even beside the sick of the plague, with the squalid, and with the dying. A feeling of devotion, of duty, of a high and steady purpose, elevated me; a strange joy filled my heart. In the midst of saddest grief I seemed to tread air, while the spirit of good shed round me an ambrosial atmosphere. (275)

It is Lionel's sympathy, refined by "the powers of love, poetry, and creative fancy," and fuelled by his sense of responsibility—his "feeling of devotion, of duty, of a high and steady purpose"—that sustains him. His sympathy protects and preserves him by turning him

outward from his own grief toward a concern for others. Indeed, Lionel later regrets that he had prevented his wife Idris, who is tortured with anxiety over the fate of her children, from doing the same thing. As he admits, "I often wished that I had permitted her to take her own course, and engage herself in such labours for the welfare of others as might have distracted her thoughts" (318). However, denied the opportunity to exert herself for the benefit of others, Idris becomes a prey to her own thoughts and is soon consumed by fear and despair.

For Idris, when faced with the knowledge that the plague might take her children from her at any moment, life becomes unbearable. Possessed by a "life-consuming sorrow," Idris grows "thin and pale," the "very soul of fear . . . tak[ing] its seat in her heart" (334, 303). Her "ceaseless care," which "with still renewing hunger [eats] into her soul" like "the vulture that fed on the heart of Prometheus," makes Idris susceptible to illness, to which she finally falls victim (304). According to Mellor, "[b]y implying that Idris' maternal suffering is as intense and unending as that of Prometheus, Shelley underlines the heroic but self-destructive dimensions of motherhood" (xii). "Because Idris identifies so closely with her children," Mellor continues, "she has no life of her own," and "her sons' deaths [therefore] annihilate her as well" (xii).[208] Wracked with fear and tortured by "wild dreams," in which "all her terrors [are] realized," Idris is confined to a state in which "there [is] no hope, no alleviation, unless the grave should quickly receive its destined prey, and she be permitted to die, before she experienced a thousand living deaths in the loss of those she loved" (Shelley, *LM* 304). Her identity completely bound up in her loved ones, Idris cannot survive without them, cannot survive even the thought that she might lose them. As Mellor argues, Idris "is portrayed almost exclusively as a mother," and "[a]s the plague advances, [she] is slowly destroyed by [her] maternal anxiety" (xi, xii). Thus, "a slow fever prey[s] on her veins, her

[208] To quote Higonnet again, "because of social training, women have always tended to perceive themselves through their relationships to family rather than as isolated individuals." See "Suicide," 108.

colour [grows] hectic," and "gloomy prognostications, care, and agonizing dread, [eat] up the principle of life within her" (Shelley, *LM* 317-18).[209] When her son Alfred becomes dangerously ill with what is believed, and later confirmed, to be the plague, Idris leaves him in the care of her niece Clara while she searches the streets of London for Lionel. As she is running wildly through the streets, she collapses and, drenched in rain, "breathe[s] an earnest prayer to die speedily, for there was no relief but death" (336). As she is lying on the ground, "life almost suspended, she [feels] a warm, soft hand on her brow" (336). In this scene, Shelley again reiterates the curative effects of sympathy, for, "[t]hat another human being, sympathetic and kind, should exist near, rouse[s]" Idris, saving her from the brink of death (336). Lionel, who has already arrived at Windsor Castle, discovers Alfred dead in Clara's arms (this, as discussed above, after he has cruelly and violently thrown the suffering black man from him and left him to die alone). He then repeats this rejection of the other when he goes in search of Idris. Hearing a solitary female calling out to him from a doorstep, he rides "swiftly on," ignoring the woman's cries (337). It is only after he recalls that there might have been another figure beside the woman (Idris) that he returns. Again, the familiar/familial takes precedence over the other.

Thus, although Lionel does eventually assume Adrian's all-encompassing approach to sympathy, he is still prone to bias, neglecting his duty to assist a fellow human being when a member of his own family is in peril. As he insists, "[a]bove all I must guard those entrusted by nature and fate to my especial care" (261). This, of course, is only natural; however, Shelley continues to depict such instances of preferential behaviour towards the familial and familiar, whereby the other is neglected and excluded, in order to underscore her claim that sympathy too often depends on affinity and similarity to self. Yet, through the character of

[209] Sadly, but significantly, Shelley, in her journal entry of October 5, 1822, overwhelmed by despair after the death of P.B. Shelley writes: "A hatred of life must consume my vital principle." See *Journals*, 2: 433.

Adrian, who instructs and influences Lionel, Shelley shows how this proclivity to familiarity can be overcome (as she does with the creature in *Frankenstein*). Through reading, so vital to both Adrian and Lionel, one learns to transcend the boundaries between self and other and inhabit the lives of those different from oneself. Shelley suggests that, in this way, sympathy's reliance on similarity can be significantly weakened and the scope of its stretch widened.

But ever attuned to the complexities and complications of sympathy, Shelley also acknowledges that sympathy's dependency on likeness can also be positive, for after the death of Idris, which leads Lionel to dwell on suicidal thoughts, it is the similarity of her features to Adrian's that recalls him from his despair. As he places Idris in the family vault, Lionel "long[s] to lie down beside her, "env[ying] her enjoyment of 'the sad immunities of the grave'" (357). "I felt that my death must be voluntary," he writes, "[y]et what more natural than famine, as I watched in this chamber of mortality, placed in a world of the dead, beside the lost hope of my life?" (357). However, as he gazes upon Idris, her "features, which [bear] a sisterly resemblance to Adrian, [bring] [his] thoughts back again to the living, to this dear friend, to Clara [his niece], and to Evelyn [his other son]" (357). Lionel's sympathy for the remaining people to whom he is "allied . . . by the most sacred ties" is re-awakened by his recognition of Adrian's features in his wife's (261). And this revivification of his former sympathies, temporarily forgotten in his despair, is aided by the presence of Idris' mother, the Countess of Windsor, for, in seeking to comfort her and remind her of her still-living relatives, Lionel simultaneously consoles and strengthens himself:

> I referred to Adrian, [Idris'] loved brother, and to her surviving child [Evelyn]. I declared, which I had before almost forgotten, what my duties were with regard to these valued portions of herself, and bade the melancholy repentant mother reflect,

> how she could best expiate unkindness towards the dead, by redoubled love of the survivors. Consoling her, my own sorrows were assuaged. (360)

Again, sympathy delivers Lionel from despair. Rather than giving in to suicide (as his sister Perdita had earlier done, as Frankenstein's creature plans to do, and as Matilda does), he recalls the other ties of sympathy to which he is bound, and which ultimately sustain him.

Finally, it is only Lionel, Adrian, Clara, and Evelyn who remain, and even in the face of such loss, Adrian's duty to sympathy persists: "'We are left to mourn, and pine, and die,'" he laments, "'[y]et even now we have our duties, which we must string ourselves to fulfil; the duty of bestowing pleasure where we can, and by force of love, irradiating with rainbow hues the tempest of grief'" (427). Here, Shelley again emphasizes that sympathy entails a moral responsibility. As Adrian reminds Lionel, "'[i]n the midst of a desert world, we are everything to [Clara and Evelyn]; and, if we live, it must be our task to make this new mode of life happy to them. At present this is easy, for their childish ideas do not wander into futurity,'" and "'the stinging craving for sympathy . . . is not yet awake within them" (427). Predictably, it is through "read[ing]" and "converse"—activities of "dynamic reciprocity," to quote George Steiner, through which sympathy is stimulated—that this remaining assemblage of humanity survives (Shelley, *LM* 431; Steiner, *Uncommon Reader* 17). Yet, Lionel explains that the emotions evoked through certain books are so strong that they threaten the tranquillity of their readers: "There were few books that we dared read; few, that did not cruelly deface the painting we bestowed on our solitude, by recalling combinations and emotions never more to be experienced by us" (431). As with the production of *Macbeth* at Drury Lane, here, the emotions awakened by art are more painful than purifying. Therefore, "[m]etaphysical disquisition; fiction, which wandering from all reality, lost itself in self-created errors; poets of times so far gone by, that to read of them was as to read of Atlantis and Utopia; or such as referred to nature only, and the workings of one particular

mind," were the books read by the four survivors of the plague (431). When Evelyn dies of typhus, Lionel, Adrian, and Clara grow even closer: "we, a simple triad on empty earth, were multipled to each other, till we became all in all" (438). The drowning of Adrian and Clara in a storm thus leaves Lionel in a state of despair from which he barely escapes. Indeed, he imagines a kind of sympathetic death with them, whereby he dissolves in his own tears:

> is there any shame . . . that mortal man should spend himself in tears? I remembered the ancient fables, in which human beings are described as dissolving away through weeping into ever-gushing fountains. Ah! that so it were; and then my destiny would be in some sort akin to the watery death of Adrian and Clara. (446)

Finding himself in a "dead world," his "soul islanded, a solitary point, surrounded by a vacuum," Lionel is at first bereft of all hope (447, 449).[210] As he relates to the reader, "I looked wistfully on the stream, acknowledging to myself that its pellucid waves could medicine my woes for ever" (453). "[M]any times I resolved a speedy end to my woes," he later admits, "and death by my own hands was a remedy, whose practicability was even cheering to me" (456-7). However, he is ultimately able to withstand the temptation to self-annihilation, which would have bestowed on him the blessing of eternal forgetfulness. What preserves him is writing, through which he revivifies past sympathies and receives solace by sharing his thoughts with an imagined audience. Like his author, Lionel uses writing, an act inherently tied to sympathy, as a form of therapy and recovery (his loved ones are restored to him through the imagination and he thereby recovers from his despair).

Although re-experiencing his sorrows in recollection proves painful, Lionel's narration of his "beloved friends, fresh with life and glowing with hope," serves "as an opiate," warding off despair and rekindling hope (267). His ability to re-live his past through writing and temporarily reanimate those he has lost is ultimately restorative and life-

[210] This recalls the image of Frankenstein "drifting on a scattered piece of ice." See *F*, 208.

sustaining. In an echo of Shelley herself, who sought to alleviate her suffering by "giv[ing] words to" her "thoughts & feelings"—as she declares in her journal entry of October 2, 1822, "[l]iterary labours, the improvement of my mind, & the enlargement of my ideas are the only occupations to elevate me from lethargy"—Lionel proclaims that "[o]ccupation alone" is "capable of affording an opiate to [his] sleepless sense of woe" (*Journals* 2: 429, 431-2; *LM* 464).[211] This is also the case for the outside narrator, the editor of Lionel's tale, which, as explained in the Introduction, is in fact a work of prophecy. For the anonymous editor (who, along with a beloved companion whom s/he later loses, had discovered the prophetic pages while visiting the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl in Naples in 1818), the process of "deciphering [the] sacred remains" of the "scattered and unconnected" "Sibylline leaves" has "sooth[ed] [him/her] in sorrow" and "excit[ed] [his/her] imagination to daring flights" (*LM* 6, 5, 6).[212] This editorial work, whereby s/he "add[s] links" and "giv[es] form and substance to the frail and attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl," recalls the work Shelley did for the 1824 edition of P.B. Shelley's *Posthumous Poems*—in 1822, shortly after P.B. Shelley's death, Shelley began to collect and transcribe her husband's unpublished works (6, 7).[213] Allen similarly observes that "the Sibylline introduction of *The Last Man* conflates the experience of writing the novel with [Shelley's] work as editor of her lost 'companion' and 'friend' [P.B. Shelley]" (*Critical* 97). And just as the process of writing proves restorative for Lionel, so it does for the outside narrator and for Shelley herself—Mellor similarly notes that, "[d]eprived of human

[211]As mentioned in the previous chapter, Shelley, in a journal entry of October 21, 1822, observes that, "when [she] wrote Matilda [*sic*], miserable as [she] was, the inspiration was sufficient to quell [her] wretchedness temporarily." See *Journals*, 2: 442.

[212] Shelley visited Naples with P.B. Shelley and Claire Clairmont on December 8, 1818, which is the same date the two companions of the "Author's Introduction" in *The Last Man* visit the Italian city. Like the fictional companions in *The Last Man*, Shelley and her companions visit "The Elysian fields—Avernus Solfatara—The Bay of Baiae." See *Journals*, 1: 242. As Mellor notes, they also visited "Sibyl's Cave at Capri." See "Introduction," xiv.

[213] As Shelley writes in her journal entry of October 5, 1822: "Well I shall commence my task, commemorate the virtues of the only creature on earth worth loving or living for, & then maybe I may join him." See *Journals*, 2: 434.

companionship, Lionel Verney and Mary Shelley both turn to creative composition for comfort" ("Introduction" xiv)."

In a journal entry of June 8, 1824, at which point she was working on *The Last Man*, Shelley expresses her delight in writing, what she understands to be a profoundly ameliorative process:

> I feel my powers again—& this is of itself happiness—the eclipse of winter is passing from my mind—I shall again feel the enthusiastic glow of composition—again as I pour forth my soul upon paper, feel the winged ideas arise, & enjoy the delight of expressing them—study & occupation will be a pleasure not a task. (2: 479)

Similarly, for the anonymous editor of the Sibylline leaves, his/her "labours have cheered long hours of solitude, and taken [him/her] out of a world, which has averted its once benignant face from [him/her], to one glowing with imagination and power" (*LM* 7). And this is also the case for Lionel, who has "lingered fondly on [his] early years, and recorded with sacred zeal the virtues of [his] companions" (466). Through the creative imagination, Lionel, like the anonymous editor and Shelley herself, is able to commune with and, for a time, revive the dead—"[t]hey [his loved ones] have been with me during the fulfilment of my task," he writes—and thereby finds temporary relief from pain (466).[214] For all three authors, imaginative writing "soften[s] . . . real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing . . . fictitious ones in that ideality, which takes the mortal sting from pain" (7). Indeed, this is true even if their writings do not find an audience. As Carlson argues in relation to Lionel's narrative, "writing literally occupies [Lionel], both in the sense of inhabiting, repopulating, and animating him and giving him something to do" (190). "This doing of something," Carlson continues, "suspends temporarily the reality of loss, grief, and death he is narrating through

[214] Carlson argues that *The Last Man* "affirm[s] that persons can return from the underworld of life, that survival is linked to remains, and that the best chance for altering the misery of reality and the reality of misery is to occupy oneself with writing." See *England's First Family of Writers*, 192.

the distance gained by re/presentation" (190). Writing, then, does not always need to be interactive; it does not always require an audience for its effects to be felt—the melioration of the author's pain can be an end in itself.

Yet, Lionel *does* have an audience for his work—as does the anonymous editor, as does Shelley—which enhances its restorative, and transformative, potential. As stated in the Introduction, the fact that Lionel's tale is actually a work of prophecy means that it will be read by his predecessors, by the people who inhabit the world of 1818—the year in which the anonymous editor discovers the prophetic pages and later "present[s]" them to the "public" (Shelley, *LM* 6). Although no future generations will read Lionel's tale, the humanity of the past will, and in so doing, they might come to recognize the value of sympathy, which is the crux of Lionel's narrative. As Wagner-Lawlor argues, "[t]he power of this text lies . . . in a feminizing insistence on sentiment, sympathy, and sociality" (771). "*The Last Man*'s frame," Wagner-Lawlor writes, "functions to re-present the narrator's mediated version of the story, insisting that his tale of a dead-end history be opened back up to reader responsiveness, back to that most important of human feelings, sympathy" (769). In *The Last Man*, then, the value of literature, of the "dynamic reciprocity" that occurs between reader and text, is first questioned and finally reaffirmed (Steiner, *Uncommon Reader* 17). The sympathy generated through literature, both for author and reader, is, this text suggests, essential to the survival of humanity.

In *Who is Man?*, Abraham Joshua Heschel claims that the "dignity of human existence is in the power of reciprocity" (46). According to Heschel, man "can never attain fulfilment, or sense of meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human beings" (46). Hence, when Lionel, "the sole survivor of [his] species," finds himself alone "in a voiceless, empty world," "unseen, unmarked, unheard," he begins to feel inhuman: "My person," writes Lionel, "seem[ed] to me a monstrous excrescence of nature" (Shelley, *LM*

330, 429, 467). Unable to interact, communicate, and sympathize with another being whose "nature [is] akin to [his]," whose "form [is] cast in the same mould," Lionel's very humanity seems to slip away (449).[215] Indeed, so fierce and "stinging" is his "craving for sympathy" that he insists that the "wild and cruel Caribee, the merciless Cannibal . . . the uncouth, brute, and remorseless veteran in the vices of civilization, would have been to [him] a beloved companion, a treasure dearly prized" (427, 449). It is only when Lionel turns to writing, through which he is able to share his "thoughts & feelings" with an imagined sympathetic audience, that his humanity is rekindled (*Journals* 2: 429). In reanimating those he has lost through the creative imagination (the means through which sympathy is awakened), Lionel himself is revived and ultimately survives. *The Last Man* is therefore not, as Morton D. Paley has suggested, about "the failure of art"; it does not "undermin[e]" the distinctly Romantic theme of "the empowerment of the imagination" (xv). Rather, it questions the efficacy of the creative imagination only to reaffirm it with renewed vigour, for it is through the imagination that Lionel recuperates the sympathy that had perished with those he lost.

In her later works, Shelley continues to reiterate the primacy of human sympathy, but she also remains committed to representing and dramatizing its more threatening aspects, reminding her readers of sympathy's profoundly paradoxical nature. As will be discussed in the concluding chapters, Shelley's final two novels (*Lodore* and *Falkner* respectively) present sympathy in vastly different lights. In *Lodore*, Shelley provides an explicit affirmation of sympathy. Although it begins by cautioning its readers against the self-sacrificial sympathy exhibited by Ethel, it ends with a celebration of Fanny Derham, Shelley's ideal sympathizer, whose sincere and "self-sufficing" sympathy runs counter to Ethel's sympathetic "self-

[215] This is precisely the case for Frankenstein's creature: because of his outward form, he is cut off from all human contact, and because of the nature of his birth and his creator's abandonment of him, he is "related to" no one. Consequently, he not only looks but feels monstrous. See Shelley, *F*, 142. Similarly, after her father's revelation of his incestuous love for her, Matilda is set apart from society, unable to participate in the social world. Consequently, she begins to feel inhuman, like "a creature cursed and set apart by nature," like a "monster with whom none might mingle in converse." See *M*, 203, 203-4.

forgetfulness" (322, 238). However, in *Falkner*, Shelley offers her most trenchant critique of sympathy, showing that, in some instances, sympathy can be more of a burden than a blessing.

## Chapter Four:

## The "Web of Human Passion":

## The Intersections of Selflessness, Self-lessness, and Selfishness in *Lodore*[216]

> The great pleasure of love is derived from sympathy—the feeling of union—of unity.
>
> —Mary Shelley, *Lodore*[217]

> Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy.
>
> —David Hume, *Treatise*[218]

Shelley's penultimate novel continues to engage with sympathy's contradictory modes and mechanisms, presenting characters who exhibit sympathy in all of its complexity. The protagonist, Lord Lodore (Henry Fitzhenry), is at once selfish and compassionate, capable of extreme callousness (he leaves England for America with his daughter Ethel, taking her away from his young wife Cornelia, Ethel's mother) and genuine sympathy (as the narrator writes, Lodore's "benevolence was active, his compassion readily afforded") (Shelley, *L* 57). Cornelia is a similar mixture of altruism and egoism. Although she gives up her fortune and home to Ethel, whose husband Edward Villiers (another fictional representation of P.B. Shelley) has become wracked with debt,[219] for Cornelia, the "image of self-sacrifice" and "the ruin of her own fortunes, [is] attended with a kind of rapture" (367). "[I]n securing Ethel's happiness," Cornelia imagines that she herself will "never feel sorrow more," implying that her selfless act of sympathy is tied to self-interest (367-8). Indeed, as

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[216] See Shelley, *L*, 448. Bunnell notes that "when it was finally published on 7 April 1835 by Richard Bentley and Henry Colburn, *Lodore* was an unqualified success, second only to *Frankenstein*." See "The Illusion of 'Great Expectations,'" 276.
[217] Shelley, *L*, 343-44.
[218] Hume, *THN*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 363.
[219] Lisa Vargo notes that "[m]uch of the financial detail" about Villiers' debts "bears similarities with the experience of Percy Shelley." See "Footnotes," *Lodore* by Mary Shelley (Peterborough: Broadview, 1997) 219.

Shelley writes, Cornelia feels "immeasurably superior . . . to all those around her" in anticipation of her good deed (371). Ethel, on the other hand, whose "pure affectionateness of . . . heart prevent[s] her from feeling for herself," represents both selfless and self-less sympathy—her sympathy stems from genuine love and benevolence, but it verges on self-effacement, on a loss of self in the other (237). Thinking "only of her lover" Edward, Ethel exhibits what Shelley refers to as a "disinterested self-forgetfulness"—she is so completely free of self-interest that she has no regard for herself (and so her very self is threatened) (237, 238).

