

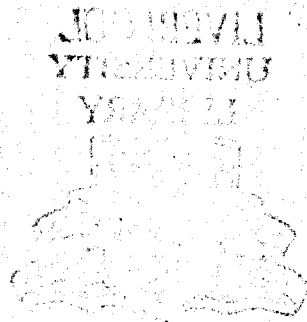
'How can I exist apart from my sister?':

Sisters in the Life and Literature of

Percy Bysshe Shelley,

Mary Shelley,

and Claire Clairmont



**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy
by Lisa Diane Leslie**

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For

Mike Oliva, who got me started;

Dr. M. John Higby, who encouraged me on the way;

Dean Rees-Evans, who pulled me through the end;

And my parents, who were there all along.

'How can I exist apart from my sister?': Sisters in the Life and Literature
of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont

Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont lived together for most of the period from the Shelleys' elopement in 1814 until Shelley's death in 1822. Shelley enjoyed the triangular relationship; Mary grew impatient with Claire's presence; and Claire admired them both and had to be asked to leave twice when the tensions between her and Mary became too intense. It was a complicated community.

But Shelley had a preference for having more than one woman in his life, and he constantly attempted to draw around him a circle of adoring female disciples that replicated his childhood home. Chapter one explores Shelley's history with sisters and sister figures, and reveals how he shaped each woman in his life, in the lyric poems he wrote to or about her, into the perfect soul sister that he always hoped to find. What Shelley could not find in the real women he created in the women of these lyric poems.

Shelley's constant and unsuccessful search for perfect sympathy from a 'sister of his soul', outlined in chapter one, led him to create the perfect sister in his writings. In *Cythna (Laon and Cythna)*, *Rosalind (Rosalind and Helen)*, *Asia, Panthea and Ione (Prometheus Unbound)*, and *Beatrice (The Cenci)*, Shelley represents his ideal sister and shows her in perfect sympathy with her brother – or, in the case of *Prometheus Unbound*, with her own sisters. Chapter two looks at the figure of the sister in these major works and explores Shelley's use of incest as a model for the ultimate connection between a man and a woman.

But although Shelley saw the figure of the sister as something ideal, Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont did not experience the sacred sororal bond that Shelley believed characterized the sister relationship. From their childhood together in the Godwin household until Mary Shelley's death in 1851, Mary and Claire had an ambiguous relationship at best. Claire idealized Mary and never seemed to sense the trouble she caused her stepsister by always being around and willing to spend time with Shelley. Mary, on the other hand, although she was disturbed by Claire's constant presence, felt a duty to provide for her stepsister. Chapter three surveys Mary and Claire's changing relationship and the tensions that appear in their letters and journals.

When each woman included a pair of sisters in her short fiction, however, the antagonism revealed itself in subtle ways. Drawing from the key term in Helena Michie's study *Sororophobia* and considering Amy K. Levin's exploration of difficult sister relations in *The Suppressed Sister*, this chapter focuses on the representation of stepsisters and how these authors attempted to negotiate the difficulties of sisterhood in their stories. Claire Clairmont's short story 'The Pole', although it attempts to present an idealised version of the Shelley community, contains the same kind of hidden antagonism that characterised her real-life relationship with her stepsister. Mary Shelley's stories that contain sisters – 'The Sisters of Albano', 'The Trial', and 'The Parvenue' – also unconsciously reveal an ambiguity in the sisters' connections. Additionally, Mary Shelley is critical of the very sense of duty that she always felt towards her stepsister, and her stories ultimately suggest that fidelity to a sister will bring about a woman's own downfall. In these tales of sisters, both Mary and Claire attempt to exert control over the conflicting emotions of a sisterhood which they could neither embrace whole-heartedly nor sunder completely.

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Abbreviation List

- BCW** *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980-93)
- BLJ** *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973-82)
- BSM** *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, 23 vols (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1986-)
- vol. ix *The Prometheus Unbound Fair Copies: Bodleian MSS Shelley e. 1, e. 2, and e. 3*, ed. by Neil Fraistat, 1991
- vol. x *Mary Shelley's Plays and her Translation of the Cenci Story: Bodleian MSS Shelley adds. d. 2 and adds. e. 13*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson, 1992
- vol. xi *The Geneva Notebook of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Bodleian MS Shelley adds. e. 16 and [part of] adds. c. 4*, ed. by Michael Erkelenz, 1992
- vol. xii *Shelley's 'Charles the First' Notebook: Bodleian MSS Shelley adds. e. 17*, ed. Nora Crook, 1991
- vol. xiii *Drafts for Laon and Cythna: Bodleian MSS Shelley adds. e. 14 and adds. e. 19*, ed. by Tatsuo Tokoo, 1992
- CC** *The Clairmont Correspondence: Letters of Claire Clairmont, Charles Clairmont, and Fanny Imlay Godwin*, ed. by Marion Kingston Stocking, 2 vols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995)
- CCJ** *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, ed. by Marion Kingston Stocking, asst. by David Mackenzie Stocking (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968)
- CCRev** *Claire Clairmont's Journal: A Revised Section*, commentary by Gavin de Beer, in *Shelley and His Circle, 1773-1822* (an edition of the manuscripts of Shelley and others in the Carl H. Pforzheimer Library), ed. by Kenneth Neill Cameron (vols 1-4, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961-70)) and Donald H. Reiman (vols. 5-8, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973-86), iii, pp. 342-75
- Dowden** Edward Dowden, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1886)
- Esdaile** *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems*, ed. by Kenneth Neill Cameron (London: Faber & Faber, 1964)
- GY** Kenneth Neill Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974)

- Hogg* Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1858)
- Holmes* Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974)
- Lyrics* Judith Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970)
- MSJ* *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). This edition has identical pagination to the original 2 volume text published from Oxford University Press in 1987.
- MSL* *Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press). vol. 1, 'A part of the Elect' (1980); vol. 2, 'Treading in unknown paths' (1983); vol. 3, 'What years I have spent!' (1988)
- MSWorks* *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley* (Nora Crook, general editor, 8 vols (1996)
- vol. i *Frankenstein*, ed. by Nora Crook
- vol. ii *Mathilda, Dramas, Reviews & Essays, Prefaces & Notes*, ed. by Pamela Clemit
- vol. iv *The Last Man*, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook
- vol. vii *Faulkner*, ed. by Pamela Clemit
- vol. viii *Travel Writing*, ed. by Jeanne Moskal
- MYR* *The Manuscripts of the Younger British Romantics: Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, 8 vols (New York and London: Garland Publishers, 1985-96)
- vol. v *The Harvard Shelley Manuscripts*, ed. Donald. H. Reiman, 1991
- PBSL* *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964)
- Poems1* *The Poems of Shelley, Volume 1: 1804-1817*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London and New York: Longman, 1989)
- Poems2* *The Poems of Shelley, Volume 2: 1817-1819*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (London and New York: Longman, 2000)
- Poetry and Prose* *Shelley's Major Poetry*, ed. by Donald Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York and London: Norton, 1977)

- Prose* *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by E. B. Murray (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1993)
- SC* *Shelley and his Circle 1773-1822* (an edition of the manuscripts of Shelley and others in The Carl H. Pforzheimer Library), ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (vols. 1-4, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961-1970), Donald H. Reiman (vols. 5-8, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973-1986).
- Silsbee* The Manuscript Notebooks of Edward Augustus Silsbee, Peabody Essex Museum, MSS 74, Box 7-10
- Tales* *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*, ed. by Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976)
- Wasserman* Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971)
- White* Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols (New York: Knopf, 1940)
- WMW* *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd, 7 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989)
- vol. iv *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*
- vol. vi *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*
- Works* *Shelley's Works in Verse and Prose*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman, 8 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880)
- YS* Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (New York: Victor Gollancz, 1951)

All journal abbreviations follow those used in the *Years Work in English Studies*

Individual Works

Claire Clairmont

Pole 'The Pole' (*Tales*)

Mary Shelley

Parvenue 'The Parvenue' (*Tales*)

Sister 'The Sisters of Albano' (*Tales*)

Trial 'The Trial of Love' (*Tales*)

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Alastor *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* (*Poems I*)

Cenci *The Cenci* (*Poetry and Prose*)

Defence *A Defence of Poetry* (*Poetry and Prose*)

L&C *Laon and Cythna; Or, The Revolution of the Golden City: A Vision of The Nineteenth Century (Poems2)*

PU *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts (Poems2)*

QMab *Queen Mab (Poems1)*

R&H *Rosalind and Helen, a Modern Eclogue (Poems2)*

1. The Introduction

In the first volume of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Jefferson is presented as the author of a noble letter and Shelley as the one who reads it aloud to the English nation. The letter is a vision of a new world, a world that is not yet created by man, but one that is possible. Shelley, in reading the letter, is not only a student of Jefferson's ideas, but also a participant in the act of reading. He is not just a passive recipient of information, but an active interpreter of it. He is not just a student of Jefferson's ideas, but also a participant in the act of reading. He is not just a passive recipient of information, but an active interpreter of it.

Shelley's reading of Jefferson's letter is not just a passive act, but an active one. He is not just a student of Jefferson's ideas, but also a participant in the act of reading. He is not just a passive recipient of information, but an active interpreter of it. He is not just a student of Jefferson's ideas, but also a participant in the act of reading. He is not just a passive recipient of information, but an active interpreter of it.

Introduction: Siblings in Life and Literature

i. Three anecdotes

In his biography of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Jefferson Hogg relates the story of a walk that he and Shelley took one day from Oxford. In the Oxfordshire countryside they stumbled upon an oval flower garden, completely enclosed by trees save for the gap through which they entered. The garden seemed completely isolated, so they stood in wonder at the sight of it. Shelley, suddenly perceiving that the garden was connected by a path to a gentleman's house far distant, hastily retreated, and Hogg followed. As they retraced their steps to Oxford, they talked eagerly about the garden, Shelley speaking 'with a more glowing animation than ordinary, like one agitated by a divine fury'. Hogg teased his friend about this passion, and suggested that the garden's 'enchantress might possibly be at hand, and since he was so eloquent concerning the nest, what would have been his astonishment had he been permitted to see the bird herself. Shelley began to describe the 'enchantress', and Hogg lamented jokingly that they had come away so quickly he was sure they would not be able to find the garden again. Hogg continues:

'You may laugh at my enthusiasm', [Shelley] continued, 'but you must allow that you were not less struck by the singularity of that mysterious corner of the earth than myself; you are equally entitled, therefore, to dwell there, at least in fancy, and to find a partner whose character will harmonise with the genius of the place.'

He then declared, that henceforth it should be deemed the possession of two tutelary nymphs, not of one; and he proceeded with unabated fervour, to delineate the second patroness, and to distinguish her from the first.

'No!' he exclaimed, pausing in the rapid career of words, and for a while he was somewhat troubled, 'the seclusion is too sweet, too holy, to be the theatre of ordinary love; the love of the sexes, however pure, still retains some taint of earthly grossness; we must not admit it within the sanctuary.'

He was silent for several minutes, and his anxiety visibly increased.

'The love of a mother for her child is more refined; it is more disinterested, more spiritual; but', he added, after some reflection, 'the very existence of the child still connects it with the passion, which we have discarded'; and he relapsed into his former musings.

'The love a sister bears towards a sister', he exclaimed abruptly, and with an air of triumph, 'is unexceptionable.' (*Hogg* 78-80)

* * *

Late in her life, Jane, Lady Shelley talked to a young woman about her life with Mary Shelley. Lady Shelley told Maud Rolleston of a particular event that occurred near the end of Mary's life. Claire Clairmont was due for a visit to Field Place, where Mary lived with Jane and Percy Florence Shelley. Jane Shelley never got on with her mother-in-law's stepsister, and as Claire arrived for her visit, Jane Shelley rose to leave the reception room so that she could avoid seeing Claire. According to Maud Rolleston, Jane Shelley related that as she reached the door Mary Shelley 'burst out in a vehement manner, not usual to her, "Don't go, dear; don't leave me alone with her. She has been the bane of my life ever since I was two!"'¹

* * *

Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont had no contact with one another for the last two years of Mary's life; the last time they saw each other was in June, 1849, when Claire arranged for Clari Clairmont, daughter of Charles Clairmont (Mary's stepbrother and Claire's half-brother), to visit the Shelleys shortly after her arrival in England in 1849. Clari had come to England after Claire offered to pay for her education in order to help Charles, who was struggling to educate his children, and during her visit to Field Place she met and quickly married Alexander Knox, a friend of Percy Florence Shelley's. An overreacting Claire cut off all communication with the Knoxes and the Shelleys, blaming Mary for not supervising the 'children' (Clari was 23) in her care. In

¹ Maud Brooke Rolleston, *Talks with Lady Shelley* (London: George G. Harrap, 1925), p. 41.

February 1851, hearing indirectly that Mary had passed away, Claire wrote the following to the grieving Percy Florence:

I have heard to-day that your Mother is dead. I have no wish to add any thing to your affliction, but indeed it was most unkind in you never to let me know she was ill. Most unkind. Now I can never see her more! Many times last winter I made Willy ask of Mrs. Knox of her health, and he always brought back word that Mrs. Knox refused positively to satisfy my wish. After the contemptuous way in which I had been treated in your house, I could not apply personally. Though I am no toady and resent insult, though I am poor and will not put up with indignity from the rich – yet I have as much feeling as others and the loss of an old friend has afflicted me most sensibly. (CC ii 536)

* * *

A constant fact of Percy Bysshe Shelley's life was the presence of sisters or sister-figures. For Mary Shelley, from the moment that her father married Mary Jane Clairmont and brought stepsiblings and a new mother into the house, the nature of Mary's position in her family changed, and it must have seemed at times that she would never be able to rid herself of this stepsister. Claire Clairmont had a great admiration for her stepsister throughout her life; and after the loss of her own daughter, Allegra, and after Shelley's death, Claire must have felt that apart from her brother, Charles, and Mary, she was very alone in the world. Thus, the figure of the sister is prominent in all three lives.

These anecdotes are symptomatic of both the way that aspects of a life are overlooked and how they are elaborated and falsified. Hogg often exaggerated the tales in his biography of Shelley, and the biography is as much about the author as it is about Shelley. Yet this early event, of Shelley, the garden, and his perception of the sister bond, finds echoes in his later writings. The belief that a sister is almost a sacred relation is evident in his constant search for a soul sister as well as in the representation of siblings in many of his major works, and this is the subject of the first section of this study.

In the second anecdote, Jane Shelley seems unaware of the true nature of Mary Shelley's relationship with Claire Clairmont. Due to what Emily Sunstein calls Jane Shelley's 'hagiographic tendencies',² her account of Mary and Claire's relationship is uniformly a Cinderella story, with Claire cast as the wicked stepsister. This casting has influenced biographers even to the present day; for example, Anne K. Mellor fastens on this legend of Mary's dislike for her stepsister, emphasising Claire's 'jealousy and envy' and suggesting Mary's lifelong hatred towards Claire, stating that Mary 'never forgave Claire for the damage she caused', referring here especially to the death of Mary's daughter, Clara.³ The travels necessitated by Claire's insistence on seeing her daughter Allegra, who was currently residing with Byron in Venice, damaged the little girl's health, and Clara died in Mary's arms as they reached Venice on 24 September 1818 (*MSJ* 227). But few scholars have examined in any depth Mary and Claire's relationship; what the evidence reveals is that their feelings towards one another fluctuated between the animosity that the Cinderella story suggests and, especially by the mid-1840s, a close friendship that each woman came to value. It was only in the last two years of Mary's life that the tensions resurfaced, due to Claire's heightened sensitivity to her family's poverty and a freakish and unexplainable reaction to the elopement of her niece with a friend of the Shelleys. The second half of this study offers an exploration of their fluctuating relationship and how it found expression in their diaries, letters, and even their fictional work. What Mary and Claire discovered, despite all their differing feelings, is that the sister bond is indissoluble.

² Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 379.

³ Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fictions, Her Monsters* (New York and London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 35; 34.

ii. The Sibling Bond in Nineteenth-Century England

Sibling relationships in the early 1800s were possibly the strongest of all the family bonds. Especially in the upper levels of society, the rearing of children was often left to a retinue of hired hands: nurses, servants, governesses, tutors. The separation from parents, whether they were loving or distant, created the need in children to forge a bond with someone else, and although they may have been strongly attached to a nurse or a governess, these people could be, and often were, replaced at a moment's notice. The one constant in a child's life in the early nineteenth century was a sibling, and so siblings learned to depend on each other for friendship, amusement, and diversions from study or work.⁴

But sibling relationships were not strong between all children of a family. Because of the laws of primogeniture, there often developed a jealous antagonism between the eldest son and heir and his younger brothers. Due only to their bad luck of being born after a first-born son, these younger boys soon realised that their destiny was to enter the working world in some manner, and often their social class lowered with this necessity to earn a living. Many of the younger sons joined the military or became clergymen; some were kept around the family home as a 'walking sperm-bank' in case the older son died before he was able to father children.⁵ This way, the estate would remain in the family; but it kept the younger son on a long leash that was often socially debilitating. Often, the observance of primogeniture by the family resulted in intense animosity between brothers.

The relationship between brothers and sisters, however, was not governed by the laws of primogeniture, and this allowed close ties to develop between them.

⁴ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Stone includes a useful analysis of childrearing practices and sibling relationships in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See especially pp. 87-88; 115-16, 449-80.

⁵ Lawrence Stone, p. 87.

Especially in the upper classes, boys were often taught by private tutors, and they did not leave home until they went away to university at sixteen or seventeen. These long periods at home during childhood provided the chance for these brother and sister bonds to mature and deepen into close, and sometimes obsessive, attachments. Stone relates the stories of several brother and sister pairs whose bond made the loss of one of them debilitating to the other,⁶ and he shows that 'there can be little doubt that there was something very special about brother-sister relationships among the landed classes at this period. They were far closer than brother-brother ties, which were always threatened by the gulf of primogeniture, and closer than child-parent relations even at the most affectionate stage in the late eighteenth century'.⁷

This brother-sister attachment predictably found representation in the literature of the early nineteenth century. James B. Twitchell suggests that due to the rise in popularity of natural philosophy, a curiosity of the self became central to many writers, and he suggests that 'the sister would provide first the ideal companion and then the ultimate completion of self to many male writers of this period'.⁸ Clearly sisters were important to their brothers, and brothers were important to their sisters; it was not unusual for a girl to give up the man she loved because her brother did not approve. Dorothy and William Wordsworth perhaps epitomise the closeness of siblings that found expression in literature. Separated for most of their childhood, when Dorothy and William decided to create a household together it was so that they could in part make up for the loss of a shared childhood that the deaths of their parents prevented. And at separate times they both expressed their sense of

⁶ For example, when Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's brother died in 1713, she felt as if she had 'lost her best, if not her only, natural friend'. And, faced with the separation from his sister when he was sent away to school at the age of eight, Sylvester Douglas ran away from the school and walked all the way home to be with her again. Stone, p. 115.

⁷ Stone, p. 116.

⁸ James B. Twitchell, *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 86; 97.

dependence on one another. In the well-known section of *Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* William turns to his sister in an attempt to recapture what he once was in former years. He tells her: 'in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read / My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes', asserting that she is, in essence, part of what can make him whole again; then, he goes on to state more plainly, 'May I behold in thee what I was once, / My dear, dear Sister'.⁹ For her part, when faced with William's marriage to Mary Hutchinson, Dorothy's reaction is catatonic. She confesses in her journal that 'I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing or seeing anything' when the men arrived to tell them the ceremony was over. And when William himself returned (notably, without his new wife) Dorothy jumped up 'faster than my strength could carry me till I met my beloved William & fell upon his bosom'.¹⁰ Dorothy reveals that William's wedding strips her of her senses; and the passion with which she conveys her reaction to his return betrays a deep dependence shadowed with the residue of fear, now allayed, that she was abandoned. Clearly, Dorothy and William Wordsworth shared one of the intense sibling bonds that Stone describes.

But, as Alan Richardson suggests, the 'Romantic idealization of the brother-sister bond' can also be 'taken as a context for understanding sibling incest'.¹¹ The bond that people felt existed as a result of an instinctual connection became a useful symbol to exploit in literature, and often it was used in the context of incest as a

⁹ William Wordsworth, *Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798*, 116-19; 120-21. *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. by Ernest de Selincourt (1904; London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 126.

¹¹ Alan Richardson, 'The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in English Romantic Poetry', *SEL* (1985), pp. 739; 738. Richardson's article provides a convincing explanation of the prevalence of incest in romantic poetry. See also Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., 'Incest as Romantic Symbol', *Comparative Literature Studies* 2.1 (1965).

means of terror, especially in gothic novels, as Montague Summers has shown.¹² However, with the valorisation of childhood in the romantic period, the shared experiences in what had come to be considered the 'most idyllic stage of life' created the opportunity for an inherent sympathy more complete than a brother or sister could feel for anyone else. And this search for complete sympathy is the driving force behind the growing frequency, in the literature of the early nineteenth century, of unions between sisters and brothers. Erotic love is frequently unsuccessful in providing that intense connection with which the romantic poets, at least, were so concerned. This elusive 'perfect sympathetic union', most male romantic poets concluded, could be found only with a sister.

But, as Jane Austen astutely observed in *Mansfield Park*, the love of siblings, 'sometimes almost every thing, is at others, worse than nothing'.¹³ Not all writers found their experiences with siblings to be the foundation for an idealised union between like minds. In her study of sisterhood, *Sororophobia*, Helena Michie offers the following definition of her title word: 'sororophobia is about negotiation; it attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women'.¹⁴ Because the laws of primogeniture tied up the bulk of an estate for the first-born son, excessive numbers of female children put a strain on what little capital a father had to provide his daughters with dowries (a cash sum called a 'portion') that would attract a good match.¹⁵ With limited cash available to them, sisters soon perceived that they were

¹² Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune, 1938).

¹³ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, 5 vols, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1932-34), iv, 235.

¹⁴ Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 9.

¹⁵ Stone, pp. 88-89.

superfluous. This perception of uselessness sometimes created tensions among families of sisters, who came to realise that not only were they in competition for what little money was available for their 'portion', they were also in competition for the husband who would receive the dowry.

The tenor of current studies that focus on relationships between women often highlight the support and nurture that a woman derives from another woman's friendship. For example, Laurie Buchanan states that 'friendship offers [a woman] the intimacy, support, and nurturance she needs without the identity issues that confuse the [mother-daughter] relationship.'¹⁶ According to Buchanan, and many other commentators of female friendship, the relationship between women of the same generation is free from the struggles to assert difference from a mother or mother figure, suggesting that women find more comfort in their relationships with friends. And in yet another study of female friendship, Janet Todd organises her discussions around five kinds of friendship which largely elide the difficulties between women. Of Todd's five categories of relationship types – sentimental, erotic, political, social, and manipulative¹⁷ – only the last admits that women's friendships have the potential to be unpleasant. The bulk of her study examines friendships in which the women cling to one another and derive strength from the friendship to bear the many trials that authors often put their young heroines through – including rape, imprisonment, seduction, romance, death of a loved one, and either happy or unhappy marriages. Perhaps it is understandable that with the rise of feminism throughout the 1980s and into the new century, women wanted to examine the trends of women drawing support from these types of sisterhoods.

¹⁶ Laurie Buchanan, "'Islands" of Peace: Female Friendships in Victorian Literature', in *Communication and Women's Friendships: Parallels and Intersections in Literature and Life*, ed. by Janet Doubler Ward and JoAnna Stephens Mink (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), p. 77.

¹⁷ Janet Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

Taking Michie's term literally, however, complicates these studies of female friendship that discover close and loving relationships between women whether they are literal or figurative sisters. Sororophobia means an abnormal fear or dislike of sisters, and this aspect of sisterhood has only recently received attention among literary critics.¹⁸ But studies in the field of psychology often highlight issues of rivalry and conflict and show that they can become hidden agendas in the sister relationship because of the explosive nature of the difficulties. Jealousy becomes a prominent emotion as sisters feel guilty of taking another's share of attention and resentful if their own share of attention is taken from them. Feelings between sisters are often ambiguous, fluctuating between the attachment created by the shared experience of being female – as highlighted in the studies of female friendship – and the aversion brought on by competition and a struggle to assert a separate identity, which scholars such as Nancy Chodorow have shown dominates a woman's development in relation to her mother.¹⁹ In short, Chodorow and other self-in-relation identity development theorists suggest that the closer bond between mothers and daughters due to their shared gender results in a less sharply differentiated sense of self in women as they grow up. Self development, according to Chodorow, occurs in opposition to the mother, who becomes the 'other' in reference to the 'self' of the child. When the child is male, he can define himself in opposition to the female mother; when the child is female, she is unable to define herself as opposite to the mother and therefore the connection between them establishes a continuity, a likeness, that can be difficult to

¹⁸ Most recent studies of the difficulties between sisters are unpublished dissertations; a few examples are Ellen Blaney, 'Sisters: Rewriting Feminism in Virginia Woolf' (unpublished doctoral thesis, New York University, 1998); Leila Silvana May, 'Relatively Speaking: Representations of Siblings in Nineteenth Century British Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1994); Eva Rueschmann, 'Those Precious Bonds: A Psychoanalytic Study of Sister Relationships in Twentieth-Century Literature and Film' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1994); and Rhoda Irene Sherwood, "'A Special Kind of Double": Sisters in British and American Fiction' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 1987).

¹⁹ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978).

shake. And, especially in the nineteenth century, as Amy K. Levin has shown, sisters are often seen as 'largely redundant'.²⁰ When one sister married and moved out of the house, the next sister would take over her role, either helping the mother to run the domestic business or taking on the role of 'mother' in the absence of one.

In *The Suppressed Sister*, Levin identifies a convention of sister stories that emphasises the polarisation between sisters, but she shows that most stories neglect to provide a history of that development. Levin explains that 'by the time a reader is introduced to a fictive household of sisters, childhood squabbles have been outgrown', and she points out that if a novel begins with sisters as young adults, already the girls 'have assumed rigidly separate identities'.²¹ So in best known novels published in the nineteenth century that include sisters, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and other Austen novels, as well as Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Gaskell's *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters*, readers are denied the very important experiences of identity development in the sister characters that are most often worked out through issues of jealousy, competition, and opposition in childhood and adolescence. And although Toni McNaron suggests that sisters almost purposefully, if unconsciously, develop complementary and often opposite qualities in order to avoid such competition,²² Michie counters that view with the suggestion that the competition between sisters stems from an underlying similarity between the women. Michie argues: 'one does not [. . .] compete with any one who, for whatever reason, seems entirely different from oneself; competition is in some sense a mark of

²⁰ Amy K. Levin, *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women* (Lewisburg, KY: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University presses, 1992), p. 17.

²¹ Amy K. Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, p. 25.

²² See Toni A. H. McNaron, 'How Little We Know and How Much We Feel', in *The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection*, ed. by Toni A. H. McNaron (New York and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985).

sameness, if only of shared goals'.²³ These fluctuating feelings of love and hate between sisters contradict the popular conception of the ideology of sisterhood, which generally signifies a loving pair or group of 'sisters', literal or figurative, who unite in the experience of being women in a patriarchal society. It is this suggestion of contradiction, according to Amy Levin, which has led to a silence in literary criticism about biological sisters in fiction. Levin suggests that this silence allows scholars to avoid discussing or even admitting the friction that exists between biological sisters which goes against what the term 'sisterhood' is used to invoke.²⁴

There are countless pairs of fictional sisters who are portrayed in contrast to one another – physically, emotionally, intellectually, psychologically – as a way to highlight their individual strengths and weaknesses. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are the embodiment of the qualities of the title of *Sense and Sensibility*, and Austen's many other sisters are antithetical in similar ways. Dorothea and Celia Brooke contrast strikingly with one another in temperament as much as Snow White and Rose Red are opposites in colouring. Cinderella and her stepsisters are perhaps the epitome of opposite sisters in looks, behaviour, and sensitivity. This method of contrasting characteristics has become, as Amy Levin has shown, part of the convention of portraying sisters in literature; but Levin asserts that it is more than just a narrative technique. Drawing on the examples of sisters in novels as well as on clinical studies by modern psychologists, Levin shows how the 'differences [between sisters] help to create and define a self, making it recognizable'.²⁵ It is a way for sisters, either real or imagined, literal or figurative, to define themselves; it is an assertion that 'I am who I am because I am different from her'.

²³ Helena Michie, *Sororophobia*, p. 7.

²⁴ Amy K. Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, p. 14ff.

²⁵ Amy K. Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, p. 37.

The figure of the sister appears regularly in Shelley's poetry; in Mary Shelley's fiction, however, it is less prevalent. Claire Clairmont's only piece of fiction is obviously based on her experiences of living with the Shelleys, so it is not surprising that a pair of stepsisters takes the centre role in that tale. But although each of these writers was influenced by their personal experiences with sisters, the figure of the sister is used to completely different ends in their writings. Shelley's lifelong search for a soul sister, which I trace in chapter one, led him to create the ideal woman in his longer poems which, as I show in chapter two, is almost always represented as a sister. The feelings of animosity and duty towards Claire Clairmont with which Mary Shelley struggled throughout her life, and the feelings of admiration and finally resentment which Claire held for Mary, are the subject of chapter three. These fluctuating feelings, which remained largely unexpressed in their private journals, found expression in a few short stories written by each woman which include a pair of sisters. As I show in chapter four, Claire suppresses any acknowledgement of the difficulties she experienced while living with her stepsister and paints an idealised portrait of her life with the Shelleys. Mary, on the other hand, turns her criticism upon the sister in her tales who acts selflessly towards her sister, condemning the very sense of duty that she felt her entire life. This trio of writers all experienced sisters, both as a community and separately; but their representation of the sister in their imaginative works reveals just how differently they experienced the dynamic of sisters and sisterhood.

iii. A Brief Biographical History of the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont

The history of biographies of the Shelley community is complex, but it can be traced back to a single governing influence that controlled the public image of these three

people in the Victorian period, and still in many ways influences the current-day picture of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont. Jane, Lady Shelley closely guarded the Shelley papers after Mary's death. As stated earlier, when Thomas Jefferson Hogg, whom Jane Shelley had personally selected to write the first Shelley biography, refused to alter the facts of Shelley's split with his first wife as he knew them – Jane Shelley wanted to believe that Harriet had been at fault and had abandoned Shelley prior to his elopement with Mary, and Hogg knew otherwise – Jane Shelley promptly refused him any further access to the Shelley papers; Hogg's *Life of Shelley* (1858), a somewhat elaborate portrait of a youthful and energetic genius, reliable as to basic facts if not to specific details, stops after two volumes up to the disastrous end of Shelley's days at Oxford – notably, before he ever met Harriet Westbrook.

Jane Shelley tried again with a hand-selected biographer, contacting the scholar Edward Dowden, who published his two-volume *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1886. According to later Shelley biographer Newman Ivey White, Dowden 'successfully maintained his independence of Lady Shelley's control' (White 417), but the Shelley that Dowden created is still more late-Victorian fantasy than early nineteenth century fact. Dowden's biography is meticulously researched, and there is little in his dozen manuscript notebooks that does not find expression in the biography. But Dowden's Shelley is, true to Jane Shelley's wish, left by his first wife before his elopement with Mary. Additionally, Dowden seems apologetic of Shelley's revolutionary ideals. Dowden does not capture the fire with which Shelley expressed his philosophies in his poems and essays; it is a much tamer Shelley who was good, in Victorian terms, despite his unconventional habits and beliefs.

It was not until Newman Ivey White's massive two-volume *Shelley*, published in 1940, that a reliable and somewhat more accurate portrait of Shelley became available. White's study is detailed and interpretive, and it brings a new understanding of this complicated figure to light. White is also the first person to give any importance to Claire Clairmont in the story of Shelley's life; until this biography, if mentioned at all, Claire is a minor character, a hanger-on who was more in the way than anything else. White's *Shelley* initiated a new wave of work on Shelley, which included Frederick L. Jones's important edition of Shelley's correspondence (1964) and Kenneth Neil Cameron's re-interpretation of Shelley's poetry in the context of his life in *The Young Shelley* (1951).

Cameron's focus on Shelley's youth presents a clear understanding of Shelley's radical beliefs. Cameron's study contributed new and solid interpretations of Shelley's early work which are still referenced today. Cameron also pays more attention to Shelley's relationship to several of the sister figures that I highlight in my own study. Although he does not see any significance in the relationship between Shelley and his cousin, Harriet Grove, Cameron's reassessment of Shelley's connection with Cornelia Turner emphasised the affection not as unrequited love, but as a mutual admiration. Cameron's discussion of several of Shelley's early relationships was instrumental to my own interpretations of Shelley's connection with these sister-figures.

Richard Holmes' 1974 biography *Shelley: The Pursuit* is for all intents and purposes the only modern biography of Shelley. Holmes himself identifies the difference in his biography from those written formerly. 'I have used both Mary's and Claire's journals more fully than previous writers', Holmes writes in his introduction, 'and for the first time I think Claire is given her full and proper place in Shelley's life' (Holmes xii). Holmes does indeed use the journals as reliable sources, and Claire does

appear as a more important figure than in any previous biography. But his biography is the work of a fanciful Shelley enthusiast; Holmes was 29 when he published his biography and as he would later admit in his autobiographical *Sidetracks*:

Explorations of a Romantic Biographer, he spent four years prior to that publication 'immersed in travelling, dreaming, and writing' this work.²⁶ 'Dreaming' is the key word here, for in this engaging portrait of Shelley Holmes does tend to fabricate speculations and present them as facts. A less than careful reader might misread Holmes's subtle speculations for evidence, and most scholars stick with the decidedly outdated White biography. It will be interesting to see what new interpretations James Bieri's forthcoming biography will offer.