Ethel's husband Edward displays a similar though extreme version of his wife's "disinterested self-forgetfulness," pondering "the idea of self-destruction . . . with a kind of savage pleasure" as "the means by which he" might end his wife's misery: "[he] fancied that if he were dead, Ethel would be happier. Her mother, his relations, each and all would come forward to gift her with opulence and ease" (376). Finding the notion of a sacrificial self-destruction "soothing," Edward symbolizes an extreme and threatening aspect of sympathy—its potential to cause not only a symbolic loss of self (as with Ethel) but also a literal annihilation of self (376). Horatio Saville, Cornelia's love interest and another fictional embodiment of P.B. Shelley,[220] is sympathetic to a fault, marrying a woman he does not love (the Neapolitan Clorinda) out of pity and compassion and remaining with her even at risk to his own life (in her jealous rage, she attacks him with a knife). Clorinda, like the eponymous heroine of *Matilda* and Perdita in *The Last Man*, exhibits an intensely pathological sympathy, ultimately "perish[ing] the victim of uncontrolled passion," her "excess of love" bringing

[220] The following description of Horatio clearly aligns him with P.B. Shelley: He was "studious," with a "capacious mind; but he was thin and shadowy, a hectic flushed his cheek, and his voice was broken and mournful." "His desire was knowledge; his passion truth." See *L*, 189. As mentioned previously, Adrian in *The Last Man* is another fictional representation of P.B. Shelley as is Woodville in *Matilda*.

about her death (407, 400).[221] Fanny Derham (the daughter of Lodore's childhood friend Francis Derham), on the other hand, displays what Shelley perceives as an exemplary form of sympathy. Through Fanny, Shelley provides her readers with "a useful lesson" in "self-sufficing" sympathy (448, 322). While Lodore "instruct[s] [Ethel] to be yielding, and to make it her duty to devote herself to his happiness, and to obey his will," Fanny's father seeks "to guard [her] from all weakness, to make her complete in herself, and to render her independent and self-sufficing" (322). Consequently, "Fanny zealously guard[s] her individuality" and so preserves her sense of self (322). In *Lodore,* then, Shelley presents us with sympathy in all its complexity. Through an examination of the major characters discussed above (Lodore, Cornelia, Ethel, and Fanny Derham), this chapter will further illustrate Shelley's unique understanding of the complicated nature of compassion.

**Lord Lodore: The Tyranny of "Self-Love"[222]**

Lord Lodore[223], like so many Shelleyan characters, is an outsider, utterly alienated from humanity, having failed to develop any "intimate connexion with [his] fellow creatures" (141). Raised to regard himself as "superior to all the world" (he is "the pride of his father and the idol of his sister"), Lodore is set apart from his fellow human beings early on in life (80-81, 80).[224] Consequently, his "self-love" becomes more tenacious than his concern for others. As the narrator observes, although he "would not wantonly have inflicted a pang upon a human being," he would exert "any power he might possess to quell the smallest resistance

[221] As discussed in the previous chapter, similar phrasing is used in *The Last Man*, in which Perdita dies "the victim of too much loving." See *LM,* 216. As we will see in *Falkner,* the eponymous protagonist, like Clorinda, is also plagued by a "mad excess of love," which has equally disastrous consequences. See *Falkner*, 295.
[222] See *L,* 131. As stated in the Introduction, the term "self-love" is also used by Hutcheson in his *Essay* and *Inquiry* and by Godwin in his *Enquiry*.
[223] Like P.B. Shelley, Lodore attends Eton and Oxford, and also like P.B. Shelley, he does not finish his degree at Oxford. See *L,* 81, 85.
[224] Shelley presents Lodore as a Byronic hero (hearkening back to Victor in *Frankenstein* and Lord Raymond in *The Last Man* and anticipating the eponymous protagonist of *Falkner*). Like Byron's world-weary and self-isolating Manfred, Lodore "looks upon himself as of a distinct and superior race to the human beings that each day" cross "his path." See *L,* 57. Manfred similarly declares to the Chamois hunter, "Preach it to mortals of a dust like thine,— / I am not of thine order." See Byron, "Manfred," 2.1.35-8.

to his desires" (81, 131). In fact, "unless when they were manifested in the most intelligible manner, [Lodore] scarcely knew that his fellow-creatures had any feelings at all" (81). Yet, he will assist "[a]ny poor family visited by rough adversity, any unfortunate child enduring unjust oppression" (81). From the beginning, then, Shelley emphasizes the essential conflict in Lodore's nature: he is capable of compassion, but only when it does not interfere with his own desires. Hutcheson's observations on man's paradoxical nature are relevant here: "it must be here observ'd," he argues, "that as all Men have Self-Love, as well as Benevolence, these two Principles may jointly excite Man to the same Action; and then they are to be consider'd as two Forces impelling the same Body to Motion; sometimes they conspire, sometimes are indifferent to each other, and sometimes are in some degree opposite" (*Inquiry* 130). We can therefore see the influence of the Moral Sense School of philosophy throughout Shelley's novels. Here, it is the recognition, as represented by Lodore, that man's nature is deeply paradoxical, and that his innate benevolence is often in conflict with his self-interest.

But like Frankenstein and Goethe's Werther, Lodore is deeply solipsistic, and his regard for self, more often than not, takes precedence over his regard for others. According to Shelley, such an excess of "self-love" can destroy the very fabric of social relations, for it impedes one's ability to sympathize. As Higonnet comments, "[f]or the romantics" in general, "solipsism was the horrifying obverse of individualism; the Fichtean *Ich* was understood to cut the self off from all anchoring otherness, i.e., from objective reality, and thereby unleash a devouring ego" ("Suicide" 111). Indeed, as will be shown below, even when Lodore does feel genuine sympathy for his daughter Ethel, that sympathy is so entangled with his own self-interest (he wishes to mould Ethel into his ideal of femininity) that it becomes harmful, even tyrannical, denying Ethel a sense of self independent of him.

Lodore's alienation from his fellow beings only increases when he leaves his home in Longfield, Essex to seek "exile and obscurity" on the continent (in so doing, he abandons his

unmarried sister Elizabeth, whose "affections," "future prospects," and "ambition, [are] all centred in him") (53, 87). And even when he returns to England and marries the "[h]aughty and proud" Cornelia Santerre, he remains detached and unable to connect (128). Rather than regarding Cornelia as a lover and an equal, Lodore looks on her as a "prize" he has "won" and as a subordinate being to educate and form to his liking—he sees her as an object to fulfil his needs rather than as an independent subject (98). Here, Lodore acts from the tyranny of his "self-love": because he is so consumed by his own selfish desires, he is incapable of entering into Cornelia's thoughts and feelings, of sympathizing with her, and so unable to develop a meaningful relationship with her. The two remain disconnected, never united by the "more intimate sympathies" (98). As the narrator observes, "there was no outpouring of the heart . . . which, passing like an electric shock, made the souls one" (100). As a consequence of Lodore's excessive regard for self, no sympathetic tie ever forms between him and Cornelia; husband and wife remain estranged.

Notably, when Lodore and Cornelia move to London, accompanied by Cornelia's mother, Lady Santerre, it is observed that Lodore "look[s] even more abstracted than before his marriage" (100). "[I]n the domestic coterie," the narrator comments, "mother and daughter were familiar friends, sharing each thought and wish, but . . . Lodore was one apart, banished, or exiling himself from the dearest blessings of friendship and love" (100). Indeed, not even the birth of their daughter Ethel—a "circumstance, which naturally tends to draw the parents nearer"—can bridge the distance between Cornelia and Lodore, their "mutual estrangement" only increasing (103, 104). Cornelia, self-willed and proud, will not conform to Lodore's vision of an ideal wife or mother (he considers her treatment of Ethel "unmotherly" since she often neglects her daughter). And Lodore, self-absorbed and equally proud, cannot see that Cornelia's seeming indifference to her daughter stems from her age (she is only seventeen at this point) and inexperience as well as from the "physical suffering"

she endures after giving birth (105). So mired in self-interest, Lodore is incapable of entering into Cornelia's feelings.

The failure of Lodore and Cornelia's relationship is finalized when Lodore, in a jealous rage, dishonours himself by striking a young gentlemen named Casimir who has developed an attachment to Cornelia. Because Casimir, unbeknownst to anyone but Lodore, is Lodore's son, he cannot enter into a duel with him as was expected of men of honour. His pride taking precedence over his fidelity to his wife, Lodore flees England to live in self-imposed exile in Illinois with Ethel.[225] Flying from his "country and the face of man," Lodore, echoing Frankenstein's creature and Matilda, vows "never more to ally himself in bonds of love or amity with one among his kind" (114-115, 121). Notably, the "insurmountable barrier" Lodore places "between him[self] and the other inhabitants of the colony" in Illinois recalls the "eternal barrier" Matilda sets between herself and her "fellow creatures" (*L* 55, *M* 196). Both Lodore and Matilda isolate themselves from all social interaction, the solitude in which they live precluding any sympathy. Emphasizing Lodore's total alienation, the narrator observes that his "pleasures [are] all solitary" (55). Yet, Shelley is careful to emphasize that although Lodore is detached from his fellow human beings, he does not despise them. "There was no tinge of misanthropy in Fitzhenry's disposition," the narrator remarks, for "[e]ven while he shrunk from familiar communication with the rude and unlettered, he took an interest in their welfare" (57). Lodore is therefore not entirely solipsistic—he is capable of compassion when it does not infringe upon his own self-interest. According to Fiona Stafford, although "Lodore's faults are serious enough," Shelley's "strategy is not to invite ridicule, so much as sympathy and regret" (190). Through Lodore,

[225] There is a suggestion of incest here since Cornelia is the same age as Lodore's son. Moreover, Lodore treats Cornelia like a daughter, seeking to educate her and teach her to be obedient to him.

Shelley demonstrates the conflicting motives that complicate compassion, the intersections between self-interest and genuine sympathy.

Indeed, although Lodore is estranged from humanity, and although he remains deeply solipsistic, his "benevolence" is nevertheless "active, his compassion readily afforded" (Shelley, *L* 57). As the narrator comments, "[i]t was quickness of feeling, and not apathy, that made him shy and retired" (57). Lodore, then, albeit self-absorbed, is not entirely apathetic. His "ardent thirst for sympathy which could not be allayed in the wilderness of America," writes the narrator, "begot a certain appearance of coldness, altogether deceptive" (57).[226] Yet, Lodore's self-interest always supersedes his concern for others when the two are in conflict. Never is this more evident than when he takes Ethel away from her mother so that he might have a companion in exile. Because Lodore's only link to humanity is through Ethel—when he is with her he thinks, "Here . . . I have something to live for, something to love"—he convinces himself that taking her away from Cornelia is necessary since to "relinquish" her, his "last remaining blessing," would be "unjust towards himself" (105, 122-23). His self-interest, his desire for the sympathy of another, causes him to act cruelly, even unethically, for he willingly deprives Ethel of her mother's love and care so that she might provide him with the comfort and companionship for which he longs (111). As the narrator observes, "[h]is arguments were false, his conclusions rash and selfish: but of this he was not aware" (123).[227] Echoing Smith, the narrator writes that "self-love magnifies, and passion obscures,

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[226] As discussed in the previous chapter on *The Last Man*, Lionel experiences a similar "craving for sympathy." See *LM*, 32. And Frankenstein's creature also longs for reciprocal sympathy: "'Oh! my creator, make me happy. . . . Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing.'" See *F*, 157. Notably, in his seeming coldness, Lodore resembles Shelley, whose friends and others she met often assumed she was cold when in fact she was deeply emotional and sympathetic. On October 21, 1822, she writes: "No one seems to understand or sympathize with me. They all seem to look on me as one without affections—without any sensibility—my sufferings are thought a cypher." "I feel dejected & cowed before them," she continues, "as if I might be the ~~unfeeling~~ senseless person they appear to . . . consider me. But I am not." See *Journals*, 2: 440, 441.

[227] The protagonist of *Falkner* uses similarly false reasoning in reference to his adoption of Elizabeth Raby: "Should he not adopt her, mould her heart to affection, teach her to lean on him only, be all the world to her"? As the narrator comments (echoing the narrator in *Lodore*), "We all are apt to think that when we discard a motive we cure a fault, and foster the same error from a new cause with a safe conscience. Thus, even now, aching and sore from the tortures of remorse for past faults, Falkner indulged in the same propensity, which,

the glass through which we look upon ourselves and others" (123). With the exception of Ethel, Lodore is "entirely alone," and she is therefore "all that render[s] him human"—since she is the only means through which he experiences the sympathy of another (111, 133).[228] Having "neither home, nor friends, nor youth, nor taintless reputation," Lodore devotes all of his sympathy to his daughter, and his attachment to her, because so exclusive and obsessive, soon becomes harmful to both himself and Ethel (124). As the narrator remarks, Lodore "cared for nothing in the wide world—he loved nothing but this little child," anticipating Falkner, whose "only tie" to the world is his adopted daughter Elizabeth: "You are my only tie—my only friend," he tells her (*L* 124; *Falkner* 42, 50). Lodore therefore selfishly makes Ethel "the partner of his exile," convincing himself that "she would be far better off with him" (124, 123). What Lodore perceives as an act of kindness, then, is predominantly self-serving, and as Hutcheson observes, "the most useful Action imaginable, loses all appearance of Benevolence, as soon as we discern that it only flowed from Self-love, or Interest" (*Inquiry* 129). Cornelia recognizes this, referring to it as an "act of unprincipled violence") (131).[229]

Paradoxically, the impetus behind Lodore's selfish act (masked as an act of compassion), is his "ardent thirst for sympathy" (57). And as in *Matilda* and *The Last Man*, this sympathy is figured as a disease. Lodore's sympathy for Ethel, like Clorinda's for Horatio, becomes deeply (and destructively) pathological. "Extreme in all things," the

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apparently innocent in its commencement, had led to fatal results. He meditated doing rather what he wished, than what was strictly just." He did not consider "[w]hat ills might arise to the orphan from his interweaving her fate with his—he, a criminal, in act, if not in intention—who might be called upon hereafter to answer for his deeds, and who at least must fly and hide himself—of this he thought not . . . he was building . . . a fabric for the future, as deceitful as it was alluring." See *Falkner*, 28, 29. And just as Elizabeth is to become Falkner's "angel of comfort," so Ethel becomes Lodore's "earthly angel of peace." See *Falkner*, 124; *L*, 133.

[228] Lionel Verney in *The Last Man*, another outsider like Lodore, is similarly made human through the sympathy of another; as he declares after his sympathetic encounter with Adrian, "I now began to be human." See *LM*, 29.

[229] In *Valperga*, the wicked Tripalda observes that "a man may be one day wicked, and good the next; for self-interest sways all, and we are virtuous or vicious as we hope to advantage ourselves." Euthanasia, another Wollstonecraftian character, responds critically to this sentiment: "That is bad philosophy, and worse morality." See *V*, 413.

narrator remarks, "Lodore began more than ever to doat upon [Ethel] and to bind up his life in her" (as we will see, Ethel's very being becomes equally bound up in Lodore's) (133). Indeed, Lodore's sympathy for Ethel is so possessive and obsessive that it borders on incestuous—as Hill-Miller observes, "[t]he emotions that Ethel and Lodore feel for each other sound very much like those of a husband and wife" (137). The language used ("doat upon," for example) also sounds like that used by two lovers. According to Hill-Miller, "Shelley's language suggests that the attachment between Lodore and Ethel exceeds the conventional bounds of family affection" (138). "Ethel imagines her father's 'dark, expressive eyes […] penetrating the depths of her soul,'" and, Hill-Miller continues, "Ethel's presence has a dramatic effect on Lodore" (138). Notably, when Lodore learns that Ethel is being courted by a man named Whitelock, his jealousy is roused, and he immediately determines to leave Illinois and return to Europe, thereby, in Hill-Miller's words, "protect[ing] the exclusivity of his daughter's attachment to him" (136). This recalls the scene in *Matilda* in which the heroine's father becomes "restless and uneasy" whenever they are visited by a young man with affections for Matilda (Shelley, *M* 164). The realization of his jealousy initiates "a change" in Matilda's father, and he determines to leave London (164). In both novels, then, excessive sympathy leads to incestuous feelings (whether those feelings are conscious, although not acted upon, as in *Matilda,* or unconscious, as in *Lodore*).[230] Through the character of Lodore, Shelley shows her readers how an individual can be at once sympathetic and self-interested, and how excessive feeling can be deeply destructive to both sympathizer and sympathized alike.

[230] Father-daughter incest is also a theme in *Falkner*. Recalling the phrase "more than cousin" from the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein,* Elizabeth tells her adopted father Falkner: "My dear, dear father!—my more than father, and only friend—you break my heart by speaking thus. If you are miserable, the more need that your child—the creature you preserved, and taught to love you—should be at your side to comfort. . . . You must not cast me off!" Significantly, when Falkner is going to fight in Greece, Elizabeth asks: "Am I to be left, like a poor sailor's wife—to get a shocking, black-sealed letter." See *Falkner*, 51, 53.

In order to prevent any further communication between Ethel and Whitelock and so preserve his exclusive relationship with Ethel, Lodore takes her to New York on route to Europe. Upon arrival in New York, Lodore receives a letter from an old friend (Francis Derham) requesting that he bring his daughter (Fanny Derham) back to England with him. Lodore's reaction to the letter again illustrates his capacity for sympathy, his desire to act for the benefit of others: he "soon became convinced that he was called upon to do this act of kindness for the daughter of his former school-fellow" (*L* 145). Notably, when he meets Fanny, "[h]er resemblance to her father" awakens "with greater kindness the roused sensibility of Lodore" (145). As in her previous novels, Shelley again acknowledges the link between sympathy and familiarity. However, Lodore does not get to perform "this act of kindness," for his passionate nature gets the best of him, and he dies in a duel soon after arriving in New York. At a dinner with Mrs. Greville (the woman charged with taking care of Fanny), Lodore overhears an Englishman named Hatfield relate the "infamy" that drove him into exile (159). A slave to his passions and "[e]xtreme in all things," Lodore reacts impulsively, inciting the duel that proves fatal for him (133). In this way, Shelley shows the disastrous effects of emotion not tempered by reason.

Edward Villiers (Ethel's husband-to-be), another Englishman who witnesses the confrontation, offers to be Lodore's second in the duel and promises to take Ethel and Fanny to England should Lodore be killed.[231] Significantly, Lodore's death can be seen as a kind of suicide since he "hasten[s] to the meeting, totally regardless of any arrangement for his security" (160). And his heedless rush towards death can also be seen as selfish, for he gives no thought to Ethel's future should he die. Because Ethel's existence is so closely linked to his, in being careless with his own life, Lodore is also being careless with Ethel's. As

[231] Carlson notes the significance of the fact that the "fates" of "the two men who dictate Ethel's fate . . . are themselves intertwined." See *England's First Family of Writers,* 121.

Stafford notes, Lodore's selfishness has still further repercussions: "The situations of [Lodore's] daughter, wife, and sister," all "left with little financial support and no moral support" upon his death, "demonstrate that the consequences of Lodore's shortcomings reach far beyond his own self-destructive career" (188). In death (brought about by his own violent passions), as in life, Lodore's "self-love" displaces his sympathy for others. According to Shelley, because Lodore has, with the exception of Ethel, alienated himself from reciprocal feeling, imprisoned himself in a "solitude of sympathy," which gives "force and keenness to all his feelings," his concern for himself is "magnifie[d]," and his regard for others "obscure[d]" (Shelley, *L* 111, 123).

As the sole participant in Lodore's "solitude of sympathy," Ethel has become imprisoned as well. Having been raised to live only for another, she is entirely free of "self-love"—even of subjecthood since her being is entirely predicated upon Lodore's. All of Ethel's actions are therefore other-directed. Importantly, Shelley shows that such an utter lack of self-regard, of concern for one's own wellbeing, is equally destructive. As discussed in the Introduction, Shaftesbury goes as far as to say that the "want" of "self-preserving affections," that is, of "self-love," is "vicious" (197). According to him, "if a creature" is "self-neglectful . . . or if he want[s] such a degree of passion in any kind as is useful to preserve, sustain or defend himself, this must certainly be esteemed vicious in regard of the design and end of nature" (197). "It is certain," Shaftesbury continues, "that [nature's] provisionary care and concern for the whole animal must at least be equal to her concern for a single part or member" (197). "To be wanting therefore in those principal affections which respect the good of the whole constitution must be a vice and imperfection," he insists (197). Although Ethel's lack of "self-preserving affections" is not "vicious" in the sense that it harms others, it is "vicious" in that it is harmful to her own wellbeing.

Indeed, because Ethel lives only in and for Lodore, the news of his death causes such a strong corporeal reaction in her that she "sinks lifeless on the ground"[232] in a kind of sympathetic communion with him, recalling Perdita's sympathetic re-enactment of her husband Raymond's suffering in prison: "She abstained from food; she lay on the bare earth, and, by such mimickry [*sic*] of his enforced torments, endeavoured to hold communion with his distant pain" (*L* 167; *LM* 169).[233] Lodore has "propped up [Ethel's] entire world"; consequently, with his death, "the foundations must moulder and crumble away without him" (*L* 166). As the narrator asks, if "he was gone—where then was she?" (166). Like Matilda, Ethel's entire sense of self is bound up in her father (just as her father's was bound up in her). Thus, when Lodore dies, Ethel, in a sense, also dies. As will be discussed below, because Ethel lacks an independent identity, she falls victim to (is infected by) the same pathological sympathy that plagues her father, and after Lodore's death, she merely transfers that sympathy to her husband Edward. As discussed in previous chapters, Hume recognized the contagious aspect of sympathy. In Pinch's words, "[f]or Hume, sympathy is the mechanism by which people can catch the feelings of others" (*Strange* 24). "People's ability to feel other people's feelings," Pinch continues, "is the sign of humankind's essentially social nature" (24). According to Hume, Pinch summarizes, "[p]eople are fundamentally linked through their common feelings, and what allows those feelings to be shared is sympathy" (24). While the contagious quality of sympathy can be positive, as shown here, in Ethel's case, it is debilitating and even life-threatening. Before turning to Ethel, however, it is essential to consider her mother Cornelia, whose absence from Ethel's life, the narrator suggests, is part of the reason Ethel never develops into an autonomous subject.

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[232] Shelley uses nearly identical phrasing in *Matilda*. After seeing her father's dead body, Matilda describes how she "sank lifeless to the ground." See *M,* 184.

[233] Perdita repeats this mimicry after learning of Raymond's death: "'Look on me as dead," she declares, "'and if death be a mere change of state, I am dead.'" See *LM*, 210. In *Valperga*, Euthanasia's sympathy for Beatrice is so powerful that she becomes "as pale, and almost as weak, as the dying Beatrice." See *V,* 387.

## Cornelia: "Self-Compassion" and Self-Sacrifice[234]

Cornelia Santerre, much like Lodore, is proud[235] and self-involved (Lodore criticizes her for the very "petulance" and "self-will" that define him) yet capable of profound sympathy (as will be seen in her devotion to her mother and daughter) (130). Also noting the similarities between Cornelia and Lodore, Hill-Miller writes: "Both consider themselves superior; both are accustomed to adulation and, therefore, think other people take great pleasure in serving and obeying them," and "[b]oth have little capacity for grasping or responding to the feelings of other people" (150). "Most important," Hill-Miller adds, "both Cornelia and Lodore hate any resistance to their desires that might be posed by the wishes of other people" (150). When Lodore meets Cornelia in Wales (she is not yet sixteen—he is thirty-four), he immediately projects his image of the ideal female onto her (as the narrator writes, "Lord Lodore cherished an ideal of what he thought a woman ought to be"—angelic, submissive, dependent, weak, gentle, innocent), but Cornelia soon proves herself to be wholly unlike the woman Lodore imagines (instead of the "complying gentleness" Lodore expects, he is confronted by Cornelia's proud resistance) (Shelley, *L* 130, 101).[236] As he later does with Ethel, Lodore therefore seeks to educate Cornelia, to play "the tutor to his fair mistress" and shape her into the woman he wants her to be (the reader hears Wollstonecraft in the narrator's implicit condemnation: "He found the lovely girl somewhat ignorant; but white paper to be written upon at will, is a favourite metaphor among those men who have described the ideal wife") (102, 96).[237] But Cornelia is not a willing pupil: "she display[s]

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[234] See *L*, 390.

[235] Hill-Miller comments that, "[a]bove all, Cornelia Santerre possesses an uncommon amount of what is commonly seen as a male virtue: pride." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 151. As will be discussed below, the narrator consistently emphasizes Cornelia's masculine characteristics, showing her to defy conventional gender norms.

[236] Bunnell observes that, "[r]esenting his supporting role, Lodore is unsympathetic to the needs and foibles of his young wife, whose reliance upon her mother displaces him as the center of her life." See "'Great Expectations,'" 279.

[237] Through *Lodore*, Shelley is, in a sense, conversing with her dead mother. As Vargo writes, "Mary Shelley's novel is an imagined conversation with her mother, a life-writing practice that allows her to speak to and through her mother's beliefs." "In *Lodore*," Vargo continues, "which concludes with the reunion of a mother

towards [Lodore] none of that deference, and yielding submission" that he expects, and she comes to see him as "her natural enemy" (103). As the narrator observes, "When her husband would have educated her mind, and withdrawn her from the dangers of dissipation, she looked on his conduct as tyrannical and cruel" (101). Lodore "had expected from Cornelia a girl's clinging fondness," the narrator continues, "but that was given to her mother" (102). Hill-Miller aptly notes that, "[i]n most instances, Cornelia's 'willfulness' with respect to Lodore is an expression of her desire for autonomy in her marriage and her desire not to be dominated by her older husband" (151-2). "In short, her 'wilfulness' toward Lodore is indeed wilful, but it is also portrayed as the defiant—and necessary—self-preservation of a resolute spirit" (152). In this way, Shelley again reveals her allegiance to her mother's feminist ideals, creating a female character who refuses to accept conventional patriarchal values; by privileging her mother over her husband, Cornelia undermines the position of the patriarch. And as stated above, when Cornelia gives birth to Ethel, husband and wife only grow further apart, as Cornelia, young and inexperienced, neglects her child. In so doing, Cornelia again defies Lodore's expectations of an ideal wife, exhibiting none of the maternal affection he has envisaged.[238]

When Lodore determines to leave England with Ethel, Cornelia's pride prevents her from joining him: "Haughty and proud, was she to be dictated thus? and to follow, an obedient slave, the master that deigned to recall her to his presence, after he had . . . deserted her?" (128). Moreover, Cornelia is influenced by her mother, who plays on her daughter's sympathy to coerce her into staying: "you will not abandon a parent, who has devoted herself

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and daughter, it is fitting that the voice of Mary Wollstonecraft is heard along with that of Mary Shelley." See "Further Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: *Lodore* as an Imagined Conversation with Mary Wollstonecraft," *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley: Writing Lives*, eds. Helen M. Buss, D.L. Macdonald, and Anne McWhir (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001) 186.

[238] Importantly, the narrator points out that, initially at least, Cornelia's neglect of Ethel is due to her illness after giving birth: "she was reduced to the lowest ebb of weakness; but Lodore, as men are apt to do, was slow to discern her physical suffering, while his cheeks burnt with indignation, as she peevishly repeated the command that his child should go." Yet, once Cornelia has recovered, she continues to neglect her child. See *L*, 105.

to you from your cradle—who lives but for you" (Lady Santerre thus manipulates her daughter's love to serve her own interests—this is yet another example of the way in which sympathy can be exploited, its effect on others used for self-serving rather than altruistic purposes) (128).[239] As Cornelia writes in her letter to Lodore, "You well know that I cannot, that I will not, desert my mother" (131). Although Cornelia is presented as selfish and unfeeling, she shows great sympathy in her devotion to her mother. Moreover, she proves that she is not, as Lodore assumes, indifferent to her child: "I demand my child," she writes, "restore her to me. It is cruelty beyond compare, to separate one so young from maternal tenderness and fosterage. . . . The tyranny and dark jealousy of your vindictive nature display themselves in this act of unprincipled violence" (131). Echoing the narrator, Cornelia castigates Lodore for his selfishness: "You alone must reign, be feared, be thought of; all others are to be sacrificed, living victims, at the shrine of your self-love" (131). Overcoming her pride, Cornelia asks that Lodore not "interfere with emotions too pure, too disinterested for [him] ever to understand" (131). In an act of maternal devotion, Cornelia endeavours to retrieve Ethel from Lodore, but a storm delays her trip, and by the time the storm subsides, Lodore has already set sail for America, and Cornelia is left to contend with her "maternal sorrow" (134). Both metaphorically and physically divided, Cornelia and Lodore remain forever estranged in feeling.

Despite Cornelia's desire to be with her child, she is still at an age (nineteen) "when youth is most arrogant, and heedless of the feelings of others" (134). As the narrator observes, Cornelia has "not learned to feel with or for others" (134). "[N]o compassion for the unhappy exile [Lodore]—no generous desire to diminish the sufferings of one, who was

[239] Hill-Miller notes that Lady Santerre "is important both for her effect on her daughter's behaviour and for what she represents as a teacher. Lady Santerre symbolizes, first of all, an inversion of natural maternal feelings for a child: rather than devoting herself to her daughter's welfare, she manipulates her daughter to be certain that Cornelia will devote herself to her mother's wellbeing. In this respect, Lady Santerre dominates Cornelia as much as Lodore tries to." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 155.

the victim of the wildest and most tormenting passions, softened her bosom" (135). Cornelia's inability to sympathize, the narrator suggests, is a consequence of her "bad education" (135). Commenting on Cornelia's character and the ill effects of being deprived of a proper education, the narrator (again echoing Wollstonecraft) writes:

> she was a woman who in Sparta had formed an heroine; who in periods of war and revolution, would unflinchingly have met calamity, sustaining and leading her own sex. But through the bad education she had received, and her extreme youth, elevation of feeling degenerated into mere personal pride, and heroism was turned into obstinacy; she had been capable of the most admirable self-sacrifice, had she been taught the right shrine at which to devote herself; but her mind was narrowed by the mode of her bringing up, and her loftiest ideas were centered in worldly advantages the most worthless and pitiable. (135)

However, through the benign and sympathetic influence of Horatio Saville (whom she meets while Lodore is still living in Illinois), and later, through her daughter, Cornelia learns to "feel with" and "for others." Although Cornelia and Horatio love one another ("each would have died for the other's sake"), even after Lodore's death, they remain apart, Horatio's modesty and self-doubt ("How could he, the abstracted student, the man of dreams, the sensitive and timid invalid, ensnare the fancy of one formed to adorn the circles of wealth and fashion?") and Cornelia's pride (she is careful to hide her affections) preventing them from being together (202). Moreover, Horatio's sisters accuse Cornelia of encouraging the attentions of the Marquess of C— and of intending to marry him, and so Horatio, in an act of selflessness, resolves not to stand in the way of their union and leaves England for Italy, which in turn wounds Cornelia's pride. When Horatio departs, Cornelia "look[s] so happy, and [speaks] so gaily, that those who were more ready to discern indifference, than love, in her sentiments, assure[d] the absent Saville, that Lady Lodore rejoiced in his absence" (204).

This speaks to the deceptive nature of emotion, to what Pinch refers to as "the arduousness of knowing . . . the feelings of others" (142).[240] Although Cornelia is pained by Horatio's departure, her pride prevents her from appearing so, and she affects happiness; hence, those around her assume she is indifferent. When Cornelia learns Horatio has married another, her emotions are so strong that her body cannot hide her inner turmoil: "Had sudden disease seized on the framework of her body, and dissolved and scattered with poisonous influence and unutterable pains, the atoms that composed it, Lady Lodore would have been less agonized, less terrified" (205). "A thousand daggers were at once planted in her bosom," writes the narrator, and "[h]er heart died within her" (205). But despite Cornelia's suffering, she is able to overcome her painful emotions through what those in Shelley's time would have considered a masculine strength of both body and mind.

Indeed, as mentioned above, the narrator often comments on Cornelia's "masculine" qualities (conventionally understood as such). For example, Cornelia is described as "a woman, brilliant, but rather masculine, majestic in figure, with wild dark eyes, and a very determined manner" (191). In this way, Cornelia transcends traditional gender norms (she is not feminine, delicate, gentle, and meek, but strong, powerful, and self-willed). Indeed, as the narrator observes, "Cornelia was possessed of wonderful firmness of purpose," and "now that danger was at hand, it served effectually to defend her. She rose calm and free, above unmerited disaster" (207). Unlike Ethel, who cannot act for herself nor overcome her excessive emotions, Cornelia grows "proud of the power" she "possesse[s]" and her ability to conquer "the most tyrannical of passions" (207). In another activity considered "masculine" (since women did not generally have the freedom to travel), Cornelia goes abroad, giving "herself up in the solitude of continental journies [*sic*] to the whole force of contending

[240] Yousef observes that "[s]kepticism and sympathy are . . . bound in a strangely complementary structure in eighteenth-century philosophical discourse, whereby the first generates an excessive anxiety about the accuracy and reliability of our apprehension of things and the second presumes an improbable confidence about our intimacy with other persons." See *Romantic Intimacy*, 7.

passions" (207).[241] After "recover[ing] a "healthier tone of mind" through the sheer force of her self-will, Cornelia returns to England determined to enforce "her rights over her child," her encounter with whom is profoundly affecting for both mother and daughter (although once again, Cornelia is able to affect calm) (207).

Shelley again comments on the problem of dissimulation when Cornelia meets Edward (who is prejudiced against her because of his connection to Lodore) at the opera prior to her encounter with Ethel:

> Lady Lodore would have despised herself for ever had she betrayed the tremor that shook her frame when Villiers entered. Her pride of sex was in arms to enable her to convince him, that no regret, no pining, shadowed her days. The reality was abhorrent, and should never be confessed. Thus when they met—each with a whole epic of woe and death alive in their memory; but both wearing the outward appearance of frivolity and thoughtlessness. (210)

As the narrator observes (echoing Hume and Smith), "[t]he evidence of the senses, and the ideas of our own minds, are more forcibly present, than any notion we can form of the feelings of others" (209). Because Cornelia "wear[s] the outward appearance of frivolity and thoughtlessness," Edward believes "[n]othing touche[s]—nothing harm[s] her; and the glossy surface, he doubt[s] not, image[s] the insensible, unimpressive soul within" (210). Ethel, however, is able to discern the inauthenticity of Cornelia's "outward appearance": "Ethel fancied that [Cornelia's] smile was often forced, so suddenly did it displace an expression of listlessness and languor" (271). Although Ethel is presented as submissive and wholly dependent upon the men in her life, Shelley also shows her to be deeply sympathetic and therefore perceptive and attuned (and responsive) to the feelings of others. In this sense,

[241] Like the Byronic figures in Shelley's other novels (the unnamed father in *Matilda*, Raymond in *The Last Man*, the eponymous hero in *Falkner*), Cornelia travels abroad in order to soothe her sorrows. In associating Cornelia with the Byronic hero, Shelley again emphasizes her masculine qualities (conventionally understood as such).

dissimulation becomes a matter of literary interpretation, for Shelley suggests that through sympathy, one can improve one's ability to read another person (their affective cues, for example) in the same way one can learn to better read a text.

Ethel's reaction to hearing Cornelia's voice for the first time (she experiences an embodied emotional response) attests to how forcibly she feels:

> A sudden thrill passed as an electric shock through her frame, every joint in her body trembled, her knees knocked together, and the colour forsook her cheeks. . . . The lady spoke, and her voice entered and stirred Ethel's beating heart with strange emotion; every drop of blood within her seemed to leap at the sound. (272)

Ethel's powerful reaction, a kind of eruption of emotion that brings with it actual physiological changes, speaks to the strong sympathetic connection that seems to already (innately) exist between mother and daughter. And when Cornelia fixes Ethel's earring for her, "a flow of sympathy and enthusiastic affection, burst[s] on [Ethel's] heart," and she again experiences a profound physical response: "Ethel felt her mother's hand touch her cheek: her very life stood suspended; it was a bitter pain, yet a pleasure inconceivable; there was a suffocation in her throat, and the tears filled her eyes" (273). To use Pinch's phrase, this scene (and others that follow between mother and daughter) is "affect-laden" (*Strange Fits* 11). Indeed, Gregory G. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe affect as "synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*"; it is "potential," a "body's *capacity* to affect and to be affected" ("An Inventory of Shimmers" 2).[242] As Seigworth and Gregg write, "With affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in its relations" (3). Ethel's emotions are writ on her body—they are evident in her trembling knees, her pale cheeks, and the tears running down her face. Cornelia, however, does not allow her body to betray her inner

[242] Hume similarly comments on "the force of sympathy thro' the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another." See *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 363.

emotions, quickly fleeing before her feelings become discernible through her body's reaction. Consequently, Ethel here misreads her mother, believing that Cornelia's wish is "that they should continue strangers to each other" (Shelley, *L* 273). Yet, this sympathetic interaction nevertheless transforms Cornelia in Ethel's eyes: she is "no longer a semi-gorgon, hid behind a deceptive mask—a Medea, without a touch of human pity. She [is] a lovely, soft-voiced, angelic-looking woman, whom [Ethel] would have given worlds to be permitted to love and wait upon" (273, 273-4).[243] Through the "flow of sympathy" between mother and daughter, perceptions are altered, and Cornelia, for a moment, appears as she is.

This change of perception through the interchange of sympathy also occurs with Fanny, who "had hitherto disliked Lady Lodore," believing "her to be cold, worldly, and selfish" (360). Having come to visit Cornelia to inform her of Ethel's circumstances, Fanny is won over by Cornelia's "frankness and kindness of manner" (360). "[B]y the powerful influence of [Cornelia's] manner," the narrator comments, Fanny is "convinced" of Cornelia's sympathetic nature (360). Hill-Miller observes that "Fanny is the only character who, seeing to the bottom of Cornelia's heart, guesses the motherly devotion and generosity that lie there" (142). Although it is true that Fanny is able to perceive Cornelia as she is, she is not the only character capable of doing so. As we have seen, Ethel, equally sympathetic, is also able to see through her mother's affected indifference. Fanny and Ethel, through the "force of sympathy," have the capacity to discern "the genuine affections of the heart"; they are better able to know the feelings of others (Shelley, *Letters* 2: 185). When Cornelia learns of Ethel's circumstances (that Edward is wracked with debt and that the couple is living in

[243] It is significant that until Cornelia displays feminine behaviour (maternal affection), she is figured as a "semi-gorgon." It was typical in the nineteenth century for women with masculine attributes (pride, strength, independence) to be considered monstrous aberrations (as will be discussed below, Fanny Derham, another unconventional woman—because of her intellect and independence—compares herself to Demogorgon). Notably, in his 1798 poem "The Unsex'd Females" (which targets female writers such as Wollstonecraft), Richard Polwhele claims that "'the sparkle of confident intelligence' in women authors" is "*in itself*, a sign of 'that independence of spirit' which" is "'offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence.'" See Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983) xvi.

poverty), she is torn between a desire to help her daughter and a longing to hold onto her independence: "to bring the young wife to her own house, and make it a home for her, was at once destructive of her own independence" (*L* 361).[244] But when she visits Ethel in her home, she is overcome by sympathy. In an echo of Ethel's powerful corporeal reaction to her mother's voice, Cornelia experiences a similar physical response to hearing Ethel speak: "The voice that told her to come in, thrilled through her, she knew not why, and she became disturbed at finding that her self-possession was failing her" (363). Cornelia's inability to "restrain the tear that start[s] into her eye [upon] beholding her daughter situated" in such dire poverty speaks to both the uncontrollability and sheer force of emotion—her sympathy for Ethel not only brings about a cognitive change (her self-centredness is weakened by the encounter) but also a physiological one (she loses her self-possession and is unable to hold back her tears) (363).

Indeed, through this sympathetic encounter with Ethel, Cornelia's compassion deepens, and she decides to imitate Ethel's kindness (she is moved by the "deep affection in [Ethel's] speaking eyes," her "earnest demonstration of heartfelt sincerity," and her self-sacrifice—Ethel tells Cornelia that she would live in "an actual dungeon" in order to be with Edward). And it is through the mechanism of sympathy that she "catches" and comes to replicate Ethel's behaviour and feelings: "No more, O never more . . . will I waste my being, but learn from Ethel to be happy, and to love," Cornelia vows (367). Here, Shelley again borrows from Hume. In Pinch's words, "[f]or Hume, persons feel most the feelings they catch from others, as if by contagion," and "[t]he force of this process—called 'sympathy,'" is the means by which feelings are transferred from one person to another (*Strange Fits* 44). Through the "force of sympathy" (recall that Seigworth and Gregg describe affect as

[244] Shelley's adherence to her mother's feminist ideals is clear in this novel. In her strength and in her desire for independence, Cornelia displays the characteristics Wollstonecraft believed women could learn through education.

"synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*"), Cornelia's very self is altered—she emulates and eventually adopts Ethel's behaviour (in particular, her self-sacrifice) (Hume, *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge 363; Seigworth and Gregg, "Inventory" 2). This can be understood as a form of what Gibbs calls "mimetic communication" (discussed previously) (186). According to Gibbs, "'mimetic communication' or mimesis" refers to "corporeally based forms of imitation" (186). "At their most primitive," Gibbs explains, "these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the 'synchrony of facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person,' producing a tendency for those involved 'to converge emotionally'" (186). Through conversing with her daughter and observing her displays of sympathy and selflessness, Cornelia comes to mimic Ethel—she experiences a contagion of affect. And this affect is translated into virtuous action when Cornelia "resolve[s] to sacrifice every thing to her daughter—to liberate Villiers, and to establish her in ease and comfort" (Shelley, *L* 367). Notably, contemporary work in the field of psychology is empirically testing (and proving) that sympathy can encourage benevolent behaviour and actions. In "Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives" (1991), for example, the social psychologists C. Daniel Baton and Laura L. Shaw show that "empathy evokes altruistic motivation" (112).[245] It is therefore significant that, through her fiction, Shelley was commenting on such a phenomenon in the nineteenth century. Through the sympathy she feels for her daughter, Cornelia is mobilized to action—her compassion is converted into altruism.

[245] Although Batson and Shaw have chosen the word "empathy" rather than "sympathy," they explain that their definition of empathy—a "particular set of congruent vicarious emotions . . . that are more other-focused than self-focused" and thus "distinct from personal distress evoked by perceiving someone in need"—is "indistinguishable from what many philosophers and early psychologists," such as Hume and Smith, refer to as sympathy. Testing their empathy-altruism hypothesis, Batson and Shaw show that "empathic emotion evokes truly altruistic motivation, motivation with an ultimate goal of benefiting not the self but the person for whom empathy is felt." See Batson and Shaw, "Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives," *Philosophical Inquiry* 2.2 (1991): 113-14, 107.

Yet, even this act of sympathy is not entirely free of self-interest (this can again be connected to Batson and Shaw's study, for they provide a "pluralistic explanation" for ethical behaviour, arguing, like Hume and Smith, that it stems from a combination of egoism and altruism) (107). As stated above, for Cornelia, "[t]he image of self-sacrifice, and of the ruin of her own fortunes, [is] attended with a kind of rapture" (Shelley, *L* 367). The "burden of life" vanishes now that Cornelia has "something worth living for"—this act of self-sacrifice for her child (367). As the narrator writes, "[t]he thoughts of love, when [Cornelia] believed that she should be united to Saville, were not so blissful; for self-approbation, derived from a consciousness of virtue and well-doing, hallowed every thought" (368).[246] Yet, although Cornelia's sympathy is clearly bound up with self-approbation and self-interest, she chooses to carry out her act of charity anonymously, which shows her to be motivated more by altruism than egoism. After explaining to Edward's solicitor that she plans to dispose "of her jointure" in order to extricate Edward from his debts, Cornelia experiences that "natural spring of inward joy" that comes with "a consciousness of doing well," showing the positive effects acts of compassion have for both giver and receiver (371). As the narrator observes, "she arose, as from a second birth, to new hopes, new prospects, new feelings; or rather to another state of being, which had no affinity to the former" (371). Through Ethel's influence, Cornelia is transformed, her very identity altered.