There has been an ongoing interest in the life story of Mary Shelley. Some represent variations on the theme of the devoted, adoring, and long-suffering wife who had a streak of brilliance with her first novel, *Frankenstein*. Still others have continued the more scathing representation first presented by Edward John Trelawny in his 1878 work *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*.²⁷ This work, a revision from his 1858 *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*, included an appendix which attacked Mary Shelley for her unsuitability to Shelley. The first sentence conveys the tenor of his feelings towards his former friend: 'Mrs. Shelley was of a soft, lymphatic temperament, the exact opposite to Shelley in everything; she was moping and miserable when alone, and yearning for society'.²⁸ With the rise of feminism in the 1970s, however, scholars delved more deeply into the story of Mary Shelley. A picture emerged of a woman who struggled to live up to the expectations of both father and husband, and who struggled to live by philosophies that her

²⁶ Richard Holmes, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000).

²⁷ Edward John Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* 2 vols, (London: Basil Montague Pickering, 1878).

²⁸ Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, II, p. 229.

husband espoused but that she never fully embraced. She was, however, more of a radical and an independent woman than the early biographies could portray.

But there is still no definitive biography of Mary Shelley. The best that scholars can do is to read critically a combination of respectable works and draw conclusions from them. Two of the best modern biographies of Mary Shelley are Anne K. Mellor's *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (1988) and Emily Sunstein's *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989). Mellor derives her interpretation of Mary's life through her family relationships, yet she still retains the sense of Mary's relationship with Claire as one of antagonism and discomfort. Mellor claims that Mary 'conceive[d] of her own identity exclusively in relational terms'²⁹: daughter; wife; mother. Yet Mellor does not delve into Mary's sense of self as a sister even though she had two sisters who had great impacts on her own life. Emily Sunstein's biography convinces us of Mary's worth as a literary figure and presents her relationship with Shelley in a way that includes all of the poet's eccentricities and complications. In doing this, she also shows that Mary was not as dependent, creatively, on her husband as many biographers, including Mellor, would have us believe. But she also misrepresents the relationship between Mary and Claire. Claire appears, in the chapters of the later years, as an important correspondent, but Sunstein only writes of the 1840s relationship that Mary 'vented [her feelings] mostly to Claire, to whom she was very close in this decade'.³⁰ There are more negative comments about the nature of their relationship than positive ones, and Sunstein does not fully show the significance of this relationship.

There have been only two biographies of Claire Clairmont, but she has been a figure in all of the modern biographies of the Shelleys. Jane Shelley's denial of

²⁹ Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, p. 178.

³⁰ Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, p. 353.

Claire's relationship to the Shelleys, and her emphasis on the troubles she caused, has led to the misrepresentation of Claire Clairmont in virtually all of the biographies of Mary and Shelley. Richard Holmes does indeed, as he claims, give her a more central role in Shelley's life than previously attributed; in many of the Shelley and Mary Shelley biographies she has been portrayed as an immature hanger-on, a drain on both Shelley's purse and Mary Shelley's patience. But even the two biographies are woefully inadequate in their attempts to present a multi-dimensional account of this neglected woman.

In 1939 R. Glynn Grylls published the first biography of Claire Clairmont. This work is a romanticised version of a girl who 'was happy when she could sing', who could dream of a life 'free from the tyranny of her home and living in a rural solitude with only books about her and the beauties of nature'.³¹ Grylls's Claire is not much different from the brief descriptions of her in the earliest biographies of Shelley. She is jovial, energetic, and passionate, but what the portrayal lacks is the sense of Claire as fiercely independent, intellectual, and determined. Due perhaps as much to a lack of information as to a biased viewpoint, this picture of Claire Clairmont limits our perception of her. Details of her struggles, both as a governess in Russia and with financial troubles before her settlement with Sir Timothy Shelley, are not included. The book is a romantic presentation of a minor character in the Shelley tale.

The 1992 *Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys* is more balanced, yet still inadequate in fully exploring the emotional complexity of Claire's later life. The death of the primary biographer, Robert Gittings, left the project of presenting all of Claire's life after Shelley's death to Jo Manton. While Manton has presented all the facts of that life in wonderfully poetic language, she has failed to capture fully the spirit of

³¹ R. Glynn Grylls, *Claire Clairmont* (London: John Murray, 1939), p. 3.

Claire's character that is so evident in her letters. Nevertheless, this is an admirable biography, and it does reveal the extent to which Claire adopted Shelley's radical principles, perhaps even more completely than Mary ever did. Two thirds of the book is dedicated to Claire's life beyond Shelley's death, which does much to recover her from the role of satellite to the stars, but there is still much of her life that is unexplored.

By far the best record of Claire Clairmont's life comes from Claire's own pen. Marion Kingston Stocking's two volume *The Clairmont Correspondence*, which includes letters of Claire, her brother Charles, and Fanny Wollstonecraft, is meticulously documented in Stocking's painstaking style. Her extensive notes fill in the gaps that the biographies create, and her discovery of the manuscript notebooks kept by Edward Augustus Silsbee, who lodged with Claire for a short time in Florence (the story of which was the basis of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*), have given us Claire Clairmont, in her own words, in all of her contradictions and complexities that the early biographies glossed over. Stocking shows us that Claire Clairmont is indeed a romantic character worthy of note in her own right.

On the whole the life stories of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont are difficult to tell. Biographers must select the events and facts that they want to emphasize, and this is often dictated as much by the time in which the biographer is writing as their own interests and agendas. With a group of people as dynamic as Shelley, Mary, and Claire, however, it is impossible to give fair due to the role that each played in the other's life. The main subject must be highlighted to the diminishment of the complexities of the others, and this has prevented a fair representation of the dynamics of the relationship between all three of these people. By focusing on the experience of the sister in the life and the writing of Percy Bysshe

Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont, I highlight the interactions between these three figures and present a portrait that reveals all the blemishes and controversies as well as the bonds and support that dominated this trio.

iv. Critical Sources for Sisterhood

Stories concerned with sisterhood and the relations between women abound in the literary period leading up to and during which the Shelley community began working through their own representations of their experiences with sisters. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that with the rise of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s-1980s, alongside the task of reclaiming women writers, scholars also began scrutinizing the fictional representation of women. For my study, I found many of these explorations which focus on friendship between women helpful, both in tracing the literary history of female friendship and in polarizing the distinction I was beginning to make: that the representations of sisters in the writings of Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley, and Percy Bysshe Shelley were less studies of female bonding and more attempts to suppress the ambiguous and complicated experiences that each author had with sisters or sister figures. Shelley's steadfastness to his idealised 'sister' in both his lyrics and his longer works comes as no surprise, for as many of the studies of female friendship show, it is often complicated relationships with her own gender which makes women's representations of friendship with other women so clouded with issues of identity and individuality. Shelley could continue to dream of his ideal woman behind the gender divide and ignore the examples right in front of him of the struggles women often had with their sisters. Shelley was miraculously blind to the conflicts that he himself caused – or so his poetic representations of the sister-sister relationship would suggest.

Explorations of sisterhood began with centralised studies which focused on women writers' experiences with their sisters and the way that their personal lives and private writing elucidate their fiction. Two works in particular contributed to my understanding of the methodology of uncovering the hidden aspects of sister relations as found in both fiction and non-fiction. Toni A. H. McNaron's *The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection* (1985) and Janet Doubler Ward and JoAnna Stephens Mink's *Communication and Women's Friendship: Parallels and Intersections in Literature and Life* (1993) present collections of feminist-driven research that ultimately come to opposing ends; the former asserts the struggles that exist between sisters and the latter proposes the value that women gain from their female friendships.³² McNaron's collection focuses on studies of biological sister pairs who either saw the sister as 'expanded self' or as 'painful aspects of self' which helped my own understanding of the ways in which women reveal their animosities, ambivalences, and affections for sisters in both public and private writings.³³ The unification of the essays in this collection is the identification of the problematic nature of the sister bond.

Ward and Mink's collection also explores the dynamics of defining the self in relation to other women. Drawing extensively on letters and journals, many of the essays in this book highlight a perspective in opposition to McNaron's more troubled sister relations. Instead, *Communication in Women's Friendship* shows again and again that 'women's friendships are to be greatly valued – even treasured' even beyond the relationship between a woman and her husband.³⁴ If these works lose a sense of

³² Toni A. H. McNaron, *The Sister Bond: A Feminist View of a Timeless Connection* (New York and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985); Janet Doubler Ward and JoAnna Stephens Mink, *Communication and Women's Friendship: Parallels and Intersections in Literature and Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993).

³³ Toni A. H. McNaron, *The Sister Bond*, p. 8.

³⁴ Janet Doubler Ward and JoAnna Stephens Mink, *Communication in Women's Friendship*, p. 3.

objectivity to their one-sided judgments on the nature of the relationship between women, they err with a purpose; with the proliferation of studies that dissect the trouble with self identification between mothers and daughters (most notably Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978)) it has become necessary to consider the role that sisters play when a woman tries to establish an identity separate from her mother. The sister, like the mother, is a reflection of the self and contributes to a girl's sense of her own identity as she grows up. Steeped in biographical and psychological interpretations, these works nevertheless provide helpful clues into the phenomena of sisterhood that I aim to explore in my own work.

Janet Todd's investigation into the friendships between women represented in the major (male-authored) novels of the eighteenth century categorises the nature of female friendship that draws on the complications presented separately in these more psychological studies. *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980), written ostensibly to explore the period's 'most splendid creations of friendship' between women,³⁵ instead seems to highlight the absence of that important relationship. Her five types of friendship (sentimental, erotic, manipulative, political, and social) in themselves reveal the complicated nature of relations between women. Additionally, her recognition of how an author's past experiences haunt the representations of their characters speaks to my investigation of the ways in which Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and Claire Clairmont each formulated their representations of each other not as direct portraits, but as fictional characters that reflect the author's perceptions of their community. If Janet Todd neglects the opportunity to more fully explore the dynamics of fictional representations of sisters in her work, perhaps it is because her

³⁵ Janet Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature*, p. 5.

stated aim is to disprove Virginia Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* that there is a lack of examples in fiction where 'two women are represented as friends'. Sisters are as often antagonistic as they are affectionate.

By far the critical study most central to my own thinking is Amy K. Levin's *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women* (1992). Levin outlines the basic marriage plot that is a part of almost every novel with female characters in her period, explaining how the presence of a sister often complicates the transition from the role of daughter to wife for many women. Levin shows that in many novels the marriage plot breaks down and sisters begin to lose the strong sense of individuality they may have exhibited previous to the introduction of a potential spouse for one or both of the sisters. Levin's statement that the presence of significant sisters in a woman writer's life 'is often inversely related to the appearance of sisters in their novels'³⁶ was a signal to me to pay close attention to the manner in which Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley wrote about sisters in their short stories. Through Levin's perceptive study of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, I came to understand the way that silences and gaps comment, often loudly, on the sister bond. I believe that Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont felt oppressed by both their situations and their time period; even now, but perhaps especially in the Nineteenth century, there was little attraction in representing difficult relationships between women. Female authors might feel antagonism, but it was important to offer examples of solidarity to a society that was beginning to interrogate more publicly the role of women.³⁷

³⁶ Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, p. 28.

³⁷ Levin writes in her conclusion, 'women obviously do not wish to portray themselves as disloyal or envious individuals just as they attain positions of respect and responsibility. Yet in valuing only the "good," pacifying emotions, they risk stifling a part of themselves' (119). I maintain that the animosity inherent in the sisters represented by Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont is a result of the authors'

This study of the representation of sisters in the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Claire Clairmont draws on the long history of biographical studies of the Shelleys, but in centralizing the sister relationship I have been able to achieve three things that contribute to several areas of literary study. First, in making a thorough examination of Shelley's life, I have been able to assemble in one place the history of his relationships with sisters and sister-figures that are usually only offered piecemeal according to critics' and biographers' beliefs in the primacy of the relationship to Shelley's work and life. My study highlights Shelley's act of poetic *making*, of creating an ideal woman in the lyrics which he wrote for different women that clearly coincides with the female ideal he created in Cythna from *Laon and Cythna*. This female ideal, worked over in both the lyrics and in that long work, finds echoes in many of Shelley's later poetic and dramatic sisters such as Beatrice Cenci, Rosalind, and Asia, Panthea, and Ione.

The second contribution my study offers to current scholarship is a clearer understanding of the relationship between Mary Shelley and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont. Few biographers have fully explained this complicated sister bond, and many still emphasize the troubling aspects of Mary's and Claire's relationship at the expense of the long period of friendship that the women enjoyed in the 1840s. This neglect is probably occasioned by Mary's lack of literary output in this decade when she published only her *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1845). Still, by examining the correspondence between the two stepsisters it is obvious that their relationship was more complicated than the simple antagonism represented by biographers from Jane, Lady Shelley up to Anne K. Mellor.

inability to completely deny their own experience with the woman who was the closest model for a sister that each had.

By centralizing the figure of the sister, I have been able to bring Claire Clairmont to the forefront, recognizing her as a woman writer and establishing her importance to Shelley throughout his later life. I assert that regardless of the details of their physical relationship, emotionally Claire was an important, and at times an essential, part of Shelley's life. Shelley emphasised that the sexual act is secondary to the primary bond of intellectual, philosophical intimacy. Clarifying Claire's role in his life supports his assertion that it is the emotional connection that most strongly defines the relationship between a man and a woman, as companions and philosophical 'siblings' – and Shelley and Claire maintained this strong bond until his death.

1. 'If I know anything about *Love* I am *not* in love':

Shelley's Sisters, Lovers, and Lyric Poetry

Shelley grew up in a household of women. Besides his mother, there were sisters Elizabeth (b. 1794), Mary (b. 1797), Hellen (b. 1799), and Margaret (b. 1801). The presence of his only brother, John (born in 1806, two years after Shelley went away to Eton), was insignificant in Shelley's years at home. Few biographers go into any depth about Shelley's earliest relationship with his father, before he entered Oxford and then was sent down in the *Necessity of Atheism* scandal in 1811; most take up the narrative of the relationship from the evidence of Shelley's own representation of it in his letters immediately after he was expelled. For example, Shelley wrote to Godwin that 'passive obedience was inculcated and enforced in my childhood: I was required to love because it was *my duty* to love', and he states outright that 'I never loved my father' (*PBSL* i 227; 230). Taking his cue from Shelley, Dowden (like many biographers) writes of Sir Timothy Shelley as 'kindly, pompous, capricious, well-meaning, ill-doing, [and] wrong-headed' (Dowden 3). Whatever the truth of the matter was, it seems that, essentially, Shelley's constant companions when he was a boy were females: a nurse, his mother, and his four younger sisters. It is not surprising, then, for Richard Holmes to state that this 'society of sisters [. . .] was to have a marked affect on his later life in which the "sisterly" ideals played a conscious part' (Holmes 12); and any understanding of Shelley's representation of sisters and brothers in his writing is enriched by considering the real-life relationships that Shelley had with sisters and sister-figures. Therefore, this chapter will explore Shelley's relationships with his 'soul sisters', combining biographical detail with

analysis of the lyric poems which he wrote to, for, or about these women. This survey reveals how Shelley constructed each woman into the figure of the perfect sister/lover that appears in the major works discussed in chapter two. Shelley's lyrics show that he perceived similar qualities in all these women, qualities which he felt were essential for him to be able to establish the close sympathy that he desired.

i. Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley

I mourn her as *no more*. (PBSL i 93)

As the oldest child and the only boy until John Shelley's birth in 1806, Shelley ruled over his sisters in their childhood play. Writing to Jane Williams Hogg in 1856, Shelley's sister Hellen reveals that Shelley's active imagination provided them with endless amusements. She mentions feelings of 'pleasing dread' when he began telling them stories, and distinct fear when he began conducting electrical experiments on his sisters, writing 'my heart would sink at his approach, but shame kept me silent' (Hogg i 7; 9). Even more revealing is a description that intends to assert Shelley's superiority of mind over his sisters. Hellen relates that 'Bysshe was certainly fond of eccentric amusements, but they delighted us, as children, quite as much as if our minds had been naturally attuned to the same tastes, for we dressed ourselves in strange costumes to personate spirits, or fiends' (Hogg i 8). It is clear that Hellen and her sisters enjoyed the games that 'Bysshe' designed, but her admiration is clouded with a sense of puppetry. The passage suggests that the amusements were unnatural to the girls, that the games were designed for Shelley's pleasure only. The sisters were players, costumed to take their roles to further the action of the scene. Yet there was evidently something magnetic in Shelley's personality that drew people into his circle of influence, and they came willingly. His enthusiasm must have been contagious. A comment from a woman who knew Shelley at Marlowe when she was a girl

corroborates this speculation; she remembered that Shelley's 'soft and gentle manner was truly captivating'.¹

Drawing on Hellen Shelley's 1856 reminiscences of her brother, Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi notes a 'sense of something dictatorial' in his interaction with his sisters,² and this substantiates Cameron's claim that Shelley was 'used to having his own way [. . .]; the one thing that inevitably produced an extreme reaction was a serious blocking of his will' (YS 29-30). Having a set of adoring, deferential sisters set a standard in his mind of a model of sisterly behaviour that he sought for and encouraged in almost all of his female acquaintances, which in turn blurred the distinctions in Shelley's mind between sister, friend, and lover. This same adoration and deference would become essential qualities of the sisters he would portray in his major poems.

Shelley's first relationship with a female out of his immediate family circle was with his cousin, Harriet Grove. This relationship began, in 1808, in an exchange of letters that on Harriet's part quickly branched out to include Mrs. Shelley and, later, Elizabeth, as she determined to make friends with Shelley's mother as well as his favourite sister.³ From January to September of 1809, Harriet recorded in her diary that she received no less than 44 letters from Shelley. The sudden exclusion of Shelley's name from Harriet's diary from September 1809 has led many commentators to conclude that the relationship was cooling at this time. Kenneth Neill Cameron goes as far as to say that 'the relationship was extremely immature and resulted in no

¹ Dowden Manuscript, Trinity College Library, Dublin, notebook 3014 (pages unnumbered). Dowden did not include this in his biography of Shelley, but it is clear that he spoke to her because he added a phrase to a letter she had written to Lady Shelley that she had used 'in conversation' (ii 120n). The woman was Polly Rose, who as a girl was taken in to be educated by the Shelleys while they lived at Marlowe (Dowden ii 123-24).

² Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, *Shelley's Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 99.

³ Harriet records writing to Mrs. Shelley and Elizabeth at least 23 times throughout her 1809 diary. See SC ii 509-40.

deep emotional involvement on either side' (YS 30). But in his 'Introduction to the Diary of Harriet Grove', Frederick L. Jones suggests that the correspondence continued as regularly as before, but that Harriet had become more 'circumspect' in recording references to Shelley in her diary. 'People will occasionally pry into other people's diaries', Jones explains, 'and Harriet had probably suffered embarrassment from the quizzing of some such prying person or persons' (SC ii 482). These conclusions, however, are only hypotheses; but the poems which Shelley wrote during this period reveal a continued attachment to Harriet Grove that did not cool until after Shelley entered Oxford in the autumn of 1810.

The poems which Shelley composed from February through April of 1810 show that Shelley and Harriet still enjoyed at least a strong friendship, and Harriet's diary reveals that she was at pains to hide the extent of her feelings for Shelley. On 7 February 1810 Harriet records that her brother William told her sister in a letter that 'he thinks I shall never be married[,] that I do not care whether I ever do or not[.] He says he thinks I never liked any one so much as [*word obliterated*] that is a thing no one will ever know but myself' (SC ii 569). Jones questions rhetorically, 'The name crossed out, could it be any other than Bysshe?' (SC ii 482). And again, for Harriet's inscription of 5 March 1810 that she received a parcel 'from my Greatest Friend', followed by seven cancelled lines, (SC ii 571), Jones states 'this could be no other than Bysshe' (SC ii 483). Later still, on 26 April 1810, Harriet begins to refer to Shelley as 'Percy' instead of 'Bysshe'. This was a sign of their increasing intimacy, for as Kathleen Jones explains, in this period 'Christian names were only used between husband and wife, brother and sister, or very close friends'.⁴ The intimacy of the two cousins, almost siblings and potential spouses, allowed for this familiarity, and this

⁴ Kathleen Jones, *A Passionate Sisterhood: The Sisters, Wives and Daughters of the Lake Poets* (London: Virago Press, 1998), p. xxi.

sudden change in Harriet's diary suggests that their relationship was not, as Cameron and others suggest, cooling during the spring of 1810. Shelley's poems written during the two years of their courtship reveal a strength of attachment that also disproves the idea that their relationship had cooled by September 1809, when Harriet stopped recording the exchange of letters in her diary. 'February 28th 1805: To St. Irvyne'⁵, which Cameron dates as being written in 1810, reveals continuing love for Harriet. In this poem Shelley asserts that 'though thou art not nigh / Think not thy lover thinks less of thee' (11-12). Her continued affection is revealed in the fifth stanza, where Shelley claims that although Harriet 'is fled' (17), she has nevertheless 'left a firm love and a lasting esteem' (19) that bind their souls together. The reference to his own death in the last, dark stanza is not death from unrequited love; rather, it is a melodramatic scene which is characteristic of Shelley's continued fascination with death that appears in much of his early writings.⁶ The two poems 'Song' ('Come —! sweet is the hour') and 'How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse' represent Shelley's frustration and sorrow at Harriet's departure from Field Place on 18 April 1810, and are not a lament for the final end of their relationship. Both poems, referring to an evening walk which Shelley and Harriet took with Charles Grove and Elizabeth Shelley, focus on parting and loss. 'Song' states 'You and I, love, may ne'er meet again' (18), and in it the trees predict 'I must part with you soon' (15); and indeed, the Groves left Field Place the day after

⁵ The poems written to Harriet Grove survive in manuscript in what has come to be known as the Esdaile notebook. Harriet Shelley retained this notebook, which also contained many poems addressed to her, after her separation from Shelley; through her daughter Ianthe it passed to the Esdaile family who sold it to the Pforzheimer Library in 1962. The poems appear in published form in four locations: Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964); Neville Rogers, *The Esdaile Poems* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966); and Judith Chernaik included many of the early lyrics from the Esdaile notebook in her book, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970). Unless otherwise noted, I take my texts from *Poems 1*. References will be made in the text by the line numbers only.

⁶ See, for example, 'Written in Very Early Youth', 'Henry and Louisa', 'Revenge', 'Song', as well as the two gothic tales *St. Irvyne* and *Zastrozzi*.

this walk.⁷ 'How swiftly' describes the old house St. Irvyne, which Harriet mentions in her diary that they visited on 17 April 1810 (SC ii 575), and a youth who is mourning 'his long lost love' (18). The youth laments the absence of his lover, but not the loss of love, and again, typical of Shelley's adolescent interest in death, he longs for his own death, claiming that 'the power to none save —'s given / To calm my bosom's frantic pain' (35-6)⁸. This is the earliest manifestation of what would become common in Shelley's later love lyrics as well as in his representation of sibling relations: dependency combined with a sense that the lover (sibling) cannot survive without the presence of the loved one. Both 'Song' and 'How swiftly' dwell on typical adolescent dependency at the absence of the loved one, not any real or permanent separation.

Shelley's poem 'How eloquent are eyes!', written between 16 April and 5 May 1810,⁹ is a tribute to the power of Harriet's eyes. But this poem also reveals the intensity of Harriet's and Shelley's feelings for each other at this time, long beyond the date (September 1809) that Cameron speculates marked the cooling of their relationship. First bidding his love to look at him so that her eyes can 'light a waste of years' that have passed without her, the speaker then counters this with the plea to quench that powerful look that, when joined with their current 'passionate Friendship', will 'inspire / . . . feverish, false desire' (10; 26; 28). Shelley states that age will not destroy the love, but that it will 'freeze the tremulous joy' (31), which he sees as a positive effect. In fact, it is not until Shelley writes 'Melody to a Scene of Former Times', dated by Matthews and Everest between 10 October and 17 November 1810 (*Poems* 127), that Shelley reveals that his love is finally, completely lost to him. This

⁷ On 17 April 1810 Harriet wrote in her diary, 'walked to Horsham saw the Old House St Irvyne [. . .] walked in the evening to Strood by moonlight' (SC ii 575). On the next day, she recorded, 'This morning we went before we left the pleasantest [sic] party in the world for the most unpleasant [sic] to Horsham [-] that is E[lizabeth] B[ysshe] & my Brothers & self' (SC ii 576).

⁸ The metre here, as Matthews and Everest show, suggests 'Harriet's' for the elided name in line 35 (*Poems* 190).

⁹ See *Poems* 190.

poem suggests Shelley's resignation that Harriet is 'for ever, ever lost' (2). Shelley refuses to reproach or blame Harriet, and he can only lament the 'blisses [that] are no more' (23), maintaining still that he loves her and lives only for her happiness. In dreams he hears her words, 'Confide in me, / For I am thine, and thine alone, / And thine must ever, ever be' (42-44), but he wakes to a 'fiercer, deadlier agony' (47) of the truth that their relationship is over. The tone of this poem is not youthful melancholy for the absent loved one which characterises 'February 28th 1805: To St Irvyne', 'Song', and 'How swiftly though Heaven's wide expanse'. Rather, it is marked by an adolescent despair in the face of the unwanted end of first love.

Shelley's relationship with Harriet Grove was coming to an end just as he entered Oxford and began reading Locke, Hume, and Godwin. As a result of this reading, his letters may well have been full of his enthusiasm for the radical theories of these authors. According to Harriet's brother, Charles, Harriet 'became uneasy at the tone of [Shelley's] letters on speculative subjects, at first consulting my mother, and subsequently my father also on the subject. This led at last, though I cannot exactly tell how, to the dissolution of an engagement between Bysshe and my sister, which had previously been permitted, both by his father and mine'.¹⁰ Shelley gave full vent to his anger at the cause of their split in January 1811, after hearing that Harriet was to be married to William Heylar: 'here I swear, and as I break my oath may Infinity Eternity blast me, here I swear that never will I forgive Christianity [...] – but it has injured me, she [Harriet] is no longer mine, she abhors me as a Deist, as what *she* was before' (*PBSL* i 35). Soon, too, he was to feel the loss of his sister Elizabeth, lamenting in May: 'I mourn her as *no more*, I consider the sister whose

¹⁰ Charles Grove to Hellen Shelley, 16 February 1857, printed in *Hogg* ii 551.

happiness is mine as dead', as she, too, rejected him because of his expressed atheism (PBSL i 93).

Shelley had been greatly comforted in the loss of Harriet Grove by his sister, Elizabeth, so her loss would have had as strong an effect on him as the loss of Harriet. The depth of his feelings for his sister is revealed in the letters he exchanged with his new friend from Oxford, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, during their first Christmas break. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Shelley became eloquent in his praise for his sister, for at this time he was simultaneously trying to promote a match between Elizabeth and Hogg while also coming to terms with the realisation that his own relationship with Harriet Grove was over. Shelley approached Elizabeth again and again to plead Hogg's case to no avail. This lengthy excerpt from a letter to Hogg demonstrates Shelley's regard for his sister as well as her very logical reasons for refusing to correspond with Hogg:

I have attempted again to plead your cause but unsuccessfully – she said – 'even supposing I take your representations of your friend's qualities & sentiments which as you coincide in & admire I may fairly imagine to be exaggerated altho' *you* may not be aware of the exaggeration, what right have I admitting that he is so superior to enter into a correspondence which must end in delusive disappointment when he finds how really inferior I am to the being which his heated imagination had pictured' – This was unanswerable, particularly as the prejudiced description of a brother who loves his sister as I do, may, indeed *must* have given to you an erroneously exalted idea of the superiority of her mental attainments. (PBSL i 30)

Shelley's claim that Elizabeth's protest is 'unanswerable' betrays agreement. By inscribing his assent that he '*must*' have overstated her accomplishments, however, Shelley contradicts his apparent agreement with her protest. In essence, Elizabeth has gone beyond Shelley's logic to identify the flaw in his plan: that if Hogg was as superior as Shelley says, then Elizabeth had no right to begin a friendship that would end in disappointment due to the fact that Shelley probably embellished his account of her virtues. Shelley was no doubt pleased by this sharp piece of logic.

Shelley's attachment to Elizabeth bordered on a dependence broken only by her rejection, like Harriet Grove's, of his increasingly anti-Christian beliefs. In April, while living in London just after his expulsion from Oxford, Shelley laments to Hogg that Elizabeth is 'lost to everything, xtianity has tainted her' (*PBSL* i 72). The entrance on the scene of another girl more sympathetic to his beliefs, Harriet Westbrook (discussed below), may have also loosened his attachment to Elizabeth; but even after his expulsion from Oxford Shelley's letters reveal something close to obsession with his sister. In the debates with his father over where Shelley would reside after losing his place at Oxford, Sir Timothy Shelley was adamant that Shelley could not return home, as this letter from Shelley to Hogg explains:

He [Sir Timothy] is resolved (the old fellow) that I shall *not* stay at F[ield] P[lace]. If I please, as I shall do, for some time I *will* – this resolution of mine was hinted to him – 'Oh then I shall take his sister away, before he comes.' – But I shall follow her, as her retirement cannot be a secret. (*PBSL* i 66-7)

Shelley's father struck where he felt it would hurt most, threatening to keep Shelley from seeing his favourite sister. And Shelley's determination to seek her out, to follow her to her place of 'retirement', reveals his obsession with his closest sister.

By May, Shelley despaired of ever hearing from her again until, on his eventual (albeit temporary) return to Field Place in mid-May, he discovered that she had been ill with scarlet fever, and he confessed to Hogg 'some emotions of pleasure were mingled with those of pain when I found that illness had prevented her writing to me' (*PBSL* i 84). From this point on Shelley begins to flaunt his intimacy with Elizabeth in his letters to Hogg, whose unrequited passion for Shelley's sister had reached such an intensity that he secretly visited Shelley at Field Place just to have one look (his only) at Elizabeth Shelley.¹¹ In the same letter in which Shelley explains

¹¹ Shelley wrote to Hogg on 25 July 1811: 'The peep at Warnham Church cannot have influenced you one way or the other but it *may*; for it is the only sensual intelligence that you have received of this fair one' (*PBSL* i 124).

that Elizabeth's silence had been caused by illness, he closes with the statement: 'I know you will excuse a long letter as I am going to read to Eliza' (*PBSL* i 85). Yet as the correspondence between Shelley and Hogg continued throughout the summer, Shelley asserts again and again that his sister has changed:

self satisfaction in trivial things [. . .] used not however to be the character of my sister – serious, contemplative, affectionate; enthusiastically alive to the wildest schemes, despising the world – Now – apathetic to all except the trivial amusements, & despicable intercourses of restrained conversation; bowing before that hellish Idol, *the world*, appealing to it's [sic] unjust decisions in cases which demands [sic] a trial at the higher Tribunal of conscience; [. . .] she is now *not* what she was, she is not the singular angelic being whom you adored & I loved; I mourn her as *no more*, I consider the sister whose happiness is mine as dead. (*PBSL* i 92-3)

Although he ends this diatribe on a note of hope ('Yet have I not hopes of a resuscitation. Certainly or I would not tear your heart with the narration'), Shelley never regained the intimacy with Elizabeth that he once enjoyed.

But Shelley's obsessive determination to see this sister despite his father's edict, and his continued hope for a return of her devotion to him, is interesting when read against comments which Claire Clairmont made in the 1870s to Edward Augustus Silsbee.¹² In his characteristic manner, Silsbee only made brief notes on what Claire told him, and although he records Claire Clairmont's assertion that Shelley's mother 'might not wish him to return to Field Place because of his love for his sister Elizabeth', he records further only the mention of 'the stories or rumour abt. it' (Silsbee Box 8 Folder 3). Claire Clairmont's comments corroborate Kenneth Neill Cameron's speculation that 'at least an unconscious desire to consummate so intimate a relationship between brother and sister must have existed' (*YS* 31). Whether or not

¹² Silsbee, a Shelley devotee, befriended Claire Clairmont in her later years and for a time was a lodger in her house in Florence. He made almost illegible notes of her conversations on Shelley and Byron in notebooks that are now held in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The story of Silsbee obtaining a Shelley manuscript from Claire Clairmont was the basis of Henry James's novella *The Aspern Papers*.

there was a conscious sexual desire on Shelley's part for his sister Elizabeth, the nature of their relationship, one that bordered on male dependency on the female, no doubt influenced Shelley's subsequent use of incest and his exploration of sibling relationships in his poetry.