Her scheme "unbounded in generosity and self-sacrifice," Cornelia prepares, in a sense, to martyr herself for her daughter (378). In addition to liquidating Edward's debts, she plans to give her home and the six hundred dollars a year she receives through Lodore's will to Ethel, resolving to keep only enough money "to procure [for herself] the necessaries of life

[246] In *Valperga*, the narrator writes something similar: ""No one can act conscientiously up to his sense of duty, or perhaps ever go beyond that sense, in the exercise of benevolence and self-sacrifice, without being repaid by . . . self-approbation." And just as Cornelia experiences that "natural spring of inward joy" that accompanies acts of compassion, so Euthanasia, after "devot[ing] herself . . . to the nursing the sick, and the feeding of the hungry," finds her "benevolence . . . repaid by a return of heartfelt spirits and peace of mind." See *V*, 398; *L*, 371, *V*, 398.

for a few years, and she [does] not look beyond" (378). Significantly, Shelley compares Cornelia's formulation of this act of generosity to an artist's conception of a poem or a work of art, connecting sympathy to representation: "The first conception of this plan had dawned on her soul, as the design of some sublime poem or magnificent work of art may present itself to the contemplation of the poet and man of genius" (378). Both are acts of imagination, and both can have an emotional effect on the creator/sympathizer and on the receiver/sympathized. Indeed, Cornelia "dwelt on it in its entire result, with a glow of joy; she entered into its details with childish eagerness," and she "pictured to herself the satisfaction of Villiers and Ethel at finding themselves suddenly, as by magic, restored to freedom and the pleasures of life" (379). Here, Shelley emphasizes the reciprocity of sympathy.

Although Cornelia still intends to execute her plan anonymously, she nevertheless laments that she has been wrongly perceived by others and will continue to be so: "How little through life has my genuine character been known, or its qualities appreciated! Nor will it be better understood now"—this again speaks to "the arduousness of knowing . . . the feelings of others" (379). "My sacrifices will continue a mystery," she continues, "and even the benefits I am forced to acknowledge to flow from me, I shall diminish in their eyes, by bestowing them with apparent indifference" (379). Despite a desire to be known as she is (as compassionate and selfless) and not as she appears (indifferent), Cornelia remains committed to "concealing the extent of her benefits," for she realizes that if Ethel and Edward "knew how greatly she was a sufferer for their good, they would insist at least upon her sharing their income—and what was scanty in its entireness, would be wholly insufficient when divided" (380). Cornelia therefore proves herself truly selfless (importantly, not self-less) in sacrificing her livelihood for her daughter without the expectation of approbation.

Planning to live "in poverty and seclusion" in Wales, Cornelia at first "look[s] forward to ruin, exile, and privation" (378, 380-381). Yet, she begins to remember the "ties

which she had formed in the world, which she had fancied it would be so easy to cut asunder" (381). Now, when an acquaintance glances at her with an "expression of kindliness and sympathy . . . a thrill of anguish passe[s] through her frame," and she laments that she will be exchanging society for "a living grave, a friendless desart [*sic*]—for silence and despair" (381). Cornelia's sense that without sympathy (achieved through the company of others), her future will be a blank ("Futurity became enveloped in an appalling obscurity") (381), her belief that solitude is but "a living grave," recalls Hume's observation in his *Treatise*:[247]

> We can form no wish, which has not a reference to society. A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer. Every pleasure languishes when enjoy'd a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable. Whatever other passions we may be actuated by; pride, ambition, avarice, curiosity, revenge or lust; the soul or animating principle of them all is sympathy; nor wou'd they have any force, were we to abstract entirely from the thoughts and sentiments of others. Let all the powers and elements of nature conspire to serve and obey one man: Let the sun rise and set at his command: The sea and rivers roll as he pleases, and the earth furnish spontaneously whatever may be useful or agreeable to him: He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy. (363)

Shaftesbury writes something similar, asking: "Who is there can well or long enjoy anything when alone and abstracted perfectly, even in his very mind and thought, from everything belonging to society?" (212). Cornelia, "now that she [is] about to abandon all" and become "[a]lone, friendless, unknown," finds "herself bound to all by stronger ties than she could have imagined" (Shelley, *L* 383). As Cornelia anticipates, her "only companions would be

[247] This also recalls the narrator's observation in reference to Lodore (cited above): "Lodore had lived many years the life of a recluse, having given up ambition, hope, almost life itself, inasmuch as that existence is scarcely to be termed life, which does not bring us into intimate connexion with our fellow-creatures." See *L*, 141.

villagers. . . . Sympathy, the charm of life," would be "dead for her" (385). The necessity of the sympathy of others becomes all too evident to Cornelia only after she learns to extend it herself. She comes to realize that it is indeed "the only pleasure worth having in the world" (Shelley, *Selected Letters* 301).

Emphasizing Cornelia's strength, self-sufficiency, and resiliency, the narrator writes (again echoing Wollstonecraft): "To one of another sex, the name of loneliness can never convey the idea of desolation and disregard, which gives it so painful a meaning in a woman's mind," for men "have not been taught always to look up to others, and to do nothing for themselves; so that business becomes a matter of heroism to a woman, when conducted in the most common-place way" (*L* 384). According to the narrator, the execution of Cornelia's plan takes a kind of heroism. Indeed, Cornelia (along with her daughter Ethel), not Lodore, as the title suggests, is the heroine of this novel.[248] As Shelley writes in a letter to her publisher Charles Ollier on January 31, 1833, the "Mother & Daughter are the heroines—The Mother who after sacrifising [*sic*] all to the world at first—afterwards makes sacrifises [*sic*] not less entire, for her child—finding all to be Vanity, except the genuine affections of the heart" (*Letters* 2:185).[249] And it is through her daughter's example that Cornelia comes to understand the primacy of sympathy, through Ethel that she learns to cultivate her compassion. As the narrator observes:

> if she sometimes repined at the hard fate that drove her into exile, yet she never wavered in her intentions; and in the midst of regret, a kind of exultation was born, which calmed her pain. Smiles sat upon her features. . . . She was more kind and

[248] Bunnell also argues that "the central figure is Cornelia, whose story interconnects with the lives of all the others." See "'Great Expectations,'" 277.

[249] Hill-Miller notes that "[w]hen Shelley began *Lodore*, she was thirty-four, Cornelia's age at the end of the novel. Like Cornelia, Shelley sacrificed her comfort and happiness for her child and found that sacrifice gave meaning to her life. But simultaneously, Shelley fought to support and cheer a dependent figure of a very different sort: her father. . . . Shelley wrote *Lodore* to provide for her father's care. . . . If Shelley found meaning and emotional sustenance in the personal sacrifices she made for her child, she found similar meaning in her devotion to her aging father." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 164.

> affectionate, and, above all, more sincere, and therefore more winning. Every one felt, though none could divine the cause of, this change. It was remarked that she was improved. . . . For the first time she knew and loved the Spirit of good and beauty, an affinity to which affords the greatest bliss that our nature can receive. (*L* 386)

Through the beneficial influence of sympathy, then, Cornelia is re-formed—she learns "to feel with" and "for others."

Indeed, as Lodore's sister Elizabeth observes, "[t]he grand, the exclusive Lady Lodore—haughty, fashionable, worldly-heartless wife" had "metamorphosed into a tender-hearted mother" (434). Cornelia herself seems to pinpoint the affective encounter with Ethel at the opera (cited above) as the beginning of this change: "When her fingers then touched her daughter's cheek, she had not trembled like Ethel; yet an awful sensation passed through her frame, which for a moment stunned her, and she hastily retreated, to recover herself" (385). It is as if Ethel's emotions are physically transferred, like an electric shock, to Cornelia; there is a "circulation of feelings," to use Pinch's phrase, a contagion of affect (*Strange Fits* 16). As Csengei writes, through sympathy, "the feelings" of others are "grafted into us" and "start living their own life and have a physical impact on our body. The other, so to say, becomes part of an extended self" (*Sympathy* 52). Through this sympathetic meeting, Cornelia comes to adopt and mimic Ethel's feelings, and she eventually believes that "she could not endure life, unless for the sake of benefitting her child" (Shelley, *L* 386). Cornelia thus signs away all she possesses and leaves London, and "whether it were a real tomb that she entered, or the living grave which she anticipated, her name and memory would equally vanish from the earth, and she be thought of no more" (388). In the ultimate sacrifice, Cornelia chooses obscurity, a death-like existence (because unattended by the sympathy of another) in order to save her daughter from a life of poverty and misery.

However, in the end, Cornelia is rewarded for her selflessness: she is reunited with Ethel and marries Horatio. According to the narrator, Cornelia now "wonders at her past self—and laments the many opportunities she lost for benefiting others, and proving herself worthy of their attachment. Her pride is gone, or rather, her pride is now placed in redeeming her faults" (446). Importantly, although Cornelia "respects, admires, in some sense it may be said . . . adores her husband," she insists "that her first duties [are] towards Ethel" and tells Horatio "that he [takes] a divided heart, over the better part of which reigned maternal love" (447). Rather than devoting herself entirely to her husband, Cornelia privileges her relationship with her daughter and so achieves a kind of transcendence over patriarchy. As Hill-Miller observes, "[f]or Cornelia, mothering Ethel represents a withdrawal from and self-chosen replacement for the traditional relations between men and women" (161).[250] Thus, although in "embracing motherhood" Cornelia "opt[s] for many of the limits associated with conventional notions of femininity: devoting oneself to children means adopting in particular the traditional female habits of selflessness and self-sacrifice in support of others," her "choice is a deliberate one" (161). Moreover, as Hill-Miller points out, "when Cornelia devotes herself to the sacrifices of motherhood, she transcends precisely that characteristic of conventional femininity that flaws Ethel: dependent weakness" (161). "Cornelia always remains strong; when she sacrifices herself for her daughter, she draws on an impressive capacity to support and sustain others" (161).[251] Cornelia retains her "perfect self-possession" and her "independent position," and her characteristic pride is not so much subdued as

[250] "Nature," Hill-Miller writes, "and 'nature' includes maternity, the most fundamentally 'natural' of female possibilities—gives women a more transcendent career than they can find in either the life of polite society or the conventional patterns of male-female relationships." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 160-61.

[251] Hill-Miller suggests that "Shelley uses Cornelia's decision to embrace conventional femininity to explore some of . . . femininity's hidden and subversive power over men. After all, when Cornelia sacrifices everything for Ethel and Edward . . . she gains a significant amount of control over her despised son-in-law." "In the closing pages of *Lodore*, then, Mary Shelley endorses and celebrates her formerly defiant heroine's redemption into conventional femininity—a domesticity that elevates the self-sacrifice and self-abnegation of motherhood and commends the woman who can exhibit great strength in the support of others." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 161.

complemented by her newfound compassion (Shelley, *L* 196, 193). Through her sympathetic tie with her daughter, Cornelia's "[s]elf-compassion" is displaced by a selfless desire to "sacrifice every thing" for Ethel, a self-sacrifice that ironically affirms rather than obliterates her selfhood (390, 367).

### Ethel: Selflessness and "Self-Forgetfulness"[252]

While Cornelia must learn compassion, Ethel has an overabundance of it, so much so that it results in a loss of selfhood. Cornelia is defined by her "self-will," Ethel by her "self-forgetfulness" (130, 238). This "self-forgetfulness," Shelley suggests, is learned, for she is raised and educated by Lodore to be self-effacing. Repeatedly characterized as a Miranda figure, Ethel is brought up in solitude, experiencing little of the outside world, and rarely interacting with its inhabitants.[253] "Except [Lodore], [Ethel's] only companion [is] her servant," and she is "sedulously kept away from communication with the settlers" in Illinois (62, 64). Having been raised this way, Ethel is "ever pliant to [Lodore's] will" and has no other relationships through which to navigate and understand the world (65). As the narrator observes, "set apart from the vulgar uses of the world, [Ethel] was connected with the mass only through another—the other. . . . her father and only friend" (65). Consequently, Ethel's sympathy is focused solely on Lodore (as his is on her), and he is able to fashion her into his ideal of femininity (as he had tried, but failed, to do with Cornelia)—as the narrator comments, "Fitzhenry drew his chief ideas from Milton's Eve, and adding to this the romance of chivalry, he satisfied himself that his daughter would be the embodied ideal of all that is adorable and estimable in her sex" (65). Lodore, the narrator continues, "resolved to make

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[252] Shelley, *L* 238.

[253] Stafford notes that "the explicit allusions to *The Tempest* seem to equate Lodore and Ethel with Prospero and Miranda, while the American settlers are cast as Calibans." See "*Lodore*: A Tale of the Present time?," *Romanticism* 3.2 (1997): 191. And as the narrator writes: "After a long silence, on his part sombre and abstracted—as Prospero asked the ever sweet Miranda, so did Fitzhenry inquire of his daughter, if she had memory of aught preceding their residence in the Illinois?" "Ethel, as readily as Miranda, replied in the affirmative." The narrator later comments that Ethel, "who, like Miranda, had known no relative or intimate except her father, warmed with pleasure to find new ties bind her to her fellow-creatures." See *L*, 79-80, 80, 155.

[Ethel] all that woman can be of generous, soft, and devoted . . . to fill her with honour, and yet to mould her to the sweetest gentleness" (65). According to Vargo, "Ethel is introduced as representing what the emergent Victorian culture of the 1830s idealizes in women, yet the voice of the narrator challenges that ideal from the perspective of Wollstonecraft's thought" ("Further Thoughts" 182). "Shelley creates a heroine," Vargo continues, "whom she compares with Shakespeare's Miranda, Campbell's Gertrude of Wyoming, and Byron's Haidee, in order that she might demonstrate how such figures embody male fantasies of feminine passivity and weakness" (182).[254] As Vargo argues, "[i]n describing Ethel's education in exile, the narrator critiques the patriarchal values of domestic ideology" (182).[255] Through Lodore's education, then, Ethel becomes reliant, submissive, and unable to think and act independently (which is exactly what her mother resists becoming, her "self-compassion" shielding her from Lodore's tyrannical control (itself motivated by "self-love") and preserving her sense of self).

The narrator points out precisely this: Ethel "seldom thought, and never acted, for herself"; Lodore's "incessant care and watchfulness . . . soften her mind, and make her spirit ductile and dependent" (67, 62).[256] Educated in this manner, Ethel becomes the weak-minded, obedient woman of sensibility that Wollstonecraft so strongly condemns in *Rights of Woman*.[257] (As will be discussed, in *Falkner*, the heroine (Elizabeth Raby Falkner), like

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[254] Bunnell similarly notes that, "[b]orrowing from stock images and archetypes, such as Milton's Eve, Shakespeare's Miranda, Byron's Haidee, and Thomas Campbell's Gertrude, [Lodore] molds the plastic Ethel so that 'she [grows] into the image on which his eye doted.'" See "Great Expectations," 279.

[255] Vargo explains that "[t]he allusion to Milton's Eve evokes Wollstonecraft's discussion of *Paradise Lost* in the *Vindication*, including her wry observation that great men are often led by their senses to inconsistencies." See "Further Thoughts," 182.

[256] Commenting on the "parallels to *Frankenstein*," Bunnell writes that "Lodore is intent on creating a perfect specimen for selfish motives as was Victor. His aim is to shape a daughter who will not only bless him as a father but will also represent his ideal image of woman, an image that, for different reasons, neither Theodora Lyzinski nor Cornelia can achieve." See "'Great Expectations,'" 279.

[257] As noted above, Vargo also comments on the connections between *Lodore* and Wollstonecraft's writings on female education. She suggests that Shelley "draws upon the methods and ideas of her mother's writings to speak to her mother as she contemplates the writing of two daughters' lives in the novel." See Vargo, "Further Thoughts," 178.

Fanny Derham, is given a proper Wollstonecraftian education and so develops into a strong, self-sufficient, and independent-minded woman capable of taking care of both herself and her suicidal father.)[258] Denied the opportunity to think independently or converse with her fellow human beings, Ethel merely imbibes Lodore's thoughts, opinions, and feelings, and her life is devoted solely to him. As the narrator remarks, "Nothing was dreaded . . . by her, except disapprobation; and a word or look from [Lodore] made her . . . turn as with a silken string, and bend at once to his will" (62). As with Matilda, Ethel is, in a sense, without a self, her identity wholly dependent upon her father:[259] "Nothing with her centred in self; she was always ready to give her soul away: to please her father was the unsleeping law of all her actions" (63).[260] Ethel's selflessness, then (because so extreme), Shelley suggests, is not a virtue, for its consequence is an annihilation of self—utter self-lessness.

And it is Lodore who is responsible for Ethel's self-lessness: "[t]he instructor," the narrator warns, "can cultivate and direct the affections of the pupil, who puts forth, as a parasite, tendrils by which to cling, not knowing to what—to supporter or destroyer" (66). "The careful rearer of the ductile human plant," the narrator continues, "can instil his own religion, and surround the soul by such a moral atmosphere, as shall become to its latest day the air it breathes" (66). To quote from *Émile*, Rousseau's famous treatise on education, Ethel

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[258] Yet, although Elizabeth, like Fanny, is given a more "masculine" education (Falkner hires a governess who teaches Elizabeth the "more masculine studies"—history, philosophy, biography), Falkner educates her in the same way Lodore educates Ethel. Like Ethel and Lodore, Elizabeth and Falkner are "never apart," sharing "in all the pleasures and pains of travel," with "each incident call[ing] forth her sense of dependence, and his desire to protect." Echoing the language used to describe Ethel's relationship with Lodore, the narrator observes that Elizabeth finds "in her adopted parent a shelter, a support, a preserver." See *Falkner*, 32, 33, 34, 40.

[259] Hill-Miller writes that "Ethel's 'sexual' education into conventional femininity, with its emphasis on submission to beloved males and self-abnegation in the service of others, is not unlike the education into traditional daughterhood that Mary Shelley received from William Godwin much later, after Fanny Imlay's death" (she initially received an education similar to Fanny Derham's, an "education into unconventional femininity, with [an] emphasis on the 'masculine' traits of intellect, independence, and assertion"). Hill-Miller explains that "[w]hen Shelley began *Lodore* . . . she was still grappling with the conflicting demands of self-assertion and self-abnegation, of autonomy and the loss of self in the service of another." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 143.

[260] Elizabeth (in *Falkner*) similarly possesses an abiding desire to please her father: "[she had an] ardent wish to make life dear to him. All her employments, all her pleasures, referred themselves . . . to this primary motive, and were entirely ruled by it." See *Falkner*, 56.

is “rais[ed] for others” (specifically for Lodore) rather than for “[her]self” (39). Her ideas, beliefs, and opinions are not her own but mere reflections of her instructor’s—she is “sufficiently plastic in her father’s hands” (Shelley, *L* 66). The narrator is forthright in her condemnation of Lodore’s educational tactics, lamenting that “[a] lofty sense of independence is, in man, the best privilege of his nature” while it is denied “the other sex,” who are not given the opportunity to learn “to rely on and act for [themselves]” (66). “[I]n the cultivation of this feeling [of independence], the education of Fitzhenry was lamentably deficient. Ethel was taught to know herself dependent; the support of another was to be as necessary to her as her daily food” (66). According to Vargo, “[i]t is clear that for Shelley, as for Wollstonecraft, dependency in women is a weakness,” and “Shelley’s narrator speaks in a voice that echoes Wollstonecraft’s rational and ironic perspective in presenting an account of the life of an inadequately educated daughter” (“Further Thoughts” 182). As Hill-Miller comments, “*Lodore*, more overtly than Mary Shelley’s other novels, analyses the many varieties of the daughter’s education at the father’s hands and portrays the impact of this education on the daughter’s behaviour and life” (136). Had Ethel been raised by her mother, the text suggests, she may have learned to emulate Cornelia’s strength and independence. As the narrator observes, “[t]here is a peculiarity in the education of a daughter, brought up by a father only, which tends to develop early a thousand of those portions of mind [passiveness, dependency], which are folded up, and often destroyed, under mere feminine tuition” (Shelley, *L* 62). In other words, “feminine tuition,” explains Hill-Miller, “destroys the daughter’s submissive and dependent behaviour” (139). “The implication,” then, “is that a mother’s education makes a daughter independent and self-sufficient” (139-40). Instead, Ethel comes to lean on “her father as a prop that could not fail” (as Lodore intends her to do), and she is “wholly satisfied with her condition,” having known nothing else (Shelley, *L* 66). Moreover, her complete isolation prevents her from cultivating relationships with other

people and so increases her reliance on Lodore. As the narrator comments, Ethel's "entire want of experience in intercourse with her fellow-creatures, gave a more decided tone to her sense of dependence than she could have acquired, if the circumstances of her daily life had brought her into perpetual collision with others" (66). Denied sympathetic interchange with anyone except Lodore, Ethel has no way to escape her subjection to him.

Consequently, Lodore becomes "the passion of her soul, the engrossing attachment of her loving heart" (149). Indeed, Ethel has "no thought or pursuit which [is] not linked with [Lodore's] participation"—that is, she has no life, no self, separate from her father, her existence entirely contingent on his (149). Ethel's love for Lodore becomes a religion; for her, he is a deity to worship: "Ethel's heart overflowed with love, reverence, worship of her father . . . the world without him, was what the earth might be uninformed by light: he was its sun, its ruling luminary" (150).[261] Importantly, the narrator again observes that "had [Ethel] been associated with others, who might have shared and weakened the concentrated sensibility of her nature," she would not have so "completely" devoted herself to (and would not have lost herself so completely in) her love for her father (150). Without such communication, all of her sympathy is inevitably "concentrated" on Lodore.

Notably, when Ethel learns that she has an aunt in England (Lodore's sister Elizabeth), she herself becomes aware of her desire for the sympathy of another: "she, who, like Miranda, had known no relative or intimate except her father, warmed with pleasure to find new ties bind her to her fellow-creatures" (155). Upon Lodore's death, Ethel goes to live with Elizabeth in Longfield, and it is her aunt's "slight resemblance" to Lodore that wins "some degree of interest" for Ethel (again speaking to the link between sympathy and familiarity): "the sole consolation offered [Ethel], was to trace a similarity of voice and

[261] In *Valperga*, the heroine Euthanasia similarly deifies her beloved (though undeserving) Castruccio: "She made a god of him she loved, believing every virtue and every talent to live in his soul." See *Valperga*, 105.

feature, and thus to bring the lost Lodore more vividly before her" (168).[262] Like Matilda after her father's death, Ethel lives only in the past: "She asked for nothing better than to live her life over again, while narrating its simple details, and to bring her father back from the grave to dwell with her, by discoursing perpetually concerning him" (168). Both Ethel and Elizabeth are "cut off from the great family of their species" and "wedded to one single being" (169-70). Indeed, "[b]oth ma[k]e the dead Lodore the focus to concentrate, and the mirror to reflect, all their sensations and experience. He visited their dreams by night, his name was their study, their pastime, their sole untiring society" (170). Exchanging one solitude for another, Ethel remains a prisoner of Lodore's tyrannical love. And rather than teaching Ethel to live for herself, Elizabeth encourages Ethel's pathological dependency on the memory of her father (no "voice [spoke] to her of the unreasonableness of her grief") (171). Having lived a sheltered existence (like Ethel, and like the majority of women in the nineteenth century), Elizabeth lives in and through Lodore: "She lived upon the idea of her brother; he was all in all to her" (170). Consequently, she merely feeds Ethel's obsession (while her mother, strong and independent-minded, could have taught her to fortify her mind and focus her attention elsewhere). Left to relentlessly pine for her dead father, Ethel becomes entombed by her memories: "Every cheerful thought lay buried with her father, and the tears she shed near his grave were accompanied by a wrenching of her being" (171). As with Matilda, life loses meaning, and, for Ethel, "the earth seem[s] a dark prison," with "liberty and light dwel[ling] with the dead beyond the grave" (171). "Eternally conversant with the image of death," Ethel is "brought into too near communion with the grim enemy of

[262] This recalls the scene in *The Last Man* in which Lionel is brought back from the depths of despair while gazing upon his dead wife's features, for she bears "a sisterly resemblance to Adrian [his wife's brother, who is still alive, and Lionel's dearest friend]." This recognition brings Lionel's "thoughts back again to the living, to this dear friend, to Clara [his niece], and to Evelyn [his other son]." Lionel's sympathy for the remaining people to whom he is "allied . . . by the most sacred ties" is re-awakened by his recognition of Adrian's features in his wife's. See *LM*, 357, 261.

life," and she soon begins to waste away (171). To Elizabeth, there "appear[s] a virtue and a filial piety in the excess of [Ethel's] regret," and so she is "blinded . . . to the fatal consequences of its indulgence" (171). "[W]ithout occupation to amuse, or society to distract her thoughts," Ethel succumbs to a dangerous illness (171).

Again recalling Matilda, Ethel "firmly believe[s] that she [is] going to die, and [she] fondly cherishe[s] the hope of rejoining her father. She was in love with death, which alone could reunite her to the being, apart from whom she believed it impossible to exist"—we have seen how Matilda is similarly "in love with death," and for the same reason that it will reunite her with her father, for whom she has a pathological attachment and without whom she cannot live (*L* 171; *M* 208). When Elizabeth recognizes the danger, she takes Ethel to a physician in London, who "pronounce[s] the mind only to be sick" and advises that Elizabeth "occupy [Ethel]" to "prevent her from dwelling on those thoughts which have preyed upon her health" (*L* 172). However, although Elizabeth takes Ethel to various public outings in London, "the absence of human intercourse, and of the conversation and sympathy of her species" "shed[s] an air of dulness [*sic*] over every thing" for Ethel (173). She longs for that "conversation [that] awaken[s] the soul to new powers," for the "spirit of sympathy" that accompanies the society of other people (173-4).[263] It is only upon being reacquainted with Edward that Ethel is revived.

As with Ethel's relationship with Lodore, there is an undercurrent of incest in her relationship with Edward; as the narrator observes, "[a] fond, elder brother, if such ever existed, cherishing the confidence and tenderness of a beloved sister, might fill the place which her new friend assumed for Ethel" (182).[264] Educated to rely on others, Ethel soon

[263] As Shelley writes in her letters (cited in the Introduction), there is "but one pleasure in the world—sympathy with another—or others"; the "the society of agreable [*sic*] . . . congenial-minded beings," she writes, "is the only pleasure worth having in the world." See *Selected Letters*, 301.

[264] In *Falkner*, the relationship between Elizabeth and Gerard is also figured as one between a brother and a sister. Recalling his first encounter with Elizabeth, Gerard declares: "Yes—and I remember a beautiful girl—and I thought such would have been my sister, and I had not been alone. . . . It is so—and I see you again, whom

transfers her pathological sympathy to Edward and becomes wholly dependent on him: "She relied on him as the support of her life—her guide and protector—she loved him as the giver of good to her—she almost worshipped him for the many virtues, which he either really possessed, or with which her fondness bounteously gifted him" (234). When the two are temporarily separated (because Edward does not have the financial means to marry), Ethel's monomaniacal passion only intensifies: "Her life became one thought, it twined round her soul like a serpent, and compressed every other emotion in its folds" (240). Yet, in Wollstonecraftian fashion, Ethel endeavours to exert and distract herself:

> She steeled her heart against every softer thought, she tasked herself each day to devote her entire attention to some absorbing employment; to languages and the composition of music, as occupations that would not permit her thoughts to stray. . . . When a thought, sweet and bitter, took perforce possession of the chambers of her brain, she drove it out with stern and unshaken resolve. She pondered on the best means to subdue every rebel idea. She rose with the sun, and passed much time in the open air, that when night came, bodily fatigue might overpower mental regrets. (242)[265]

Indeed, although she comes close to succumbing to her illness ("She grew pale and thin, and her eyes again resumed that lustre which spoke a quick and agitated life within"), she "rouse[s] herself to contend afresh with her own heart" (243). Notably, the "energy called into action by her fortitude, [gives] a tone of superiority to her mind" (243). Yet, upon

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then my heart called sister." Later, he insists: "I will not adopt the name of brother—yet use me as a brother—no brother ever cherished the honour, safety, and happiness of a sister as I do yours." See *Falkner*, 75, 240.

[265] In *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft insists that women should "endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and *body*" and that "girls" should therefore be "allowed to take exercise, and not [be] confined in close rooms till their muscles are relaxed." See *Rights of Woman*, 111, 179. Shaftesbury similarly argues that "[t]here is no one of ever so little understanding in what belongs to a human constitution who knows not that, without action, motion and employment, the body languishes and is oppressed, its nourishment turns to disease, the spirits [*sic*] preys upon herself." "In the same manner," he continues, "the sensible and living part, the soul or mind, wanting its proper and natural exercise, is burdened and diseased. Its thoughts and passions, being unnaturally withheld from their due objects, turn against itself and create the highest impatience and ill humour." See *Characteristics*, 213.

returning to Longfield, she again relapses, for she feels "condemned" again "to incommunicative solitude" (173). Ethel sees herself and Elizabeth, like so many of Shelley's characters, as "solitary wanderers on earth, cut off from human intercourse," and she "[shrinks] into herself when she reflect[s], that should the ground at her feet open and swallow her, not one among her fellow-creatures would be sensible that the whole universe of thought and feeling . . . was shrunk up and strangled in a narrow, voiceless grave" (243). Ethel now feels that she would be "glad to discover any link that might enchain her to the mass," and her reunion with Edward provides the link she desires (243).

However, her marriage to Edward only cuts her off further from "the mass," for her existence becomes entirely bound up in him: "[he] was all in all to her. . . . She had no thought but for her husband" (252).[266] Recalling the exclusive love between Matilda and her father, Ethel becomes possessive of Edward: she "was in her heart glad" when Horatio (Edward's closest friend) is "absent" (265). As the narrator comments, "[s]he had no place in that heart to spare away from her husband; and however much she liked Horatio, and worthy as he was of her friendship, she felt him as an encroacher" (265). This recalls Shaftesbury's observation that "wherever any single good affection . . . is over-great, it must be injurious to the rest and detract in some measure from their force and natural operation. For a creature possessed with such an immoderate degree of passion must of necessity allow too much to that one and too little to others" (196). And when it is necessary for Ethel and Edward to again be apart while he deals with his debts, Ethel despairs: "all her thoughts were employed in conjectures as to where Edward was, what doing" (286).[267] As she tells Edward, "[t]he aim of my life, and its only real joy . . . is to make your existence happier than it would have been

[266] In a journal entry on October 10, 1822 (after P.B. Shelley's death), Shelley writes of a similar loss of self in another: "And I am then moonshine, having no existence except that which he [P.B. Shelley] lends me." See *Journals,* 2: 436.
[267] Matilda similarly confesses that "[i]t was a subject of regret to [her] whenever" she and her father "were visited by a third party." See *M,* 163.

without me. . . . Deprived of the opportunity to accomplish this, I am bereft of that for which I breathe" (288). It is only through the positive influence of Fanny Derham that Ethel's obsession is mitigated: "She could never forget herself while away from [Edward], or find the slightest alleviation to her disquietude except while conversing with Fanny Derham" (321). When Ethel tells Fanny that Edward is being pursued by bailiffs, "Fanny listen[s] with looks of the kindest sympathy" and assures Ethel that she will speak to the bailiffs the next day (308). In order to alleviate Ethel's anxiety, Fanny relates her life's story, eliciting Ethel's sympathy (and the reader's) by "enter[ing] into the details of her own history:—the illness and death of her father; the insulting treatment her mother had met from his family; the kindness of a relation of her own, who had assisted them" (308). As the narrator writes, "[h]er narration interested Ethel, and served to calm her mind. She thought—'Can I not bear those cares with equanimity for Edward's sake, which Fanny regards as so trivial, merely because Plato and Epictetus bid her do so?" (308). Fanny's telling of her personal narrative, then, has both therapeutic and educative value for Ethel: it soothes and "tranquilize[s]" her and teaches her how to confront adversity and fortify her mind by directing her sympathy to another (309).

Because Ethel's and Fanny's fathers have given them entirely different educations, they have developed into wholly different women, Ethel being taught to be weak, dependent, and submissive, Fanny to be strong, independent, and self-sufficient. As the narrator writes:

> They had been educated by their . . . fathers with the most sedulous care, and nothing could be more opposite than the result, except that, indeed, both made duty the master motive of their actions. . . . The one fashioned his offspring to be the wife of a frail human being, and instructed her to be yielding, and to make it her duty to devote herself to his happiness, and to obey his will. The other sought to guard his from all

> weakness, to make her complete in herself, and to render her independent and self-sufficing. (321)

In this way, Shelley again emphasizes the powerful influence of education, its ability to shape an individual, to form identity (and this influence can be positive, as in Fanny's case, or negative, as in Ethel's). Importantly, Fanny's presence in Ethel's life serves, however slightly, to re-form Ethel; through her friendship with Fanny and the "force of sympathy" connecting them, Ethel imbibes at least a modicum of Fanny's self-reliance.

But having been "brought up . . . to dependence" by Lodore and having no other positive influence than Fanny, whom she rarely sees, Ethel continues to rely on others for support, her sense of self almost entirely contingent upon her husband (323). In contrast, Fanny has been taught "to disdain every support, except the applause of her own conscience" and can therefore sustain both herself and others (323). While Ethel is given a conventional female education, Fanny is given one for which Wollstonecraft advocated, that is, a "masculine" education. According to Wollstonecraft, education, not nature, is the cause of women's perceived delicacy and intellectual inferiority. Women are not born inferior but are raised to be so. In other words, education gives the "*appearance* of weakness to females" (Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman* 131, my emphasis). As Wollstonecraft contends, if women were allowed "to share the advantages of education . . . with man," they would "grow wiser and become free" (310). Through the characters of Ethel and Fanny, then, Shelley reiterates her mother's feminist beliefs, showing the debilitating effects a conventional female education has on women through Ethel and providing an alternative through Fanny.[268] Indeed, Shelley suggests that Ethel's education is so harmful that it affects her physical wellbeing. When she learns that Edward has been arrested, she becomes ill once again,

[268] Vargo writes that "it is in the portrayal of the educations of two daughters, Ethel and Fanny, that Shelley most clearly converses with her mother's words to regenerate revolutionary principles in the 1830s: the harm of poor education, the need for women to be independent, and the creation of alternatives for women besides marriage and family." See "Further Thoughts," 181.

sinking "back on her pillow almost bereft of life" (Shelley, *L* 349). Because of Ethel's poor education, when confronted with adversity, she experiences both psychic and somatic effects, her body deteriorating as her mind is in turmoil.[269] It is only through Fanny, "who believe[s] in" and practises "the mastery of mind" that Wollstonecraft recommended for women in all of her writings, that Ethel is revived from her "hysteric fit" (349). And when Ethel insists that she will stay in prison with Edward, Fanny does not oppose her wishes: "[h]aving thus fortunately fallen into reasonable hands, guided by one who could understand her character, and not torture her by forcing notions the opposite of those on which she felt herself compelled to act, Ethel became tranquil" (350). Because Fanny's sympathy is not clouded by "self-love" but is genuinely altruistic, she is able to truly "understand [Ethel's] character" and does not seek to impose her own "notions" upon her; rather, she encourages Ethel to act in accordance with her own wishes. Vargo observes that Shelley has created "two figures who have the potential to appreciate the other's qualities, but who cannot imagine leading one another's lives, each 'wondering at a mechanism of mind so different from her own'" ("Further Thoughts" 184). Importantly, this proves that sympathy need not depend on similarity, for Ethel and Fanny can enter into one another's feelings and understand and appreciate one another despite their difference. According to Shelley's conception of sympathy as embodied in Fanny, then, genuine sympathy is grounded in a recognition of the dignity of the other as distinct from the self—as opposed to the homogenizing force of a sympathy founded on self-interest, which refuses to preserve and respect the difference, the distinctness, of the other in the sympathetic encounter.

Ultimately, it is through Fanny that Ethel and Cornelia, the heroines of *Lodore*, are reunited (Fanny therefore, in a sense, orchestrates the events that lead to the novel's

[269] According to Vargo, "Shelley uses a narrative of one life [Ethel's] to represent the ideological position of middle-class women. The story she would tell is that such weakness is a threat to the health of the social body if obedience and dependence in women are valued at the expense of their understanding and self-reliance." See "Further Thoughts," 183.

conclusion). As Hill-Miller notes, Fanny "sets in motion the events that allow . . . Cornelia to redeem herself"; she "is the only person who [with the exception of Ethel], seeing to the bottom of Cornelia's heart, guesses the motherly love and generosity that lie there" (142). Moreover, it is through Fanny's influence that Ethel comes to realize that in being "engrossed by her love for her husband, she [has] bestowed no sympathy, made no demonstration towards her mother" (Shelley, *L* 415). In large part because of Fanny, then, Ethel learns to extend "her sphere of benevolence," no longer reserving her sympathy solely for her husband but directing it towards others in her circle of concern (329).

**Fanny Derham: "Self-Sufficing" Sympathy**

Exhibiting the traits for which Wollstonecraft advocated so strongly in women—she is self-sufficient, intelligent, and compassionate—Fanny is a fictional manifestation of Wollstonecraft's ideals, which Shelley herself was devoted to following throughout her life. Vargo makes a similar observation: "Wollstonecraft believed that women need to be independent and should be presented with practical alternatives to marriage and family, and Shelley responds with her own versions of those beliefs through the figure of Fanny Derham, who embodies Wollstonecraft's ideals" ("Further Thoughts" 183). Again, Shelley attributes Fanny's strength and independence to her education, which involves avid reading and the study of philosophy and Greek letters. "Fanny, like Mary Shelley herself," writes Hill-Miller, "is educated in a manner utterly unorthodox for a woman—in fact, in the manner generally reserved for a son" (140). As Hill-Miller notes, "Fanny's father teaches her the dead languages, and other sorts of abstruse learning, which seldom make a part of a girl's education" (140-41). Consequently, Fanny develops into an independent being capable of thinking and acting for herself: "[her] first principle was, that what she ought to do, that she could do, without hesitation or regard for obstacles" (323). Unlike Ethel, who requires the

support of another to sustain her, Fanny requires only "her liberty and her books" (323).[270] Moreover, "her time, her thoughts, her decided and resolute modes of action" are "all at [the] command" of others "whenever she [is] convinced that they [have] a just claim upon them" (323). Hill-Miller observes that, "[w]ith the single exception of Cornelia, Fanny Derham is the character in *Lodore* who possesses the most discriminating understanding of human motivation and the strongest capacity to act in support of others" (143). "Fanny's lack of conventional femininity," Hill-Miller comments, "allows her wider possibilities for female friendship and lets her serve as a model and source of support for other women" (143). "As Mary Shelley insists," writes Hill-Miller, "Fanny's singularity makes her both an inspiration to more ordinary women and a refuge for them, since her support is free from the social and emotional 'dangers' attached to the support provided by men" (144). Fanny's education, then, has cultivated both her intellect and her compassion; it has taught her to both think and feel, the ideal education according to Wollstonecraft.

But like so many of Shelley's characters, Fanny is alienated from the social world, set apart, other. As a single woman devoted "to the life of the intellect," and with no desire to marry, Fanny is considered an aberration, and she is not given the opportunity to enter society in the way a married woman would, for as Hill-Miller observes, marriage was "the only way for a woman to achieve social status in nineteenth-century England" (144).[271] But it is only after developing a relationship with Ethel that Fanny comes to feel her isolation. As she tells Ethel (when she is about to leave London):

> "For the first time you have made it hard for me to keep my soul firm in its own single existence. I have been debarred from all intercourse with those whose ideas rise above the soil on which they tread, except in my dear books. . . . Yet I am not

[270] This recalls Euthanasia in *Valperga*, who learns to "connect wisdom and liberty together." See *V*, 109.
[271] As Wollstonecraft laments in *Rights of Woman*, "the only way women can rise in the world . . . [is] by marriage." See *Rights of Woman*, 112.

> ungrateful to you, even while I declare, that I shall do my best to forget this brief interval, during which, I have no longer, like Demogorgon, lived alone in my own world, but become aware that there are ties of sympathy between me and my fellow-creatures. (331-332)[272]

It is significant that Fanny compares herself to Demogorgon, the name of "a powerful . . . god or demon, associated with hell or the underworld"—as with Frankenstein's creature, Fanny's otherness is associated with monstrousness (*OED* def. 1). Through the unconventional female characters of Fanny and Cornelia (recall that Cornelia is figured as "a semi-gorgon"), Shelley condemns her society's tendency to associate female power and intellect with monstrosity and instead highlights the redemptive virtue of their very unconventionality (273). Also of significance, to be likened to Demogorgon is to be seen to have "absolute power or supremacy," and Fanny does have "absolute power [and] supremacy" over herself (a very different power from that Lodore would exert over his wife and daughter) (*OED* def. 2). Although Fanny's education and "single existence" have set her apart and "othered" her, it is precisely this otherness that makes her Shelley's ideal heroine, the very embodiment of Wollstonecraft's ideals.[273]

But while *Lodore* ends with a celebration of Fanny, it also acknowledges that the world as it is (that is, the world of nineteenth-century England in which the novel is set and in which Shelley lived) is not ready for such an individual (a female capable of both reason and profound sympathy). Indeed, the narrator laments that [o]ne who feels so deeply for others . .

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[272] In this way, Fanny is much like the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Mary* (whose best friend is named Fanny after Wollstonecraft's closest friend, Fanny Blood—Wollstonecraft also named her daughter, with Gilbert Imlay, Fanny). In this novella, Wollstonecraft presents "the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers." Yet, because of her intellect, Mary, like Fanny, is a social outcast, another Rousseauvian "solitary walker" set apart from society. See *Mary*, 4.

[273] According to Julia Saunders, Fanny, "with her loyalty, intelligence and competent independence, hovers at the edge of the plot of *Lodore*, suggesting another way for young women than the kind of femininity chosen by Ethel." See "Rehabilitating the Family in Mary Shelley's Falkner," *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From* Frankenstein *to* Falkner, ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra (London: Macmillan Press, 2000) 218. And according to Vargo, Fanny "offers an alternative to submissive womanhood." See "Further Thoughts," 184.