From his position as eldest brother, Shelley developed an expectation of being surrounded by an adoring and obedient female band. His younger sisters, and Elizabeth Shelley and Harriet Grove, all fulfilled this desire, and they listened attentively, almost worshipfully, to his ideas and instructions. Cameron states that Shelley was 'continually, and often with an abnormal intensity of purpose, attempting to shape the thinking of the whole female group (YS 31). Gelpi, more melodramatically, identifies something 'dictatorial, overbearing, and frightening' in his mastery over these girls.¹³ The developing radicalism prompted by his exposure at Oxford to Locke, Godwin, and others drew a line beyond which his two favourites, Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley, would not cross. But with the loss of these two devotees coincided the gain of two new disciples who, in their individual ways, would serve as more than adequate substitutes for the lost sister and (potential) lover. These two women were Harriet Westbrook and Elizabeth Hitchener.

ii. Harriet Westbrook and Elizabeth Hitchener

I ought to count myself a favored mortal with such a wife and friend (these human names and distinctions perhaps are necessary in the present state of society). (PBSL i 252)

In January of 1811, Shelley struck up a friendship with Harriet Westbrook and her sister Eliza, and June of that year marks the first letter in an important correspondence and relationship between Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener, a Sussex schoolteacher.¹⁴ Hellen Shelley had introduced her brother to her school friend,

¹³ Gelpi, p. 99.

¹⁴ How much the *names* of these new friends contributed to Shelley's desire to befriend them is

Harriet, on one of Shelley's visits to her at her school in Clapham, and in a letter dated April 1811 Shelley was already writing to Hogg that Harriet's 'school fellows will not even reply to her questions, she is called an *abandoned* wretch, & universally hated' (*PBSL* i 76), presumably because of her association with the atheist Shelley.¹⁵

Knowing retrospectively that Shelley would come to despise his sister-in-law intensely,¹⁶ it is interesting to note that in three successive mentions of Harriet's sister Eliza in the early days of their acquaintance, in letters to Hogg, Shelley's opinion of her initially fluctuates only to end in a final compliment. On 24 April 1811 Shelley writes of the Westbrooks that 'the youngest [Harriet] is a most amiable girl' while 'the eldest [Eliza] is really conceited but very condescending'. Shelley adds 'you say I talk philosophically of her kindness in calling on me. She is very charitable & good. I shall always think of it with gratitude, because I certainly did not deserve it & she exposed herself to much possible odium' (*PBSL* i 66). Then, in a letter which Kenneth Neill Cameron dates as 25 April, Shelley writes, 'I was too hasty in telling my first unfavourable impression [of Eliza Westbrook] – she is a very clever girl, tho' *rather* affected' (*PBSL* i 76). Finally, on 8 May Shelley wrote, still a little ambiguously, that 'I was a great deal too hasty in criticizing [Eliza's] character; - [. . .] I *really* now consider her as amiable, not perhaps in a high degree, but perhaps she is', but he then offers an excuse for himself, that 'I most probably now am prejudiced for you cannot

impossible to tell. But as Shelley first established the household with Harriet and her sister Eliza, and then added Elizabeth Hitchener, the combination of names still reflected his first two loves: Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley.

¹⁵ Harriet explained her early opinion of Shelley in a letter to Elizabeth Hitchener: 'You may conceive with what horror I first heard that Percy was an Atheist; at least so it was given out at *Clapham*; at first I did not comprehend the meaning of the word; therefore when it was explained I was truly petrified. I wondered how he could live a moment professing such principles and solemnly declared that he should never change mine. I little thought of the rectitude of these principles and when I wrote to him I used to try to shake them, making sure he was in the wrong & that myself was right' (*PBSL* i 274).

¹⁶ Thomas Love Peacock recalls this exchange with Shelley over the disintegration of his first marriage: 'I said, "It always appeared to me that you were very fond of Harriet." Without affirming or denying this, he answered: "But you did not know how I hated her sister."' Thomas Love Peacock, *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1860), p. 95. Shelley also told Hogg in a letter of 1814 'I certainly hate her with all my heart and soul. [. . .] I sometimes feel faint with the fatigue of checking the overflowings of my unbounded abhorrence for this miserable wretch' (*PBSL* i 384).

breathe you cannot exist if *no* parts of loveliness appear in co-existent beings' (*PBSL* i 77). Shelley was not being contrary in his report of Eliza Westbrook. He wanted to like her, and his changing opinion is more a reflection of his success in convincing himself of her merits than of his true opinion of her. What Shelley desired of this pair of sisters was a re-creation of the band of sisters which he had lost when Harriet Grove and his sister Elizabeth rejected him. Of Eliza's sister Harriet, by late July Shelley could write to Hogg that 'Yr. Jokes on H[arriet] Westbrook amuse me. It is a common error for people to fancy others in their situation but if I know anything about *Love* I am *not* in love' (*PBSL* i 123). But the joke was on Shelley, 'in love' or not; by 3 August Harriet had 'thrown herself' upon Shelley's protection (*PBSL* I 131) and by 28 August they were married in Edinburgh.¹⁷

One of Shelley's early poems provides a commentary on Shelley's emotional state during the summer of 1811, before he was called upon to 'rescue' Harriet Westbrook from her tyrannical father.¹⁸ In many ways the summer (in particular, the month of July) can be identified as a transitional period for Shelley in which all of the very emotional events of the past eighteen months could be assessed and assimilated. 'Death-spurning rocks!', written during Shelley's first visit to Cwm Elan with his cousin, Harriet Grove's brother, Thomas, reveals the extent of Shelley's perception of his emotional instability caused by the loss of Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley, his expulsion from Oxford, his rejection from his family, and his growing feelings for Harriet Westbrook. The solitude of the Welsh countryside provided a calm setting in

¹⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Shelley: A Life Story* (London: Collins, 1946), p. 69. Blunden prints the Edinburgh register entry for Shelley's marriage to Harriet: 'August 28, 1811. Percy Bysshe Shelley, farmer, Sussex, and Miss Harriet Westbrook, daughter of Mr. John Westbrook, London.'

¹⁸ The extent of Mr. Westbrook's tyranny over his daughter was this: Harriet, at sixteen years old and beyond the conventional age of schooling, remained at school in an undescribed capacity. She was discovered reading a letter from Shelley (Hellen and Mary's atheist brother) and she became an outcast, both with the students and the teachers. Harriet was unhappy enough at her treatment at the school that when her father tried to send her back to school after the summer break, she refused. When he determined to force her, she applied to Shelley for help, certain of his sympathetic assistance. See Louise Schutz Boas, *Harriet Shelley: Five Long Years* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

which Shelley could comprehend the full impact of all these events. His coming to terms with these emotional incidents resulted in the nervous illness and suicidal thoughts that are revealed in the poem. The poem identifies a 'maniac-sufferer' who wandered the landscape 'with wild intent' (11). He spends time in a 'little spot' (13) where he is held captive by his memories, where 'each prophetic feeling wakes / A brood of mad and venomed snakes / To make the lifesprings of his soul their food, / To twine around his veins and fatten on his blood' (17-20).

Matthews and Everest state that in this poem Shelley 'uses the landscape allegorically with full consciousness', where the 'rocky ascent symbolizes the course of [Shelley's] emotional life' (*Poems* 181). All of the emotional upheavals of 1810-11 are referred to, and the fact that Elizabeth Shelley's rejection of her brother finds expression in this emotionally driven poem shows the extent of Shelley's attachment to his sister as well as his pain to discover her betrayal. Characterised as 'Pity's self', according to Matthews and Everest, Elizabeth Shelley is shown to have initially offered comfort only to provide further pain:

One fleeting beam flashed but its gloom to shew,
Turned was the way-worn wanderer from the door
Where Pity's self promised to soothe his woe. (22-24)

In addition, a short visit with Harriet Westbrook in London before travelling to Wales added a conflicting emotion to his feelings of lost love and devotion, which also finds expression in the poem through natural imagery. Shelley questions: 'Shall he turn back? The tempest there / Sweeps fiercely thro' the turbid air' (25-26). The 'tempest' referred to, according to Matthews and Everest, corresponds with Shelley's inner conflict over committing himself to 'save' Harriet Westbrook (*Poems* 182n). On 28 July Shelley had written cryptically to Hogg that although the scenery in Wales was more astonishing than he had expected, 'I do not *now* much regard it. I have other

things to think of (*PBSL* i 128). He did not mention that what he had divulged earlier in the letter, that he had received a letter from 'the Westbrooks', was the 'other' thing occupying his mind.

A few days after writing this letter, Shelley clarifies what had been absorbing his attention, writing to Hogg: 'I shall certainly come to York, but *Harriet Westbrook* will decide whether now or in 3 weeks' (*PBSL* i 131). Passive, waiting for Harriet to decide his future, Shelley reveals what would become characteristic of both the representation of his relationships with women and of sibling/lover relationships in his major poems: a willingness to be directed by the loved one. Yet the explanation of this comment reveals a contradictory element of the ideal relationship Shelley desired most with women, which is that they look to him for advice and listen attentively to his suggestions:

Her father has persecuted her in a most horrible way, & endeavours to compel her to go to school. She asked my advice: resistance was the answer at the same time that I essayed to mollify old W[estbrook] in vain! & in consequence of my advice *she* has thrown herself upon *my* protection! I set off for London on Monday. How flattering a distinction: – I am thinking of ten million things at once. What have I said I declare quite *ludicrous*– I advised her to resist – she wrote to say that resistance was useless, but that she would fly with me, & threw herself on my protection. (*PBSL* i 131)

In a letter to Hellen Shelley, Charles Grove identifies more of Shelley's anguish than Shelley's own letter conveys in his decision to run away with Harriet Westbrook.

Grove states that Shelley wrote him a letter about 'what he termed, his summons to link his fate with another, closing his communication thus: "Hear it not, Percy, for it is a knell, which summons thee to heaven or to hell"' (Hogg ii 554). 'Death-spurning rocks!', however, reveals the vacillation that the letter attempts to hide: 'Beyond a gulf before that yawns / The daystar shines, the daybeam dawn. - / God! Nature! Chance! remit this misery. / It burns!' (27-30). In essence, Shelley admits that there is hope ('The daystar shines, the daybeam dawns'); however, as Matthews and Everest note,

the declaration 'It burns' refers rather ambiguously to this coming sun, probably the first reference in one of Shelley's poems to his future wife (*Poems* 181). The burning could be an ardour for Harriet; it could also be a prophecy of pain in the face of the future. Shelley made his decision, however, after Harriet made hers; and by the end of August, they had determined to elope to Edinburgh for a hasty marriage.

But almost three months before the marriage, Shelley had begun a correspondence with twenty-nine year old Elizabeth Hitchener, whom he had met at his uncle's house in June. Shelley was nineteen. They had an extraordinary exchange of letters that Frederick L. Jones describes as 'unique [. . .] in any correspondence' (*PBSL* i 97n). As he did for Harriet Westbrook when they first met, Shelley sent to Elizabeth Hitchener books of politics, education, and poetry; Elizabeth appears to have read them all and she was able to converse with Shelley, through their letters, on the kinds of topics that most interested him. Religion was the initial topic of their correspondence, Elizabeth's belief in God a contrast to Shelley's growing atheism. Shelley's intent, it seems, was to 'improve her mind';¹⁹ instead, he seems to have persuaded himself, at least initially, that she was an ideal woman.

It is interesting to note that it was actually Elizabeth Hitchener who first initiated the concept of soul-siblings. In an early letter (June 1811) she exclaims, 'It seems to me you know me better than I do myself, yet, surely *we differ?*' (*PBSL* i 99). Four months later, after Shelley has almost sheepishly tried to justify his marriage after his claims of hatred toward the institution, she fondly explains away the marriage as a kindness on Shelley's part to save Harriet from the scorn of society.²⁰

¹⁹ 'Self-love you see prompts me eagerly to accept the opportunity you offer me of improving my mind by a correspondence with you [. . .]'; see Elizabeth Hitchener's letters to Shelley printed in the notes of *PBSL* i 98ff.

²⁰ This explanation reflects the situation of the two protagonists, based loosely on William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, of Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter* (1805). Harriet Westbrook sent this novel to Shelley in July 1811, and Shelley told Hogg that Harriet 'desired my opinion with earnestness – what is this tale but I shall read it tonight' (*PBSL* i 122). Having been

Elizabeth Hitchener continues affectionately, 'I long to be introduced to *your Harriet* will she ever permit me to call her so, she shall have a Sister's affection, for are you not the Brother of my soul' (*PBSL* i 145). From this point their letters become intimate. Shelley replied enthusiastically, although now married for just over six weeks, that 'henceforth will I be your's [sic], your's with truth sincerity & unreserve . . . I love you more than any relationship I possess; you are the sister of my soul, its dearest sister' (*PBSL* i 149). With this comment, written not long after his marriage, Shelley has effectively replaced his real sister ('*you* are the sister of my soul') and supplanted his wife ('I love *you* more than any relation I possess) with a schoolteacher he barely knew who wrote uninhibitedly of her feelings for Shelley. Later, Shelley would enjoy a similar correspondence with Teresa Viviani, who wrote openly of her affection for Shelley and who also called him her brother.

Harriet, too, befriended the schoolteacher, and the Shelleys invited Elizabeth Hitchener to join them in Ireland in 1812. An impassioned letter from Shelley to Elizabeth Hitchener reveals the blatant unconcern for her position that their first request for her to join them suggested; he excuses himself and Harriet with the claim that 'the warmth of our hearts ran away with the coolness of our heads; – forgive the fault of friendship' (*PBSL* i 251). Still, Shelley held onto the idea that Elizabeth Hitchener could, and would, join his family in the summer of that year: 'Nothing shall prevent our eternal union in the summer. *I* ought to count myself a favored mortal

convinced of the anti-matrimonial theories of the radical philosopher Glenmurray, Adeline subsequently finds herself forced by the unwanted advances of her mother's new husband to run away. She lives with Glenmurray in a monogamous but marriage-free relationship, the communication of which she finds radically alters the behaviour of both women and men to her. After the first experience of Adeline's being shunned by a friend and his sisters, Glenmurray attempts to convince Adeline to marry him so that her position in society will be protected, and she will not find herself constantly compromised by men who think her union with Glenmurray gives them license to solicit her sexual favours, as well. Adeline refuses to marry Glenmurray, however, and the novel catalogues the exile which an unmarried women in her position faces in society. By 25 July Shelley still had not read the novel (*PBSL* i 123), but it may have contributed to the decision to elope with and marry Harriet only a month later.

with such a wife and friend (these human names and distinctions *perhaps are necessary* in the present state of society)' (*PBSL* i 252). Shelley's own emphasis on the 'necessity' of categorising Harriet and Elizabeth Hitchener as 'wife and friend' reveals his belief that labelling these two women with socially acceptable definitions is of no consequence; in his mind, the distinction between the nature of each relationship is almost non-existent. Even after six months of marriage, Shelley was as passionate as ever about his desire to have Elizabeth Hitchener join his party. He wrote from Dublin in March 1812, 'My brain has scarcely time to consult my heart or my heart to consult my brain, yet with the remaining nature, with thee who constitutest the *Trinity* of my Essence I will converse' (*PBSL* i 270). Shelley here conveys his conviction that Elizabeth Hitchener was necessary to him to make up the 'trinity of his essence': head, heart, and Elizabeth Hitchener, the sister of his soul. Shelley still encouraged Elizabeth Hitchener to believe that she held a special, and indeed superior, position in Shelley's heart, equal or above that of his wife. Newman Ivey White suggests that distance was what gilded Shelley's ideas of Elizabeth Hitchener; he writes that 'Elizabeth's superiority to Harriet in Shelley's eyes was due to her absence, which made her easier to idealize, and to her intellectual and moral qualities' (White i 201).

The Shelleys, still accompanied by Harriet's sister Eliza, left Ireland in April and intended to summer in Wales.²¹ The plans for Elizabeth Hitchener to join them appear to have been settled enough in Shelley's mind that as they chose a house in South Wales he also picked out lodgings for her and her father, and he wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener, 'Oh my friend what shall I say of the scenery but *you* will enjoy

²¹ Shelley wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener on 16 April 1812, 'We left Dublin, and arrived at Holyhead after a passage of wearisome length, we have traversed the whole of Wales, & heard no tidings of a house - [...] We came from Barmouth to Aberystwyth 30 miles in an open boat & at length have arrived at *Rhayader*, the very spot where I spent last summer, & are about to take a house' (*PBSL* i 281).

it with us, which is all that is wanting to render it a perfect Heaven' (*PBSL* i 281). Unable to raise the money to buy the house, however, the Shelleys headed for Cwm Elan, where Shelley was sure of a welcome and a free residence for a time. It appears, according to Shelley's letter of 29 (misdated for 25) April, that Elizabeth Hitchener's main objection to joining the Shelleys was due to rumours that were injurious to her reputation as a teacher; namely, it was being spread around Sussex that Elizabeth was to live with the Shelleys as Shelley's mistress.²² Faced once again with an obstacle to his cherished desires, Shelley rallied the 'sister of his soul' to stick to their plans: 'What! because a few paltry village gossips repeat some silliness of their own invention till they believe it[,] shall those resolves [to join the Shelleys] be shaken which ought to survive the shock of elements & crush of worlds?' (*PBSL* i 288). Hoping it would help convince her, he also asserted that both Harriet and Eliza desired her company and saw nothing improper about her joining them in Wales, repeating for the sisters, 'they will not hear of any alteration', and claiming that 'Harriet & Eliza determine that you shall be ours' (*PBSL* i 289). For his part, Shelley

²² A similar charge was repeated against Shelley while he maintained Claire Clairmont in his household. The accusations centred on an infant child, Elena Adelaide. The archives at Naples registered her birth, to Percy Shelley and 'his wife', on 28 December 1818. The child was later placed in a foundling home, where she died in June 1820. At this time the Shelleys' former servant, Paolo Foggi, attempted to blackmail Shelley over this child; although his accusations are not known, just over a year later their French maid Elise repeated rumours to the Hoppners that Shelley had had a child by Claire Clairmont, abandoned it in Naples, and was abusive to Mary Shelley. Lord Byron heard of the rumour through the Hoppners (the English consulate in Venice who had cared for Claire and Byron's daughter Allegra). In response to a letter passing on this gossip, Byron wrote 'the Shiloh story is true no doubt – though Elise is but a sort of *Queen's* evidence – [. . .] Of the facts however there can be little doubt – it is just like them'. (*BL&J* vii 191). The 'Hoppner Scandal' and the 'Neapolitan Mystery' have urged some scholars to accept Claire Clairmont as Elena Adelaide's mother. The details of these events are most clearly recounted in *MSJ* 249-50 n.1 and 321-22 n. 3. See also *CCL* 645-53, where Marion Kingston Stocking recounts the blackmail attempt and the 'Hoppner Scandal' and comes closest to solving the mystery of Elena Adelaide Shelley's parentage. The charge of Shelley's inappropriate relations with more than one woman was raised again in an unsigned review of *QMab* in 1821: 'A disciple following [Shelley's] tenets, would not hesitate to debauch, or, after debauching, to abandon any woman: to such, it would be a matter of perfect indifference to rob a confiding father of his daughters, and incestuously to live with all the branches of a family whose morals were ruined by the damned sophistry of the seducer'. *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres* 226 (May 19, 1821), pp. 305-08. Reprinted in Newman Ivey White, *The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1938), pp. 55-60. See also James E. Barcus, ed., *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 74-80. The passage quoted here appears in *The Critical Heritage* (p. 79) and *The Unextinguished Hearth* (p. 59).

appealed to Elizabeth Hitchener's attachment to him, asking 'are we or are we not to sacrifice [sic] an attachment [. . .] to the swinish multitude, to the indiscriminating million [. . .]. But my beloved friend the good will not rail at us; *they* will not say that we are the slaves of contemptible passions, we who aspire to the eminence which *they* have gained' (*PBSL* i 294-95). Shelley even went so far as to write to Elizabeth Hitchener's father, promising (or threatening): 'you will forfeit the esteem I have thus acquired for your character, if you *endeavour* by parent{al} command to change the decisions of {her} free-born soul' (*PBSL* i 291).

During this period of convincing Elizabeth Hitchener to join him, while the Shelleys were staying at Cwm Elan, Shelley composed 'The Retrospect: Cwm Elan 1812'. In this poem Shelley reflects, as in the poem he wrote during his first visit to Cwm Elan, on the state of his emotional life, past, present, and future. It is a poem complicated in its manner of referring to his loved ones, and Matthews and Everest identify it as 'Shelley's first poem of any real imaginative complexity, whose cryptic self-revelation anticipates that of *Epipsychidion*' (*Poems* 1 221). 'The Retrospect' highlights the differences between Shelley's two visits to his cousin's estate in Wales. It opens with the opinion that one must possess great objectivity to look upon one's life experiences, and to compare 'thoughts that have passed and thoughts that are / With truth and feeling' (13-14). Early on he characterises his different interpretations of his surroundings, which were informed by his emotional state at each visit. His first visit, in the summer of 1811 just previous to his elopement with Harriet and when he wrote the reflective poem dealing with Harriet Grove's rejection of him ('Death-spurning rocks!'), is described as 'a scene which wildered fancy viewed / In the soul's coldest solitude' (15-16). The present visit with his wife Harriet, in contrast, is a time

when 'peaceful love / Flings rapture's colours o'er the grove, / When mountain, meadow, wood and stream / . . . / Are unison and harmony' (17-19; 22).

The largest part of the poem deals with Shelley's first visit. At that time, he preferred night to day ('The moonlight was my dearer day [. . .] For day with me was time of woe' (23; 27)). He expressed suicidal tendencies ('[I would] long to leave existence there / If with it I might leave the pain' (45-46)). And he explains the sources of his grievances, mentioning all that contributed to his pain, including 'unrequited love' (49; of Harriet Grove), hurt 'pride' (51; of her rejection of him), the absence of a 'friend or kindred dear / Formed to become that spirit's mate' (59-60; possibly the loss of both Harriet Grove and Elizabeth Shelley), and 'broken vows' (65; also referring to Harriet Grove). This section of the poem is filled with sounds of grief: an 'unremitting roar', 'overwhelming woe', 'fitful gasps' (26; 28; 32). These phrases all contribute to the sense of pain that Shelley tried to convey in the description of his first visit to Cwm Elan.

In this poem Harriet Grove has lost her halo of perfection, and Shelley is scathing in his criticism of her treatment of him when she ended their relationship. He states that 'whilst the faithful bosom swelled / Then the envenomed arrow came, / And apathy's unaltering eye / Beamed coldness on the misery' (67-70), suggesting that not only did she reject him when he was still very much in love with her, but that she behaved as if they had had no 'understanding' about a connection, instead maintaining an apathetic and cold stance in the face of his pain. Kenneth Neill Cameron explains that Shelley viewed Harriet's discussing his letters (on 'speculative subjects', according to Charles Grove) with her parents 'as a betrayal, her conformity a retreat from a principled existence' (*Esdaile* 213). This sense of betrayal finds expression in

the poem in the following lines, where Shelley criticises the inability of 'they', i.e., those who are guided by convention instead of the heart, to feel:

*They could not share the bosom's feeling
Which, passion's every throb revealing,
Dared force on the world's notice cold
Thoughts of unprofitable mould,
Who bask in Custom's fickle ray,
Fit sunshine of such wintry day!
They could not in a twilight walk
Weave an impassioned web of talk[.]* (92-99)

Shelley goes on to say that although this multitude might 'shine in courtly glare' and attract love, although they 'might be learned, witty, gay' and 'be princes' friends', they will never be a soul mate to Shelley (104;108; 111). This criticism of the willingness to be swayed by society was not levelled only at Harriet Grove, however. Elizabeth Shelley was also accused of being led by the opinion of others. Shelley wrote to Hogg in May 1811 that his sister 'regards as a sacred criterion the opinion of the world [. . .] where eyes are shut nothing can be seen. She asks: Am I wrong to regard the opinion of the world, what would compensate to me for the loss of it? Good Heaven what a question. Is it not answerable by a word; if you were here by a look – *I too have lost her confidence, that confidence once so unbounded*' (PBSL i 90). And, even at the time of composition of 'The Retrospect'²³ Shelley was trying to convince Elizabeth Hitchener to disregard the opinion of the world and come join him and Harriet despite the rumours that she was to be his mistress. So although in the context of the poem the surrounding material suggests that Shelley has Harriet Grove's reasons for her rejection of him in mind, there is much more outside the poem that would add strength to Shelley's diatribe against those easily persuaded by opinion.²⁴

²³ Matthews and Everest date the composition of 'The Retrospect' between 14 April and c. 18 June 1812. See *Poems* 1 220.

²⁴ Shelley also criticised Mary Shelley's friend Isabella Baxter for this same concern with the world's opinion in the poem which contrasts Shelley and Mary's relationship with Isabella and David Booth's, *Rosalind and Helen* (1817).

A great deal of the poem deals with the topic of friendship, fed by the digression on friendship in Godwin's novel *Fleetwood* which Shelley read earlier that year.²⁵ Again, Shelley's experiences with Elizabeth Hitchener act as a gloss on this section of the poem. In his note to this poem Cameron recalls Shelley's later comments (after his elopement with Mary Godwin) to Harriet Westbrook that the foundation of their relationship was friendship, not passion, and that he hoped she would one day find a 'lover as passionate and faithful, as I shall ever be a friend affectionate & sincere' (*PBSL* i 389). These comments, Cameron suggests, show that their relationship was one of 'love similar to that of friendship but somewhat more "ardent"' (*Esdaile* 283). Although Shelley may have felt all along that his relationship with Harriet Westbrook was based on friendship, any focus of Shelley's on friendship at this time of his life would have included some thoughts of Elizabeth Hitchener, the 'sister of his soul'. The projection from line 132 onwards, which brings the time of the poem into the present, reveals this dual reference to both Harriet Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener. Shelley comments on how changed he is from his former visit, more even than the metamorphosis from 'loathsome worm' to 'butterfly [of a] million hues' (136; 140). He explains, in the way of an answer to his question 'How do I feel my happiness' (144), that 'every gloomy feeling [is] gone' and therefore he can feel only

²⁵ On 24 February 1812 Shelley wrote to Godwin: 'I am sorry that you cannot come to Wales in the summer. I had pictured to my fancy that I should first meet you in a spot like that in which *Fleetwood* met Ruffigny' (*PBSL* i 260). Godwin's discourse on friendship in *Fleetwood* anticipates Shelley's understanding of love which he works through in his representation of sisters (which I discuss in the next chapter) and delineates in the 'Essay on Love'. Godwin writes: 'But what sort of friend is it whose kindness shall produce a conviction in my mind that I do not stand alone in the world? This must be a friend, who is to me as another self, who joys in all my joys, and grieves in all my sorrows, not with a joy or grief that looks like compliment, not with a sympathy that changes into smiles when I am no longer present, though my head continues bent to the earth with anguish. - I do not condemn the man, upon whom a wound through my vitals acts but as a scratch; I know that his feelings are natural; I admit him for just, honest, and humane - a valuable member of society. But he is not the brother of my heart.' (*The Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philip; *Fleetwood*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), v, 148-49.

'friendship and passion' (146; 147). Newman Ivey White sees this section as a 'glowing tribute to Harriet' (White i 235):

O thou! whose virtues latest known,
 First in this heart yet claim'st a throne,
 Whose downy sceptre still shall share
 The gentle sway with virtue there,
 Thou fair in form and pure in mind,
 Whose ardent friendship rivets fast
 The flowery band our fates that bind[.] (153-59)

The last two lines of the poem, referring to the 'reviving ray / Which thou has flung upon my day' (167-68), recall Shelley's first mention of Harriet Westbrook in his earlier poem 'Death-spurning rocks!'. This and the sense of the lines, suggesting the reason for the change that has come about between the former visit to Cwm Elan and the present one, relate unquestionably to Harriet.²⁶ Yet the duality of 'passion and friendship' of line 147, and the fact that 'thou! whose virtues latest known, [...] / Whose sceptre still shall share' the place in his heart with the virtue already residing there (i.e., Harriet's), could be read as referring to two women: Harriet (passion) and Elizabeth Hitchener (friendship). These identifications recall Shelley's earlier mention in his letter to Elizabeth Hitchener (discussed previously) of the necessity of making the distinction of 'wife and friend' (*PBSL* i 252). If, as Newman Ivey White states, the grief of the first visit was due to a general feeling that '[Shelley's] whole world was out of sympathy with him' (White i 235), then the fact that at the time of the second visit he had both a beautiful wife and an 'ardent friendship' with Elizabeth Hitchener would be sufficient to make him feel that all was right in his world.

In July 1812 Elizabeth Hitchener joined Shelley and Harriet at their home in Lynmouth. By December, however, the ideal community was dissolved. In a letter to

²⁶ In another poem addressed to Harriet, Shelley attributes to her the power to lessen his sufferings: 'Harriet! thy kiss to my soul is dear, / At evil or pain I would never repine / If to every sight and to every tear / Were added a look and a kiss of thine'. The sense that she has become everything to him is clear in the statement: 'Thy love is my Heaven, thy arms are my world': ('To Harriet' 1-4; 18).

Hogg Shelley refers to Elizabeth Hitchener as the 'Brown Demon', elaborating that 'she is an artful, superficial, ugly, hermaphroditical beast of a woman [. . .] What would Hell be, were such a woman in Heaven?' (*PBSL* i 336). Richard Holmes speculates that the break-up occurred due to something of a sexual nature.²⁷ Writing to their Irish friend Catherine Nugent, Harriet Shelley also suggests a sexual element to the events that resulted in Elizabeth Hitchener's return to Sussex:

We were entirely deceived in her character as to her republicanism, and in short everything else which she pretended to be. We were not long in finding out our great disappointment in her. [. . .] She built all her hopes on being able to separate me from my dearly beloved Percy, and had the artfulness to say that Percy was really in love with her, and [it] was only his being married that could keep her within bounds now. (printed in *PBSL* i 331n)

Harriet insinuates that Elizabeth Hitchener pestered Shelley with letters until both he and Harriet corresponded with her, explaining to Mrs. Nugent that Shelley 'had seen her twice before his marriage. He thought her sensible but nothing more. She wrote continually, and at last I wrote to her [. . .]' (*PBSL* i 331n). Although this misrepresents Shelley's correspondence with Elizabeth Hitchener, most commentators have accepted the main points of this explanation of the reason for Elizabeth Hitchener's departure. Newman Ivey White elaborates on Hogg's account of Elizabeth Hitchener's last day with the Shelleys, supporting Hogg's 'belief that Eliza Westbrook thought Miss Hitchener personally disgusting and resented her presence and influence over Shelley, that she soon converted Harriet to her point of view, and that between them they rendered her odious to Shelley' (White i 263). Whatever the cause, Shelley successfully removed her from his life and continued to search for another 'sister of

²⁷ Holmes, elaborating into fancy when there is lack of evidence, speculates, 'it is likely that Miss Hitchener met Shelley's own passionate outpourings with what amounted to a frank physical offer, since she was already the Sister of his Soul, and both were agreed on the "Godwinian system." Shelley may or may not have taken it up with any seriousness – the limited circumstances of their lives at this period suggest that if so, it was clandestinely done, the consequence of their walks along the rock shores of Lynmouth' (Holmes 176).

his soul' who could step into the community of devoted and sister-like women which he was trying to create around him.

iii. Fleeting Friendships

She is the reverse of everything bad[;] she inherits all the divinity of her mother. (*PBSL* i 384)

The dedication to Harriet in *Queen Mab* ('To Harriet'), probably written in November or December of 1812,²⁸ shows that Shelley was still idealising her at this time, claiming 'thou wert my purer mind; / Thou wert the inspiration of my song' (9-10). This tribute to Harriet suggests a continued strength of love on Shelley's part, yet their relationship was subtly beginning to weaken. This became clear to Shelley most acutely as his friendship with Mrs. Boinville and her daughter, Cornelia Turner, developed. For the first time Shelley found himself a part of a large social circle that advocated, among other things, vegetarianism. The centre of this circle, Mrs. Jean Baptiste Chastel de Boinville, made a great impression on Shelley, as did her daughter. As late as 1819 Shelley wrote warmly to Thomas Love Peacock (whom he met in the Boinville circle) of his thoughts on Mrs. Boinville and Cornelia:

I could not help considering Mrs. B. when I knew her as the most admirable specimen of a human being I had ever seen. Nothing earthly appeared to me more perfect than her character & manners. [. . .] Cornelia although so young when I saw her, gave indications of her mother's excellencies, & certainly less fascinating, is I doubt not, equally aimiable [sic] & more sincere. (*PBSL* ii 92)

This warm praise, however, does not convey the extent of Shelley's connection with Mrs. Boinville and her daughter in 1813-1814, for in Cornelia Turner Shelley found another woman to complete his preference for triangular relationships.

After the birth of their first child in June 1813, Harriet abandoned her intellectual pursuits in favour of the more conventional interests of babies and

²⁸ For a discussion of the possible dates of composition, see *Poems* 1 261; Cameron, *The Esdaile Notebook*, pp. 217-18; and Dowden i 288n.

bonnets. Hogg relates that Harriet's 'studies, which had been so constant and exemplary, had dwindled away to nothing, and Bysshe had ceased to express any interest in them, and to urge her, as of old, to devote herself to the cultivation of her mind' (Hogg ii 500); Hogg also complained that his walks with Harriet always led them to the bonnet shop (Hogg ii 501). After a short stay in the Lake District, and two months in Edinburgh, the Shelleys finally returned to the south, taking lodgings in Windsor. At this time in his life, Shelley had three homes: his house in Windsor, rooms at his London publisher's, and rooms at Mrs. Boinville's at Bracknell. Shelley spent most of his time at Mrs. Boinville's, and he began studying Italian with Cornelia. In a letter to Hogg, Shelley details the conflicts of his current emotional state:

I have been staying with Mrs. B for the last month; I have escaped, in the society of all that philosophy and friendship combine, from the dismaying solitude of myself. They have revived in my heart the expiring flame of life. I have felt myself translated to a paradise, which has nothing of mortality but its transitoriness; my heart sickens at the view of that necessity, which will quickly divide me from the delightful tranquillity of this happy home – for it has become my home. [. . .]