. cannot hope to pass from youth to age unharmed" (Shelley, *L* 448). "Deceit, and selfishness, and the whole web of human passion must envelope her, and occasion her many sorrows," the narrator continues, "and the unworthiness of her fellow-creatures inflict infinite pain on her noble heart" (448). Importantly, however, the narrator writes that Fanny will not "be *contaminated*—she will turn neither to the right nor left, but pursue her way unflinching," and "in her lofty idea of the dignity of her nature, in her love of truth and in her integrity, she will find support and reward in her various fortunes" (448, my emphasis). Shelley's choice of the word "contaminated" is notable given that, as we have seen, she so often presents sympathy as a kind of contagious disease. However, because of Fanny's strong sense of self, she is immune to the negative influence of others; her sympathetic nature will remain intact despite the pain and disappointment the narrator insists she will inevitably endure. Moreover, the narrator suggests that, "[i]n after times," Fanny's story may "teach" others "what goodness and genius can achieve in palliating the woes of life" and how "the passions of our nature [may be] purified and ennobled by an undeviating observance of those moral laws on which all human excellence is founded—a love of truth in ourselves, and a sincere sympathy with our fellow-creatures" (448).[274] Shelley suggests here that although the world of *Lodore* (and Shelley's own world), is unaccepting of Fanny's difference, some future world may learn from her example.[275] Carlson makes a similar claim, noting that "[t]he text's last words are literally inspiring, since they admit that Fanny's current reality and fate cannot be spoken

[274] Hill-Miller comments that "Fanny Derham is so unconventional, and so different from the other women of her time, that it is difficult to imagine her future." "In short," she continues, "in the world of nineteenth-century England, Fanny Derham's story cannot yet be told. Her tale might unfold in the fugue of 'after times,' just as Euthanasia's story could unfold in the distant past of fourteenth-century Italy. When Shelley completed *Lodore*, the real world of nineteenth-century social expectation was too confining even to predict the fate of a woman as unconventional as Fanny." See Hill-Miller, *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 145.

[275] In this way, Fanny again recalls the eponymous heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, which concludes with the heroine longing for death, a desire that derives from her awareness of the injustices of an oppressive, patriarchal society utterly hostile to female genius (Fanny also recalls Frankenstein's creature, whose yearning for death is a consequence of his recognition that society will never accept his difference). However, in longing for death, Mary is also yearning for a world that *might* be, and so her suicidal thoughts can be read as a radical summons to change. And Mary, like Fanny, is the model for that change. See *Mary*, 4.

in a few ‘tame’ lines” (126). “New histories and associations,” Carlson continues, “need to be forged around the words that compose her existence before they can be registered as meaningful and worthy of emulation” (126). As Vargo writes, “[t]he final lines of *Lodore* regenerate the voice of Wollstonecraft’s writings as Shelley imagines a woman’s life—and not a man’s—as a model for social transformation” (313). And the key to that “social transformation” is sympathy, the “self-sufficing” sympathy exhibited by Fanny. *Lodore* therefore concludes with an unequivocal celebration of sympathy. Indeed, Bunnell argues that all of the protagonists of *Lodore* eventually “discover that benevolent virtue is indeed ultimately rewarded” (277). However, for Shelley, sympathy remained fraught with ambiguity. As will be discussed in the following chapter, in her final novel, *Falkner*, she shows how sympathy can infringe upon an individual’s basic human liberty—her right to die.

## Chapter Five:

## "[H]aving bound her fate to his, what right had he to die?":

## Sympathy, Fidelity, and Suicidality in *Falkner*[276]

> [His] very crime was a mad excess of love.
>
> —Mary Shelley, *Falkner*[277]

In a letter to her friend Maria Gisborne on November 8, 1835, Shelley confesses that, "as [she] grow[s] older," she has come to "look upon fidelity as the first of human virtues" and that she plans to "write a novel to display [this] opinion" (Shelley, *Letters* 2: 260). That novel would be her final work, *Falkner*. Shelley cues her readers to the centrality of fidelity to her novel by quoting from P.B. Shelley's *Rosalind and Helen* for her epigraph: "—there stood / In record of a sweet sad story, / An altar, and a temple bright, / Circled steps, and o'er the gate / Was sculptured, 'To Fidelity!'" (*Falkner* 4). Indeed, the two main characters, Rupert Falkner and his adopted daughter Elizabeth (Raby) Falkner, share this one attribute: "We are not parent and child," Elizabeth says to Falkner, "but we have a strong resemblance on one point—fidelity is our characteristic" (278).[278] Importantly, though not linked by ties of blood, Elizabeth and Falkner form a sympathetic connection as strong and enduring (if not more so)[279] as that between true blood relations, destabilizing Smith's argument (following

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[276] See Mary Shelley, "Falkner: A Novel," *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1996) 77. In a letter to her publisher Charles Ollier on March 7, 1836, Shelley writes of *Falkner*: "I told you then that having at your suggestion begun another novel, I had hit upon a story that pleased me so much, that I wrote with a rapidity I had never done before—& had reason to believe that it would succeed far better than Lodore—being also of the present times—but with a much more interesting story." See *Letters*, 2: 267. And on April 26, 1837, in a letter to her friend Leigh Hunt, also referring to *Falkner*, Shelley writes: "I am much flattered & pleased by your praise of my book. . . . I own it is a favourite of mine—yet I can see its defects—I had a vivid conception of the story & wrote with great speed." See *Letters*, 2: 285-6.

[277] Shelley, *Falkner*, 295.

[278] Melissa Sites observes that "[f]idelity, the quality the novel claims as its central concern, is never assigned to one gender or the other and is exemplified equally by Falkner, his adopted daughter Elizabeth, and Gerard Neville." See "Utopian Domesticity as Social reform in Mary Shelley's 'Falkner,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 54 (2005): 151.

[279] Allen notes that "[e]arly on in the novel," it is clear "that Falkner and Elizabeth share a bond which mere relation through blood cannot produce." See *Critical Issues*, 168.

Hume) that "[a]fter himself, the members of" an individual's "own family . . . are naturally the objects of his warmest affection" (*TMS* 220). Not so for Falkner and Elizabeth. As Saunders contends, Falkner and Elizabeth's fidelity to one another is based on "more substantial values than a blind adherence to the creed that blood is thicker than water" (215). For Elizabeth, "[f]ilial duty . . . is something which is earned by the parent, and is not the result of biology" (216). Similarly, Falkner "extend[s] his protection to an orphan with no claim on him" (216). Notably, Allen connects the relationship between Falkner and Elizabeth to Godwin's "life-long attempt . . . to assert a social bond between individuals more primary than the bonds of family," referencing his novel *Cloudesley* (1830), which "celebrates . . . the triumph of authentic feeling over the legal and habitualized demands of consanguinity, blood relations" (167). However, Shelley does not present this relationship, although based on "the genuine affections of the heart," as entirely positive; in fact, she shows that the extreme sympathy between Elizabeth and Falkner is deeply destructive to both (Shelley, *Letters* 2: 185).

According to Shelley, even fidelity, itself engendered by sympathy, can in some instances be a "defect" rather than a virtue (*Falkner* 278). As Elizabeth points out to Falkner, his fidelity has "prove[n] a misfortune" (278). So devoted is Falkner to his beloved Alithea that he ignores her request that they be friends, not lovers (she is married to another and insists she is "happy in [her] children") and, as Melissa Sites observes, "disregards her right to determine her own future" by abducting her against her will (he believes he is rescuing her from her tyrannical husband) and inadvertently causing her death by drowning (Shelley, *Falkner* 181; Sites 163). Falkner's fidelity, then, brings only misery and death.[280] And

[280] Bunnell notes that Falkner's abduction of Alithea is "motivated more by self-interest than sympathy"; his love, she writes, "is not the self-sacrificing or disinterested one that Alithea and Elizabeth Raby possess but an obsessive one fed" by "a self-produced image of a romance hero whose daring deeds will earn him the reward of his heart's desire." See "'Great Expectations,'" 286. Allen, on the other hand, perceives a more virtuous intention in Falkner's action, commenting that "Falkner's attempt to relocate Alithea, to liberate her from 'the

although Elizabeth claims that her own fidelity to Falkner "can never be" a "defect," it is precisely her fidelity that forces Falkner to live against his will (Shelley, *Falkner* 181). Convinced that his suicide will eradicate his guilt, atone for his crime, benefit those he loves, and bring an end to his suffering, Falkner devises various means to end his life. However, his suicide attempts are consistently thwarted by the sympathetic entreaties of Elizabeth (not "permit[ing]" Falkner "to die," it is Elizabeth who is "direct[ing] [his] fate") (153).[281] Consequently, Falkner is forced to "endure" a life of unremitting suffering, his "inner mind" tortured by "the unhealing wound" of his guilt—Falkner considers himself a "[m]urderer in effect, if not in deed" (153, 77, 299, 133). Elizabeth's fidelity to Falkner, then, only prolongs his suffering.

Importantly, the fidelity between father and adopted daughter is forged through sympathy. As the narrator observes:

> There is a magic in sympathy, and the heart's overflowing, that we feel as bliss, though we cannot explain it. This sort of joy Elizabeth felt after [her] conversation with her father. Their hearts had united; they had mingled thought and sensation, and the intimacy of affection that resulted was an ample reward to her for every suffering. She loved her benefactor with inexpressible truth and devotedness, and their entire and full interchange of confidence gave a vivacity to this sentiment which of itself was happiness. (65)

Through what Hume refers to as the "force of sympathy," Falkner and Elizabeth become linked, and their "fidelity" to one another becomes "uneradicable [*sic*]" (Hume, *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 363; Shelley, *Falkner* 125). Yet, it also turns pathological. As with Matilda and her father and as with Ethel and Lodore, the sympathy between Elizabeth and Falkner is so

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man without a soul, the incarnate Belial' . . . and so restore justice to his and her world, is at one and the same time insanely misjudged and yet ethically honourable and understandable." See *Critical Issues*, 175.

[281] Saunders similarly notes that Elizabeth "wields great mastery over [Falkner]." See "Rehabilitating," 220.

obsessive and exclusive that its typically positive outcomes (the union of "hearts," the "mingl[ing] [of] thought and sensation," the "intimacy of affection") are undermined by the adverse effects that result when sympathy is felt too excessively (and to the exclusion of others).

Notably, as with Matilda and her father and Lodore and Ethel, the extreme nature of Falkner and Elizabeth's sympathy for one another verges on incestuous. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is an undercurrent of incest when Elizabeth, recalling the phrase "more than cousin" in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*, declares: "My dear, dear father!—my more than father, and only friend—you break my heart by speaking thus. If you are miserable, the more need that your child—the creature you preserved, and taught to love you—should be at your side to comfort. . . . You must not cast me off!" (Shelley, *Falkner* 51). And when Falkner is going to fight in Greece, Elizabeth asks: "Am I to be left, like a poor sailor's wife—to get a shocking, black-sealed letter[?]" (53). Hill-Miller also comments on the incestuous nature of Elizabeth and Falkner's relationship. As with the descriptions of Lodore's feelings for Ethel and vice versa, "Falkner's feelings for Elizabeth" are described in language "replete with sexual overtones," and, Hill-Miller continues, if Falkner's "feelings for his daughter are charged with sexual overtones, Elizabeth's feelings for her father are equally tinged with sexual implication" (181, 182). Importantly, Hill-Miller points out that the "sexual suggestiveness of the language Shelley uses to portray the tie between Elizabeth Raby and her adopted father is heightened by one fundamental fact: Rupert Falkner is not really Elizabeth's father at all" (183). As in Shelley's previous novels, the incest theme is utilized here to underscore the dangers of sympathetic excess—in particular, the potential for illicit love.

Further, in Falkner's case, Elizabeth's pathological sympathy perpetuates his misery, for she will not allow him to end his life. While Elizabeth believes that Falkner has been

"pardoned," his "crime forgotten" by his "repentance," that the "drops of anguish" he has "shed in atonement" have "washe[d] away [his] sin," Falkner is convinced that the only means of "expiat[ing] and . . . aton[ing]" for his crime is through his own death (194, 23). For him, suicide is both a virtuous act (through it he will be cleansed of his sin and make amends for his crime) and an escape from suffering, a means to freedom. By ending his life, Falkner seeks to escape what Hume would call a "miserable existence"—Shelley in fact uses this exact phrase in reference to her suicidal hero: "now the heart dies, though the body lives—and a *miserable existence* is dragged out, after hope and joy have ceased to adorn it" (Hume, *Suicide* 9; Shelley, *Falkner* 129, my emphasis).[282] Falkner is thus actuated, in part, by Humean motives. As Hume writes in his *Essays on Suicide* (quoted in Chapter Two), "both prudence and courage should engage us to rid ourselves at once of existence, when it becomes a burthen" (9). Thomas More argues something similar in *Utopia* (1516). Describing his ideal society, More writes that

> when "disease brings" unceasing "pain and trauma, the priests and magistrates [would] urge the sufferer, now unfit for the duties of life and become a *living burden* to himself as well as a distress to others, to cease fostering disease and plague and be willing to die, now that living is an anguish, and so liberate himself from a life as bitter as imprisonment or torture—or let others liberate him. (91, my emphasis)

In this instance, suicide becomes a kind of moral imperative, for it not only ends one's own suffering but also the suffering of others. Indeed, More argues that in choosing death, "the sufferer act[s] wisely, since death will put an end not to enjoyment but to torment"—on the part of both the individual and his relations (91). Notably, according to More, because the

[282] In seeking to destroy himself to end his suffering, Falkner recalls Frankenstein's creature, the eponymous heroine of *Matilda*, and Perdita of *The Last Man*. As discussed in Chapter Two, Matilda also gives voice to Hume's philosophical ideas concerning suicide—as she declares, "I wish to die. I am quite weary of enduring the misery which hourly I do endure, and I will throw it off. What slave will not, if he may, escape his chains?" See *M*, 200.

suicide would be "obeying the counsels of the priests, interpreters of God's will, his death would be a pious and devout act" (92). And this is precisely how Falkner imagines his suicide, that is, as a virtuous and altruistic act, for he believes Elizabeth will "be happier and more prosperous when he [is] removed" (Shelley, *Falkner* 53).[283] Inasmuch as Falkner's suicide would enhance rather than hinder Elizabeth's wellbeing, it could thus be construed as a moral act.

As will be discussed below, Falkner also assumes his death will benefit Elizabeth's love-interest, Gerard Neville (the outraged son of Alithea), for it will make it possible for him to marry Elizabeth—since Falkner is responsible for Alithea's death, while he lives, the "mutual attachment" between Elizabeth and Gerard is inevitably "beset by difficulties" (199). However, although Falkner "long[s] for the moment when the bullet shall pierce [his] flesh," for the time when he "may hope to be, that for which [he] thirsts, free!," Elizabeth will not allow him to die (156). It is Elizabeth's assiduous sympathy that prevents Falkner from "destroy[ing] himself" and so from making amends for his crime, contributing to the wellbeing of others (as he perceives it), and "escap[ing] . . . this cruel scene," from embracing his basic human liberty, his right to die (Shelley, *Falkner* 196; Hume, *Suicide* 6).

Through her sympathy, Elizabeth coerces Falkner into living; she compels him to surrender himself to her care and abandon his suicidal mission, hoping to "ma[k]e" him "love life for her sake" (Shelley, *Falkner* 196). As Saunders writes, Elizabeth's "presence forces [Falkner] to live against his will" (220). In this sense, Falkner is no longer free, for, as Isaiah Berlin writes in his "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958), "To coerce a man is to deprive him of freedom" (6). "If I am prevented by other persons from doing what I want," writes Berlin, "I am to that degree unfree" (7). Although Elizabeth's coercive sympathy is imposed

[283] This recalls Villiers in *Lodore,* who ponders "the idea of self-destruction . . . with a kind of savage pleasure" as "the means by which he" might end his wife's misery: "[he] fancied that if he were dead, Ethel would be happier. Her mother, his relations, each and all would come forward to gift her with opulence and ease." See *L,* 376.

benevolently (and, as she believes, for Falkner's benefit), it nevertheless strips him of his liberty, of his right to determine his own fate. While Elizabeth lives, so must Falkner.

Elizabeth first takes control of Falkner's fate when she is a mere child of six years. A "friendless orphan" (like so many of Shelley's characters), Elizabeth is accustomed to sit for long hours beside her mother's grave, as Shelley herself had done, with her picture-books (Shelley, *Falkner* 7).[284] It is at this very location that Falkner, having travelled to Cornwall "intent to make due sacrifice to the outraged manes of Alithea," chooses to commit the deed:

> He approached the spot . . . and drew forth his pistol, cocked it, and, throwing himself on the grassy mound, raised the mouth of the fatal instrument to his forehead. 'Oh go away! go away from mamma!' were words that might have met his ear, but that every sense was absorbed. As he drew the trigger, his arm was pulled; the ball whizzed harmlessly by his ear. (192, 19)

Falkner, "just bent on self-destruction," his "conscience burning to the heart's core," is diverted from his suicidal plan by the almost divine intervention of the young Elizabeth (22). As Falkner later writes, "She stopped my hand. An angel, in likeness of a human child, arrested my arm" (192). According to Bennett, "Elizabeth Raby is [thus] the novel's [true] hero," for, "[r]ather than run from the scene," she "takes action that symbolizes human responsibility" ("'Not this time'" 10). Saunders argues that Elizabeth's intention is "not to save [Falkner's] life" but to prevent "him [from] desecrating the grave of her mother" (220). "Her power over him," argues Saunders, "thus begins with her assertion of her right to defend the female territory" (220). Importantly, though, while Elizabeth's motives for saving Falkner do not initially stem from sympathy for him, this quickly changes once he adopts her as his

[284] Sunstein relates that Godwin would take Shelley for walks, "cross[ing] the meadows to nearby ancient, stubby St. Pancras church and its quiet graveyard"; they would stand at Wollstonecraft's "pedestal-like tombstone between a pair of weeping willows Godwin had planted. He taught Mary to read and spell her name by having her trace her mother's inscription on the stone." Sunstein notes that, "[e]specially in low moods when she felt unloved or unworthy, [Shelley] went—as does orphaned Elizabeth Raby in *Falkner*—to be 'with mamma' at Wollstonecraft's grave and to fantasize." See *Romance*, 26, 36.

own, an act that solidifies her fidelity to and sympathy for him. Elizabeth, then, is figured as a powerful and almost divine being capable of changing the very course of Falkner's fate. And Falkner, his interest and sympathy awakened by Elizabeth's "orphan and desolate position," initially feels that he has been "called upon to live for her sake" (192). Indeed, he comes to believe that he might "expiate and . . . atone" for his crime by being "the cause of good to the friendless orphan" (and so by *preserving*, rather than *ending*, his life) (23). As Falkner imagines, "[t]he very finger of God pointed to this act, since the child's little hand had arrested his arm at the fatal moment when he believed that no interval of a second's duration intervened between him and the grave" (23). He therefore "resolve[s] to live yet a little longer—till he [has] fulfilled some portion of his duty towards the lovely orphan" (24). Yet, Falkner's decision to adopt Elizabeth is not entirely selfless; his love for Elizabeth, like Lodore's for Ethel, is mired in self-interest.

Although Falkner claims that his decision to "live yet a little longer" stems from a desire to fulfil "his duty towards" Elizabeth, he also believes that he might "expiate and . . . atone" for his crime by becoming Elizabeth's guardian and protector (23). He does not act solely for Elizabeth's benefit but for his own personal ends. And as Hutcheson argues, cited in the previous chapter, "the most useful Action imaginable, loses all appearance of Benevolence, as soon as we discern that it only flowed from Self-Love, or Interest" (129). Further, just as Lodore does with Ethel, Falkner wishes to "mould [Elizabeth's] heart to affection, [to] teach her to lean on *him only*"; he longs to "be all the world to her" (Shelley, *Falkner* 28, my emphasis).[285] That is, Falkner adopts Elizabeth so that she might be a comfort to him, his sole companion, and he intends her to be wholly dependent upon him.[286] As Allen

[285] As the narrator of *Lodore* writes, Lodore wished to "mould [Ethel] to the sweetest gentleness: to cultivate her tastes and enlarge her mind, yet so to controul [*sic*] her acquirements, as to render her ever pliant to his will." See Shelley, *L*, 65, 66.

[286] Bennett argues that "Falkner's notion of raising the child for 'the solace he needed' . . . parallels the Creature's need for companionship." (Bennett therefore responds more sympathetically to Falkner's character and motives.) See "'Not this time, Victor,'" 11.

writes, "[t]he motive for [Falkner's] 'adoption' of Elizabeth can certainly be read, like Lodore's 'abduction' of Ethel, as a selfish desire for a compensatory, passive object of affection" (165). Hill-Miller argues that "Shelley uses her depiction of Rupert Falkner to portray and criticize" the father's tendency "to use his daughter to meet his own often unacknowledged emotional needs" (180). "Lord Lodore molded his daughter, Ethel, into his image of the perfect wife," writes Hill-Miller, and "this 'sexual education' resulted in a woman who was conventionally submissive, silent, and entirely dependent upon her father" (180). Further, "[l]ike Lodore, Falkner decides to make Elizabeth Raby into the image of a lost lover," and finally, also "[l]ike Lodore, Falkner . . . insures the success of his venture by isolating his daughter from society and other influences" (180). "For each father," then, "the sexual education of his daughter is both a species of control and a way of satisfying his own unmet emotional requirements" (180). Moreover, as the narrator indicates, Falkner does "what he wish[es]" rather "than what [is] strictly just" (Shelley, *Falkner* 28). He does not consider, writes the narrator, "[w]hat ills might arise to the orphan from his interweaving her fate with his—he, a criminal, in fact, if not in intention—who might be called upon hereafter to answer for his deeds, and who at least must fly and hide himself" (29).[287] (Falkner later confesses his folly, admitting to Elizabeth, "[i]n making you mine, and linking you to my blighted fortunes, I may have prepared innumerable ills for you . . . it was wrong—it was mere *selfishness*") (65, my emphasis). In this way, Shelley again highlights the complex and

[287] According to Allen, "Falkner's character represents a challenge to the novel's readers," for "his motive for 'adopting' Elizabeth, and much of his behaviour in the first part of the novel, is fundamentally ambiguous." However, Allen also suggests that, "[c]ompared with staying with the small-minded and rather vindictive Mrs Baker, or returning to the isolated, bigoted and essentially paranoiac Raby family, Falkner's 'adoption' of Elizabeth is unquestionably the best option." "The action is ethically wrong," Allen continues, "and yet it is by far the best one available. Falkner's story and his character continually confront the reader with this kind of moral ambiguity and, in ways which directly relate Shelley's fictional art to that of her father, force us to suspend any quick and simplifying ethical judgement." See *Critical Issues*, 172. The ambiguity of Falkner's motives for adopting Elizabeth recalls that of Lodore's "abduction" of Ethel, which is also "ethically wrong" since he takes her away from her mother and forces her (she has no say in the matter) into a life of exile and isolation. Although Lodore convinces himself that he is acting for Ethel's benefit, he also admits that he does so out of a desire for companionship. Here we again see that sympathy in Shelley's view is grounded in paradox.

often paradoxical nature of sympathy. Although Falkner does extend his sympathy to Elizabeth by adopting her as his own, his compassion and self-interest are inextricably entangled.