Eliza is still with us – not here! – but will be with me when the infinite malice of destiny forces me to depart. I am now but little inclined to contest this point. I certainly hate her with all my heart and soul. [. . .]

I have begun to learn Italian again. [. . .] Cornelia assists me in this language. Did I not once tell you that I thought her cold and reserved? She is the reverse of this, as she is the reverse of everything bad. She inherits all the divinity of her mother. (*PBSL* i 383-84)

This letter conveys several events in Shelley's life that combine to reveal the failing state of his marriage. He stresses the joy he gets from the society of the Boinvilles, comparing his existence in their house to 'paradise', a 'delightful tranquillity' which he has come to feel is his 'home'. The thought of returning home 'sickens' him, but he recognises that 'necessity' and 'destiny', i.e., the fact of his marriage, dictates that he must. Shelley also reveals the extent of his hatred for Eliza Westbrook, elaborating his 'unbounded abhorrence for this miserable wretch' (*PBSL* i 384). Cornelia Turner is

raised to the level of female perfection; in a significant omission, Harriet is not mentioned.

But it is the last paragraph quoted above that reveals to the greatest extent the cause of his happiness at Mrs. Boinville's home. Certainly he held Mrs. Boinville in high esteem; but over the Italian lessons with Cornelia Turner, like Paolo and Francesca in the fragment of Dante's *Inferno* that Shelley translated into a notebook along with several other related lines, Shelley was falling in love. In the back of the notebook which Shelley later gave to Claire Clairmont to use as a journal on the elopement tour, Shelley had copied the following lines from Dante's *Inferno* (Canto V):

Ma s'a conoscer la prima radice
 Del nostro amor tu hai cotanto affetto
 Faro come colui que piange e dice.
 Noi leggiamo un giorno per diletto
 Di Lancilotto come amor lo strinse
 Soli eravamo e senza alcun sospetto
 Per piu fiate glie occhi ci sospinse
 Quella lettura, e scolorocci'l viso
 Mo solo un punto fu quel che ci vinse
 Quando leggemmo il disiato riso
 Esser [several words burned] cotanto amate
 Ques [several words burned] fia diviso
 La bo [several words burned] utto tremante,
 Galeotto fu'l libro e che lo scrisse
 Quel giorno piu non vi legemmo avante. (CCJ 62)²⁹

This scene, in which Francesca relates how she and Paolo fell in love over their reading of the story of Lancelot and Guinivere, may have suggested a parallel in Shelley's mind to his own study of Italian with Cornelia Turner. It would not be unlikely that Dante was included in the texts that Shelley studied. The Italian scholar

²⁹ 'But if thou art so eager to learn the starting-point of our love, I will do as he doth who weeps and speaks withal. We were reading for pleasure one day of Lancelot, how love mastered him; we were alone and devoid of all fear. Many a time did that reading impel our eyes to meet, and take the colour from our cheeks, but one point only was that which overpowered us. When we read how by that noble lover the longed-for smile was kissed, this one, who never shall be severed from me, kissed me on the lips all trembling. The book and its author played the part of Gallehaut: that day we read no further therein'.

Michele Barbi has written of this passage that 'the very survival of their love in Paolo and Francesca beyond their death and their condemnation is offered as a sign of the power of that love and to show how hard it was to resist it';³⁰ Shelley may have felt a similar irresistibility in his attraction to Cornelia Turner.

Hogg recounts a visit to Shelley in Bracknell in the spring of 1814 that suggests that Shelley's feelings for Cornelia Turner had taken this unexpected and irresistible turn towards love. Hogg recalls the episode in full:

... A young lady never looks so like an angel, I observed to Bysshe, as when she is handing one a large cup of good strong tea.

'Oh! you wretch,' he exclaimed; 'what a horridly sensual idea!'

A lovely young creature gave him cup after cup. He was greedily swallowing the nectar, discussing and disputing the while, and trembling with emotion; and pouring the precious liquor into his bosom, upon his knees, and into his shoes, and spilling it on the carpet. She stood before him; and, when he had emptied his cup, she gently wiped him with a white cambric handkerchief.

'Was I so far wrong, then?' I asked him in a whisper. For once, the philosopher was impatient of the truth, and returned no answer. (Hogg ii 529-30)

Richard Holmes reduces the content of Hogg's anecdote to support his claim that 'Shelley was on the verge of a breakdown' (Holmes 224). This is a distinct possibility, given Mrs. Boinville's comment to Hogg that 'I think his mind and body want rest. His journeys after what he has never found, have racked his purse and his tranquillity'

(Hogg ii 134). But the extreme agitation, even if exaggerated for Hogg's comic effect, could be a symptom of his nervousness in the presence of a woman with whom he

was falling in love. In an almost incoherent passage in his notebook, Edward

Augustus Silsbee records that Claire Clairmont made at least one mention of Cornelia

Turner in their conversations. Silsbee writes, 'Shelley falls in love with C[ornelia] tells her so' (Silsbee Box 8 folder 3).

³⁰ Quoted in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. John D. Sinclair, 3 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), i, 84.

Besides the fragment of Dante, Shelley also copied out in Latin, 'Nondum amabam, sed amare amabam, quiescebar quid amarem amans amare'.³¹ The sentiment of the Latin phrase suggests that Shelley was looking for someone to love, to fill the spaces left by the hollowing of his passion for Harriet and the absence of a 'sister of his soul' after the disaster with Elizabeth Hitchener. Yet some verses he sent along with the letter to Peacock discussed above suggest that the growing passion for Cornelia Turner was more than strategic attraction.³² In the first four lines, Shelley implies that the looks and the voice of a woman have lodged themselves deeply into his heart³³, 'stir[ring] poison there' (2). The presence of this woman, he claims, 'hast disturbed the only rest / That was the portion of despair!' (3-4). This suggests that the calm tranquillity and happiness which Shelley found at Mrs. Boinville's had been disturbed to the point that it was now adding to his emotional strife. The last four lines of the poem state outright that he had been resigned to stay with his wife, that 'Subdued to Duty's hard control / I could have borne my wayward lot' (5-6). Finally, he ends with a statement that although his relationship with Harriet was going through a difficulty, he had not given up on it: 'The chains that bind this ruined soul / Had cankered then – but crushed it not' (7-8).³⁴ He was not entirely estranged from Harriet,

³¹ *CCJ* 61. This passage can be translated, 'Not yet did I love, but I loved to love, I sought what I should love loving to love', and comes from St. Augustine's *Confessions* III i. Shelley's connection with this phrase is evident in his frequent use of it. It appeared in the 'Advertisement' to the 'Mary' poems in the Esdaile notebook, and he used it again as the epigram for the poem *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude* (*Poems I* 463).

³² The untitled lines are designated in *Poems I* as 'Stanza, written at Bracknell' and begin: 'Thy dewy looks sink in my breast' (*Poems I* 435).

³³ Shelley would continue this theme of the power of a woman's voice and eyes and her ability to affect a person deeply. See, for example, 'To Constantia', *Laon and Cythna*, *The Cenci*, among other poems discussed here.

³⁴ In an appendix to *Poems I*, Matthews and Everest speculate that some lines formerly entitled 'To Emilia Vivani' are in fact related to the lines sent to Hogg, giving as one convincing reason the identical rhyme-scheme and metre, which are unique among Shelley's lyrics (*Poems I* 588-89). The lines do compliment the sentiments expressed in the stanza which I have discussed. Although addressed to a woman named 'Priscilla', the rhythm and stresses of this name are identical to the pronunciation of 'Cornelia', and Shelley may have used the false name to maintain an allusion as to the identity of the woman figured in the poem. Shelley conveys that the woman's form and voice are with him in his dreams. He notes the woman's 'gentle face', her 'trembling lips', and her 'voice divine' (1, 3, 4), and questions 'why comes the morning blank / To quench in day this dream of peace' (5-6), which recalls his portrayal of his time at the Boinvilles as a 'paradise' (*PBSL* i 383), the 'calmest serenest the

although her refusal to breastfeed their daughter and her loss of dedication to his ideals had created a distance between them.³⁵

The heavenly characteristics that Shelley assigned to the Boinville home and his growing feelings for Cornelia revealed to Shelley the lack of deep passion in his feelings for Harriet. After his elopement with Mary Godwin, Shelley explained the events of the spring of 1814 at the Boinville house to his old friend Hogg, highlighting the contrast between the happiness he felt in their company and his 'former friendless & deplorable condition':

In the beginning of spring, I spent two months at Mrs. Boinville's without my wife. If I except the succeeding period [his acquaintance and elopement with Mary Godwin] these two months were probably the happiest of my life: the calmest serenest the most free from care. The contemplation of female excellence is the favorite [sic] food of my imagination. Here was ample scope for admiration: novelty added a peculiar charm to the intrinsic merit of the objects; I had been unaccustomed to the mildness the intelligence the delicacy of a cultivated female. The presence of Mrs. Boinville & her daughter afforded a strange contrast to my former friendless & deplorable condition. I suddenly perceived that the entire devotion with which I had resigned all prospects of utility or happiness to the single purpose of cultivating Harriet was a gross & despicable superstition. –Perhaps every degree of affectionate intimacy with a female, however slight, partakes of the nature of love. [. . .] I saw the full extent of the calamity which my rash & heartless union with Harriet: an union over whose entrance might justly be in[s]cribed

Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate!

had produced. I felt as if a dead & living body had been linked together in loathsome & horrible communion. It was no longer possible to practise self deception: *I believed that one revolting duty yet remained, to continue to deceive my wife.* –

(PBSL i 401-02, emphasis added)

Although written several months after the period described, the final sentence emphasised above reveals that although Shelley recognised that his feelings for Harriet had changed, he continued for a time to play the part of husband and father.

Late in her life, Claire Clairmont is said to have revealed that at Bracknell 'Shelley fell in love with Mrs. Turner. Madame de Boinville and Mrs Turner were

most free from care' (PBSL i 401).

³⁵ See, for example, White i 326; Gelpi, p. 3.

indignant, and broke off his acquaintance; [. . .] The stanzas dated April, 1814, are addressed to Madame de Boinville and Cornelia Turner' (Dowden ii 549). Like the poem 'The Retrospect. Cwm Elan, 1812', 'Stanzas. – April, 1814' opens with a landscape that reflects Shelley's emotional state in the spring of 1814. The image is of a storm rising, the 'moor is dark', clouds and wind are gathering, and 'profoundest midnight shroud[s] the serene lights of heaven' (1; 4). Shelley identifies his home with Harriet as 'sad and silent', with a 'desolated hearth' on which Shelley weeps 'bitter tears' (9; 10). The adjectives throughout the poem present images of darkness and decay ('dim shades', 'wasted autumn', 'frost that binds the dead', 'cloud shadows of midnight' (11; 13; 15; 17)).

Shelley reveals that he was sent away from the Boinvilles, writing 'Every voice cries, Away!' (5). The lines following refer to Mrs. Boinville as a friend, and Cornelia Turner as a lover, and they reveal Shelley's banishment from their house: 'tempt not with one last tear thy friend's ungentle mood; / Thy lover's eye, so glazed and cold, dares not entreat thy stay: / Duty and dereliction guide thee back to solitude' (6-8). What is important in these lines, however, is the suggestion that the lover, Cornelia, was not entirely in accordance with the ban. Although the 'lover's eye' is 'glazed and cold', she *dare* not entreat him to stay. In other words, Cornelia has succumbed to the pressure of her mother (and husband) that Shelley must leave their society. Mary Jane Godwin reported to Lady Mountcashell that Shelley 'had fallen in love with Mrs. Turner, Madame de Boinville's daughter, and paid her such marked attentions Mr. Turner, the husband, had carried off his wife to Devonshire' (Dowden ii 543). Although Kenneth Neill Cameron makes it clear that Mrs. Godwin's dates might be wrong, he suggests that the idea that Shelley had fallen in love with Cornelia, and that Mr. Turner had eventually been forced to remove his wife from Shelley's

company, may well be accurate. Cameron writes, 'it has always been assumed that Shelley was in pursuit of a reluctant Cornelia. But if Turner felt that he had to whisk his wife off to Devon it may be that the interest was not one-sided' (*SC* iv 616). That the lover only '*dares not*' beg him to stay suggests that she did, in fact, have strong feelings for him.

After a section describing the scenes of the decaying season which he will witness, Shelley ends the poem with the statement that his 'remembrance, and repentance, and deep musings are not free / From the music of two voices and the light of one sweet smile' (23-24). In other words, he is destined to be haunted by the thoughts of the two voices of Mrs. Boinville and Cornelia, and of Cornelia's smile. Although Shelley resumed relations with Harriet (she was to give birth to their son, Charles, a month premature on 30 November), Newman Ivey White suspects that 'motherhood introduced interests [to Harriet] that clashed with discipleship', and that 'the recent flurry over Cornelia Turner was perhaps an effect rather than a cause, that Shelley was physically and spiritually ill, from reasons that were not entirely domestic' (White i 331-32). The society that Shelley enjoyed with Mrs. Boinville, and the passion that he felt for Cornelia, was symptomatic of Shelley's persistent desire to be at the centre of a group of female devotees, loving and beloved by all.

iv. The Godwin Girls

Why may not Fanny come to Lynmouth . . . ? (*PBSL* i 312)

The sublime & rapturous moment when [Mary] confessed herself mine, who had so long been her's in secret cannot be painted to mortal imaginations— (*PBSL* i 403)

I think [Claire] would be happier here; and indeed always either with or near me. (*PBSL* ii 430)

In January of 1812, Shelley wrote his first letter to William Godwin, and for several weeks in October and November Shelley's ménage resided in London where his friendship with Godwin intensified. This new friendship, that more truly mirrored the

relationship between Ruffigny and Fleetwood that had struck a chord with Shelley, may have served also to weaken his attachment to Elizabeth Hitchener, who left the Shelleys by the end of November of the same year. Apart from his admiration of the great philosopher, Shelley was particularly fond of Fanny, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay whom Godwin had adopted at her mother's death. As early as July 1812, Shelley wrote to Godwin, 'Why may not Fanny come to Lynmouth with Miss Hitchener [. . .] our hearts long for a personal intercourse with those to whom they are devoted' (*PBSL* i 312). In December he wrote directly to Fanny in a jovial letter, 'it is not until I have assured you that I am one of the most inoffensive of my species, that I live on vegetable food, & never bit since I was born that I venture to intrude myself on your attention. – But to be serious' (*PBSL* i 337). Additionally, Godwin's stepdaughter, Claire Clairmont, developed a sincere attachment to Shelley. In fact, Godwin says in an early letter that 'the moment when I may now call the well-known hand was seen, all the females were on the tiptoe to know' (*PBSL* i 313n).

By May of 1814 Shelley was deeply involved with trying to raise money for Godwin, whose income could never keep up with the needs of his large family. As the negotiations became more and more involved, Shelley moved to London, both to avoid creditors and to make the many meetings with Godwin and moneylenders more convenient. In late May, because the negotiations were taking so long, Shelley wanted to return to Harriet in Bracknell so that they could enact their plans to return to Wales to live. But Godwin held him in London, and Harriet went to Bath. By June, Shelley was spending much time with Mary Godwin and Claire Clairmont; Fanny had been sent away by Mrs. Godwin as 'she had noted Shelley's attentions to Fanny Imlay and had suspected that Fanny was in love with Shelley' (White i 336). Shelley's attention

was soon captured by Mary, the daughter of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, one of Shelley's female ideals. As difficulties developed in his marriage to Harriet, both during and after the Cornelia Turner affair, Mary's perfection seemed to increase proportionately. Finally, they declared their love for each other, and after facing Godwin's disapproval, eloped to the continent in July 1814. Unsurprisingly, Claire was invited to accompany them; curiously, Fanny was left behind.

In a letter to John Taylor, William Godwin relates the basic facts of the events leading up to Shelley's elopement with Mary Godwin and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont. He writes that 'On Sunday, June 26, [Shelley] accompanied Mary, & her sister, Jane Clairmont, to the tomb of Mary's mother, one mile distant from London; & there, it seems, the impious idea first occurred to him of seducing her, playing the traitor to me, & deserting his wife'.³⁶ In a letter to Hogg, Shelley describes how he suddenly came to realise his love for the daughter of William Godwin and Mary

Wollstonecraft:

I speedily conceived an ardent passion to possess this inestimable treasure. In my own mind this feeling assumed a variety of shapes, I disguised from myself the true nature of affection. I endeavoured also to conceal it from Mary: but without success. I was vacillating & infirm of purpose; I shuddered to transgress a real duty, & could not in this instance perceive the boundaries by which virtue was separated from madness, *where* self devotion becomes the very prodigality of idiotism. Her understanding was made clear by a spirit that sees into the truth of things, & affections preserved pure & sacred from the corrupting contamination of vulgar superstitions. No expressions can convey the remotest conception of the *manner* in which she dispelled my delusions. The sublime & rapturous moment when she confessed herself mine, who had so long been her's [sic] in secret cannot be painted to mortal imaginations – (PBSL i 403)

In this letter Shelley endeavours to justify his actions to a friend whose sympathies were decidedly on Harriet's side; yet he does manage to convey the sense that he did not realise the extent of his feelings for Mary until she herself declared her own

³⁶ *The Elopement of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley as Narrated by William Godwin, with commentary by H. Buxton Forman* (London: privately printed, 1911), p. 11.

passion for him. That Mary and Shelley fell passionately in love with each other is evidenced specifically by a poem of Shelley's and an inscription of Mary's written in the copy of *Queen Mab* that Shelley had given her. In the poem 'Mine eyes were dim with tears unshed' Shelley reveals that the 'reward' (15) of Mary's confession of love woke him 'from torture' (18), 'turning to bliss [his heart's] wayward pain' (24).

Likewise, Mary wrote in her copy of *Queen Mab* that 'I love the author beyond all the powers of expression, and [. . .] I am parted from him, dearest and only love – by that love we have promised to each other, although I may not be yours, I can never be another's. But I am thine, exclusively thine. [. . .] I have pledged myself to thee, and sacred is the gift'. Shelley also wrote in the book, inscribing the following humorous anecdote which was presumably meant to invalidate the loving dedication to Harriet: 'Count Slobendorf was about to marry a woman who, attracted solely by his fortune, proved her selfishness by deserting him in prison' (White i 338-39).

Realising that Mary shared his feelings, Shelley wrote to Harriet (then residing in Bath) to come to London (*PBSL* i 389n). Harriet met with Shelley and learned of his passion for Mary Godwin. In a letter written shortly after their meeting, Shelley tells Harriet earnestly that his connection with her 'was not one of passion & impulse. Friendship was its basis, & on this basis it has enlarged & strengthened. It is no reproach to me that you have never filled my heart with an all-sufficing passion' (*PBSL* i 389-90). Newman Ivey White speculates that Harriet may have considered Shelley's love for Mary Godwin as analogous to the passion he had felt for Cornelia Turner, and that his feelings would subside and he would return to her (White i 340-42). But after a month filled with meetings with Godwin, Harriet, and even Mrs. Boinville, Shelley determined to elope.³⁷ Mary and Claire joined Shelley in a chaise

³⁷ F. L. Jones outlines all the meetings, taken from Godwin's diary. See *PBSL* i 390n.

on the morning of 27 July³⁸ and two days later they were on French soil.³⁹ Claire, White speculates, 'needed liberation from "tyranny" too' (White i 346). Fanny, tucked away by her stepmother for protection, was momentarily forgotten.⁴⁰

Shortly after their vows of love were first exchanged, Shelley wrote a poem to Mary which relates the progress of his emotions during his acquaintance with Godwin's daughter. 'Mine eyes were dim with tears unshed' opens with a representation of the frustrating period when Shelley tried to hide, and even deny to himself (as he explained to Hogg in the letter previously discussed), the depth of his feelings for Mary. He then reveals that Mary's declaration of love has revived him, and that he woke 'from torture' (18) when he learned that his love was requited. The fourth stanza, in particular, shares with so many of Shelley's lyrics to sister-figures the idea of the healing voice and the powerful persuading eyes:

Upon my heart your accents sweet
 Of peace and pity fell like dew
 On flowers half dead, thy lips did meet
 Mine tremblingly, thy dark eyes threw
 Their soft persuasion on my brain,
 Turning to bliss its wayward pain. (19-24)⁴¹

³⁸ Godwin noted this event in his journal: 'Five in the morning'.

³⁹ Shelley began the elopement journal that would become the basis for Mary's travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* with a dramatic recount of their rough crossing to Calais and began the entry for 29 July: 'I said - Mary, look. The sun rises over France' (MSJ 7).

⁴⁰ Newman Ivey White takes as his authority the highly dramatised and largely inaccurate letters of Mrs. Godwin to Lady Mountcashell, printed in Dowden ii 542-43. Whether Fanny was away in Wales, as White asserts, or in London, she was left behind. Claire was chosen to accompany Shelley and Mary, according to her revised journal, 'to speak French' (CCRev 351). But there is no question that Shelley wanted Claire's company. He wanted her to be the sister in contrast to Mary's position as the lover, to complete his ideal of triangular relationships and his desire to surround himself with dedicated and adoring women. He could not have known that the sister bond between Mary and Claire was ambiguous; see chapter three for a discussion of Mary and Claire's relationship as sisters.

⁴¹ Especially interesting is the similarity of images between this early poem to Mary Shelley and the lines Matthews and Everest attribute to being written about Cornelia Turner ('Thy gentle face, Priscilla dear'). Both refer to 'trembling' lips (although in the poem to Mary the lips are Shelley's). Both insinuate that the woman's voice is calm and soothing, with Mary's being described as 'accents sweet / Of peace and pity' (19-20) and Cornelia's as 'divine' (4). Finally, both poems assert the affect of the woman on Shelley's state: Mary 'turn[s] to bliss [his brain's] wayward pain' (24), and the loss of the dream of Cornelia's image take away 'this dream of peace' (6). These similarities show that more than Shelley writing love poems to individual women, he was actually formulating his thoughts on the ideal woman and the effect she should have on him.

Figuring himself as almost lifeless, Shelley asserts that Mary's voice falls 'like dew / On flowers half dead', attributing to her the power to bring him back to life. He also notes the power of Mary's eyes to change his state from 'wayward pain' to 'bliss'. The poem closes with the assertion, 'Nor can I live if thou appear / Aught but thyself – or turn thy heart / Away from me' (32-34), which in essence admits a dependence upon Mary which all the previous lines anticipate.

Although later he would try to convince Harriet that because their marriage had been based on friendship *only*, his *passion* for Mary Godwin justified his elopement, in this early poem to Mary he describes his relationship to her as 'sacred friendship' (29). With this term, in this context, Shelley must be thinking again of the description of friendship in Godwin's *Fleetwood*, which also influenced 'The Retrospect'. *Fleetwood's* discourse on friendship calls for a friend to be 'another self',⁴² which anticipates Shelley's own description of love as 'something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness' ('On Love', *Poetry and Prose* 474). This poem to Mary may signal the point in Shelley's consciousness when the idea of complete sympathy shifted from being characteristic of friendship to being the foundation of love. But the distinction between love and friendship was never fully clarified in his mind; and this became one of the difficulties for him as he continued to search for the ideal and perfect sympathy of a friend which so often, and so confusingly, took on the nature of love.

Shelley continued to call Mary his friend as he continued to assert her power over him in the 'Dedication' to *Laon and Cythna*, drafted most likely during the summer of 1817. This poem is similar to 'Death Spurning Rocks!' and 'The Retrospect. Cwm Elan 1812' in that Shelley reflects over his past loves in order to

⁴² William Godwin, *Fleetwood*, p. 148.

illuminate and idealise his current relationship. Lamenting that 'love should be a blight and snare / To those who seek all sympathies in one' (46-47), Shelley reveals that 'such once I sought in vain' (48) before his world became dominated by 'black despair' (48). He continues to condemn his past relationships in order to further deify his current connection with Mary:

Yet never found I one not false to me,
 Hard hearts, and cold, like weights of icy stone
 Which crushed and withered mine, that could not be
 Aught but a lifeless clog, until revived by thee. (51-54)

Some lines cancelled in the draft of this stanza more specifically refer to 'One whom I found was dear but false to me / the other's heart was like a heart of stone / Which crushed & withered mine'.⁴³ Kenneth Neill Cameron identifies the 'one' who was 'false' as Harriet Grove, and the 'other' with the 'heart of stone' as Harriet Shelley (*GY* 281-82). Whether these identifications are accurate is not as important here as the fact that Shelley is again representing himself as lifeless, due to infidelity, rejection, or more simply, failure at finding 'all sympathies in one' (47). Here, in the dedication to *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley rejects all past love and sees Mary as the life-giving source, the 'Friend, whose presence on my wintry heart / Fell, like bright Spring upon some herbless plain' (55-56). Again, without friendship (or love), Shelley feels he doesn't live.

It is beyond the scope of this study to delineate the whole of Shelley's relationship with Mary. Investigations of their initial happiness, the deaths of their children and the affect those deaths had on both Shelley and Mary, and the poems which Shelley wrote which trace the waxing and waning of their connection, abound, and I could not hope to shed new light on this well-covered territory. What I have

⁴³ BSM xiii 229.

attempted here is to show that when Shelley first fell in love with Mary Godwin in 1814, his expressions of their connection, in poetry and letters, did not differ significantly from the first sparks of feeling that he expressed for Harriet Grove, Harriet Westbrook, Elizabeth Hitchener, or Cornelia Turner. Perhaps it is a tribute to Mary Shelley that she was a part of Shelley's life for so long despite his continued searching for the friend/lover, the sister of his soul, that he once thought he had found in her.

There are no letters from Shelley to Fanny Godwin after the early, jovial one of 1812 quoted previously, when he was eager to have her join him and Harriet in Wales. However, the few surviving letters of Fanny to her half-sister Mary after Mary, Shelley, and Claire's return from their second visit to the continent in 1816 mention Shelley often and show that she felt a continued sense of friendship towards him. Writing of Shelley's journey around Lake Geneva with Lord Byron, Fanny claims 'I am angry with Shelley for not writing [poetry about this journey] himself. She goes on to explain what she gets from his poetry, simultaneously praising him and castigating her own ideas:

It is impossible to tell the good that poets do their fellow creatures – (at least those that can feel) whilst I read I am a poet – I am inspired with good feeling's, feeling[sic] that create perhaps a more permanent good in me, than all the every day preachments in the world it counteracts the dross which one gets in the every day concerns of life – & tells us there is something yet in the world to aspire to – something by which succeeding ages may be made happy, or perhaps better[.] If Shelley cannot accomplish any other good – he can this divine one. – laugh at me but do not be angry with me for taking up your time with my nonsense. (CC i 57)

This passage displays Fanny's admiration for and faith in Shelley as a poet, asserting that if all of his social goals come to nothing he still has the power and the talent to effect this 'divine' purpose. But the passage also highlights Fanny's sense of

worthlessness. The word 'divine', used in relation to Shelley, contrasts with the repetition of the phrase 'every day'. Fanny may have seen herself as more a part of the 'every day' than of the 'divine'. Her response to poets suggests that she feels a need to better herself, that perhaps she equates herself with the 'dross' that makes up the 'every day concerns of life'. In many ways, this passage represents a continuity with the retrospectively cryptic passage from an earlier letter that may hold clues to her decision to commit suicide: 'I have determined never to live to be a disgrace to such a mother [i.e., Mary Wollstonecraft] – I have found that if I will endeavour to overcome my faults I shall find being's to love and esteem me' (CC i 49).

Fanny Godwin found herself in the unfortunate position of wanting to remain loyal to her sisters and Shelley, ('believe my dear friend's that my attachment [sic] to you has grown out of your individual worth, and talents, & perhaps also because I found the world deserted you I loved you the more' (CC i 49)) while still living under the care of Mrs. Godwin ('Mamma and I are not great friends – but always alive to her virtues – I am anxious to defend her' (CC i 80)). It is clear that Fanny always championed those whom fortune turned against; perhaps this is why she took it upon herself to relay the facts of Godwin's troubled financial situation to Shelley and Mary when Godwin refused to communicate with them. She wrote to Mary, 'I think it my duty to tell you the real state of the case' (CC 59), especially because she suspected that Shelley and Mary deceived themselves about Godwin's financial state (CC i 59; 81). Additionally, Godwin may have asked Fanny (either directly or indirectly) to convey his financial problems to her sister and Shelley.

Shelley saw Fanny in London towards the end of September in 1816, and at this meeting it appears that Shelley discussed his efforts to raise £300 to pay off a debt of Godwin's, a promise which, in July, Fanny had accused Shelley of forgetting. On

26 September Fanny wrote a more cheerful letter than usual, adding the optimistic plea 'tell Shelley as soon as he knows certainly about Longdill to write that [Godwin] may be eased on that score – for it is a great weight on his spirits at present –' (CC i 75). The tone of her letter and her confidence that Shelley would successfully negotiate the payment suggest that Shelley had led her to believe that it was only a matter of time before the money would be available. More likely, as Fanny herself speculated in her next letter, '(to own the truth & not offend either of you) I cannot help thinking that he had arranged every thing with Longdill before I parted from him in Piccadilly the other day & for wise reasons he chose not to be frank with me'. Fanny further protested, 'if Shelley had told me to inform papa that he must not expect to have the whole £300 it would have done much better than leading him to expect the whole would come in a fortnight' (CC i 81). But again, in this letter Fanny shows her admiration of Shelley and her inability to think ill of him, excusing his decision to lie to her as the result of some 'wise reasons' of his own.

Shelley's letter to Godwin on 2 October conveyed the devastating news. In the second sentence, without even a line of address or greeting, Shelley writes bluntly, 'I cannot send you £300 because I have not £300 to send. I enclose within a few pounds the wrecks of my late negotiation with my father' (PBSL i 509). According to William St Clair, however, he did enclose a check for £200. Godwin returned it, proclaiming 'no consideration can induce me to utter a cheque drawn by you and containing my name'.⁴⁴

Shelley probably knew that he would not be able to pay the whole debt when he saw Fanny in late September, but he also probably felt unable to convey the truth to her. Fanny's despairing letter of 3 October, which Mary called 'stupid' in her journal

⁴⁴ William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 409ff.

(MSJ 138), records in painful detail the effect Shelley's letter had on Godwin.

'Shelley's letter came like a thunderclap', she wrote, explaining that as she watched Godwin's face while he read the letter she 'perceived that Shelley had written in his most desponding manner' (CC i 81). This letter details the conflicting situations which Fanny was faced with, thinking Mary and Shelley used her as the butt of their jokes, feeling inferior, and wanting to be loved by them and thought well of by them. Fanny was afraid of offending Shelley and Mary, yet she was determined to spell out Godwin's troubles clearly. And finally, with her expressed dedication to truth and hatred of gossip, Fanny felt herself obligated to defend Mrs. Godwin against Shelley's and Mary's criticisms, even though she herself did not get along with her stepmother.

On 7 October Shelley wrote out a new check, made out to Joseph Hume, and sent it back to Godwin,⁴⁵ but it did not arrive before Fanny had made her own plans.

On 8 October, Mary records in her journal that they received a letter from Fanny, but this letter is now lost. In 1872, Lady Shelley claimed that this letter stated that Fanny was coming through Bath on her way to join her Wollstonecraft relatives in Wales.⁴⁶

It is not known whether either Shelley or Mary saw her in Bath, but Marion Stocking makes the interesting speculation that if he did see Fanny, Shelley, 'not feeling free to invite her to join them because of the closely guarded secrecy of Claire Clairmont's pregnancy, sent her on her way' (CC i 89n). There are many suggestions put forth for

⁴⁵ See Walter E. Peck, *Shelley: His Life and Work*, 2 vols (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), ii, 437.

⁴⁶ Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1991), pp. 126-27; 430n. There were no Wollstonecraft relatives in Wales. Mrs. Bishop and Everina Wollstonecraft, sisters of Mary Wollstonecraft, ran a school in Dublin. Lady Shelley, from whose letters Sunstein takes her information, must have been convinced by a letter from William Godwin to W. T. Baxter which contained what became the 'official' story of Fanny's death: 'From the fatal day of Mary's elopement, Fanny's mind had been unsettled, her duty kept her with us: but I am afraid her affections were with them. Last Autumn she went to a friend in Wales - and there was a plan settled about her going from thence to spend a short time with her Aunts in Dublin, but she was seized with a cold in Wales which speedily turned to an inflammatory fever which carried her off' (quoted in White i 473). The hiding and falsifying of the facts of Fanny's death were so complete that as late as 9 August 1817, nine months after Fanny's death, her brother Charles Clairmont wrote to Mary: 'Tell me [...] if you see Fanny often' (CC 108).

Fanny's motives for suicide,⁴⁷ but the only certainty is her suicide letter: 'I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare' (CC i 86).

Although the death of his first wife Harriet, discovered a month after Fanny's suicide, brought shock as well as a legal battle to gain custody of his children, it was the death of Fanny that shook Shelley the most. Writing to Byron of the birth of Byron's daughter by Claire Clairmont in January 1817, Shelley twice emphasises the effect of an event which he cannot name, explaining that the shock of Harriet's suicide followed 'in the train of a far severer anguish', and mentioning an event of the past autumn 'that affected me far more deeply' (PBSL i 530).

After the death of Harriet, Shelley hastily married Mary, hoping that it would allow him to gain custody of his children by his first wife. He wrote to Mary on 16 December that 'I told [Longdill] that I was under contract of marriage to you; & he said that in such an event all pretences to detain the children would cease' (PBSL i 520). Yet he still calls the marriage institution 'a mere form' (PBSL i 520), and his letter to Claire Clairmont written on the day of his marriage to Mary expresses his continued disrespect for the institution: 'Nothing could be more provoking than to find all this unnecessary [. . .] However, they will now be satisfied and quiet' (PBSL i 524). In this letter he notes with disdain the 'magical' effects of the ceremony, which brought immediate 'polished and cautious attentions' and 'kindness' from Godwin and 'affectation, prejudice, and heartless pride' from Mrs. Godwin (PBSL i 525).

⁴⁷ The most comprehensive consideration of Fanny Godwin's motives for killing herself is in Burton R. Pollin, 'Fanny Godwin's Suicide Re-examined', *Études Anglaises* 18 (1965), pp. 258-68. Burton purposes to offer evidence to disprove all theories of Fanny's motives except one: that she killed herself because she was in love with Shelley and he chose her sister over her.

The marriage, however, proved to have no influence on Shelley gaining custody of his children by Harriet. The Westbrooks, who had taken possession of the children on Harriet's death, sought the protection of the Chancery court, petitioning for the prevention of Shelley keeping his children. Shelley explained to Mary the charges filed by the Westbrooks:

They have filed a bill, to say that I published *Queen Mab*, that I avow myself to be an atheist & a republican; with some other imputations of an infamous nature.⁴⁸ This by Chancery law I must *deny* or *admit* upon oath, & then it seems that it rests in the *mere* discretion of the Chancellor [sic] to decide whether those are fit grounds for refusing me my children. (*PBSL* i 527)

But it was not just the possession of Harriet's children that was at stake. After the Chancery suit was settled against Shelley, he revealed the lasting repercussions in a letter to Byron: 'it may become necessary that I should quit the country. It is possible that the interference exercised by Chancery in the instance of my two other children might be attempted to be extended to William' (*PBSL* i 547). The Chancery did not pursue William Shelley, and it was almost a year before the Shelleys and Claire decided to return to Italy because of Shelley's failing health. He had changed his legal status towards Mary ('if it be a change' as he wrote to Byron (*PBSL* i 539-40)), to influence the decision of the Chancery suit, but he was unsuccessful. And despite this more formal tie, just as with his marriage to Harriet and his friendship with Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley continued to organise himself into situations in which he could enjoy the love of a wife and the friendship of a 'sister'.

Probably the most important of the women whom Shelley saw as a sister-figure was Claire Clairmont, who lived with Shelley and her stepsister off and on until Shelley's death in 1822. Her status as third began, well before the legal marriage of Shelley and Mary in 1817, when she accompanied the couple on their elopement tour

⁴⁸ These included charges of blasphemy. For the complete text of the bill, see Thomas Medwin, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp. 463-68.

in 1814. Whether or not Claire Clairmont's relationship with Shelley was explicitly sexual (and all commentators have their own ideas on this matter), they were certainly close enough to disturb Mary's sense of security. Chapter three fully explores the evidence of this strained relationship between Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley; but here I am concerned with Claire's relationship to Shelley. In many ways, Claire Clairmont was to fulfil the roll of 'sister of my soul' that was vacated by Elizabeth Hitchener, to make up the third point of the triangle that Shelley preferred. Shelley guided Claire Clairmont's reading merely by means of what he had in his household once they had returned to London.⁴⁹ Claire Clairmont's journals show that besides *The Curse of Kehama* Claire was reading other Shelley favourites, including Godwin's *Political Justice* and Sir James Henry Lawrence's *Empire of the Nairs* (CCJ 44-59). As Shelley first began writing to Elizabeth Hitchener in order to enlighten her, so too did his friendship with Claire Clairmont begin with the intent of improving her mind. Three weeks into the elopement tour, Mary records in her journal that 'Shelley & Jane talk concerning J's character' (MSJ 18). And at one point they had an epistolary relationship, while Claire was living with a family in Florence,⁵⁰ that nevertheless lacked the depth of intellectual exchange that characterised the Hitchener correspondence.

'To Constantia Singing' is the poem most often discussed in relation to Shelley's feelings for Claire Clairmont. The name Constantia, which Claire adopted

⁴⁹ Shelley encouraged everyone around him to read the books that he most enjoyed. In his first letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley tells her he has had a copy of Locke sent to her, and that she should obtain from Captain Pilford, at whose house they first met, George Ensor's *On National Education* (1811) and Southey's *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) (PBSL i 97), which he later calls 'my most favourite poem' (PBSL i 101). Two days later Elizabeth Hitchener wrote to tell Shelley that the Locke had arrived and that she was 'highly delighted' with what she had read so far (PBSL i 98n).

⁵⁰ At the urgings of Lady Mountcashell, former pupil of Mary Wollstonecraft and described by Byron as 'Claire's Minerva' (BL&J ix 205), in October of 1820 Claire Clairmont left the Shelleys to reside as a paying guest at the Bojti household in Florence. Lady Mountcashell encouraged this move because she saw the strain that Mary was under with Claire in the house, and she also felt it would be best for Claire if she extracted herself from Shelley's influence.

and had engraved on her tombstone at the cemetery in Antella, just outside of Florence, came from Charles Brockden Brown's novel *Ormond; or, the Secret Witness* (1799). Peacock explained that Shelley was 'especially fond of Brockden Brown, and he asserts that the heroine of *Ormond*, Constantia Dudley, 'held one of the highest places, if not the highest place in Shelley's idealities of female character' (Peacock 656-57). It does not seem likely that Shelley meant to suggest that Claire possessed the perfections which he evidently saw in the heroine of *Ormond*, except in the category of singing. The comment in *Ormond* that 'if ever human tones were qualified to convey the whole soul, they were those of [Constantia's] when she sung'⁵¹ is an accurate description of what Shelley meant to convey in his poem. Matthews and Everest place the composition of this poem between April 1817 and January 1818, and on 19 January, Claire wrote in her journal 'copy part of Verses to Constantia' (CCJ 79). Edward Augustus Silsbee recorded in the Shelley notebook that he acquired from Claire, which contained a copy of this poem, 'written at Marlowe 1817 wd not let Mary see it'.⁵²

Shelley's praise for Claire's singing voice is unmistakable in this lyric; he claims that her voice is able to transport him beyond the physical world. Initially, her voice is described in terms that suggest its gentleness; it is 'slow rising like a Spirit' and it 'lingers / O'ershadowing me with soft and lulling wings' (1-2). But Shelley quickly turns his focus to the effect the voice has on him, which is violent and physical in contrast to the voice's gentleness. Shelley describes the effect on him:

My brain is wild, my breath comes quick,
The blood is listening in my frame,
And thronging shadows fast and thick
Fall on my overflowing eyes,

⁵¹ Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; or the Secret Witness, The Novels and Related Works of Charles Brockden Brown*, eds. Sydney J. Krause, S. W. Reid, and Russel B. Nye, 6 vols (Kent State University Press, 1977-87), ii, 187.

⁵² *MYR* v pp. 18; 29.

My heart is quivering like a flame. (5-9)

As Judith Chernaik points out, these are the 'physical symptoms that precede trance and the vision that follow' (Lyrics 53); and Shelley concludes the stanza, and affirms Chernaik's charge that he enters a trance, with the resignation that 'I am dissolved in these consuming ecstasies' (11). By the end of the poem, Shelley has experienced such a frenzied vision of the 'wild lessons [that] mad men learn: / Long thus to sink - thus to be lost and die / Perhaps is death indeed' (34-36), that he pleads for the singer to stop. And yet, though she sings no more, the power to sustain the manic vision remains, and he closes the poem with the assertion of this continuing power: 'even while I write my burning cheeks are wet - / Such things the heart can feel and learn, but not forget!' (43-44).

Shelley was extremely attached to Claire throughout his life, and his letters to her from the last months of his life are affectionate as he pleads with her to return to his household with Mary to live.⁵³ Shortly after her departure to live with the Bojtis in Florence, Shelley wrote her a tender letter, opening it with 'My dearest Clare' and urging her to keep up her spirits:

They tell me you looked very melancholy and disconsolate, which they impute to the weather. You must indeed be very uncomfortable for it to become visible to them. Keep up your spirit, my best girl, until we meet at Pisa. But for Mrs. Mason [Lady Mountcashell], I should say, come back immediately and give up a plan so inconsistent with your feelings - as it is, I fear you had better endure - at least until you come here. You know, however, whatever you shall determine on, where to find one ever affectionate Friend, to whom your absence is too painful for your return ever to be unwelcome. (*PBSL* ii 241-42)

Shelley reveals a deep attachment to Claire and a concern for her well-being in the terms of endearment he uses ('my best girl') as well as in his characterisation of

⁵³ Shelley was always generous to people in difficulty. In 1812 he and Harriet extended an invitation to Catherine Nugent to come to them (*PBSL* i 297; 309n). He also extended an invitation to Keats to join the Shelleys in Pisa to recover his health, stating 'Mrs. Shelley unites with myself in urging the request, that you would take up your residence with us' (*PBSL* ii 221).

himself as an 'ever affectionate Friend'. He emphasises that their separation is against his wishes, and insinuates it is against her own, as well. He also suggests, through a negative assertion that 'your absence is too painful for your return ever to be unwelcome', that her presence is healing to him. All of these expressions of fondness and regard seem to deny the anxiety and discomfort that Claire's presence in the household caused Mary, but a later comment in the letter suggests that by this time Shelley was thinking more in terms of his separation from Mary instead of his connection to her. He mentions to Claire some plans to cruise to Greece, Syria, and Egypt with a 'man of large fortune', and he writes invitingly that 'it would give me the greatest pleasure, and the pleasure might be either doubled or divided by your presence or absence', adding a cautionary note to 'lay to your heart what I say, and do not mention it in your letter to Mary' (*PBSL* ii 242-43). Shelley was interested enough in the *idea* of going to the near east that he began searching for Arabic grammar books (*PBSL* ii 241; 243). His desire for Claire to keep this plan a secret from Mary encourages the interpretation that he was going to go without Mary, and possibly, with Claire. It seems that as his relationship with Mary suffered from their inability to cope with their son's death, he turned to Claire, as he had always done, for comfort and friendship.

The letters that Shelley wrote to Claire Clairmont until she finally joined the Shelleys in June 1822 are full of similar expressions of devotion. In December 1821, Shelley wrote, 'Do not think that my affection & anxiety for you ever cease, or that I ever love you less although that love has been & still must be a source of disquietude to me' (*PBSL* ii 367). The following spring Shelley maintained a clandestine correspondence with Claire, instructing her to 'address me at the Post Office – not Hodgson (for that name is liable to mistakes, but) Joe James' (*PBSL* ii 402) –

presumably to keep the frequency of their letters a secret from Mary. In the last extant letter that Shelley wrote to Claire Clairmont, although he suggests what he thinks would be best for her, it is actually a claim of what Shelley himself most needs: 'I think you would be happier here; and indeed always either with or near me' (*PBSL* ii 430). In this seemingly altruistic suggestion Shelley reveals a request that Claire Clairmont probably could not fail to understand. In actuality, it is the selfish claim that 'I think *I* would be happier' if she were 'with or near me', the expression of an ever-present desire to have a second woman to make up the triangle and be the devoted disciple and friend.

v. Italian Platonics

I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal. (*PBSL* ii 434)

While Claire Clairmont was still a part of the household, in November 1819 she and the Shelleys became acquainted with another woman who commanded Shelley's attention, albeit for a very short period of time. Sophia Stacey, the ward of Shelley's uncle Robert Parker, and her travelling companion Corbet Parry-Jones, moved into the house on Via Valfonda in Florence where the Shelleys and Claire had settled at the end of September to await the birth of Percy Florence.⁵⁴ Mary, who was still suffering from the shock of the death of their son William, gave birth on 12 November, just two days after Sophia Stacey and Corbet Parry-Jones moved into the Palazzo Marini. Although she recovered quickly, there would have been at least a week when she would have been unable to go out; this was when Shelley got to know his young 'cousin'. Shelley visited the Uffizi with Sophia, he walked in the Cascine

⁵⁴ For excerpts from Sophia Stacey's diary from this period, see Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Shelley and his Friends in Italy* (London: Methuen, 1911), pp. 96-102.

with her, and he helped her with her Italian. He arranged her travelling plans to Rome and, as Sophia wrote in her diary, 'Mr. Shelley walked with me to see our carriage for Rome, and the step being high he lifted me out of the carriage'.⁵⁵ After several weeks Shelley sent Sophia and her companion off in December with a letter of introduction to the Signora Mariana Dionigi in Rome (*PBSL* ii 167-68) and a literary pocket annual in which he had copied three poems that she might want to set to music: 'Good Night', 'The fountains mingle with the River' ['Love's Philosophy'], and 'Time Long Past'.⁵⁶

Although he was able to help Sophia in practical ways, there were underlying intentions that were more than altruistic. Kenneth Neill Cameron notes that 'both Sophia's journal and Shelley's and Mary's comments indicate a mild flirtation, with Shelley, the black sheep of the family, talented but dangerous, gallantly courting his wide-eyed cousin' (*GY* 297-98). For her part, Mary wrote lightly to Maria Gisborne that of the two women 'the younger one was entousiasmée to see [Shelley]' (*MSL* i 118). Claire Clairmont records in her journal the arrival of several letters from Sophia Stacey throughout the first half of 1820 (*CCJ* 117ff), and Mary records in her journal writing to Sophia on 12 January (*MSJ* 305). Characteristic of her method of dealing with troublesome or difficult events, Mary does not mention Sophia in her journal again. But while Sophia was in Florence, Shelley enjoyed her company. Like Claire Clairmont, Sophia Stacey had a well-trained, beautiful singing voice that enchanted Shelley, and he often listened to her as she practised. He gave her poems to set to music, and she herself inspired at least two poems that he may or may not have shown her.

As Cameron notes, the lyrics which Shelley wrote for Sophia to sing, 'though not ostensibly intended to have any direct reference to her, could be so taken' (*GY*

⁵⁵ Quoted in Angeli, p. 99.

⁵⁶ Angeli, p. 99; White ii 172-73.

298). In the poem 'Thou art fair and few are fairer' Shelley pays the usual compliments to his new love.⁵⁷ Just as he did for all the other women for whom he wrote poems, Shelley praises the power of Sophia Stacey's eyes, which can 'gaze the wisest in to madness' (8). And, as in 'To Constantia, Singing' in tribute to Claire Clairmont's singing, Shelley praises Sophia's musicality, revealing not only its beauty but, like Constantia's voice, the extent of its effect on him:

If the fainting soul is faintest
 When it hears thy harp's wild measure,
 Wonder not that when thou speakest
 Of the weak my heart is weakest. (15-18)

These lines could not have failed to convey a message of interest to the sentimental young girl whose curiosity to see her 'cousin' had been great. Comments such as 'Thou art fair, and few are fairer / Of the Nymphs of earth or ocean' (1-2) and 'as one who feels an unseen spirit / Is my heart when thine is near it' (23-24) would flatter any young woman and encourage any attraction that may have been already building. Sophia's point of recording in her diary that Shelley lifted her out of the carriage which she was to take to Rome is a more substantial suggestion of Sophia's feelings of flattery and attraction to her 'cousin'.

Yet the private lyrics which Newman Ivey White states were 'intended for Sophia Stacey' (White ii 174) show that Shelley had a cautionary realisation that the search for an ideal sister/lover was useless and damaging, both to his marriage and to his health. In the short poem 'I fear thy kisses, gentle maiden' Shelley's reassurance that his behaviour will not lead to anything improper may have been directed to himself as much as to Sophia.⁵⁸ His assertion in the final lines that '*Innocent* is the

⁵⁷ In a short memoir quoted in Angeli, Sophia Stacey wrote, 'On hearing me frequently play the harp, he expressed a wish to write some lines for me, and a short time afterwards he placed 'Thou art fair and few are fairer' in my hands' (p. 102).

⁵⁸ Judith Chernaik asserts a hesitation to subject this poem to 'extensive literary analysis' (*Lyrics* 280). She presents this poem in an appendix in which she expresses doubt that the eight-line form is a complete poem. Working through the draft (found in BSM xviii 115-16) she proposes a probable order

heart's devotion / With which I worship thine' (7-8; emphasis added) could be an attempt to convince himself as much as Sophia that his attraction is harmless and non-threatening. The poem betrays the fact that it is Shelley, alone, who has something to fear. He fears Sophia's appearance, her movements, and her kisses, because he recognises in them the seeds of attraction and idealisation that are so destructive to his health and happiness; as he would later write to Teresa Viviani, love and health cannot coexist within him. Yet these lines to Sophia suggest that it is more than poor health that he fears. Instead, it is the disruption that would result from any action on Shelley's part to pursue the imaginative idealisation of Sophia as a sister spirit as he had done with Elizabeth Hitchener. 'My spirit is too deeply laden', Shelley writes, 'Ever to burthen thine' (3-4). In addition to the grief over William's death, Mary's distancing depression, and his own constant bad health, Shelley has also come to realise that the search for the ideal sister/lover, a third point to make a triangle of his relationship with Mary, was a major source of pain in his life.

It was during Claire's first visit to the Shelleys after leaving for Florence at the end of November 1820, that Teresa Emilia Viviani was introduced to the Shelley community. The first mention of Teresa Viviani comes from Claire Clairmont's journals: 'Wednesday, Nov 29th. Go with M. to a funzione in the church of San Niccolo. Pacchiani Fudge & Campbells. Then with Pacchiani to the Convent of St. Anna. The beautiful Teresa Viviani, Madame Aust & Bassanti' (CCJ 189). Teresa (called Emilia by the Shelleys and Claire) had been locked in a convent by her father until she could be suitably married; in this she resembled Harriet Westbrook, whom

of composition, and suggests that Mary Shelley, who first printed the lines in the *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: John and Henry L. Hunt, 1824), may have extracted the eight line lyric with authority from Shelley. The authority of the form of the poem is not as essential to this discussion as the emotions and events expressed, so it is included here to further illustrate the nature of Shelley's feelings about Sophia Stacey (the 'presumptive maiden' according to Chernaik (*Lyrics* 279)). See *Lyrics* 277-80 for a complete discussion of this 'textual puzzle'.

Shelley had 'rescued' from an overly oppressive father. Shelley's attachment to Teresa was short-lived, but intense. Once again, as with Elizabeth Hitchener, Shelley let his imagination exaggerate her virtues out of proportion to their reality. The Shelleys and Claire Clairmont called upon Teresa frequently during the spring of 1821. In her Shelley found another 'sister of his soul', and in the poem he dedicated to her, *Epipsychidion*, he calls her 'my heart's sister' (415).⁵⁹

In her letters Teresa's terms of affection were divided equally between Shelley, Mary, and Claire, calling them 'my dear brother', 'my dearest sister', and 'my Claire' (White ii 467; 468; 470).⁶⁰ This sense of kinship, as Newman Ivey White notes, 'struck the right chord for intensifying the new friendship' for Shelley (White ii 249). The earliest surviving letter from Teresa to Shelley contains echoes of Elizabeth Hitchener's claim of being the 'sister of [Shelley's] soul'; in it Teresa writes, 'call me always, if you like, your sister, for so sweet a name is very dear to me; and I too will always call you my dear brother, and will consider you as though you were such indeed. [. . .] Our hearts understand each other, [. . .] they have the same sentiments, and were created to be bound by a strong and constant friendship. I embrace my very dear and beautiful sister Mary, whose company is so agreeable to me' (White ii 467). Teresa looked upon them all as equally dear, maintaining that they were 'angelic creatures', and stating 'I like you, I adore you even, I consider and admire you like three Divinities' (White ii 475). She was eager to praise the wife of her new friend, and she wrote to Mary: 'You have much talent, my Mary, which, together with your virtue and your excellent heart, makes you one of the loveliest of God's or Nature's creatures' (White ii 475). In another letter to Mary, however, she

⁵⁹ All quotations from *Epipsychidion* come from *Poetry and Prose*.

⁶⁰ Newman Ivey White (ii 466-85) includes the translations of sixteen letters or letter fragments written by Teresa Viviani to the Shelleys, eight to Shelley and eight to Mary. All quotations from her letters are from this source.

notices, 'You seem to me a little cold sometimes, and that causes me an uncomfortable feeling; but I know that your husband said well when he said that your apparent coldness is only *the ash which covers an affectionate heart*' (White ii 476). Mary's journals do not reveal how she felt about the fact that her husband was discussing her 'coldness' with a woman with whom he was becoming infatuated, or how she responded to Teresa's assertion that Shelley was right in his estimate of her behaviour. But later Mary was to satirise Teresa Viviani's situation, and Shelley's involvement with her, in her short story 'The Bride of Modern Italy' (1824), and when she wrote to Marianne Hunt to tell her of Teresa's marriage in March 1822, she referred to the event as the 'end of Shelley's Italian platonics' (MSL i 223). As White rightly suggests, 'probably no wife, however confident of her husband's fidelity, could have fully sympathized with Emilia's unrestrained adoration of Shelley' (White ii 252-53).

Shelley's attachment to Teresa developed into a 'sister of my soul' love that he found with so many 'other women'. So as Teresa continued to assure him 'that you have in me a tender Sister and Friend, and that I will cherish you always' (White ii 471), Shelley became more and more enamoured with this young, emotional, Italian woman who openly revealed to him her emotions which seemed to accord perfectly with his own. 'This poor heart is so affected by its cruel wounds that I cannot prevent its giving vent to its grievance with you, my Percy, and to shed upon this paper a drop of the sadness that fills my soul', Teresa wrote in a letter which she explained would be in Shelley's 'own tone' of familiarity (White ii 472). In response to his lament that her freedom would divide them, she replies, 'O my friend! My soul, my heart, can never be parted from my brother and from my dear sisters [. . .] Emilia will seek you everywhere, even were you at the utmost boundaries of the world' (White ii 472).

Teresa was conscious of the intimate tone of her correspondence with Shelley, and

twice she wrote of the potential feelings of jealousy that her 'sisters' might feel. 'My Claire, if she reads this, will say that she is *jealous*: but let her reflect that I do not write thus save to her good brother and to mine', Teresa wrote to Shelley in mid-December (White ii 472). And sometime after the new year, she ends a letter 'by telling you (hoping that Mary won't be *jealous*): "I love you with all my heart, dear Brother!"' (White ii 480). Despite Teresa's faith that the epithets of family connection should prevent any real concern, (and Mary and Claire may have realised this), the term 'sister' was one that intensified Shelley's passion more than it abated it.

In *Epipsychidion*, which Shelley dedicated to 'E[milia] V[iviani]', Shelley shows the extent to which he idealised this new friend, as he had done formerly with Elizabeth Hitchener, far in excess of her real human qualities. Named 'Emily' in the poem, Teresa is described as a 'Seraph of Heaven[,] too gentle to be human, / Veiling beneath that radiant form of Woman / All that is insupportable in thee / Of light, and love, and immortality' (21-24). She is a 'Star above the Storm' (28), the 'Harmony of Nature's Art' (30). For over 100 lines Shelley praises Teresa in language that suggests worship, and his cry, 'Ah, woe is me! / What have I dared? where am I lifted? how / Shall I descend, and perish not?' (123-25) is a realisation of his love for her as well as a deeper understanding that his exaggerated praise will lead him to disappointment (death). Like 'The Retrospect', *Epipsychidion* offers a history of Shelley's former attachments in a way that emphasises the harmony of the present one.

More clearly than any other piece of Shelley's writing, *Epipsychidion* reveals the ideas that Shelley held about sisters. Teresa Viviani, perhaps more like Shelley, emotionally, than any other woman he knew, is called 'Sister of that orphan one' which is interpreted by Donald Reiman and Sharon B. Powers as either Shelley's own, or Mary Shelley's, soul (*Poetry and Prose* 374 n4). With this interpretation there is

immediately presented either a soul sister or a triangular relationship involving Shelley and two sisters, which replicates the situation which Shelley seemed to be searching for his entire life. Further, in a stanza central to a consideration of Shelley's conflation of sister and lover, the sibling connections between all three figures in this situation are suggested thus:

I never thought before my death to see
 Youth's vision thus made perfect. Emily,
 I love thee; though the world by no thin name
 Will hide that love from its unvalued shame.
 Would we two had been twins of the same mother!
 Or, that the name my heart lent to another
 Could be a sister's bond for her and thee,
 Blending two beams of one eternity!
 Yet were one lawful and the other true,
 These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due,
 How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!
 I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*. (41-52)

In these lines Shelley reveals his consciousness that the love he feels for Teresa is not acceptable in the world's eyes. He offers two alternative solutions for his love's impropriety which suggest the very foundations of his thinking about sisters. Initially, he wishes that he and Teresa had been biological twins; this would provide them with a bond in which their affection for one another might be seen to operate on an acceptable social level. Additionally, the twinship would no doubt, in Shelley mind, presuppose the emotional sympathy which Shelley already feels for Teresa. Shelley suggests that within the social restrictions of the world's view of his married state, if Teresa was his sister then he could have her near him as much as he wanted and enjoy the complete sympathy he has with her. The second solution which Shelley puts forth is still more radical: he wishes that he could marry Teresa and that the sharing of Shelley's name would be enough to make her and Mary sisters, 'two beams of one eternity'.

In both of these solutions Shelley figures a sibling-like relationship. Either he and Teresa are twins and Mary remains his wife, or Teresa and Mary become sisters through the sharing of Shelley as a husband. But Shelley realises his marriage is a hindrance to his desire; whatever the definitions of the connections ('one lawful and the other true') Shelley feels deeply that it is Teresa to whom he belongs. In the final lines, echoing poems to other women as well as sentiments expressed or insinuated by the siblings he would create in his poetry, Shelley asserts: 'I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*'.

No one knows for sure whether Shelley and Teresa Viviani were lovers, and although Mary Shelley's comments to Marianne Hunt suggest that the relationship was platonic, in this as in his relationship with Elizabeth Hitchener and Claire Clairmont, there are hints that there may have been a more physical connection. In her conversations with Edward Augustus Silsbee, Claire Clairmont talked several times about Shelley's relationship to Teresa Viviani. In his characteristically brief style, Silsbee records one such conversation thus: 'C says again E. V.^{ani} said in 32 in Belladonna Street – after what has passed with Shelley she cd love no one else. C thinks they were lovers yet S. did nothing when she was married nor did he seem to mourn at it. Jane had engrossed her [for *him*] was that it? He must be in love with someone beside his wife' (Silsbee Box 8 Folder 3). Early in their relationship, Shelley wrote this fragment of a letter to Teresa which suggests more than a little physical intimacy:

Your form, visible to my mind's eye, surrounds me with the gentle shadow of its divine beauty. Many times you thus [?] me. Your dark eyes, ever most beautiful, are above me. I seem to feel your hands on mine and your lips – but then I close my eyes until you cease to love it – then it will be quenched like a flame which lacks fuel. I have suffered much in health today. Your sweet eyes are smiling within me. I no longer think of death: I believe that the soul that is loved by you cannot [breaks off here] (PBSL ii 449)

This could be a fantasy or a memory of an experience of physical contact between Shelley and Teresa. Also, it could be an instance of Shelley trying to figure, through frankly sensual imagery, the emotions which Teresa inspired in him. Nevertheless, in this letter Shelley asserts his dependency on Teresa, and he insinuates that if he is loved by her he need not think of death. Although Shelley breaks off the fragment before adding the final word, it seems likely that he intended it to be 'die'. But what is certain is that several months after the Shelleys had last seen Teresa, Shelley wrote to Byron, 'they have made a great fuss at Pisa about my intimacy with this lady. Pray do not mention anything of what I told you; as the whole truth is not known and Mary might be very much annoyed at it' (*PBSL* ii 347). Nothing exists to determine what 'the whole truth' of Shelley's relationship with Teresa was, but as Shelley feels that it would 'annoy' Mary, then physical intimacy cannot be ruled out.

The Shelleys and Claire Clairmont soon wearied of their friendship with Teresa, and Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert state that 'clearly Shelley and Mary had heard something about Emilia that had hurt and disgusted them' (*MSJ* 597). Something did turn them from her; perhaps for Mary, it was the realisation that once again her husband's attentions had turned from her, and perhaps for Shelley it was recognising an old, unsatisfying habit; perhaps it was related to a request from Teresa, four days before her wedding, for money (*White* ii 484-85).⁶¹ Claire Clairmont told Silsbee that 'Shelley was quite capable of running off with E. Viviani but that he had grown wiser by experience & saw his visions did not come true. He had tired of Harriet & Mary' (Silsbee Box 8 folder 4). Shelley himself referred to the impossibility of finding the embodiment of his vision of the perfect companion in a letter to John

⁶¹ For more information on this request of Teresa's and her estrangement from the Shelleys, see *White* ii 323-26.

Gisborne, written shortly before he died, that sounds like a more mature understanding of the *Alastor* experience:

The 'Epipsychidion' I cannot look at; the person whom it celebrates was a cloud instead of a Juno; and poor Ixion starts from the centaur that was the offspring of his own embrace. If you are anxious, however, to hear what I am and have been, it will tell you something thereof. It is an idealized history of my life and feelings. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal. (PBSL ii 434)

Here Shelley makes reference to Juno, the sister and lover of Jupiter, revealing again his interest in the bond between siblings that does not observe the incest taboo. It creates a link between the incestuous pair and his own relationship with his 'sister', Teresa Viviani ('the person whom it celebrates'). In addition, the cloaking of his situation in terms of the Greek myth of Ixion suggests only more ambiguity as to whether there may have been physical intimacy between Shelley and Teresa. Ixion, making love to a cloud that had been given Juno's form, fathered the centaur. So Shelley, 'making love' to Teresa – whether her form was physically real, or whether he was making love to his idealised image of her – 'fathered' his poem *Epipsychidion*. The formlessness of the cloud does not negate the result of the union; the centaur, and Shelley's poem, were very real results of each union. But, if it were just a case of Shelley idealising a woman from afar, Mary would have no cause for the annoyance that Shelley tells Byron would result from her knowing 'the whole truth' (PBSL ii 347). All that is certain is revealed in Shelley's last sentence to Gisborne in the letter quoted above, for this reveals that Shelley was 'in love' with Teresa, whatever that meant to him. It also reveals that Shelley came to learn, as Claire Clairmont's comment to Silsbee suggests, that he was seeking an impossible dream in 'seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal'.

vi. Shelley's Last Love

Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, 'Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful'. (*PBSL* ii 435-36)

When Shelley first met the heavily pregnant Jane Williams towards the end of January 1821 he had no perception of her fulfilling the role of sister to his soul, for he was still enjoying his relationship with Teresa Viviani. He wrote to Claire Clairmont on 16 January that although Jane was 'an extremely pretty & gentle woman', she was 'apparently not *very* clever' (*PBSL* ii 256-57). Yet Shelley's changing feelings can be traced in the comments that he made to Claire over the months. For example, in May: 'I have got reconciled to Jane'; and in June: 'I like her much better than I did' (*PBSL* ii 292; 296). By the following January (1822), Shelley described Jane Williams as 'more amiable and beautiful than ever, and a sort of spirit of embodied peace in our circle of tempests' (*PBSL* ii 376). Shortly before his death, and amidst the growing estrangement between Mary and himself, Shelley wrote to John Gisborne of the joy he felt in Jane's company as they took excursions in his new boat:

Williams is captain, and we drive along this delightful bay in the evening wind under the summer moon, until earth appears another world. Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, 'Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful'. (*PBSL* ii 435-36)

Shelley makes clear in this letter the growing separation between Mary and himself, neglecting to mention whether Mary joins them on these outings which are so perfect to him. But a further comment made to Gisborne makes it clear that Shelley had lost his connection with Mary: 'I only feel the want of those who can feel, and understand me. Whether from proximity and the continuity of domestic intercourse, Mary does not' (*PBSL* ii 435).