However, as the relationship between father and adopted daughter develops, Falkner's selfishness is mitigated under the influence of Elizabeth's disinterested sympathy. Yet, at the same time, Elizabeth's sympathy becomes dangerously self-less. As the narrator writes: "[Elizabeth] never thought of herself. This was [her] peculiarity. She could be so engrossed by sympathy for others, that she could forget herself wholly" (195).[288] This recalls Shelley's first Elizabeth, Elizabeth Lavenza, of *Frankenstein*, who, in sympathizing with and supporting the Frankenstein family, is "entirely forgetful of herself" (73).[289] Similarly, in *Lodore* (as discussed in the previous chapter), Ethel is actuated by a "disinterested self-forgetfulness" (238). But where Elizabeth Lavenza's and Ethel's sympathy (their "self-forgetfulness") poses a threat to their selfhood (since their lack of education and independence has prevented them from developing a strong and stable sense of self), Elizabeth's is tempered by her expansive education (Falkner hires a capable governess) and by her fierce and abiding "self-possess[ion]," which mirrors that of Euthanasia in *Valperga* and Fanny Derham in *Lodore*, both Wollstonecraftian characters and both of whom are educated by their fathers (*Falkner* 62).[290]

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[288] Bunnell argues the opposite, suggesting that Elizabeth "possesses neither an obsessive, dramatic sensibility nor a debilitating subjectivity." See "'Great Expectations,'" 290.

[289] Bennett notes that "Mary Shelley created in her first and last novels two characters who, like philosophic bookends, reflect, extend, and comment on each other and the works in which they appear: Elizabeth Lavenza in *Frankenstein* (1818) and Elizabeth Raby in *Falkner* (1837)." See "'Not this time, Victor,'" 1, 17.

[290] Perdita in *The Last Man* is equally self-sufficient and independent until she loses herself in her love for Raymond. In *Valperga*, Euthanasia describes how she read "the literature of ancient Rome" with her father, and how her "whole soul was [thereby] filled with the beauty of action, and the poetic sentiment of these writers." Ultimately, she learns "to connect wisdom and liberty together." See *V*, 108-109, 109. Similarly, Fanny's father teaches her philosophy and Greek letters and encourages her to read avidly. Because of their "masculine" education, Euthanasia and Fanny become independent subjects capable of thinking and acting for themselves (and so defy conventional gender norms).

Elizabeth, on the other hand, is educated by a woman, her governess, Miss Jervis, who takes "great pains to excite Elizabeth to learn" and who soon awakens her "curiosity" and "love of knowledge"—qualities typically gendered as masculine in the nineteenth century (39).[291] Although Falkner has some influence on Elizabeth's intellectual and emotional growth, Miss Jervis is the primary authority when it comes to her education:

> Falkner was a man of no common intellect; but his education had been desultory; and he had never lived with the learned and well-informed. . . . His observation was keen, and his imagination fervid; but it was inborn, uncultivated, and unenriched by any vast stores of reading. He was the very opposite of a pedant. Miss Jervis was much of the latter; but the two served to form Elizabeth to something better than either. She learned from Falkner the uses of learning: from Miss Jervis she acquired the thoughts and experience of other men. . . . [S]he found infinite delight in the pages of ancient history: she read biography, and speedily found models for herself, whereby she measured her own thoughts and conduct, rectifying her defects, and aiming at that honour and generosity which made her heart beat, and cheeks glow, when narrated of others. (39)[292]

Significantly, it is Miss Jervis, not Falkner, who inspires Elizabeth to improve: "[Falkner's] praise was enthusiastic . . . and yet . . . it is doubtful whether [Elizabeth] ever strived so eagerly, or felt so satisfied with it, as for the parsimonious expressions of bare satisfaction from Miss Jervis" (39). Elizabeth "loved her protector the more for his fervid approbation . . . but Miss Jervis inspired self-diffidence, and with it a stronger desire for improvement"

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[291] Again, Fanny in *Lodore* has a similar "love of knowledge." As the narrator writes: "The only pleasure which attracted [Fanny's] young mind was study—a deep and unremitted application to those profound acquirements, to the knowledge of which her father had introduced her." See *L*, 144.

[292] This echoes the experiences of the creature in *Frankenstein* and Perdita in *The Last Man*. Like Elizabeth, through their reading, the creature and Perdita question both themselves and the world around them.

(39).[293] Moreover, it is Miss Jervis who teaches Elizabeth the "more masculine studies"—that is, history, philosophy, biography (40). According to Allen, "Miss Jervis, who cannot but remind us, in different ways, of both Claire Clairmont and Mary Wollstonecraft . . . provides Elizabeth with an education which is both superior to Falkner's and explicitly balanced between 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities" (*Critical* 166). As in Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, Shelley here blurs the boundaries between male and female, creating a female governess capable of teaching apparently "masculine studies" and a female student equally capable of learning them.[294]

Indeed, the narrator describes Elizabeth's intellectual growth and education in explicitly Wollstonecraftian language. "It was through [Miss Jervis]," writes the narrator, "that [Elizabeth] had methodized her mind—through her that she had learnt to concentrate and prolong her attention, and to devote it to study" (55). Miss Jervis, the narrator continues, "had taught [Elizabeth] order and industry . . . she had inspired ardour for knowledge, delight in acquisition, and a glad sense of self-approbation when difficulties were conquered by perseverance" (55). Elizabeth, then, like Fanny in *Lodore*, has been given the very education for which Wollstonecraft so fiercely advocates in *Rights of Woman*. Emphasizing the strength of Elizabeth's intellect, Shelley reiterates Wollstonecraft's belief that conventional education merely gives the "*appearance* of weakness to females" (131, my emphasis). Educated only in those female accomplishments that prepare them for the marriage market (dancing, drawing, singing), women have not been taught to think; their minds, Wollstonecraft maintains, remain uncultivated.[295] Liberate woman, teach her to exercise her reason, and she will become a

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[293] According to Sites, the influence of Falkner and Miss Jervis is equally beneficial: "Through exposure to the combined influence of these two personalities [Falkner and Miss Jervis], Elizabeth develops a well-balanced mind." See "Utopian Domesticity," 155.

[294] This also recalls the blurring of gender boundaries in *Lodore*, in which both Cornelia and Fanny are characterized by what were conventionally understood as "masculine" characteristics: Cornelia is proud, strong, and independent-minded, and Fanny is intelligent, rational, and self-sufficient. Also, as stated above, Fanny is given a similarly "masculine" education.

[295] As Wollstonecraft laments, women "spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the

rational being, equal to, rather than subjected by, man. Shelley seeks to demonstrate the validity of this belief through Elizabeth Falkner: given the opportunity to expand her mind, she becomes self-sufficient and "[s]elf-possessed," capable not only of taking care of herself but of her adopted (and emotionally demanding) father (Shelley, *Falkner* 62).

*Falkner*, then, contrary to what many critics have argued, is a powerfully feminist text. Indeed, although Shelley was accused in her day of "lukewarmness in the 'Good Cause [that is, the rights of women],'" she, in her own words, "earnestly desire[d] the good & enlightenment of [her] fellow creatures [referring to women specifically]," and she aspired to achieve this, like her mother, through her fiction (*Journals* 2: 553). In the character of Elizabeth, Shelley presents her audience with an example of her (and Wollstonecraft's) ideal female, a woman both sympathetic and rational.[296] Although Elizabeth possesses fine feeling—she had "senses and sensibilities so delicately strung, as to be true to the slightest touch of harmony"—she is able to temper her more fervent emotions with reason (*Falkner* 34). Her education having fortified her mind, Elizabeth is able to develop and maintain a strong sense of self and a confidence in her own convictions, demonstrated throughout the narrative as she consistently refuses to "bend to the laws of civilization" and instead does that which her conscience tells her is just (Saunders similarly notes that Elizabeth's "upbringing has been unorthodox and has freed her to act from conviction rather than convention") (Shelley, *Falkner* 238; Saunders 214).[297]

Aware of the benefits of educating her mind, Elizabeth's "chief time" is therefore "spent in study" (Shelley, *Falkner* 56). Importantly, she does not read only "to store her

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desire of establishing themselves,—the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage." See *Rights of Woman*, 112.

[296] The narrator writes: "In describing Elizabeth's conduct . . . it may be thought that the type is presented of ideal and almost unnatural perfection." "She was intelligent, warm-hearted, courageous, and sincere." See *Falkner*, 55. Sites also notes that, through Elizabeth, Shelley "present[s] a fully realized Wollstonecraftian heroine . . . a 'womanly' yet independent-minded and idealistic heroine." See "Utopian Domesticity," 150-51.

[297] Similarly, Fanny "disdain[s] every support, but the applause of her own conscience." See *L*, 323.

mind—to confirm its fortitude—to elevate its tone," but to equip herself with the knowledge necessary to save Falkner from himself, to cure him of his "mortal sadness," to quote from Rousseau's *Julie* (1761), and subdue his suicidal impulse (Shelley, *Falkner* 56; Rousseau, *Julie* 29).[298] As the narrator observes, "She read also to acquire such precepts of philosophy and religion as might best apply to her peculiar task [of preventing Falkner from taking his own life], and to learn those secrets of life and death" that might help her better understand (and so combat) "Falkner's desire to die" (Shelley, *Falkner* 56). Construed in this way, reading becomes a means of preserving another's life, an activity capable of providing an individual with the tools necessary to not only assuage another's pain but to potentially save another's life. "[W]hatever the occasion of [Falkner's] sufferings," writes the narrator, Elizabeth "dedicated herself to their relief; and resolved to educate herself so as to fulfil the task of reconciling him to life, to the best of her ability" (54). The fact that Falkner is still alive at the novel's end suggests that Elizabeth's education has prepared her well for her "peculiar task," for the heavy burden of preserving the life of one who longs only for death, of one for whom life itself has become "a burthen" (Hume, *Suicide* 9).

Yet, Shelley consistently shows that Falkner's existence nevertheless poses a threat to Elizabeth's wellbeing (despite her strength, determination, and self-sufficiency). Intent on "sharing [Falkner's] wretchedness," Elizabeth's own life is endangered by her unwavering fidelity to and sympathy for him (Shelley, *Falkner* 137, 125). This is evidenced by the fact that, when she becomes ill, "[h]er medical advisors" determine that "her malady [is] the effect of the extreme nervous excitement she [has] gone through" while taking care of her

[298] Rousseau's *Julie*, one of the quintessential sentimental novels, was an important text for both Wollstonecraft and Shelley. The heroine of Wollstonecraft's *Maria* reads it while imprisoned in a madhouse, and it points to her dangerous tendency to be overly sentimental (which is part of the reason she ends up in the madhouse in the first place). Shelley read Rousseau's *Julie* and *Confessions* in 1815, and she read *Reveries* in 1816, simultaneously to writing *Frankenstein*. See *Journals*, 1: 89, 90, 121. The creature is clearly a literary disciple of the Rousseauvian "solitary walker" (as are several other characters in Shelley's fiction), and Shelley imitates Rousseau's confessional form when she has the creature confess his crimes (as she does when she has Falkner confess his).

despairing and suicidal father (78). Tellingly, when Elizabeth is temporarily taken away from Falkner—"the physicians" advise that "a short separation from him [is] essential to [her] recovery"—she recovers from her illness immediately, implying that Falkner's existence is in fact *detrimental*, rather than beneficial (as Elizabeth wrongly perceives), to her wellbeing (79). As Falkner himself observes, "he lived, and the consequences of his resolve to die fell upon her—she was his victim" (78).[299] However, Elizabeth is also the victim of her own excessive sympathy, her fidelity to Falkner perpetuating her own and her adopted father's misery. Gerard echoes Falkner's words, observing that Elizabeth "clings to the destroyer's side, and shares his miserable fate—lost to happiness—to the innocence and sunshine of life. She will live a victim, and die a martyr, to her duties" (229). When Falkner is accused of murder by Sir Boyvill, Gerard's father and Alithea's former husband (he had managed to get a legal divorce from his wife when he wrongly believed she had run away with another man and deserted her family), Elizabeth insists on joining her father in prison and participating in his suffering.[300] Not only this, "[a]s the child of a man accused of murder, there [is] a barrier between her and the world," and Elizabeth herself experiences "many a yearning . . . to enter with her ill-starred father the silent abode of the tomb" (249, 250). Thus, not only is Falkner's existence a burden to Elizabeth's life and happiness, jeopardizing her health and preventing a union with Gerard, it also causes her to contemplate suicide.

But unlike Falkner, Elizabeth does not succumb to her suicidal thoughts, nor will she permit Falkner to act upon his. Though "weary of life" and "willing to die," Falkner, having "bound" his "fate" to Elizabeth's, is forced to "endure life"—the fidelity of one to the other ensuring each remains in misery (61, 77). As Falkner later laments in his confessional letter,

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[299] This again speaks to the contagious aspect of emotion. Just as Matilda is infected by her father's unhealthy emotions—she adopts his immense and immeasurable melancholy, his guilt, and later, his suicidal thoughts—so Elizabeth catches her father's despondency. Indeed, as will be stated below, Elizabeth is even infected by her father's suicidal thoughts, for she experiences "many a yearning . . . to enter with her ill-starred father the silent abode of the tomb." See *Falkner*, 249, 250.

[300] This recalls Ethel's insistence on joining her husband Edward in debtor's prison in *Lodore*.

referring to his first suicide attempt, "Still I grieve for the unaccomplished purpose; still I repine that I did not there die" (192). "I tried to live for my Elizabeth," he writes, but "the struggle was violent, for I longed to make atonement by my death" and "to forget my crimes, and their consequences, in the oblivious grave" (193, 192). Although he believes, on the one hand, "that it [is] cowardice to postpone his resolve—that to live [is] to stamp himself poltroon and traitor," there are moments when he is swayed by the opposing view that "the true cowardice [is] to die—to fly from the consequences of his actions, and the burthen of existence" (23).[301] As mentioned above, Hume would support the former argument, maintaining that suicide is "a native liberty" and that it is foolish to "prolong a hated life" (*Suicide* 5, 7). The latter argument, that "the true cowardice [is] to die," recalls those against suicide made by Rowley and Godwin. As discussed in Chapter Two, Rowley argues that in committing suicide, the individual acts selfishly, even sinfully, for he violates his "obligations" to his "country, family, [and] friends" (335). Although not as extreme in his views as Rowley (Godwin was sympathetic to Hume's position on suicide), Godwin nevertheless insists in his *Enquiry* that the would-be suicide should consider the benefits he could bestow on others by living as well as the possibility that his present suffering will eventually cease. In *Falkner*, as in *Matilda*, Shelley draws on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical and psychological texts concerning suicide to provide a more nuanced understanding of the motives behind it and of the effects it can have on both a personal and social level.

Significantly, Elizabeth's belief that virtue lies in living aligns with the anti-suicide arguments of Rowley and Godwin. As she tells Falkner,

[301] Albert Camus would agree with the latter sentiment, insisting that suicide "is acceptance to the extreme" and that *living* is the revolt, that liberty is found in a simultaneous "awareness and rejection of death." See *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Books, 1955) 54.

> Your life is saved, despite yourself. Accept existence as an immediate gift from heaven; and begin life, from this moment, with new hopes, new resolves. Whatever your error was . . . it belonged to another state of being. Your remorse, your resignation, has effaced it; or if any evil results remain, you will rather exert yourself to repair them. (Shelley, *Falkner* 64)

For Elizabeth, Falkner's path to absolution begins with living, whereby he may "repair" his wrongs by contributing to the social good through acts of sympathy. Like Rowley and Godwin, Elizabeth maintains that the prospect of future happiness and social utility (of sympathetic relationships and sympathetic deeds) are reasons enough to live. For Rowley and Godwin, and for Elizabeth, sympathy is a positive, life-saving force, and its appeal to those "ties of affection," to quote from *Frankenstein*, and to those duties one owes the living (whether to family, friends, or the wider world) may, and should, restrain the would-be suicide (194). However, Shelley suggests (rather controversially) that in some instances, sympathy can become more of a burden than a blessing, forcing an individual to remain living when death is what she most desires and what, more controversially still, could well be in her best interest (as well as in the best interest of her loved ones).

In *Falkner*, then, Shelley presents an instance in which suicide might be construed not only as permissible but, in Humean terms, "laudable" (Hume, *Suicide* 9). Faubert makes a similar argument in reference to *Matilda*, suggesting that, in Shelley's view, the heroine's father "acts laudably by killing himself" since his incestuous desire for his daughter "threatens to undermine one of the most sacred relationships in society" and since, "should his 'fierce passion' cause him to act upon it," he would become "a 'burden to society'" (108). As Hume writes, "suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to society"; in such a case, "my resignation of life must not only be innocent, but laudable" (*Suicide* 9). Given that Falkner's existence stands in the way of Elizabeth and Gerard's

happiness (they cannot marry while he lives), and given that Elizabeth's very life is threatened by her assiduous sympathy and care for Falkner, it seems to follow that, according to Hume's logic, Falkner's "resignation of life" would "not only be innocent, but laudable" (since it would, in one sense, be of benefit to both Elizabeth and Gerard) (9). Yet, because of Elizabeth's resolute fidelity, Falkner does not have the freedom to relinquish his life for the sake of others.

Importantly, according to the philosophy of Shelley's parents, Godwin and Wollstonecraft, freedom is essential for virtue to flourish. As Wollstonecraft argues in *Rights of Woman*, "Liberty is the mother of virtue" (147).[302] And indeed, while imprisoned by Elizabeth's sympathy, Falkner is unable to carry out what he considers a virtuous act, his suicide. Though Elizabeth tries to "reconcile him to life," Falkner cannot escape his suicidal thoughts, and his resolve to live is soon subsumed by his "desire to die" (Shelley, *Falkner* 196, 193). He therefore determines to go to Greece to "sacrific[e] his life" by "quitting it honourably on the field of battle" (53). As he pleads to Elizabeth, "Let me gain peace of mind by exposing my life to danger. By advocating a just cause I may bring a blessing down upon my endeavours" (52). "I shall go to Greece," he continues, for "[t]heirs is a good cause—that of liberty and Christianity. . . . *Let* me die for it" (the phrasing here suggests again that Falkner must ask Elizabeth's permission to end his life) (52, my emphasis).[303] Feeling himself "unworthy to exist," that he has "forfeited every right to enjoy the blessings of life," Falkner believes it "is cowardly to live" and that true courage lies in sacrificing his life for a "just cause" (50). As he tells Elizabeth, "For many years now my life has been spent in

[302] In her recent biography of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, Charlotte Gordon writes that, for Godwin, as for P.B. Shelley, "the liberty of the individual is a necessary component of a virtuous state." See *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Her Daughter Mary Shelley* (New York: Random House, 2015) 326.

[303] Rajan argues that *Falkner*'s "Byronic hero is the text's central problem." "That Falkner cannot die, either in the graveyard where he meets Elizabeth or in the war in Greece," she continues, "marks the novel as concerned with survival: the survival of a Romanticism that had seemed exhausted in the unexpected, violent deaths of Lodore and of Raymond in *The Last Man*." See, "A Peculiar Community," 156.

pleasantness and peace—I have no right to this—hardship and toil, and death, I ought to repay" (52). "The cry of my victim rings in my ears," he continues, "and I am base to survive my crime. *Let* me . . . make my own the praise, that nothing graced my life more than the leaving it" (52, my emphasis). Falkner therefore imagines his self-sought death as a selfless act that would contribute to the betterment of society (since he would be sacrificing himself for the sake of "liberty and Christianity"). Yet, as with his first good deed (his adoption of Elizabeth), this one is also tied to self-interest, for the real motivation behind his desire to die is his guilt, which he hopes to eradicate by intentionally bringing about his own death. Once again, Shelley draws attention to the complicated nature of compassion: although Falkner does exhibit his benevolence through his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of society (as he sees it), this imagined act of self-destruction would also benefit Falkner himself as it would finally release him from his guilt.