Shelley's feelings for Jane Williams are perceptible in the many lyric poems that he wrote to her in the last months of his life. It appears that, while recognising the

inability to discover his ideal soul mate, and his own tendency to idealise women, Shelley slowly fell in love with Jane. It could be that part of the attraction for Shelley was Jane's devotion to Edward, who was as close a friend to Shelley as anyone had ever been. This put a new element into the triangular relationships for Shelley, whose common habit was to find two 'sisters' both of whom were focused on and devoted to him. With this new situation, Shelley found himself as one of two 'brothers', both of whom were focused on, and devoted to, one woman. Shelley may have come to prefer this new dynamic of the triangular relationship, and his lyrics begin to reveal a developing physical attraction to Jane even as they show a growing appreciation of Edward's friendship. Thus in 'The Serpent is Shut Out from Paradise' (1821) Shelley explains his attachment to and connection with Jane and Edward in terms of his feelings of having to *avoid* them or, more specifically (as suggested by the repeated use of the singular 'friend') having to avoid Jane:

Therefore, if now I see you seldomer,
 Dear friends, dear *friend*, know that I only fly
 Your looks, because they stir
 Griefs that should sleep, and hopes that cannot die.
 The very comfort which they minister
 I scarce can bear; yet I,
 (So deeply is the arrow gone)
 Should quickly perish if it were withdrawn. (17-24)

In these last lyric poems, written to Jane Williams, Shelley presents his emotions in full awareness of the hopelessness of his situation: estranged from Mary, in love with Jane, and thankful for the companionship of Edward.

There are at least eight poems that can be traced to Shelley's relationship with Jane Williams, and they illustrate the movement from restrained admiration in 'The Magnetic Lady to her Patient' to the effects of desperate physical desire in 'Lines Written in the Bay of Lerici' that the poems in between trace through a more subtle progression. G. M. Matthews suggests that because Shelley knew there was no future

in his love affair with Jane, he was led 'to set a supreme value on the immediacy of its day-to-day contexts',⁶² and indeed, all of the poems written to or about Jane Williams seem to focus on just this kind of 'passing moment'. Thus in the 1822 poem 'The Magnetic Lady to her Patient' Shelley centres on an incident in which the lady of the poem speaks what most commentators believe are the words of Jane to Shelley. In the poem the lady clearly states:

I love thee not;
 But when I think that he
 Who made and makes my lot
 As full of flowers as thine of weeds,
 Might have been lost like thee;
 And that a hand which was not mine,
 Might then have charmed his agony
 As I another's – my heart bleeds
 For thine. (10-18)

The lady declares that she does not love the patient – much as Jane may have done during the 'magnetising' (hypnosis) sessions she performed on Shelley to try to ease his kidney pains.⁶³ In addition, the lady in the poem recalls her own lover, paying tribute to him who 'makes my lot / As full of flowers as thine of weeds', thinking of the pain that he would feel if he had to seek care and comfort from someone else. In this way she justifies her own feelings for the patient, which are clearly feelings of pity.

Although it seems that Shelley had realised by this time his tendency to seek 'in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal' (*PBSL* ii 435), he could not, or did not want to, control his attraction to Jane. In 'To Jane. The Invitation', Shelley gives to Jane the title that acts as a key to clarifying his relationship to her. Inviting

⁶² G. M. Matthews, 'Shelley and Jane Williams', *Review of English Studies* 12 (1961), p. 45.

⁶³ Thomas Medwin was the first to hypnotise Shelley, on 15 December 1821, and he gives a full account of it in his *Life of Shelley*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), pp. 269-70. See also *MSJ* 342; *CCJ* 196. After Medwin left Pisa, Shelley was 'magnetised' by Jane Williams, who had learned the techniques while she and Edward Williams lived with Medwin in Geneva in 1819 (*MSJ* 342n).

her to come away from the town and into the woods for a walk on a beautiful winter's day, he calls her 'Radiant Sister of the day' (47). At the beginning of the poem he calls Jane 'Fairer far than this fair day' (2) and proceeds to praise the beauty of the day; by referring to Jane as the 'Sister of the day' Shelley could be intending to say that since they are both so beautiful (Jane and the day) they must be sisters. But in light of Shelley's history with sister-figures and his persistent use of the term to denote the woman to whom he feels a particularly close connection, it is also possible to understand the phrase to mean that Jane is Shelley's 'sister of the day' – in other words, she is the 'sister' to whom he currently feels a strong connection. This suggestion finds support in the earlier lines in which Shelley explains why he is asking his 'Best and brightest' to 'come away' (1); he wants to go with her to the woods:

Where the soul need not repress
Its music lest it should not find
An echo in another's mind,
While the touch of Nature's art
Harmonizes heart to heart. (24-28)

Reiman and Powers' note to this poem states that Shelley had not shown the finished poem of 'To Jane. The Invitation' and its companion piece 'To Jane. A Recollection' to Mary because 'though the walk that inspired them on January 2, 1822, was taken by Mary, Jane, and Shelley together, Jane alone evoked Shelley's happiness' (*Poetry and Prose* 443n). This is borne out in the above lines, which suggest that Shelley had experienced times when he did feel the need to 'repress' his feelings because they did not find 'echo in another's mind'. The expectation on this walk with Jane is that Nature will provide the setting for the two of them to experience the harmony that Shelley senses between them. Understandably, Mary's friends would be hesitant to show her these sentiments of Shelley's so shortly after his death.

This last relationship was an unusual one for Shelley, for although in this period Jane was a friend to Mary, she was not unattached.⁶⁴ Shelley placed himself as the outsider to what appeared to him an ideal couple. Jane, although married to a man in England, was absolutely devoted to Edward Williams.⁶⁵ In 'With a guitar, to Jane', Shelley casts Jane and Edward in the roles of Miranda and Ferdinand, an image of ideal love. Shelley is Ariel, who must remind Miranda of his long service. It almost sounds like penance when he claims: 'From life to life, must [Ariel] still pursue / Your happiness; for thus alone / Can Ariel ever find his own' (14-16). Shelley here expresses that he can only find happiness in creating and maintaining Jane's own.

vi. Conclusion

I loved, I know not what – but this low sphere
 And all that it contains, contains not thee,
 Thou, whom seen nowhere, I feel everywhere. ('The Zucca' 20-22)

In many ways, sections of the poem 'The Zucca' provide a gloss, in verse, of Shelley's lifelong habit of searching outside of his marriage for these sister/lover figures. 'The Zucca' was written sometime between October 1821 and January 1822.⁶⁶ Shelley had failed to heed the warning that he started to acknowledge in the poems to Sophia Stacey that there was a danger for him in the 'innocent' attachments, after his deep connection with Teresa Viviani had been found and the ideal image of her had dissolved into the very real person who married in September 1821, and after his disinterested opinion of Jane Williams had developed into a more sincere and almost

⁶⁴ Mary and Jane Williams would later have a falling out over tales that Jane spread about Mary's coldness to Shelley in the last months of their life, and Shelley's preference for Jane. On 13 July 1827 Mary wrote in her journal, 'Jane My friend has proved false & treacherous! Miserable discovery - for four years I was devoted to her - & I earned only ingratitude'. For the story of their estrangement and reconciliation, see *MSJ* 502 n2; 506 n2; and Joan Rees, *Shelley's Jane Williams* (London: William Kimber, 1985), pp. 138-40.

⁶⁵ For a brief sketch of the Williams' connection and Mary Shelley's close friendship with Edward Williams see *MSJ* 597-99.

⁶⁶ *BSM* xii liv.

obsessive affection. In the first stanza of 'The Zucca' Shelley reveals his feelings of being misunderstood, that he did indeed 'desir[e] / More in this world than any understand' (3-4). In other words, Shelley felt that what he sought, be it Intellectual Beauty, perfect sympathy with a similar sister-soul, or a combination of both, was beyond the understanding of all those around him.

The third stanza of 'The Zucca' suggests what Shelley wrote to John Gisborne in June 1822: that he was seeking in vain for the ideal in the real. In the poem he speaks to some unknown person before shifting to address the ideal that he knows is out there, the lost 'soul within the soul' (*Epipsychidion* 456):

I loved – O no, I mean not one of ye,
 Or any earthly one, though ye are dear
 As human heart to human heart may be; –
 I loved, I know not what – but this low sphere
 And all that it contains, contains not thee,
 Thou, whom seen nowhere, I feel everywhere. ('The Zucca' 17-22)

Essentially, the stanza supports the proposition that Shelley felt he never really loved any of the women in his life. The repetition of the phrase 'human heart' reveals a belief that what he felt was a closeness that is nevertheless limited by the human condition. The real object of his love is not 'contained' or limited to the 'low sphere' of the human realm. This inhuman object of love recalls the insistent pull towards the unattainable that is the tale of both *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*, an attraction to that which cannot be reached.

Twice Shelley uses the image of the moth and the light to convey the experience of this irresistible desire, a desire which is figured as having the power to destroy the person who seeks the unattainable:

I sprang, as one sandalled with plumes of fire,
 And towards the loadstar of my one desire,
 I flitted, like a dizzy moth, whose flight
 Is as a dead leaf's in the owlet light,
 When it would seek in Hesper's setting sphere

A radiant death[.] (*Epipsychidion* 218-23)

I can give not what men call love,
 But wilt thou accept not
 The worship the heart lifts above
 And the Heavens reject not;
 The desire of the moth for the star,
 Of the night for the morrow,
 The devotion to something afar
 From the sphere of our sorrow? ('One Word is too often Profaned' 9-16)

Shelley's manipulation of the moth/light image further emphasises the seeking of something unearthly. The light that the moth seeks is not simply a flame; it emanates from an unattainable source: the setting sun in the first passage, a star in the second. These metaphors illustrate the admission in *Epipsychidion* that 'in many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol' (267-68). In a more light-hearted mood Shelley explained this sentiment to John Gisborne: 'the *Epipsychidion* is a mystery – as to real flesh & blood, you know that I do not deal in those articles, – you might as well go to a ginshop for a leg of mutton, as to expect any thing human or earthly from me' (*PBSL* ii 364). This humour may be laced with sarcasm, or despair, as Shelley reveals that he did seek for what was not to be found on earth.

This realisation may have come as no surprise to Shelley, and the pattern evident in the poems he wrote to the sister-figures in his life certainly reveals that Shelley consistently invested each of these women with unearthly qualities. Thus Shelley can be seen to be constructing in his lyrics an ideal woman who was initially based on the women in his life. Judith Chernaik warns of the temptation of reading Shelley's lyrics only for what they reveal about Shelley's life, and she points out that 'the figure of the poet is literary and traditional as well as autobiographical' (*Lyrics* 10). Shelley said as much to the Gisbornes when he wrote that 'the poet & the man are two different natures: though they exist together they may be unconscious of each other' (*PBSL* ii 310). The 'I' in the poem is not necessarily relating the specific

experience of Shelley, although it may and probably does have some foundation in Shelley's experiences. Likewise, the way he presents Harriet Grove, Elizabeth Shelley, Harriet Westbrook, Elizabeth Hitchener, Cornelia Turner, Mary Godwin, Claire Clairmont, Sophia Stacey, Teresa Viviani, and Jane Williams, although based on each woman, is an elaboration of the qualities which he expected to find in a figure who was 'not one of ye, / Or any earthly one, though ye are dear / As human heart to human heart may be' ('The Zucca' 17-19).

Shelley wrote in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* that 'it is the business of the Poet to communicate to others the pleasure and the enthusiasm arising out of those images and feelings, in the vivid presence of which within his own mind, consists at once his inspiration and his reward' (*Poems* 2 34). Thus he states clearly that it is 'images and feelings' that form the foundation, the inspiration, of his poetry. Yet as he developed his ideas on poetry in response to Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* Shelley came to express the view that the poem may turn out to be, if not different from the experience that inspired it, then at least not the same:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them.⁶⁷

Shelley felt that the poet adjusts the impressions, both external and internal, in order to create the more complicated, yet complimentary, expressions (in poetry) which are harmonious to the melody of the exact experience which makes an impression on the poet. The poet can alter the experience which they wish to represent in their poetry in

⁶⁷ *Defence, Poetry and Prose* 480.

order to best serve the form into which the poet wishes to craft them. This is true of both the major poems and the lyrics which Shelley wrote to his sister-figures.

In all of the lyrics, Shelley attempted to represent what it was like to be in love and to feel the close sympathy that he sensed between himself and the women who inspired the poems. Again in the *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley drew out what he perceived as the connection between love and poetry:

Love became a religion, the idols of whose worship were ever present. It was as if the statues of Apollo and the Muses had been endowed with life and motion and had walked forth among their worshippers; so that earth became peopled by the inhabitants of a diviner world. The familiar appearance and proceedings of life became wonderful and heavenly; and a paradise was created as out of the wrecks of Eden. And as this creation itself is poetry, so its creators were poets.⁶⁸

Love, Shelley states, makes the human realm into something divine. The perfect forms of gods descend to inhabit the earth, and life's commonplaces become beautiful and full of grace. Love, then, creates the illusion that what is unattainable, the forms and feelings of a diviner world, is within reach. In order to fit into his concept of seeking for something both unreal and unattainable – best figured in *Alastor* when the poet 'eagerly pursues / Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade' (205-06) – Shelley had to create a sense that the women who represented that ideal in each poem had sufficient power in their personal characteristics to encourage that obsessive searching that the narrator of *Alastor* blames for causing the visionary poet to 'overleap the bounds' (207) between dream life and waking reality. So he returns again and again to descriptions of the woman who inspired the poem that make her into an otherworldly light, that he, as the moth, seeks but can never reach.

The women are represented as possessors of certain powers that draw Shelley to them, as the moth to the light, which emphasise his own passiveness. He cannot

⁶⁸ *Defence, Poetry and Prose* 496-97.

help himself, he seems to suggest. The eyes, which can 'light a waste of years' ('How eloquent are eyes' 10) and turn 'to bliss [the heart's] wayward pain' ('Mine eyes were dim with tears unshed' 24), can also 'gaze the wisest into madness' ('Thou art fair and few are fairer' 8); thus although they have a restorative power, they also can have a more sinister affect, which stresses their potency. Additionally, the voice can cast a spell on the listener; it can 'stir poison' in the listener's breast ('Thy dewy looks sink in my breast' 2), or it can dissolve the listener in the 'consuming extacies [sic]' and encourage the belief that the listener has 'no life, [. . .] but in thee; / Whilst [. . .] thy song / Flows on' ('To Constantia, Singing' 11-14). The woman in these poems has the power to calm and revive the poet; she is variously granted the power to 'calm [the] bosom's frantic pain' ('How swiftly through Heaven's wide expanse' 36) and to revive 'in [the] heart the expiring flame of life' (*PBSL* i 383-84). She is a 'reviving ray' ('The Retrospect. Cwm Elan 1812' 167) whose 'presence on [the poet's] wintry heart / Fell, like bright Spring upon some herbless plain' (Dedication to *Laon and Cythna* 55-56). Shelley's early feeling that friendship or love could be found only with one who was a reflection of the self served this image of the ideal woman, as in both poems and letters he projected an intertwining of natures that made it difficult to distinguish between the speaker and the woman; this was most clearly conveyed in the early passages describing the connection between the protagonists in *Laon and Cythna*, but it began with statements that Shelley made about his sister Elizabeth, whose 'happiness is mine' (*PBSL* i 93), Elizabeth Hitchener, the 'sister of his soul' (*PBSL* i 149), and, still later, Teresa Viviani, to whom Shelley asserted 'I am not thine: I am a part of thee' (*Epipsychidion* 52).

Shelley exclaims in *Epipsychidion* that 'in many mortal forms I rashly sought / The shadow of that idol' (267-68). He seems to have known for quite some time that

what he sought was not to be found on earth. This biographical survey highlights the complexities of Shelley's relationships with sisters and sister-figures, tracing his habit of surrounding himself with woman in order to explore Richard Holmes's urbane identification of Shelley's 'disinclination to live entirely in the company of one woman for more than a few hours at a time' (Holmes 79). As I have shown, Shelley was attracted to the idea of having more than one woman near him, and throughout his life he attempted to form a 'family' of sister-figures around him. This ideal of sister-spirits had a strong influence on his inclusion and portrayal of sisters and sister-figures in his major poems.

Shelley's plea to Teresa Viviani in *Epipsychidion*, that 'the name my heart lent to another / Could be a sister's bond for her and thee, / Blending two beams of one eternity' (46-48), reveals much about his desire to have sisters around. The plea vocalises his wish that, although already married legally to Mary, he could also unite with Teresa, and that the two women could live together harmoniously as 'sisters' while they shared their husband. Having lived with Mary and Claire, and previously with Harriet and Eliza, Shelley was not blind to the often difficult relations between sisters. Again in *Epipsychidion*, when bidding the Comet (identified by most commentators as Claire Clairmont)⁶⁹ to 'float into our azure heaven again' (373), he assure her that 'the Moon [Mary] will veil her horn / In thy last smiles' (376-77). This promise is as idealistic as it is, in this biographical context, unrealistic, for Mary and Claire's relationship was fraught with suppressed antagonism and sororophobia. The desire for Mary and Teresa to live as sisters, predated by the similar request to Elizabeth Hitchener to join his household with Harriet and Eliza Westbrook, as well

⁶⁹ For a discussion of the biographical details of the central part of *Epipsychidion*, see Kenneth Neill Cameron, 'The Planet-Tempest Passage in *Epipsychidion*', *PMLA* 63 (1948), pp. 950-72. Reprinted, with corrections, in *Poetry and Prose* 637-58.

as the later entreaty to Harriet to come and join the *ménage* at lake Lucerne in 1814, shows Shelley's idealised theory of how sisters could live: together, in harmony, and happy to share the attentions of one man. Shelley did obtain this happy communion of sisters in his representation of Prometheus and Asia establishing a household with Asia's sisters, Panthea and Ione, but he never achieved it in his personal life.

But the wish to establish a household with sister-figures became the foundation of his search for the ideal sister/lover, a figure which he developed in the poems that have siblings at their centres: *Laon and Cythna* (1817), *Rosalind and Helen* (1817), *Prometheus Unbound* (1819), and *The Cenci* (1819). What these major works focus on is the character and behaviour of what, in 'The Zucca', Shelley reveals is 'seen nowhere, but [felt] everywhere': Shelley's ideal woman, the sister/lover figure who is in perfect sympathy with the brother/poet who loves her and who reveals herself as ideal *because* she is the perfect sister.

2. 'Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one':

The Representation of Sisters in *Laon and Cythna*, *Rosalind and Helen*,
Prometheus Unbound, and *The Cenci*

From 1817 to 1819, sisters appear in all of Shelley's longer works except for *Julian and Maddalo*. In *Laon and Cythna* (1817) and *Rosalind and Helen* (1817), incest becomes the defining characteristic of the relationship between a brother and a sister, representing all that is best in a loving relationship between a man and a woman; in *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) is the only representation of a group of sisters in all of Shelley's work; and in *The Cenci* (1819), Shelley combines these two exponents in the representation of Beatrice – although her sister is not a character in the play and the incest is a symbol of tyranny rather than love. Cythna, Rosalind, and Beatrice have brothers to whom they are (or, in the case of Rosalind, were) close, while Asia, Panthea and Ione are represented in an ideal sisterhood that ends in the formation of a happy household, in a reformed world, with Asia's lover, Prometheus. I have previously shown Shelley's involvement with sisters and sister-figures, and it does not come as a surprise that the sibling relationship can be traced in the major works written around the time which Stuart Curran calls Shelley's 'annus mirabilis'.¹ (AM).

In 1817, when Shelley wrote the earliest of the works discussed here, he had not yet encountered Sophia Stacey, Emilia Viviani, or Jane Williams. Claire Clairmont and her daughter by Byron, Allegra, were both part of the Shelley household. By the end of 1819 Shelley had met his cousin Sophia; in another year,

¹ Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1975).

Claire had introduced the Shelleys to Emilia Viviani; and by the spring of 1821, the Shelleys were establishing themselves in the house they shared with Jane and Edward Williams. Yet from all of the qualities which I have shown Shelley to be concerned with in his poems either addressed to or written about his sister-figures, a template emerges of what can be identified as Shelley's ideal woman. She should be intelligent, unconcerned about the world's opinion and able to reason for herself, as Shelley represented his sister Elizabeth to Hogg before Shelley's estrangement from her, as Elizabeth Hitchener was in her ability to discuss Shelley's favourite topics in their letters, as Mary Shelley was as the intellectual heir of the philosophical Godwin and the radical Wollstonecraft. She should be willing to be guided by Shelley, devoted, obedient, and adoring, as his sisters were when they were younger, as Harriet Westbrook was before the birth of their first child, as Elizabeth Hitchener was in accepting Shelley's suggestions for reading, and as Claire Clairmont was both when Shelley first entered the Godwin household and after the elopement when she resided with Shelley and Mary before she had her affair with Lord Byron. The template also reveals what is possibly this ideal woman's strongest characteristic, which is the ability to influence Shelley: with her eyes, the tone of her voice, her touch, or even just her presence. All of these qualities Shelley highlighted in poems about Harriet Grove, Harriet Westbrook, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont, Sophia Stacey, Emilia Viviani, and Jane Williams. And Cythna, the first formal expression of this ideal, became a touchstone for all of the later sisters – Beatrice Cenci, Asia, Panthea, Ione, and even Rosalind – and she remained the most complete composite of all that Shelley desired and praised in the sister-figures in his life.

The brother-sister relationship is presented, in *Laon and Cythna* and *Rosalind and Helen*, as an incestuous connection that is nevertheless sanctioned by Shelley's

treatment in each poem. He saw the connection between siblings as the most favourable for experiencing the complete sympathy for which he sought in his private life, and this is why he did not simply represent the ideal lover as a woman who was biologically unconnected to the man. For Shelley, thinking of a lover in terms of a sibling was important because it meant the relationship had built up through a long connection during which time the siblings probably developed similar likes, dislikes, and ideas.² And in light of Shelley's belief that society was in need of vast moral improvement, his inclusion of siblings in these works can be seen as part of his programme for, or vision of, the improved moral state of the world that would come about in the aftermath of political revolution.

i. Cythna as Prototype for the Ideal

nor did I prize
Aught human thing beneath Heaven's mighty dome
Beyond this child. (*L&C* II.xxi.849-51)

The earliest and most comprehensive treatment of the brother-sister relationship in Shelley's work appears in *Laon and Cythna*. The poem was finished, according to Mary Shelley's journal, sometime between 20-29 September 1817 (*MSJ* 180). On 3 December, a letter from Shelley to his publisher reveals that the printer was concerned about some of the contents of the poem. Eager to have the work available to the public, Shelley declared: 'Let him print the errata, & say at the top if he likes, that it was all the Author's fault, & that he is as immaculate as the Lamb of God'. Shelley's closing remark, 'only let him do it directly, or if he wont [sic] let some one else', shows that the least of Shelley's concerns were the alterations desired by the printer;

² The incestuous brother and sister in *Rosalind and Helen* were not brought up together, as the discovery of their connection only on their wedding day makes clear. But as Rosalind accounts for Helen the story of her love for her brother, she makes it clear that some connection, perhaps predetermined through their biological connection, existed. See section ii for more on the connection between Rosalind and her brother.

he wanted the work released immediately, at any cost (*PBSL* i 571). Yet he encountered another delay in the form of a retraction by his publishers, Charles and James Ollier, which Shelley claimed would be more injurious to his reputation than the poem itself:

If I had never consulted your advantage, my book would have had a fair hearing. But now, it is first published, and then the publisher, as if the author had deceived him as to the contents of the work, and as if the inevitable consequence of its publication would be ignominy and punishment, and as if none should dare to touch it or look at it, retracts, at a period when nothing but the most extraordinary and unforeseen circumstances can justify his retraction. (*PBSL* i 579)

Shelley urged Charles Ollier to reconsider, and only two days later, in a tone of compliance and generosity, Shelley invited Ollier to come to Marlow to help him revise the poem. 'No one is to blame,' Shelley wrote in a conciliatory manner in response to a letter from Ollier explaining the desired alterations, and Shelley closed his letter with the promise: 'you will find a friendly welcome and a warm fire at the end of your journey' (*PBSL* i 581-82).

The progression of the correspondence between Shelley and Ollier on the fate of *Laon and Cythna* and its release as *The Revolt of Islam* in January 1818 contradicts Thomas Love Peacock's representation of a reluctant Shelley who 'contested the proposed alterations step by step [. . .] and always insist[ed] that his poem was spoiled'.³ In a letter to Thomas Moore, Shelley claimed that the alterations 'consist in little else than the substitution of the words *friend* or *lover* for that of *brother & sister*' (*PBSL* i 582), making the changes appear of little consequence to him. Although this account of the changes is not exactly accurate, in an essay which outlines the nature of all the changes made Frederick L. Jones states that 'Shelley seemed to think the concessions to public prejudice would have no vital effect on the important message

³ Thomas Love Peacock, 'Percy Bysshe Shelley: Supplementary Notice', *Fraser's Magazine* (March 1862), p. 346.

which the poem was meant to convey⁴, and Cameron relates his opinion of Peacock's reluctant Shelley by relegating Peacock's comments to a footnote and stating that 'the sequence of events shows that Peacock was exaggerating, no doubt partly for comic effect' (*GY* 312; 620 n. 5). Shelley's explanation to Moore that his original impulse to make his protagonists siblings was due to the fact that 'the seclusion of my habits has confined me so much within the circle of my thoughts, that I have formed to myself a very different measure of approbation or disapprobation for actions than that which is in use among mankind' (*PBSL* i 582), denies the truth that incest was a popular and common theme in literature of the period.⁵ Besides, Moore was no intimate of Shelley's, and such comments would have been made more with an eye towards eliciting support for his poem than confessing any completely truthful motivations for making the changes. In the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* Shelley admits that he included the love scene between brother and sister to 'startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life', calling incest a 'crime of convention' and asserting that 'it is because there is so great of multitude of artificial vices, that there are so few real virtues' (*L&C*, Preface, 258-59; 262-64). But whether Laon and Cythna are siblings, as in the first version of the poem, or unrelated foster-siblings, as in the revision, has little impact on the message behind the strength of the bond between the two protagonists. It is the complete sympathy felt between Laon and Cythna, regardless of the definition of their relationship, which Shelley strives to represent. The tone of Shelley's comment to Moore, and his own experiences with sister-figures, suggest that in Shelley's mind there was little difference between lovers, siblings, and soul mates.

⁴ Frederick L. Jones, 'The Revisions of *Laon and Cythna*', *JEGP* 32.3 (1983), p. 371.

⁵ See Alan Richardson (op. cit.) and Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., (op. cit.) for two of the most important treatments of incest as a common theme in romantic poetry.

Consequently, his representation of siblings often combined what characterises these types of relationships.

From the moment that Laon first mentions Cythna as he recounts the adventures of his life, Shelley makes clear that the connection between brother and sister is no ordinary bond. Shelley so entwines Laon's introduction of Cythna and her obvious value to him that we are left with a convoluted sense of Laon's identity, which seems to be made up of at least as much of Cythna as of Laon. Several passages build upon one another to create a foundation of joint identity:

As mine own shadow was this child to me,
A second self, far dearer and more fair (II.xxiv.874-75)

And this beloved child thus felt the sway
Of my conceptions . . .

.....
Her's too were all my thoughts, ere yet endowed
With music and with light (II.xxxi.937-38; 940-41)

In me, communion with this purest being
Kindled intenser zeal, and made me wise
In knowledge. (II.xxxii.946-48)

Cythna is at different times Laon's shadow, what is projected of him when he is exposed to the light; she is his mind, enhancing and improving all his thoughts; and she is his inspiration, infusing him with a more fervent devotion to his own ideals. The representation of Cythna, and her value to Laon, echoes what Shelley showed, in the lyric poems discussed in chapter one, that he valued in the sisters and sister-figures in his life. Cythna is intelligent, devoted to her brother, strong, and, as these passages show, a reflection of Laon, both philosophically and physically. But Cythna is more than a 'reviving ray' ('The Retrospect' 167-68), a 'purer mind' that is the 'inspiration of [his] song' ('To Harriet', dedication to *Q Mab*, 9, 10). She is a necessary presence for Laon even to begin telling his tale in much the same way as the presence of Mrs. Boinville and Cornelia Turner, and indeed all of Shelley's sister-figures,

renewed Shelley, as he explained to Hogg in March 1814: 'They have revived in my heart the expiring flame of life' (*PBSL* i 383). Shelley makes it clear that 'none else beheld [Cythna's] eyes - in [Laon] they woke / Memories which found a tongue, as thus he silence broke' (l.ix.666-67), showing that Cythna alone reminds Laon of the past, and it is this gift of the memory of their lives that gives Laon his voice to begin the tale which makes up the bulk of *Laon and Cythna*.⁶

In his fragmentary essay 'On Life', Shelley promotes a philosophy that contributes to his representation of Laon and Cythna's connection. In a long passage he asserts that it is unity that characterises life:

Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind [. . .] The words *I* and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. (*Poetry and Prose* 478)

Here Shelley attempts to do away with the idea of individuality, and his representation of Cythna and Laon being so close in sympathy that they resemble one another and appear to exist only as part of the pair is reinforced by the opinion that any distinction between self and other is erroneous. Cythna is like Laon is like Cythna because they are each a part of the 'one mind' that comprises life.⁷

⁶ Deborah A. Gutschera proposes of this episode that '[Cythna's] first appearance with Laon before the senate indicates [. . .] her initial function may be to inspire the man', and she goes on to highlight the limitations of Cythna's discourse ('she never addresses the senate herself; 'her audience is reduced to an audience of one in an intimate setting'; 124). But in fact, Cythna's role in this scene more active. Laon does not speak until he looks into Cythna's powerful eyes, giving Laon the memories and the means to speak. Despite this difference of interpretation, Gutschera's conclusion that Cythna is 'more than a domestic appendage' (124) is valid, but her reading does not consider Cythna's power over Laon and his dependency, throughout the poem, on his sister. Deborah A. Gutschera, 'The Drama of Reenactment in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*', *K-SJ* 35 (1986).

⁷ Cythna discovers this principle of the 'one mind' after her daughter has been taken from her in her prison, and she becomes the image of all revolutionaries:

My mind became the book through which I grew

From the moment Cythna enters the scene of Laon's narrative, however, Shelley contradicts our expectations, which have been formed by our knowledge of Shelley's interaction with sister-figures, that the younger sister will be from the beginning a devoted disciple of the older brother's revolutionary ideals. Prior to introducing his sister, Laon describes the discovery of his calling to lead a rebellion in terms of a mystical experience among some ancient ruins, the 'dwellings of a race of mightier men' that 'tell their own tale to him who wisely heeds / The language that they speak' (II.xi.759; 761-62).⁸ Laon hears the message of the ruins and he takes upon himself the responsibility of leading the revolution:

It must be so - I will arise and waken
The multitude, and like a sulphurous hill,
Which on a sudden from its snows has shaken
The swoon of ages, it shall burst and fill
The world with cleansing fire: it must, it will -
It may not be restrained! - and who shall stand
Amid the rocking earthquake stedfast still,
But Laon? (II.xiv.784-91)

The figuring of Laon's effect on the world as a volcanic eruption illustrates a comment Edward Dowden made in a notebook in which he recorded his thoughts and discoveries while researching his biography of Shelley, that 'Shelley's view of nature - does not [?favour] substance, but force, energy. Colour, flowers, [?], light, winds &c all the expression of forces, & of spiritual forces'.⁹ Laon presupposes the strength of

Wise in all human wisdom, and its cave,
Which like a mire I rifled through and through,
To me the keeping of its secrets gave -
One mind, the type of all, the moveless wave
Whose calm reflects all moving things that are,
Necessity, and love, and life, the grave,
And sympathy, fountains of hope and fear;
Justice, and truth, and time, and the world's natural sphere. (*L&C* VII.xxxi.271-79)

⁸ This situation of Laon apprehending his 'calling' amid ancient ruins is anticipated in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', written in the summer of 1816, a year before the composition of *Laon and Cythna*: 'While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped / Through many a lonely chamber, vault and ruin / And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing / Hopes of strange converse with the storied dead [...] I vowed that I would dedicate my power / To thee and thine' (49-52; 61-2; *Poetry and Prose*).

⁹ Edward Dowden, MS notebook 3109 (pages unnumbered), Trinity College, Dublin.

his persuasive powers to be uncontrollable, and he strives to bring together a band of like-minded men whom he felt were his brothers, 'sons of one great mother' (II.xvii.817). This is the first public expression of Shelley's belief that what determines the sibling relationship is a philosophical rather than a biological parent.

But the rendering of Laon's effect as an earthquake also offers another image: Laon 'steadfast still', unmoving, passive amidst the turmoil that he has created. This is borne out in the fact that while Laon is trying to rouse this band of revolutionaries, Laon himself is under the influence of his younger sister Cythna. With the first metaphor, describing Cythna's eyes, Shelley conveys the power this younger sister has over her brother. Cythna is not, as we might expect, a passive follower of Laon. Laon states that Cythna's 'fair eyes / Were loadstars of delight, which drew me home / When I might wander forth' (II.xxi.847-49). Besides reflecting the praise which Shelley offered to the power of the eyes of Harriet Grove, Harriet Westbrook, and Cornelia Turner, and anticipating the similar praise of Sophia Stacey's and Emilia Viviani's eyes, the identification of Cythna's eyes as 'loadstars' concretises the message Shelley wished to convey in the praise of his sister-figures in the lyric poems: his actions are determined by them.¹⁰ The word lodestar was revived in the nineteenth century, according to the OED, with the figurative meaning of a "guiding star"; that on which one's attention or hopes are fixed'. Shelley used the word in *The Cenci*, *Epipsychidion*, and his translation of Calderon to denote this meaning; in the Calderon translation, especially, it is used as a metaphor for an event that is impelled forward and cannot be stopped. And although Shelley's first use of the word lodestar, in this passage of *Laon and Cythna*, represents Cythna's eyes as a guiding star or an

¹⁰ Kelvin Everest also discusses Shelley's attraction to women's eyes and their association in Shelley's mind with love and strong feeling in an essay that considers romantic eye-contact as a signal for the moral function in poetry. Kelvin Everest, 'Literature and Feeling: New Directions in the Theory of Romanticism', *Reviewing Romanticism*, ed. Philip W. Martin and Robin Jarvis (Basingstoke and London: MacMillan, 1992).

object of attraction, the implication of the use in Calderon is clear. Laon cannot resist Cythna's eyes; and this can be seen, as Kelvin Everest has stated, as a sign of the intensity of their relationship.¹¹ In this stanza, and throughout the rest of the poem, Laon looks to Cythna as a guide; her wishes and thoughts become his goals and achievements, a dependency that Shelley stressed with each representation of a brother-and-sister connection.

This initial admission of Cythna's power over Laon points back to the scene in Canto I when Laon shows an inability to find the words to tell his tale until he sees Cythna's eyes. It also points forward to their entwined natures that work to confuse the identity of both. When Laon first describes his relationship with his younger sister, we also see how the two siblings came to feel such a bond for one another. Initially, because of her power over him, Cythna is everything to her brother, as he expresses clearly: 'nor did I prize / Aught human thing beneath Heaven's mighty dome / Beyond this child' (II.xxi.849-51). Since being betrayed by his closest friend, Laon turns his affection towards his younger sister, who is the only thing (apart, ostensibly, from the revolution) he values. So he decides in turn to become everything to her, claiming that 'since kin were cold, and friends had now become / Heartless and false, I turned from all to be, / Cythna, the only source of tears and smiles to thee' (II.xxi.853-55).

Just as Laon emphatically claims his intent to lead the revolution, so too does Cythna take on the responsibility of gathering support among women for his cause by claiming: 'It shall be mine, / This task, mine, Laon!' (II.xxxviii.1000-001). Like a younger sibling emulating her admired older brother, Cythna claims that her ideas are

¹¹ Everest states that Shelley 'not only thought of the look of the eye as an index of moral and intellectual loveliness, he also associated the perception of this quality in the eye with love itself, including the sexual love of men and women' ('Literature and Feeling', p. 104).

an extension of his own, stating that her power 'is a power which thou bestowest, / Through which I seek, by most resembling thee, / So to become most good, and great and free' (II.xl.1020-022). But though she is only repeating his own realisation of his role in the revolution, Laon seems to scoff at her appropriation of it; he says, 'I smiled, and spake not' (II.xxxix.1009). This almost condescending smile draws from Cythna an oration which culminates in Shelley's most eloquent and forceful lines regarding the aims of his own revolutionary ideas:

Can man be free if woman be a slave?
Chain one who lives, and breathes this boundless air
To the corruption of a closed grave!
Can they whose mates are beasts, condemned to bear
Scorn, heavier far than toil or anguish, dare
To trample their oppressors? (II.xliii.1045-50)

Cythna has the eloquence to formulate the ideals of the revolution in a way that Laon doesn't. She realises that unless women are allowed the same freedom as men (an indication of Shelley's admiration of Mary Wollstonecraft) there is no chance that the revolution can be successful.¹² For Cythna to lead a 'happy female train' (II.xxxviii.1003) to meet Laon and his revolutionary brothers on the 'rejoicing plain' (II.xxxviii.1004) merely underscores the connection between the siblings, who then become two leaders of one revolutionary force. By bringing together all the male and female followers, Laon and Cythna symbolically fuse into one being as the joint leaders of the uprising.

But Laon has not yet learned to trust Cythna's instincts, which is nowhere more evident than in the aftermath of Laon's dream, when he wakes to find himself surrounded by the tyrant's men. Laon relates that:

ere with rapid lips and gathered brow

¹² In the introduction to *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft called for the opportunity for women to pursue the same virtues as men, 'the exercise of which ennoble the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind'. *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Marilyn Butler and Janet Todd, 7 vols (London: Pickering, 1989), v, 74.

I could demand the cause - a feeble shriek
 It was a feeble shriek, fain, far, and low
 Arrested me - my mien grew calm and meek,

.....

'twas Cythna's cry!

Beneath most calm resolve did agony wreak
 Its whirlwind rage - (III.viii.1162-65; 1167-69)

The slightest sound from Cythna silences Laon's indignant questioning, although deep beneath his 'calm and meek' exterior his anger brews like another uncontrollable force of nature. Cythna, bound by the tyrant's men, counsels Laon not to retaliate. Seeing her imprisonment as an opportunity to begin her task, Cythna calls herself truth's 'chosen minister' (III.viii.1179). She explains to Laon that the men who imprison her 'are but the slaves who bear / Their mistress to her task' (III.ix.1181-82) and she ends her speech with the confirmation of her bond with Laon – and with the revolution. She assures him that 'In victory or in death our hopes and fears must blend' (III.ix.1188). But Laon, disregarding her instruction to accept her capture as a portent of future good, and abandoning the principle of non-violence, causes his own imprisonment and his further inactive status in the revolution. Just as in Canto I when Laon cannot speak until he sees Cythna's eyes, so in the realm of revolutionary activities he seems unable to act unless it is to help Cythna. He kills three of her captors in an effort to free her before he himself is overcome. And later, after his own imprisonment, release, madness, and recovery, when he sets off to join the revolutionaries, he again proves that Cythna is his 'loadstar', directing his path:

Aye, as I went, that maiden who had reared
 The torch of Truth afar, of whose high deeds
 The Hermit in his pilgrimage had heard,
 Haunted my thoughts. - Ah, Hope its sickness feeds
 With whatso'er it finds, or flowers or weeds!
 Could she be Cythna? - Was that corpse a shade
 Such as self-torturing thought from madness breeds?
 Why was this hope not torture? *yet it made*
A light around my steps which would not ever fade.

(IV.xxxiv.1711-19; emphasis added)

As these thoughts of Laon reveal, it is the hope of seeing Cythna, more than the principles behind the revolution, that drives him on.

Even in their separate ordeals the siblings are shown to be connected in the similarity of their reactions to their imprisonment and its effects.¹³ Both Laon and Cythna are stripped bare, Laon by the men who chained him to the pillar ('with brazen links, my naked limbs they bound' (III.xiv.1230)), Cythna by the tyrant during the rape ('like a Spirit in fleshy chains she lay' (VII.vi.2882)). Both notice particularly the sounds of the scenes of their imprisonment; Laon comments that 'The grate, as they departed to repass, / With horrid clangour fell' (III.xiv.1231-32), and Cythna similarly notices, at the opening to her prison, 'a sound [that] arose like thunder / A stunning clang of massive bolts redoubling' (VII.x-xi.2919-20). Oddly, they both experience the sensation of something living within them. Pregnancy is clearly the cause for Cythna's sensations of life within her, and she felt 'there seemed a being / Within me – a strange load my heart did bear / As if some living thing had made its lair / Even in the fountains of my life' (VII.xvi.2967-70). But Laon, too, feels life inside of him, and he talks of his thirst as being 'like a scorpion's nest / Built in mine entrails' (III.xxi.1289-90). They both are transported from their prisons in boats, and for Cythna, this creates the opportunity for her first mass-conversion of men to the revolutionary cause (III.xxxi-xxxiv.1378-1413; VII.xli-VIII.xxx.3190-3468).

Additionally, they both experience alternating periods of sanity and madness throughout their ordeals, and they both lose track of time (Laon: 'The sense of day and

¹³ E.B. Murray, "Elective Affinity" in *The Revolt of Islam*, *JEGP* 67 (1968), p. 572, writes that 'by separating [Laon's and Cythna's accounts of their imprisonment] so, Shelley manages to obscure the fact that his hero and heroine go through similar experiences during their imprisonments, and that these experiences take place at about the same time'. But the similarity of their experiences is obvious in the light of the strong bond (whether siblings or cousins) which is revealed through what they say and do prior to their separation. Shelley did not 'obscure' this fact and the obvious parallels between Laon's and Cythna's experiences in prison reinforce Shelley's attempts to portray the closeness of the bond, whether spiritual or biological.

night, of false and true, / Was dead within me' (III.xxiv.1315-16); Cythna: 'Time past, I know not whether months or years; / For day, nor night, nor change of seasons made / Its note' (VII.xxv.3055-57)).

But, as many commentators have noted, it is the similarity of the 'dreams' that Laon and Cythna have during their imprisonment that is most striking.¹⁴ In Laon's first period of madness, unable to tell if his vision is a dream or real, he sees the men who imprisoned him bringing four 'stiff corpses bare' to hang near Laon 'by the entangled hair' (III.xxv.1325; 1327). Stretching towards the bodies 'so that I might eat' (III.xxv.1331) Laon notices something familiar about the body which he is consuming:

A woman's shape, now lank and cold and blue,
The dwelling of the many-coloured worm,
Hung there, the white and hollow cheek I drew
To my dry lips - what radiance did inform
Those horny eyes? whose was that withered form?
Alas, alas! it seemed that Cythna's ghost
Laughed in those looks, and that the flesh was warm
Within my teeth! (III.xxvi.1333-40)

In this vision Laon appears to eat the flesh of his own sister in an act of cannibalism that almost anticipates their sexual union in Canto VI. Even in death, Cythna's eyes retain their primary power; in his madness, as he eats the flesh, Laon can still identify the 'radiance' still present in her 'horny eyes'. In fact, it is only the eyes that confirm to Laon that the flesh that he has eaten is his sister's. If not for her 'ghost [which] /

¹⁴ For discussions on the use of parallel dreams and madness in *Laon and Cythna*, see: Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Richard H. Haswell, 'Shelley's The Revolt of Islam: "The Connexion of Its Parts"', *K-SJ* 25 (1976); and Deborah A. Gutschera (op. cit.). Cronin sees the madness of Laon's and Cythna's dream-visions as 'therapeutic madness from which they emerge strengthened' (p. 103). Haswell sees the madness that the siblings experience as punishment for the mistakes each makes in terms of (for Laon) not following the ideal of non-violence, and (for Cythna) refusing 'to give herself as a prey to the evils of the world' (pp. 84-6). Gutschera sees the imprisonment and madness of Laon and Cythna as trials which, through their survival, gain the siblings greater maturity, although she emphasises the differences of Cythna's trials, who 'is tested by having to face the ordeals of a woman's nightmares: rape, solitary and unaided childbirth, forcible separation from her baby'; she also suggests that the dreams of Laon and Cythna are 'negative versions of the more encouraging dreams earlier in the work' (pp. 124; 121).

Laughed in those looks', the 'lank and cold and blue' corpse of the woman would have remained unidentified. Laon reacts with a repulsive sickness as he realises he has violated his sister in a way almost analogous to the Tyrant's rape. And Cythna's vision, too, includes a reference to cannibalism. She recounts that the eagle who brought her food 'looked a fiend who bore / Thy mangled limbs for food!'

(VII.xv.2961-62). The significance of the cannibalism in this work has been explained as, among other suggestions, the assertion that good can come from evil,¹⁵ or that it makes the revolutionary principles of Laon and Cythna's stronger than the radicals of the French Revolution.¹⁶ Additionally, Stuart Sperry reminds us that 'Freud [. . .] has specifically described this kind of cannibalism as symbolic of consuming desire for a loved object and for its assimilation'.¹⁷ But considering Shelley's thoughts on the sibling relationship and his emphasis on the connections between brother and sister or sister-figure, by eating Cythna's flesh Laon is represented as taking her inside of him, consuming her, and making her, physiologically, a part of himself. This would do away with the physical distinction and separation of two 'spirits' or 'souls' that feel the strength of connection for which Shelley seemed always to be searching.

The sexual union of the siblings in Canto VI echoes the physiological union that the act of cannibalism suggests. Laon states that during their sexual embrace 'I felt the blood that burned / Within her frame, mingle with mine, and fall / Around my heart like fire' (VI.xxxiv.2634-36). Cythna is again represented as being taken within Laon's body as she had been when he ate her flesh, and their blood 'mingled' and

¹⁵ E. B. Murray, pp. 573-74.

¹⁶ Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts*, pp. 103-04.

¹⁷ Stuart M. Sperry, 'The Sexual Theme is Shelley's The Revolt of Islam', *JEGP* 82 (1983), p. 42. The source for Freud is *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in the Standard Edition of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), xviii, 105. Stephen Cheeke, 'Shelley's *The Cenci*: Economies of a "Familiar" Language', *K-SJ* 47 (1998) also acknowledges the sexual element of cannibalism in Shelley's work showing that 'cannibalism is clothed in the metaphor of incestuous rape, just as in *The Cenci* incestuous rape takes a metaphor of filial cannibalism' (p. 151).

surrounded and filled his heart. Additionally, the stanzas that relate their escape and consummation of sexual union are full of phrases concerned with assimilation, integration, connection: 'Oblivion wrapt / Our spirits' (VI.xxx.2596-97); 'the common blood [. . .] ran within our frames' (VI.xxxi.2610); Cythna's eyes as 'twin phantoms of one star' (VI.xxxiii.2627); the 'speechless swoon of joy, as might befall / Two disunited spirits when they leap / In union' (VI.xxxiv.2638-40); 'limb / Twined with limb' (VI.xxxvi.2651-52); the 'faint eyes [that] swim / Thro' tears of a wide mist, boundless and dim, / In one caress' and 'two restless frames in one reposing soul' (VI.xxxvi.2653-55; 2658). As Laon states, 'those / Who grow together cannot choose but love, / If faith or custom do not interpose' (VI.xl.2686-88). The cannibalism and the sexual union in *Laon and Cythna* fulfil the same ends: to represent physically the intense spiritual connection between the brother and sister, which Laon describes as 'close sympathies' in a stanza which suffered from Shelley's alterations:

There we unheeding sate, in the communion
 Of interchanged vows, which, with a rite
 Of faith most sweet and sacred, stamped our union. -
 Few were the living hearts which could unite
 Like ours, or celebrate a bridal night
 With such close sympathies, for to each other
 Had high and solemn hopes, the gentle might
 Of earliest love, and all the thoughts which smother
 Cold evil's power, now united a sister and a brother.
 (VI.xxxix.2677-85)¹⁸

Shelley's inclusion of incest was a way to encourage, not the act of incest itself, but the close sympathy that a man and woman can enjoy if they share the same philosophical ideals such as equality and freedom.¹⁹ The profound connection

¹⁸ In *The Revolt of Islam* the last four lines of this passages were replaced by the following: 'for they had sprung / From linked youth, and from the gentle might / Of earliest love, delayed and cherished long, / Which common hopes and fears made, like a tempest, strong' (*The Revolt of Islam* VI.xxxix.2682-85).

¹⁹ Nathaniel Brown, *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979) sees the connection between Laon and Cythna as an 'all-encompassing paradigm of sympathetic communion between the sexes, like mated to like in perfect harmony, sexual division overcome in a total fusion of sentimental affinities' (p. 216), and he later states that 'sympathetic lovers are always blood relations, kindred spirits, sisters and brothers of each other's souls' (p. 219). Brown's

between Laon and Cythna illustrates the moral qualities necessary for those who would lead the world to political revolution.

ii. Brothers and Sisters in *Rosalind and Helen*

For here a sister and a brother
Had solemnized a monstrous curse,
Meeting in this fair solitude:
For beneath yon very sky
Had they resigned to one another
Body and soul. (*R&H* 156-61)

In September 1817, shortly after he had completed *Laon and Cythna*, Shelley's failing health urged his doctor to forbid him from writing poetry. In response to this ban, Mary wrote to Shelley, 'It is well that your poem [*Laon and Cythna*] was finished before this edict was issued against the imagination but my pretty eclogue will suffer from it' (*MSL* i 43). Shelley had started *Rosalind and Helen* probably in July 1816, in Switzerland,²⁰ and it was based in part on Isabella Baxter's rejection of Mary's friendship after her elopement with Shelley.²¹ Kelvin Everest has constructed a composition pattern from various internal and historical sources, and he suggests that the poem was begun in 1816 and then put aside (*Rosalind and Helen* headnote, *Poems* 2, p. 267). The deaths of Harriet Shelley and Fanny Godwin, the complications in arranging accommodation for himself, Mary, and a now-pregnant Claire, and his marriage to Mary, which brought about a brief reconciliation between Isabella and

discussion of *Laon and Cythna* focuses on the representation of incest as symbolic of a real-life relationship between lovers, whether related by blood or by philosophy, and he also argues that this is the 'most powerful feminist poem in the English language' (p. 181). Brown's acknowledgement that 'a close early relationship between lovers was built into the very structure of Shelley's love psychology, a relationship that could be figured symbolically as incest' (p. 219) is more in line with my own speculations about Shelley's relationships with sister-figures, discussed in the previous chapter, than most commentators' views.

²⁰ Parts of the poem are in a notebook which also contains the draft of 'Mont Blanc', and examinations of the manuscript show, through the colour of ink, that 'Mont Blanc' was written on top of the lines of *Rosalind and Helen* which appear in the 'Mont Blanc' draft. See *Rosalind and Helen* headnote (*Poems* 2 266-69) and *BSM* xi 6-9; 28-29.

²¹ William Baxter, Isabella's father, told Mary that Isabella's husband 'is illtempered and jealous towards Isabell - & Mr B[axter] thinks that she half repents her marriage - so she is to [be] another victim of that ceremony' (*MSL* i 41).

Mary, prevented both opportunity and inspiration for continuation. The composition of *Laon and Cythna* forestalled any progress on *Rosalind and Helen* throughout much of the summer and autumn of 1817, but a visit by Isabella Baxter's father in late 1817 motivated Shelley to continue the tale. Early in 1818, Shelley sent part of the manuscript to his publisher (*MSJ* 194). The poem was then continued for a short time after the Shelleys arrived in Italy and visited Lake Como, but it was not completed until August 1818, when the Shelleys were settled in Bagni di Lucca.²²

Rosalind and Helen is unique among Shelley's representations of sibling relationships. In this poem it is the sister, Rosalind, who relates the tale of her incest and who is one of the main speakers in the eclogue; her brother, dead long before the scene of the poem commences, remains unnamed. The section of the poem that deals with their relationship is minor, taking up only thirty-one lines of a total 1,218.

Rosalind begins to describe their connection by confessing to her friend Helen, with whom she is reunited – both now exiled from England – after a number of years apart, that in the past she had loved someone other than her husband.²³ She relates how she discovered that the man she loved was actually her brother, and that he died at the altar on their wedding day as a result of their common father revealing the true nature of their relationship at the last minute. After an indeterminate period of suffering, Rosalind married another man and had three children by him who were subsequently

²² On 16 August Shelley wrote to Thomas Love Peacock, 'I have finished, by taking advantage of a few days of inspiration [. . .] the little poem I began sending to the press in London' (*PBSL* i 29).

²³ Richard Holmes (379) calls Rosalind and Helen 'sisters', and Crook and Guiton, *Shelley's Venomed Melody* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) call this poem a 'loving sisterly encounter' (p. 144). Determining the relationship between Rosalind and Helen is difficult because of phrases such as 'our abandoned home' (18) and 'our common home' (33). Yet Helen identifies the 'abandoned home' as 'our land' (21, emphasis added) and she calls Rosalind 'gentle friend' (11) and speaks of 'altered friendship' (29). Rosalind explains that she 'mourn[ed] o'er thy wickedness / *Even with a sister's woe*' (50-1, emphasis added), suggesting that her reaction was like a sister's reaction, but that she is not, in fact, Helen's sister. Further, if Rosalind and Helen were sisters, then Rosalind's lover would have been some relation to Helen, as would the father and mother that figure in Rosalind's tale. In truth, there is no real evidence that Shelley meant for Rosalind and Helen to be taken as anything more than childhood friends, a reflection of the real-life situation between Mary Godwin and Isabella Baxter which Shelley meant to mirror.

taken from her by the false statement in his will that she was an atheist and an adulterer. Rosalind's tale of incest is prefaced by another tale of incest: the story of the events which occurred at 'Fenici's seat' (74). The explanation of the legend of the place where Rosalind and Helen plan to exchange their tales of suffering states that 'here a sister and a brother / Had solemnized a monstrous curse, [. . .] / For beneath yon very sky / Had they resigned to one another / Body and soul' (156-61).²⁴ In an incredibly violent act the 'multitude' proceeded to tear the couple's child 'limb from limb' (163) and murder the mother; the father, however, was saved by a priest 'for God's most holy grace, / [. . .] to burn in the market-place' (165-66). The line 'had solemnized a monstrous curse' is what Shelley decided to have printed, an alteration from the draft line 'had loved so fondly one another'.²⁵ Shelley may have altered the line after the altercation with both the printer and the publishers over *Laon and Cythna*, which demanded he remove the theme of incest by altering the relationship between his hero and heroine from brother and sister to foster-brother and -sister. The violence with which the 'multitude' destroy the incestuous pair and their child is Shelley's way of showing the overreaction of the world to what Shelley calls in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna* a 'crime of convention'; in this way he reveals his own belief in the close sympathies possible between siblings. Yet Shelley attempts to cover his sanction of the incestuous relationship by having the brother and sister destroyed by the multitude, which precludes any character from experiencing happiness from a situation that they knew was forbidden and that was offensive to convention. The happiness Rosalind felt with her brother existed only in the time before they knew they were siblings, and even then it was haunted by a spectre of

²⁴ Crook and Guiton suggest the 'monstrous curse' is a 'vow that the brother and sister have made to defeat tyranny, especially the tyranny of Christian sexual morality' (p. 162). This interpretation brings to Shelley's eclogue a dimension of social reform that, in essence, links it with *Laon and Cythna* in the use of incest as having larger aims than merely conveying a forbidden relationship.

²⁵ BSM xi 18.

doom. But despite this motion to condemn a pair of incestuous lovers, Shelley ultimately, if subtly, reveals his support for the brother and sister, for in this scene of *Rosalind and Helen* Shelley offers an explicit example of what he cautioned in the Preface to *Laon and Cythna*: an 'innocent' action which brought down the 'bigoted contempt and rage of the multitude' (*L&C* 98).

Rosalind's connection with her brother is presented in terms analogous to the language describing the relationship of Prometheus and Asia, Beatrice and Bernardo Cenci, Laon and Cythna, as well as Shelley's own connection to his sister-figures in the lyric poems I have discussed. In these examples there is a dependency on the beloved for both life and the *will* to live, and there is also the expectation that the lover will also die if the beloved dies. Shelley continues this theme of life-affirming dependency in Rosalind's description of her connection with her brother – 'Day and night, day and night, / He was my breath and life and light' (284-85) – and in her claim as she recalls her wedding day when her father exposed the lovers as siblings and effectively kills her brother, that 'I saw his lean and lifted hand, / And heard his words, – and live! Oh God! / Wherefore do I live?' (295-97). This sentiment is ubiquitous in Shelley's poems to his lovers and siblings, as I have shown.²⁶ But it also appears in Shelley's representation of Laon and Cythna's sibling bond in *Laon and Cythna*, Beatrice and Bernardo's connection in *The Cenci*, and Prometheus and Asia's union in *Prometheus Unbound*. The lover reveals the extent of his or her dependency on the beloved, without whom the lover expects to perish. And, despite Rosalind's expression of surprise that she is still alive, the immediate effect of her brother's death is a death-in-life state that also occurs in *Laon and Cythna* when the siblings are separated and imprisoned, and individually suffer a stupefied madness. Rosalind's

²⁶ The clearest statement of this dependence is in 'To Constantia, Singing': 'I have no life, Constantia, but in thee' (12).

reaction mirrors her brother's to the extent that for an indefinite period of time she is all but dead. As Rosalind explains to Helen:

I was clammy-cold like clay!
I did not weep: I did not speak:
But day by day, week after week,
I walked about like a corpse alive! (309-12)

Fully expecting (and anticipating) her own death to be the inevitable result of the loss of her brother, Rosalind fashions herself as unmoveable and hardhearted, and she attempts to convince both herself and Helen that 'This heart is stone: it did not break' (314). Rosalind considers the death of her brother as the true test of her humanity; she can conceive of nothing more tragic than losing him and because she did not die she assumes that her heart is made of 'stone'.

Shelley links Rosalind and her brother/lover with the lovers who were destroyed at Fenici's seat in a way that urges the reader to associate the crimes of the legend with the relationship between Rosalind and her brother. In fact, it is never stated explicitly of Rosalind and her brother, as it is of the siblings in the legend, that they 'solemnized a monstrous curse' and 'resigned to one another / Body and soul' (157; 160-61); in other words, it is not clear if Rosalind and her brother actually committed incest. For three years, unacquainted with the true nature of their relationship, Rosalind and her brother loved one another, but the reader is not told if their intimacy was physical or not. All that Rosalind reveals is that 'on the fourth [year of their relationship], my gentle mother / Led me to the shrine to be / His sworn bride eternally' (287-89). At the wedding, however, Rosalind's father interrupts the ceremony to reveal that the two lovers are actually siblings. But in the midst of their innocent three year connection Rosalind suffers from nightmares that work to associate her relationship to that of the lovers in the legend:

His name in my ear was always ringing,
 His form to my brain was ever clinging:
 Yet if some stranger breathed that name,
 My lips turned white, and my heart beat fast:
 My nights were once haunted by dreams of flame,
 My days were dim in the shadow cast
 By the memory of the same! (277-83)

Rosalind reveals her lover's complete possession of her, both physically and emotionally, in terms that recall Orsino's charge to Beatrice Cenci, 'do you believe / Your image [. . .] Follows me not whether I wake or sleep?' (*Cenci* I.i.11-13). In line 280 Rosalind also echoes, in both message and rhythm, the claim in 'To Constantia, Singing' that 'My brain is wild, my breath comes quick, / The blood is listening in my frame' (5-6). And finally, Rosalind intimates what the speaker of 'To Constantia, Singing' comes to realise, that love can and does have a disquieting affect ('thus to be lost and die / Perhaps is death indeed' (35-36)).²⁷

In this passage Shelley clearly alludes to the incestuous pair of the legend, and Rosalind's 'dreams of flame' suggest a repeat of the fate of the incestuous brother, whom 'a priest saved to burn in the market-place' (166). Through her dream Rosalind's brother suffers the same fate as the brother in the legend (of which Rosalind is ignorant) for ostensibly the same crime. And finally, when Rosalind tells Helen of her second marriage, she states that 'I went forth [. . .] / To *another* husband's bed' (324-25; emphasis added). The word 'another' can here be defined as 'one more; one further; a second of two things' (OED). As with the careful placement of the apostrophe in Bernardo's speech in *The Cenci* that 'soon the heart's blood of all I love on earth / will sprinkle [the executioner]' (V.iv.126-27; discussed later), Shelley's word choice is precise. Calling this man 'another husband' – a second husband – asserts the existence of a *first* husband: Rosalind indirectly but not

²⁷ See also the maniac's soliloquy in *Julian and Maddalo*, especially line 349: 'Love sometimes leads astray to misery' (*Poems*2, p. 681).

mistakenly calls her brother her husband. The fact that they were never married in the eyes of the law is as insignificant as whether they committed incest in *deed* as well as in sentiment, and the terminology leads the reader to speculate on the extent of their intimacy prior to their incomplete marriage. Laon and Cythna are united 'in the communion / Of interchangéd vows, which with a rite / Of faith most sweet and sacred, stamped our union' (*L&C* VI.xxxix.2677-79). Similarly Helen tells that she suggests to Lionel, on discovering that the marriage rite 'Could not be shared by him and me' (848), that they could create their own rites: 'But our church shall be the starry night, / Our altar the grassy earth outspread, / And our priest the muttering wind' (852-54). As Shelley demonstrated in his own life when he eloped with Mary Godwin, it is not the rites of the church, or the sanction of the law, that makes a couple husband and wife. Similarly, as is evident in Shelley's relationships with his sister-figures, it is not a physical, sexual act, nor the familial biological ancestry, that determines and defines that relationship. In Shelley's case, the physical love, though important to him, was subordinate to the higher, intellectual love.

Opinions of *Rosalind and Helen* have developed greatly since Shelley's comments to Peacock that he 'lay no stress on it one way or the other', and to Lord Byron that 'it was a mere extempore thing, and worth little' (*PBSL* ii 94; 199). But while Nora Crook and Derek Guiton call it a 'loving sisterly encounter' (*Shelley's Venomed Melody* 144), they and other scholars have consistently decoded this poem with a biographical cipher.²⁸ Crook and Guiton focus on the incest associated with Fenici's seat as a 'highly metaphorical account' of Shelley's thwarted desire to unite with his cousin, and the 'multitude' who kill the incestuous lovers are representative of

²⁸ A notable exception to the trend of interpreting *Rosalind and Helen* through biographical details is Carl Grabo, *The Magic Plant: The Growth of Shelley's Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936). Grabo confidently states that 'for the same reasons that Shelley dismissed [*Rosalind and Helen*] as of small importance it need not be further discussed in the history of Shelley's ideas' (p. 237).

the conventions to which Harriet Grove withdrew in the face of his growing radicalism. Kenneth Neill Cameron also finds specific biographical instances to associate with various events in the poem, and he calls *Rosalind and Helen* 'a peg used by Shelley to support a passionate exposition of his social beliefs' (GY 253).²⁹

As Desmond King-Hele notes, Shelley's sentiments are clearly on the side of Helen, whose marriage-less love represents Shelley's and Mary's relationship until their marriage in 1816.³⁰ This one-sided sympathy seems evident in Helen's tale, which is almost twice as long as Rosalind's. Rosalind is shown to be overly concerned with the world's opinion: 'I knew / What to the evil world is due, / And therefore sternly did refuse / To link me with the infamy / Of one so lost as Helen' (51-55). Read against Shelley's criticism of Harriet Grove's and Elizabeth Shelley's concern for the world's opinion that effectively turned his disciples against him, this honest admission of Rosalind's inability to disregard convention, in spite of the fact that she herself was guilty of a love that was censured by society, is yet another criticism of Rosalind. This in turn offers praise for Helen, the model of Mary, who shows herself as the suffering, dedicated, and ever-loving 'sister' who was abandoned by her own 'sister' Rosalind (Isabella) when she acted against the world's opinion.

Just as Helen makes it clear that she was the abandoned and not the abandoning one –

Speak to me. Leave me not. [. . .]

I would not chide thee, though thy faith is broken:
Turn to me. [. . .]

²⁹ Cameron states that Shelley wrote *Rosalind and Helen* for Mary in order to contrast their union with the 'harsh but respectable' one of Mary's childhood friend Isabella Baxter and David Booth. Some of the biographical analogies Cameron notes are: Rosalind's loss of her children and Lionel's trial for blasphemy relate to Shelley's feelings over losing his children by Harriet; Rosalind's description of her poverty draws on the poverty Shelley and Mary endured when Shelley was dodging bailiffs and making ruinous deals with money lenders. See GY 254.

³⁰ Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 97.

Turn, as 'twere but the memory of me,
And not my scorned self who prayed to thee. (32; 35-6; 38-9)

– so too does Rosalind show that she still holds, at least initially, the same opinion: that she should avoid her childhood friend. Rosalind's first words, in reply to Helen's forgiving plea above, reveal her prejudice: 'Is it a dream, or do I see / And hear frail Helen? I would flee / Thy tainting touch' (40-42). Her next words, however, show she has had a change of heart, as she laments, 'former years / Arise, and bring forbidden tears; / And my o'erburthened memory / Seeks yet its lost repose in thee' (42-45). But despite the consciousness of her unfaithfulness, Rosalind seeks Helen's comfort because now, she says, 'I share thy crime' (46). Their reunion, motivated by a deep desire for communion on Helen's side, is for Rosalind no more than an opportunity to find comfort with another being who has been lost to the world.

Rosalind is portrayed in a less sympathetic light than Helen, who upon hearing Rosalind's tale of suffering immediately expresses complete sympathy and asserts that Rosalind has indeed suffered the worse tragedy. Helen comments, 'I thought that grief had severed me / From all beside who weep and groan; [. . .] but thou art / More wretched' (573-74; 576-77). Desmond King-Hele states that Shelley's emphasis on Helen's tale, and the way it is told 'more sympathetically' than Rosalind's, implies that 'love without marriage is better than marriage without love'.³¹ In this scene Helen is shown as being more kind than Rosalind, ever ready to comfort the friend who had so cruelly rejected her. This reaction is in contrast to Rosalind's initial impulse to avoid her old friend. But Rosalind is not entirely condemned, for Shelley allows her, too, to feel the joy of complete sympathy, of 'love without marriage' which Shelley privileges. And it is worth noting that it is Rosalind, and not Helen, who experiences

³¹ King-Hele, p. 97.

the complete sympathy with her own brother, a sympathy which Alan Richardson calls the 'intuitive attraction of a blood tie'.³²

Although it has generally been accepted that the poem was intended to present a lawless and fulfilling 'marriage' as preferable to a lawful and unfulfilling one, considering *Rosalind and Helen* as merely a fictionalisation of Mary and Isabella's relationship is reductive. Shelley chose to write this tale in the form of an eclogue which, although it was revived by Robert Southey in his 'English Eclogues' (1799), had a history that reached back as far as Virgil (*Eclogues* 40 B.C.E.). This choice of form was significant to Shelley, for although the use of the pastoral as a means to convey ideas of social reform or criticism was not widespread, political and social references were occasionally made in pastoral poems.³³ As early as 1599 George Puttenham asserted that the eclogue was to be used 'to insinuate and glance at greater matters'.³⁴ In *Rosalind and Helen*, then, we find Shelley working in a genre that traditionally presented the opportunity for the poet to express his own concerns about social issues through the voices of his speakers. *Rosalind and Helen* contributes to the template of the ideal sister and the connection that can exist between men and women by conveying the differences between Rosalind's feelings towards her brother, which are immoral according to society's rules, and her feelings towards her husband, which are lawful but unfulfilling. Nowhere does Shelley state that the society which would condemn Rosalind's first love and which would allow her to be maligned without trial

³² This type of incest in which the brother and sister do not grow up together and discover their relationship only after their involvement is most typical of incest in the eighteenth-century novel. Alan Richardson cites *Moll Flanders* and *Evelina* as examples, as well as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, which Shelley read in 1814 (*MSJ* 85). Richardson states that 'this pattern evokes the romance tradition, with its emphasis on nature over nurture, birth over experience' (p. 739).