Indeed, while life only prolongs Falkner's suffering, the contemplation of his death (and the good he believes it will bring) alleviates it.[304] Consequently, "contempt of life" leads him "invariably to select the post of danger for himself" in battle, although "he [is] sedulous to preserve the lives of those under his command"—a detail that serves to increase the reader's sympathy for Falkner since it points to his essential goodness, his innate sympathy, demonstrated by his concern for the wellbeing of others (even while he is in the throes of suicidal despair) (58).[305] Importantly, as with Matilda, if the reader sympathizes with Falkner, she may be more inclined to understand (and so sympathize with) his suicidal impulse.

Falkner's death-wish is nearly fulfilled when, after three years in Greece, he is wounded in battle and contracts malaria (61). As he proclaims, "'I am *willing* to die! I do not

[304] This recalls the comfort, even elation, Cornelia experiences while contemplating her act of self-sacrifice for Ethel: for Cornelia, the "image of self-sacrifice" and "the ruin of her own fortunes, [is] attended with a kind of rapture." See *L*, 367.
[305] In this way, Falkner again resembles Lodore, for both characters, despite their flaws, are nevertheless sympathetic.

suffer very much—though I am weary of life'" (61, my emphasis).[306] The use of the word "willing" is significant, for Falkner has been deprived of his free will since his first suicide attempt—Elizabeth, not Falkner, is the governor of Falkner's fate. And Elizabeth continues to direct the course of Falkner's life, successfully "avert[ing] the fatal consequences of [his] disease" (though unsuccessfully "combat[t]ing] [his] desire to die") (55). It is Elizabeth's steadfast sympathy and care that "sav[e] [Falkner's] life" (63). But Falkner does not want his life to be saved. Just as Lodore's excessive sympathy for Ethel, founded upon his "self-love," deprives Ethel of the ability think and act for herself, so Elizabeth's fidelity strips Falkner of his self-will and so prevents him from expiating his guilt, making amends for his crime, being of service to others (Elizabeth included), and achieving the freedom from suffering for which he longs through a self-inflicted death (*L* 131). In being loved by Elizabeth, Falkner is dispossessed of autonomy.

Were Elizabeth more like Ethel (submissive, obedient, weak, dependent), Falkner might easily have escaped the world. However, Elizabeth, independent-minded and strong-willed, is able to summon "all the resolution she [has] endeavoured to store up to assist her at this extremity" (*Falkner* 60). "Self-possessed and vigilant," Elizabeth guides the people in charge of Falkner's care (the narrator notes that "[n]o one could remember that it was a girl of sixteen who directed them"), and "in the end his recovery [is] attributed to her careful nursing" (62, 63). Falkner's "life is [thus] saved, despite [him]self," despite his ardent "desire to die" (64). As he says to Elizabeth, "through you . . . I am destined to live"—in this way, Elizabeth is again figured as a kind of divine being directing Falkner's fate (63). Falkner acknowledges Elizabeth's seemingly divine power when he declares: "I will not quarrel again with existence, since it is your *gift*" (63, my emphasis). As our lives are traditionally

[306] Hume maintains "that a man who [has] tired of life," is "hunted by pain and misery," and so "bravely overcomes all the natural terrors of death, and makes his escape from this cruel scene" should not be condemned. See *Suicide*, 9.

considered God-given, it is significant that Falkner attributes this "gift" to Elizabeth. She therefore becomes a powerful figure in the novel, occupying the position of Creator in bestowing life upon Falkner.

Yet, Falkner once more "quarrels with existence," his "desire to die" indomitable (56). When he learns that Elizabeth and Gerard must remain apart because of him—since "between Falkner and Gerard Neville, there existed a gulf unfathomable, horrific, deadly"—Falkner again becomes consumed by self-destructive thoughts (137-8). Knowing that he stands in the way of a marriage between Elizabeth and Gerard ("the son of his victim, he whose life was devastated by him"), Falkner decides to "exile himself for ever from . . . the child of his heart" and become "a soldier once again," certain that "the boon of death [will] not be for ever denied him" (146, 138, 139). As before, Falkner's motives are partially altruistic (he hopes to "repay the injury he ha[s] done [Gerard]" by making it possible for him to marry Elizabeth) and partially selfish (he longs to be released from his guilt and suffering) (138). As with Lodore, there is an essential conflict in Falkner's nature between sympathy and self-interest.[307]

In order to pave the way for Elizabeth's marriage to Gerard, Falkner determines to restore Elizabeth to her father's aristocratic family before exiling himself from her. However, Elizabeth's bigoted grandfather Oswi Raby, who sees "the whole world almost concentrated in himself" (his fierce solipsism precluding the possibility of sympathy), refuses to accept her into the family (141).[308] In the end, Falkner does not go to Greece and instead reveals his crime to Elizabeth and Gerard in a confessional letter, the revelation of which he believes will

[307] Allen observes that Falkner "is another in the now long series of examples, in Shelley's fiction, of the male Romantic idealist undermined by the realities of self and a tragic external reality." See *Critical Issues*, 173.
[308] Saunders argues that "the most sustained criticism" of the aristocracy in the novel is "reserved for the Rabys, an old Catholic family and Elizabeth's natural protectors. Such is the narrow prejudice of the family that they cast off Elizabeth's father for his apostasy and renounce all responsibility for his child while she remains with her mother." "Oswi's aristocracy," Saunders continues, "is a monster, devouring its younger sons and daughters to favour the heir; a dying institution headed for senility, as is Oswi himself." See "Rehabilitating," 217.

"bring all things to their destined end" (that is, free him from Elizabeth and so allow him to destroy himself—since he believes his crime unforgiveable) (151). Echoing the creature's confession in *Frankenstein*, which itself recalls Rousseau's autobiographical *Confessions,* Falkner acknowledges his sins as well as his virtues; as he writes: "if I reveal the secrets of my heart and dwell on the circumstances that led to the fatal catastrophe I record, so that, though a criminal, I do not appear quite a monster, let the egotism be excused for her dear sake [that is, for Alithea's]" (154). Bunnell observes something similar, noting that, "[l]ike the confessional histories of Godwin's Caleb Williams and James Hogg's Robert Wringham Colwan," Falkner's letter "reveals [him] to be both protagonist and antagonist, both victim and villain" (284).[309] By presenting himself as both "victim and villain," Falkner, like the creature and Rousseau, highlights his humanity and so appeals to his reader's sympathy. In this way, Shelley again points to the complexity of the sympathetic process and to the ways in which one's sympathy can be manipulated, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Importantly, Falkner believes that the very confession of his crime will make it possible for him to die, for he knows that Gerard, a gentleman, will resort to the "law of honour" to "avenge the death" of his mother and challenge him to a duel (Shelley, *Falkner* 199). Although Elizabeth, governor of Falkner's fate, will not allow him to destroy himself, Falkner knows there is still this "one reparation he [can] make," to die *deliberately* "by the young man's hand" (199). Notably, as Donna T. Andrew explains, "[f]rom the late seventeenth century," many people saw "duelling 'as a kind of Self-Murder'" (84). Through what he refers to as a "cunning suicide," then, Falkner hopes to not only atone for Alithea's death but to make it possible for Elizabeth and Gerard to be together. For Falkner, his death will be like the "levelling of a mountain," with everything "plain, easy, happy, when he no

[309] According to Bunnell, "Mary Shelley's choice of the frame story enables her to criticize her central character's romantic illusions as well as the unjust and hypocritical society that fuels his actions." See "'Great Expectations,'" 284.

longer deform[s] the scene" (Shelley, *Falkner* 199). Falkner thus imagines his suicide, once again, in altruistic terms—through it, he will release Elizabeth from her self-appointed duty, which is in fact destroying her, and "repay the injury he ha[s] done" Gerard "by bestowing on him a creature . . . to be his solace and delight to the end of his life" (138). However, Falkner's self-destructive plans are diverted once more, and he is denied the opportunity to die (deliberately) by Gerard's hand.

When Sir Boyvill learns that he has been mistaken in condemning his wife, he seeks vengeance on Falkner by accusing him of murder (and he therefore convinces his son to abandon his "chivalrous notions" of a duel) (216). Locked in prison (he is soon thereafter arrested on the charge of murder), Falkner is tyrannized by "a perpetual struggle," "[h]ating . . . life," "yearning for liberty" but unable to escape "the bars and forms that stand between him and [freedom]," the bars of the prison functioning in the same way as Elizabeth's sympathy (241, 273). When it is believed that Falkner will be found guilty of murder, Falkner insists that he has "taught his spirit . . . to be content to die"; as he declares, "I shall be satisfied to die, so to quit at once a blind, blood-thirsty world!" (254, 253). Yet, in Shelley's view, there is an important difference between Falkner dying by his own hand (or intentionally by Gerard Neville's) and dying at the hands of the law. Although the result would be the same, Shelley strongly condemns Sir Boyvill's attempts to have Falkner punished by the state (in part because Falkner is *not* in fact guilty of murder and in part because, Shelley suggests, there is more justice in Falkner having the freedom to take his own life). In explicitly Wollstonecraftian and Godwinian language, the narrator describes the horrors of the prison in which Falkner is confined. "[T]here is no one circumstance" as "forlorn" as being imprisoned, the narrator asserts, for it "wound[s] the free spirit of man, and make[s] him envy the meanest animal that breathes the free air, and is at liberty" (241). In this degraded position, Falkner has no opportunity to atone for his crime, either by a self-

inflicted altruistic death (whereby he would sacrifice himself for the wellbeing of others, as he would have it) or by an altruistic life (whereby he would selflessly "endure" a "miserable existence," as Elizabeth would have it) (129, 232).

In the end, however, Falkner is not condemned to death—Sir Boyvill, having become ill while Falkner was imprisoned, relents on his deathbed and asks Gerard to declare Falkner's innocence at the trial. Although Falkner is acquitted, this declaration of his innocence in the eyes of the law does not alleviate his guilt, and he is conscious that his existence still stands in the way of a union between Elizabeth and Gerard. As the narrator writes, "again he was forced to abhor himself, as the destroyer of the happiness of all who came within his sphere" (293). Planning to deceive Elizabeth by pretending to go away for a short time when in fact he plans never to return (as he says to Gerard, "you shall never see me more. . . . You must compensate to my dear child for my loss"), Falkner again seeks oblivion (for both his own, his daughter's, and Gerard's benefit—as he tells Gerard, "endeavour to remember only the benefit you receive in gaining Elizabeth") (296).[310] Yet, Falkner's altruistic suicide is frustrated by the sympathy of the very people he hopes will benefit from his death.

Elizabeth has made it abundantly clear that she is "bound" to Falkner by an adamantine "chain of gratitude and fidelity," her sympathy steadfast and vehement (196). As she insists, "I cannot leave you. . . . If Gerard Neville is hereafter lost to me, I cannot help it; it would kill me to fall off from you" (278). Knowing that a marriage to Gerard would separate her from Falkner forever, Elizabeth "is firm not to marry" (294). However, Gerard ignores Falkner's plan to deceive Elizabeth, choosing to forgive his former enemy and welcome him as a father-in-law, thereby removing any barrier to a union with Elizabeth. As

[310] Notably, as discussed in Chapter Two, the unnamed father in *Matilda*, burdened by his incestuous love for his daughter, adopts a similar approach, writing a letter explaining that he will be going away for a short time when in truth he has gone to kill himself (again, as Faubert has argued, for his own, his daughter's, and society's benefit).

the narrator observes, "Elizabeth could not break faith with Falkner—Neville could not renounce her . . . they three must remain together through life, despite all of tragic and miserable that seemed to separate them" (299). According to Saunders, in refusing "to choose between her adopted father and her lover," Elizabeth places "the responsibility not on her will but on the involuntary demands of filial duty" (220). "This abnegation," Saunders continues, "forces those around her to conform to her emotional needs," and Gerard ultimately "accept[s] her tie to the man who destroyed his mother, and thus joins the ménage à trois which places Elizabeth at the emotional centre" (220). Bound by their mutual ties of fidelity, the three live on together in what seems like domestic bliss, with Falkner living "in retirement" and growing "a sage amidst his books and his own reflections" and Elizabeth and Gerard visiting often with their "beautiful children" (300). Yet, the narrator is not entirely convincing, describing Falkner as enjoying "[a]s much happiness as any one . . . whose inner mind bears the *unhealing* wound of a culpable act," which, as we have seen in Falkner's case, is not a great deal of happiness (299, my emphasis). Indeed, it is this "unhealing wound" (Falkner's ineradicable guilt) that has driven him to attempt to destroy himself. Given that the wound is "unhealing" (that is, *incurable*), that Falkner has spent the past years of his life trying (doggedly) to end it, and given that nothing has changed (the narrator admits that Falkner continues to be plagued by guilt—"[h]e could not forgive himself—and this one shadow remained upon his lot—it could not be rid of"), it seems unlikely that Falkner has achieved much happiness (and unlikely that he has been cured of his death-wish) (299).

Thus, although the ending is happy enough, the reader is left with a nagging feeling that the protagonist has not been "rid of" his "desire to die" (299, 53). The narrator's use of such phrases as "we *may* believe" and "*perhaps*" in reference to Falkner's absolution and apparent happiness, for instance, introduces a sense of uncertainty and doubt (299, my emphases). Moreover, the narrative up to this point has been presented as a tragedy, and there

are references to *Hamlet* throughout (Gerard compares himself to the tortured hero and Falkner himself resembles Hamlet in his constant meditations on death).[311] It therefore rings false when the narrative ends in the manner of a Shakespearian comedy, with all reconciled and resolved through a happy marriage. The conclusion, then, belies a deeper (and darker) meaning. It is as if Shelley is encouraging the reader to question whether Falkner can indeed find happiness given that he has been "a perpetual mourner beside Alithea's grave" and has sought continuously, despite Elizabeth's best efforts, to end his own life (300). Shelley's genius is to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty that mirrors that of her protagonist, wondering whether Elizabeth is correct in her belief that virtue lies in living or whether Falkner is correct in his belief that it lies in dying. The tragedy is that Falkner is denied the right to choose. Elizabeth's sympathy, though well meaning, may finally be more harmful than death itself, for it not only deprives Falkner of his bodily autonomy but forces him to prolong a "miserable existence."[312] While living, Falkner's "wound" is indeed "unhealing." The only cure is death itself.

[311] Recall Macbeth's lament: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" See Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," *The Norton Shakespeare,* ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997) 1.2.129-132.

[312] Hill-Miller similarly argues that, "[i]n a very real sense, Elizabeth controls her father's fate at the close of *Falkner*." See *"My Hideous Progeny,"* 199. Conversely, Sites contends that "Elizabeth does not destroy but allows Falkner at last to redeem himself, to transform from a destructive Byronic hero to a more enlightened Shelleyan one, to live instead of seeking an 'honorable' suicide." See "Utopian Domesticity," 153.

## Conclusion

## "The living intercourse is the vital heat":

## Shelley's Ethic of Sympathy[313]

> It is this shattering of indifference . . . this possibility
> of one-for-the-other, that constitutes the ethical event.
>
> —Emmanuel Levinas, "Preface," *Entre Nous*[314]

Writing to Mary Shelley from Paris on May 7, 1845, Shelley's half-sister Claire Clairmont comments on the pleasurable, remedial, and ethical effects of Shelley and her son Percy's company, through which Claire experiences an interchange of sympathy: "Near you and Percy it is impossible to be unhappy—for your society is so charming, and there is so much calm and happiness in you, it . . . imparts a most beneficial influence to all who approach you" (*Clairmont Correspondence* 2: 428). "[Y]our conversation so wise and so universal," she continues, "draws one out of the narrow cares of self" (2: 428). As this letter suggests, Claire, who read all of Shelley's novels, imbibed her sister's understanding of sympathy, voicing Shelley's belief that "the only pleasure worth having in the world" is "sympathy with another—or others," the "society of agreable [*sic*]" and "congenial-minded beings" (Shelley, *Selected Letters* 301).[315] Interestingly, Claire's observation that Shelley and Percy's "calm[ness] and happiness" transmit "a most beneficial influence to all who approach [them]" speaks to the contagious quality of emotion, a concept that, as we have seen,

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[313] See Shelley, *Journals*, 2: 556.

[314] See Levinas, "Preface," *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 1998) viii.

[315] In a letter to Shelley on March 15, 1836, for example, Claire writes: "Mrs. Hare admired Lodore amazingly—so do I or should I, if it were not for that . . . modification of the beastly character of Lord Byron . . . of which you have composed Lodore. I stick to Frankenstein merely because that vile spirit does not haunt its pages as it does in all your other novels, such as Castruccio [in *Valperga*], now as Raymond [in *The Last Man*], now as Lodore." See *The Clairmont Correspondence: Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin*, Vol. 2, 1835-1879, ed. Marion Kingston Stocking (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 341.

informed Shelley's writings.[316] Further, in asserting that the sympathy of others serves to weaken self-love, "draw[ing] one out of the narrow cares of self" and so constituting what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "ethical self," one which is no longer only "for-itself" but "for-the-other," Claire shows that she has wholly embraced her sister's philosophy (Levinas, "Dialogue" 174). For Shelley, the very act of sympathizing is an "ethical event," for, in Levinas' words, it "shatter[s] . . . indifference" and initiates "concern for" one "other-than-oneself," which is the locus of ethics ("Preface" viii; "Dialogue" 174). That Claire so clearly absorbed her sister's understanding of sympathy indicates that Shelley's writings (functioning in the same way as sympathy) had "a beneficial influence" on her readers.

Importantly, as stated in previous chapters, the writing of her novels was also a therapeutic activity for Shelley, providing her with comfort and a sense of companionship in her grief after the deaths of her children and her husband. Indeed, the centrality of sympathy to Shelley's creative output is a reflection of its importance in her personal life. The devastating losses Shelley endured throughout her lifetime inevitably caused her to contemplate suicide, through which she hoped to be reunited with her loved ones. As she writes in one of her journal entries after the death of Byron in 1824,

> What do I do here? Why am I doomed to live on seeing all expire before me? God grant I may die young—A new race is springing about me—At the age of 26 I am in the condition of an aged person—all my old friends are gone—I have no wish to form new—I cling to the few remaining—but they slide away & my heart fails when I think by how few ties I hold to the world. . . . Each day I repeat with bitterer feelings 'Life is the desart [*sic*] and the solitude—how populous the grave.' (2: 478)

[316] Notably, Claire initially uses the word "spreads" instead of "imparts" in her letter, a word that has connotations with the language of disease and contagion. See *Clairmont Correspondence*, 2: 428.

Yet, as Shelley writes earlier that year on May 14, 1824, "oh my loved Shelley—it is some alleviation only to write your name, drowned though I am the while in tears" (2: 476). Just as Lionel in *The Last Man* finds solace in writing, so Shelley is able to mitigate her sorrow through the written word. As she declares in another journal entry (quoted in Chapter Two), "Literary labours, the improvement of my mind, & the enlargement of my ideas are the only occupations to elevate me from lethargy" (2: 431-2). Yet, "[l]iterary labours" alone (referring to both writing and reading) are not enough to relieve Shelley's suffering. As she insists, "books do much—but the living intercourse is the vital heat, debarred from that how have I pined & died" (2: 556). Ultimately, it is "the living intercourse," the sympathetic exchange she shares with her son Percy and the companionship he provides, that delivers Shelley from despair.

Sustained by the sympathy she finds through her relationship with her son, Shelley recalls herself from her grief and resists the impulse to suicide. Although her despair never wholly leaves her, Shelley nevertheless finds happiness in her son: "Percy—my all in all," she writes, "will—I trust—by his excellent understanding—his clear bright sincere spirit & affectionate heart repay me for sad long years of desolation" (2: 557).[317] And indeed, he does; as she later rejoices on November 27, 1839, "Through Percy I enjoy perpetual sunshine—& he spreads a warm glow over my life that . . . penetrates every portion of it—" (2: 563). Importantly, although Shelley does refer to Percy as her "all in all," she does not succumb to

[317] Notably, in a letter to William and Dorothy Wordsworth in December 1798, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes: "You have all in each other," a comment so significant that Newlyn makes it the title of her book, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other*. See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). In *The Last Man*, Lionel, Adrian, and Clara, the three survivors of the plague, are "multiplied to each other, till [they] bec[o]me all in all." See *LM,* 438. In *Lodore*, Elizabeth Fitzhenry is described as "liv[ing] upon the idea of her brother; he was all in all to her," and Edward is described as being "all in all to [Ethel]." See *L,* 170, 252. In *Falkner* the eponymous hero tells Elizabeth: "Yet the time will come when I shall not be all in all to you." And similar phrasing is used in reference to Falkner's beloved Alithea: "She turned the full, but checked tide of her affections, from her husband to her son. Gerard was all in all to her—her hope, her joy, her idol." See *Falkner*, 64, 95.

the excessive sympathy to which so many characters in her novels fall victim, for she is the ultimate Wollstonecraftian heroine, supporting herself and her son (as well as her father) through intellectual endeavour and so exhibiting that independence for which her mother advocated so strongly. In the end, Shelley becomes her own ideal heroine, surpassing even Fanny Derham in her self-sufficiency and capacity for sympathy.

This study has endeavoured to illuminate the development of Shelley's philosophy of sympathy over her entire writing career. From the creation of *Frankenstein* in 1818 through to her final journal entries in the 1840s, Shelley focused her attention on this pressing preoccupation of her day. Her committed inquiry into and interrogation of the concept of sympathy constitutes the key to her unique contribution. Her works, as has been shown, are marked by a singular insight into the intricacies of sympathy, into its complex and contradictory nature. Through her fiction, Shelley navigates sympathy's varying manifestations and motivations to finally create one pattern of meaning, revealing sympathy to be a profoundly complicated moral sentiment, grounded in paradox but capable of initiating an ethical response.

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