³³ For discussions on the contrasting uses to which pastorals were put, see Michael C. J. Putnam, *Virgil's Pastoral Art: Studies in the Eclogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) and Marion K. Bragg, *The Formal Eclogue in Eighteenth-Century England* (Orono, ME: The University Press, 1926).

³⁴ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 38.

by the dead husband's will is at fault. Yet Shelley's representation of the way in which the legend-siblings are destroyed by the multitude (the mother 'stabbed and trampled', the child torn 'limb from limb' (164; 163)), and the innocence with which Rosalind and her brother loved combined with the intensity of their passion (Rosalind asserts that her brother 'was my breath and life and light' (285)) becomes a covert indictment of society and a hint of the type of moral reform that Shelley envisioned. In *Rosalind and Helen* Shelley asserts even more clearly than in *Laon and Cythna* that incest is an innocent connection that draws irrational responses from the common mind.

iii. *Prometheus Unbound* and the Companionship of Sisters

Fair sister-nymphs, who made long years of pain
Sweet to remember, through your love and care;
Henceforth we will not part. (*PU* III.iii.8-10)

Prometheus Unbound is the only work in which Shelley represents a family of sisters. Panthea and Ione act as a connection between their sister, Asia, and her lover, Prometheus, and they are generally seen to have been created, like the ancient Greek chorus, to comment on the action as it happens on stage. *Prometheus Unbound* is often read as the expression of a modern revolution and the resultant new order of harmony and freedom brought about by Prometheus's resistance against Jupiter's power and Jupiter's Oedipal defeat by his son, Demogorgon. Within this reading Asia, Prometheus's lover, is seen as the personification of universal love which is essential to both the successful transformation and maintenance of this new world (Wasserman 275) – a direct statement of the moral reform that Shelley felt was essential to insure the success of any political reform. The connection between Prometheus and Asia while he is chained to the rock, sustained by Panthea and Ione, is represented in terms similar to those that reveal Shelley's dependence on his sister-figures in the lyrics: Prometheus recalls 'drinking life from [Asia's] loved eyes' (*PU* I.123), and in response

to Prometheus's despair Panthea reminds him of her sister's 'transforming presence, which would fade / If it were mingled not with thine' (*PU* 1.832-33). Prometheus gains his life's energy from Asia's eyes, and Asia is similarly dependent on Prometheus for her strength. The assertion of a lover being one's life-blood and breath is similarly expressed by Laon, Bernardo Cenci, and Rosalind about their siblings (who are, in Laon's and Rosalind's cases, also their lover). This sense of complete dependence, stretching as far back as Shelley's poems to Harriet Grove, became one of the fundamental experiences and one of the basic joys of the sibling-like relationship which Shelley encouraged in his personal relationships and envisioned in his writings. But to see Asia's sisters, Panthea and Ione, as merely the agency of commentary neglects an important aspect of their characteristics, both in the drama as well as in a consideration of Shelley's representation of sisters. Panthea and Ione seem to represent different and opposing aspects of Asia; and despite Donald Reiman's association of Panthea with 'intellectual love' and Ione with a more physical love based on sensory perceptions (Reiman 78), it is possible to align Panthea with experience, and Ione with innocence, in the conventions of sister representations which Amy K. Levin identified in *The Suppressed Sister*.³⁵

Kelvin Everest also locates the source of difference between Panthea and Ione in their relations to human love, but he, too, aligns them oppositely to Reiman's configuration:

Panthea [. . .] embodies those forms of human love accessible in the dark epoch of pre-revolutionary oppression, particularly sexual love (Panthea is more confident and experienced than Ione, and relates to Prometheus in physical terms); Ione is more timid, shy and inexperienced [. . .] and also more sensitive and alert, embodying innocent and purer forms of human love, such as altruism (headnote to *PU, Poems 2*, p. 467)

³⁵ Amy K. Levin, *op. cit.*, pp. 20ff. See also Toni A. H. McNaron, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Even more fundamentally, as Everest also notes, Panthea is more bold and intrepid, while Ione is hesitant and fearful. For example, when the spirit first repeats Prometheus's curse (through the medium of Jupiter) Ione fearfully cries, 'He speaks! O shelter me!', while Panthea, on the other hand, claims, 'See, how he lifts his mighty looks, the heaven / Darkens above' (*PUI.257; 256-57*). Further, after the Furies have left, Ione comments on Prometheus's 'low yet dreadful groan' (*PUI.578*), and she asks Panthea, 'Darest thou observe how the fiends torture him?' (*PUI.582*). But Panthea has already, characteristically, dared; she replies, 'Alas, I looked forth twice, but will no more' (*PUI.583*).

Panthea consistently displays no fear of looking upon the scenes of torture, whereas Ione, who almost throughout the drama consistently asks Panthea to explain what things are (again suggesting Panthea's more vast knowledge and worldly experience), is afraid that the sights will kill her: 'Dear sister, close thy plumes over thine eyes / Lest thou behold and die' (*PUI.439-40*). And yet the songs of the Spirits of human thought that come to comfort Prometheus after the Furies' torture instigate what appears to be an exchange between Ione and Panthea of their individual characteristics. Representing Courage, Self-Sacrifice, Wisdom, and the Imagination, the first four spirits offer tales that show the natural impulse that exists in human beings to love.³⁶ At the approach of the fifth and sixth spirits, Ione uncharacteristically is able to identify the second of the two as 'despair / Mingled with love' (*PUI.756-57*). Confronted with the sight of these two spirits Panthea, also uncharacteristically, is at a loss for words. Her speechlessness allows her only the question 'Canst thou speak, sister? all my words are drowned' (*PUI.758*), to which Ione forthrightly replies, 'Their beauty gives me voice' (*PUI.759*). The different

³⁶ See Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis*, p. 99: 'The spirits that arise with the Furies' departure confirm the human urge to love in its many guises'.

reactions of the sisters to these Spirits may be founded on Ione's and Panthea's identification as altruistic and physical love. Altruism is characterised by an unselfish concern for the welfare of others, and Ione's inexperience means that she empathises with tales of suffering without any sense of self-concern or of having experienced similar pain. Her fear of the Furies and the scenes of torture is as a child's fear; she is afraid of the sights and sounds but not through any sense of having experienced the pain herself. Panthea's more worldly experience means that her concerns are more physical. She can look at the torture of the Titan but she is overcome by the tales of human suffering. Ione is inspired by the message that human beings want to express love; Panthea is overcome with the realisation that love can lead to pain. By the final act of the drama, Ione has reverted back to her habit of questioning everything and expecting Panthea to give her the answers; but in a final transformation in Act Four she becomes possessed of understanding, and she joins Panthea in both describing *and* explaining the changes in the universe brought about by Asia's reunion with Prometheus. Thus Shelley implies that physical love, as well as altruism, has its place in the new moral order that is the result of Jupiter's defeat.

But Shelley has done more with the characters of these sisters than to provide commentators for the action (which, nevertheless, they do) and to distinguish them as the representations of innocent love and experienced love. Ione's habit of asking Panthea to explain things, and Panthea's explanations, reflect another aspect of their difference. Ione, often seeing shapes and hearing sounds before her sister, describes them in abstract, ethereal terms; Panthea, quick to discover what the things are that Ione sees or hears, identifies them in more concrete language. So when Ione points to the location 'where through the azure chasm / Of yon forked and snowy hill / Trampling the slant winds on high / With golden-sandalled feet, [. . .] / A Shape

comes now' (*PU*I.316-19; 322), Panthea sees immediately that 'Tis Jove's world-wandering herald, Mercury' (*PU*I.325). And, when Ione asks 'who are those with hydra tresses / And iron wings that climb the wind, / Whom the frowning God represses / Like vapours steaming up behind' (*PU*I.326-29), Panthea explains, 'These are Jove's tempest-walking hounds, / Whom he gluts with groans and blood' (*PU*I.331-32). This question-and-answer exchange shows Ione's tendency to resort to imagery and metaphor and Panthea's quick knowledge in naming what Ione sometimes only tenuously describes. But as Panthea and Ione come to resemble one another before blending almost imperceptibly into Asia their language continues to distinguish them one from the other.

Each sister's description of the visions 'of strange radiance' (*PU*IV.i.202) in Act Four highlight their contrasting language. Speaking first, Ione is able to make out the vision of the moon, and she sees things in terms of light and air. The chariot, the crescent moon, has wheels of 'solid clouds' (*PU*IV.i.214) which 'as they roll / Over the grass and flowers and waves, wake sounds / Sweet as a singing rain of silver dew' (*PU*IV.i.233-35). White is the dominant colour in the vision, and Ione emphasises it in her description of the 'wingèd infant' (*PU*IV.i.219) with its face 'like the whiteness of bright snow', its feathers 'of sunny frost', its limbs 'gleam white, through the wind-flowing folds / Of its white robe, woof of ethereal pearl', its white hair 'the brightness of white light / Scattered in strings' (*PU*IV.i.220; 221; 222-23; 224-25). Yet amid this brightness are the eyes, 'heavens / Of liquid darkness, [. . .] With fire that is not brightness' (*PU*IV.i.225-25; 230).

In contrast, Panthea's description of the vision of the earth focuses on colour and concrete imagery, as this long passages illustrates:

And from the other opening in the wood
Rushes, with loud and whirlwind harmony,

A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,
 Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass
 Flow, as through empty space, music and light:
 Ten thousand orbs involving and involved,
 Purple and azure, white and green and golden,
 Sphere within sphere;

.....
 and they whirl
 over each other with a thousand motions,
 Upon a thousand sightless axles spinning,
 And with the force of self-destroying swiftness,
 Intensely, slowly, solemnly roll on,
 Kindling with mingled sounds, and many tones,
 Intelligible words and music wild.
 With mighty whirl the multitudinous Orb
 Grinds the bright brook into an azure mist
 Of elemental subtlety, like light;
 And the wild odour of the forest flowers,
 The music of the living grass and air,
 The emerald light of leaf-entangled beams,
 Round its intense, yet self-conflicting speed,
 See kneaded into one aërial mass
 Which drowns the sense. (*PU IV.i.236-61*)

There is a vast array of colour in Panthea's vision, and the descriptions of both shapes and movements are less fluid than in Ione's vision. The sphere is 'solid as crystal', the orbs spin on 'axles [. . .] with the force of self-destroying swiftness'. The natural objects are moved upon in violent ways. The Orb 'grinds' the brook; the flowers, grass, and leaves are 'kneaded' together. And the rest of Panthea's vision is similarly concrete and mechanic, with beams that 'shoot' and 'pierce' (*PU IV.i.270; 278*), and evidence of Death's presence in 'prodigious shapes / Huddled in grey annihilation, split, / Jammed in the hard, black deep', and the 'serpents, bony chains, twisted around / The iron crags' (*PU IV.i.300-02; 305-06*). The description of these visions illuminates the differences in the characters of Panthea and Ione. Far from being generic chorus characters, as many have thought, Shelley has created a pair of sisters who possess individual traits that complement each other in their opposition.

But Panthea and Ione have another sister, Asia, who, although she can be seen as the driving force in this drama, needs her sisters to support and help her. And within Earl R. Wasserman's reading of *Prometheus Unbound* as 'Shelley's vision of the entire history of man's inevitable movement toward equality and freedom' (Wasserman 305) is embedded this ideal of sisters whose bonds are strengthened by their mutual support and help. Wasserman states that 'the retraction of evil by Demogorgon upon being awakened by Love [Wasserman's identification of Asia], and the immediate release and guarantee of the "natural" order of events by Love – is the heart of Shelley's millennial vision' (Wasserman 324). Although it is Asia who brings about this change through her dialogue with Demogorgon, Panthea is *not* just, as Reiman claims, 'necessary here as elsewhere as a chorus character to comment on the significance of the action' (Reiman 81). As Kenneth Neill Cameron notes, Shelley 'regarded sexual love as an integral part of the whole complex of love' (GY 509); so Panthea, the representation of the physical aspect of love, must be present for the 'generative love' of Asia to be effective (Wasserman 346). Therefore it is worth emphasising the role that Panthea plays in assisting her sister.

The two sisters' exchange of dream-tales, which initiates the journey to Demogorgon's cave where Asia will contribute to the defeat of tyranny, reveals the extent of Panthea's importance to her sister and, by implication, to the reformation of the world. Initially, Panthea recites one dream (discussed later) but cannot recall the other; but as Asia looks into Panthea's eyes to make contact with Prometheus in Panthea's soul, the forgotten dream reveals itself. Panthea relates this second dream, and Asia comments: 'As you speak, your words / Fill, pause by pause, my own forgotten sleep / With shapes' (PU II.i.141-43). Wasserman explains this

associationism: 'given the premise that nothing exists except as it is perceived,³⁷ presumably we experience words directly only as themselves; as communicative signs they function by giving shape to thoughts and thereby arouse in the auditor's mind similarly shaped thoughts already resident there through prior experiences' (Wasserman 309). Thus Panthea enables Asia to recall a dream she had had but that she could not remember. Although his discussion of this sequence of *Prometheus Unbound* intends to show Shelley's use of dreaming as significantly different to that in Shelley's other poems, Marlon B. Ross's explanation of this dream exchange illuminates Panthea's importance in the drama. Ross writes, 'Asia's attempt to apprehend Panthea's dream results in two crucial acts: Asia's recognition of her own dream and the actualization of the dreams into reality. [. . .] This dream-intercourse between Asia and Panthea also represents for the reader the necessity of collective dreaming. It is not enough for each individual to sustain her or his individual dream; each must become a part of the other's dream and in so doing sustain a communal dream'.³⁸ It is the *combination* of their dreams that urges Panthea and Asia to journey to the cave where Asia's interview with Demogorgon 'triggers the reformation of reality'.³⁹ What Ross here implies is that Asia could not have done it alone; the 'collective dreaming' makes possible events which ultimately bring about the reformation of the world. Panthea thus becomes even more than Asia's chosen companion. She is transformed into a fundamental agent of the process of change which sees the defeat of tyranny and the freeing of Prometheus and, by implication,

³⁷ Shelley wrote, 'All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient'. *A Defense of Poetry*, in *Poetry and Prose* 505.

³⁸ Marlon B. Ross, 'Shelley's Wayward Dream-Poem: The Apprehending Reader in *Prometheus Unbound*', *K-SJ* 36 (1987), p. 123.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

the human condition, from oppression. As Ross puts it, Panthea 'proceeds to act in renewing Asia and thus participating in bringing about the spring of human reform'.⁴⁰

It is Asia who first hears the Echoes in the distance, beckoning her to 'follow, follow' as the exhortations in both her own dream and Panthea's had done. As the sound grows faint, she asks Panthea if they should indeed follow, and Panthea's hesitating reply is to wait: 'List! the strain floats nearer now' (*PU* II.i.189). It is the mention of Prometheus, however, that convinces Asia to act:

O follow, follow
Through the caverns hollow;
As the song floats, thou pursue,
By the woodland noon-tide dew,
By the forests, lakes and fountains,
Through the many-folded mountains,
To the rents, and gulfs, and chasms,
Where the Earth reposed from spasms
On the day when He and thou
Parted - to commingle now,
Child of Ocean! (*PU* II.i.196-206)

Acting on the promise of a reunion ('to commingle now') with Prometheus – and it is worth noting that Kelvin Everest identifies 'mingle' as 'one of [Shelley's] habitual terms for sexual intercourse'⁴¹ – Asia sets out, pausing only to request her sister's company on the journey: 'Come, sweet Panthea, link thy hand in mine; / And follow, ere the voices fade away' (*PU* II.i.207-08). Although she thinks she is going to her lover, Asia wants her sister to come with her; perhaps this is because Asia is not altogether confident that the journey will be easy or pleasant, and she wants her sister there for encouragement and help. But also, she may simply want Panthea to share in the joy of her reunion with her lover.

Although Panthea is present throughout Asia's interview with Demogorgon in his cave, her silence might suggest that her presence is merely technical, or that she is

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴¹ *Poems* 2, *PU* II.i.80n.

needed, as Reiman notes, strictly to provide commentary on the action of the play. This reading, however, grossly underestimates her role, as both the sexual aspect of Asia's representation of 'spiritual love' (*GY* 509) as well as the sister whom Asia has chosen to accompany her to her reunion with Prometheus. What is more, it is not just the fact that Asia *wants* Panthea to accompany her to what she believes will be a reunion with Prometheus but what is in fact a journey to Demogorgon's cave. Two fauns comment on the sisters' progression through the forest as they follow the echoes of their dreams. Asia thinks the echoes have promised a reunion with Prometheus, but the fauns reveal that the 'echoes, music-tongued [. . .] draw, / By Demogorgon's mighty law, [. . .] All spirits on that secret way' (*PU* II.ii.42-3; 45). In a much-debated passage, the fauns explain how Demogorgon attracts beings to his cave:

those who saw
 Say from the breathing earth behind
 There steams a plume-uplifting wind
 Which drives them on their path, while they
 Believe their own swift wings and feet
 The sweet desires within obey:
 And so they float upon their way,
 Until, still sweet, but loud and strong,
 The storm of sound is driven along,
 Sucked up and hurrying: as they fleet
 Behind, its gathering billows meet
 And to the fatal mountain bear
 Like clouds amid the yielding air. (II.ii.51-63)

Defending Shelley from accusations that he has a 'weak grasp upon the actual', G. M. Matthews maintains that this passage 'belongs to a crucial episode in the poem', explaining that the volcanic imagery (the 'plume-uplifting wind') is both a 'medicinal' steam and a 'suppressed revolutionary' force.⁴² Recalling the volcanic imagery in *The Mask of Anarchy*, the 'slaughter to the Nation / Shall steam up like inspiration, /

⁴² G. M. Matthews, 'Shelley's Grasp upon the Actual', *Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954), pp. 328; 329. The charge that Shelley had a 'weak grasp upon the actual' comes from F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 206; and Ralph Houston, 'Shelley and the Principle of Association', *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953), pp. 45-46. Matthews was responding particularly to the Houston essay.

Eloquent, oracular; / A volcano heard afar' (*The Mask of Anarchy* lxxxix) – and, I would add, Laon's vision of his effect as a revolutionary in *Laon and Cythna*, 'I will arise and waken / The multitude, and like a sulphurous hill, / Which on a sudden from its snows has shaken / The swoon of ages, it shall burst and fill / The world with cleansing fire' (*L&C* II.xiv) – Matthews explains the importance of the 'plume-uplifting wind' passage in terms that serve this reading of Panthea's importance:

Demogorgon inhabits a quiescent volcano [. . .] and the 'oracular vapour' hurled up from his realm is oracular in several senses; it bodes no good to Jupiter, and it makes those who breathe it eager to grasp the future (Oracles in ancient time had used such vapours to induce a prophetic trance). Those affected are inspired and compelled to 'follow'; *they thus become agents of the power that converted them. . . .*⁴³

Although it is Asia who questions Demogorgon to the point of his successful defeat of Jupiter, according to Matthews's statement above Panthea, too, has become an 'agent' of the revolutionary force. In another study, although his intent is *not* to validate Panthea's presence, Matthews's discussion of the role of the daughters of Ocean in the volcanic eruption of Demogorgon's defeat of Jupiter asserts Panthea's importance in bringing about that defeat.⁴⁴

Once they have boarded the chariot that will whisk them to Prometheus, Panthea asks about the source of light which surrounds them; 'the sun is yet unrisen',

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 329-30; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ G. M. Matthews, 'A Volcano's Voice in Shelley', *ELH* 24 (1957). In a detailed and convincing argument, Matthews establishes the contemporary scientific understanding of volcanic activity just prior to and including the period in which Shelley wrote *Prometheus Unbound*. The crux of his discussion depends on the opinion, derived from the ancients, that "volcanoes erupted when their caves were invaded by sea-water" (p. 215). Matthews traces this belief in Strabo, Pliny, and Lucretius, and he shows its currency in the early nineteenth century by the fact that even in a little known poem such as Miss Porden's *The Veils: of the Triumph of Constancy* (1815), the volcanic activity was represented as issuing from an excess of water in the caves beneath a volcano. Shelley wrote in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock that Pompeii erupted because of 'torrents of boiling water' (*PBSL* ii 71), and although some people doubted this idea (the explorer and prolific writer Alexander von Humboldt, for one), it was a pervasive assumption. So, as Matthews explains, 'It is clear what was to be expected, scientifically speaking, if children of Ocean were drawn into contact with the magma of a volcanic cavern – a violent eruption, accompanied by the classic symptoms [. . .] – in this case final destruction of the heavenly dictatorship' (p. 216) which, Demogorgon says, 'none may retain, / Or reassume, or hold' (*PU* III.i.57-8). Panthea, as one of the daughters of Ocean, is explicitly responsible for the eruption that causes the overthrow of Jupiter.

she observes to the charioteer (*PU II.v.9*). The spirit's answer, that the light 'flows from thy mighty sister', has a strong effect on Panthea (*PU II.v.13*). As Asia is changed, so is her sister Panthea, who responds to Asia's concerned question, 'What is it with thee, sister? Thou art pale' (*PU II.v.15*), with an account of the change that she perceives in Asia, a change that ultimately affects the whole universe:

How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;
 I feel, but see thee not. I scarce endure
 The radiance of thy beauty. Some good change
 Is working in the elements, which suffer
 Thy presence thus unveiled. (*PU II.v.16-20*)

Panthea continues with a narrative of Asia's birth, when 'love, like the atmosphere / Of the sun's fire filling the living world, / Burst from thee' (*PU II.v.26-8*), and she describes Asia's current transformation and its transforming effect on her:

Such art thou now; nor is it I alone,
 Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one,
 But the whole world which seeks thy sympathy.
 Hearest thou not sounds i' the air which speak the love
 Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not
 The inanimate winds enamoured of thee? (*PU II.v.32-7*)

Panthea reveals that since the overthrow of Jupiter, 'all articulate beings' now conduct themselves through the guiding principle of love; this is the moral improvement that Shelley hoped would be the result of any massive political reform of the magnitude of this defeat of Jupiter. But if there is any expression of a sense of loss in Panthea's recognition of her sister's transfiguration, it is in the implication that it *used to be* 'I alone, / Thy sister, thy companion, thine own chosen one' who sought Asia's sympathy (emphasis added). By recalling to Asia her previous role as sister and chosen companion, Panthea attempts, perhaps, to remind Asia of their essential bond of sisterhood. But Asia's response that 'Thy words are sweeter than aught else but his / Whose echoes they are: yet all love is sweet' (*PU II.v.38-9*) shows that Asia has already moved beyond the realm of ordinary physical or familial love. Her love has

reached the undiscerning level of equanimity; Panthea's words, and even Prometheus's (similar) words, have been surpassed. 'All love is sweet', Asia explains, and in the new order of the universe, it is to be 'common as light' (*PU* II.v.40).

Although clearly one of Shelley's most complex poems, in this carefully structured expression of political and moral reform Shelley does not neglect to include a representation of an idealistic and happy union of a man living harmoniously with sisters. This suggestion comes most clearly in the first dream that Panthea relates to Asia, in the events after she wakes from the dream, and in Prometheus's own words after he is freed from his chains. As many commentators have shown, Panthea acts as a mediator between Prometheus and Asia, bringing her sister news of Prometheus's situation, and offering Prometheus comfort in the absence of his lover. In this way, Panthea acts as a caring and thoughtful sister. But in fact, Panthea herself fuses with Prometheus in a dream of sexual intercourse that she relates to Asia during the dream exchange scene before they journey to Demogorgon's cave:

I saw not, heard not, moved not, only felt
 His presence flow and mingle through my blood
 Till it became his life, and his grew mine,
 And I was thus absorbed – until it passed,
 And like the vapours when the sun sinks down,
 Gathering again in drops upon the pines,
 And tremulous as they, in the deep night
 My being was condensed; and as the rays
 Of thought were slowly gathered, I could hear
 His voice, whose accents lingered ere they died
 Like footsteps of far melody: thy name
 Among the many sounds alone I heard
 Of what might be articulate; (*PU* II.i.79-91)

In this dream, which Panthea openly recounts for Asia, Prometheus and Panthea have had sex. Their sexual union gave Panthea the feeling that she became part of Prometheus, and that he became part of her; this echoes the intense spiritual union of Laon and Cythna that is characterised by the synthesis of the two lovers. But

Prometheus has not mistaken one sister for another. He is perfectly aware of who Panthea is, calling her the '*sister of her whose footsteps pave the world / With loveliness*' (*PU II.i.68-9*, emphasis added). By the end of their sexual union, however, he can only call out Asia's name. Like Wasserman, I see in Asia's comments to Panthea, 'thy words / Are as the air, I feel them not. . . . oh, lift / Thine eyes, that I may read his written soul' (*PU II.i.108-10*), a request to see the "'soul" of the transfigured Prometheus "written" on Panthea's spirit' (Wasserman 308). Asia is not jealous that her sister has had a sexual dream about Prometheus. Instead, she takes advantage of the strength of Panthea's dream, which Panthea admits to her sister made her wings 'faint' with 'delight' (*PU II.i.35; 36*). As Panthea has acted as a messenger for Prometheus and Asia, communicating to each of them the other's thoughts and questions, so Asia hopes Panthea can transmit the experience of that sexual union to her through gazing into her eyes.⁴⁵

To add to this confusion Panthea explains that when Ione woke she revealed that Panthea's dream had worked its way into her psyche, as well. Panthea relates to Asia that Ione asked her:

Canst thou divine what troubles me tonight?
 I always knew what I desired before,
 Nor ever found delight to wish in vain,
 But now I cannot tell thee what I seek;
 I know not – something sweet, since it is sweet
 Even to desire; it is thy sport, false sister!
 Thou hast discovered some enchantment old,
 Whose spells have stolen my spirit as I slept
 And mingled it with thine; – for when just now
 We kissed, I felt within thy parted lips
 The sweet air that sustained me, and the warmth
 Of the life-blood, for loss of which I faint,
 Quivered between our intertwining arms. (*PU II.i.94-106*)

⁴⁵ The ability to transmit Prometheus's 'written soul' to Asia attributes a power to Panthea's eyes that Shelley emphasises, as I have shown, in almost all of the poems to or about sister-figures as well as in the longer works discussed in this chapter. See also Kelvin Everest, 'Literature and Feeling', op. cit.

Through her own amatory dream, Panthea has introduced Ione to the joys of sexual desire; and Ione recognises that Panthea has knowledge of this 'enchantment' that has 'mingled' their spirits together. Because Shelley often uses 'mingle' as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, these lines suggest that through dreaming of sexual intercourse with her sister Asia's lover, Panthea has also initiated her other sister Ione into similar pleasures in an act that appears to be a lesbian incestuous experience. What Shelley requested of the Moon and Sun in *Epipsychidion* (that his shared name be a 'sister-bond' as well as a license for consensual polygamy) is here made explicit in *Prometheus Unbound*. Each woman is a different aspect of love (physical, altruistic, and universal) yet their relationship as sisters asserts that these three different types of love are all related. As Ione's sexual awakening allows her to merge into Panthea's realm, as Panthea's dream shows Prometheus's refusal and/or inability to distinguish between his lover and her sister, and as all three sisters seem to begin to merge into one being, the result is nothing less than Shelley's desire for a harmonious sexual relationship with more than one woman that would be acceptable under the terms of the moral reform that Shelley advocated.

Shelley did not subscribe to a theory of promiscuous 'free-love'. What he contended was that people should be free of any bond that prevents them from loving whomever they choose, whenever they choose, without the legal constraint of institutionalised marriage, which attempts to legislate emotional ties. In a note to *Queen Mab*, Shelley explains that 'the connection of the sexes is so long sacred as it contributes to the comfort of the parties [. . .] to promise for ever to love the same woman is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed; such a vow in both cases excludes us from all enquiry'.⁴⁶ In an 'Essay on Marriage', Shelley goes

⁴⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Even Love is Sold' [note to *Q Mab*], in *Poems* 1 368. In *Political Justice* William Godwin asserts that 'promises [. . .] are in no sense the foundation of morality' and that

further to explain his dislike of marriage. In this essay he explains the 'original spirit of marriage' which, he says, derives from a view of women as property:

[Women] were as valuable to [men] in the same manner as their flocks and herds were valuable, and it was as important to their interests that they should retain undisturbed possession. The same dread of insecurity which gave birth to those laws or opinions which defend the security of property suggested also the institution of marriage: that is, a contrivance to prevent others from deriving advantage from that which any individual has succeeded in pre-occupying.⁴⁷

Shelley's dislike of formal marriage, then, was as much concerned with the moral rights of women as it was with the freedom to love at will. Shelley envisioned relations between the sexes as something beyond the scope of regulation, a bond that ceased to be binding as soon as one person ceased to love the other, and that allowed a certain freedom in which to search out the different modes of sympathy necessary to the complexities of human nature without any system of oppression or restriction involved.

By representing these different modes of sympathy in *Prometheus Unbound* in the form of three sisters, who by the end of the poem settle happily with Prometheus, Shelley shows in this poem of the 'movement toward equality and freedom' (Wasserman 305) his vision of the new society that would accept the arrangement of one man living with a band of sister-spirits. On a more mundane level, Shelley wanted to live with Mary, with Claire, and with whomever else he found a connection.

Although composition of the drama may have begun as early as September 1818, by the time the Shelley party had settled in Rome in the spring of 1819 Shelley 'caught

'promises are, absolutely considered, an evil, and stand in opposition to the genuine and wholesome exercise of an intellectual nature'. Godwin's consideration of promises rests on the argument that what one promises to do should be done out of a sense of justice and duty; to promise to do something only recommends a 'precarious and temporary motive' for the action and does not instill a sense of doing something for its intrinsic goodness. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793), 3rd edn (1797), ed. F. E. L. Priestley, 3 vols (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1946), i, 194; 196.

⁴⁷ 'Essay on Marriage', in *Prose* 274.

fire', according to Neil Fraistat, and had completed what he considered the entire drama but which, after several more months, became the first three acts of the complete, four act drama.⁴⁸ Shelley, Mary and Claire were all delighted with Rome. Claire spent time in the grounds of the Villa Borghese and she thrived on the society of Signora Dionigi's *conversazioni*.⁴⁹ Mary, though not as fond of the Signora as her stepsister, nevertheless reveals the extent of her pleasure in Rome in a letter to Marianne Hunt in which she declares, 'Rome repays for everything. [. . .] my letter would never be at an end if I were to try [to] tell a millionth part of the delights of Rome - it has such an effect on me that my past life before I saw it appears a blank & now I begin to live' (*MSL* i 88-89). Shelley himself enjoyed Rome almost to the point of mystical elation, and he closed a long letter to Peacock describing the Baths of Caracalla with the exhortation: 'Come to Rome. It is a scene by which expression is overpowered: which words cannot convey' (*PBSL* ii 84-5). Richard Holmes jokes that 'from a comparison of Mary's journal and Claire's diary it would seem that [Shelley] preferred on the whole not to take them [on moonlight walks in the Forum] together' (*Pursuit* 487), insinuating that discord continued between the two women. But their journals suggest that Claire and Mary had separate amusements enough to keep the strain of their relationship in check, at least for the present. At the end of his life, Shelley approached his ideals of living with a band of sister-spirits in the house in San Terenzo, with Jane and Edward Williams, a visiting Claire, and Mary, but this period was probably more fraught with 'marital' difficulties than any other in his life.

⁴⁸ For the most complete discussion of the complicated genesis and composition of *Prometheus Unbound*, see Neil Fraistat's commentary in *BSM* ix lxiii-lxxiii and the headnote to the drama in *Poems* 2 456-70.

⁴⁹ 'Drive in the Borghese gardens and sit on the steps of the divine temple to Esculapius the Saviour' (25 March 1819, *CCJ* 103). Claire records visiting the Signora Dionigi frequently from their arrival in Rome until the Signora's departure on 27 April (*CCJ* 99-109). Mary, however, described the Signora to Maria Gisborne as 'very old - very miserly & very mean' (*MSL* i 95). For a biographical sketch of Marianna Dionigi, see *CCJ* 462-64.

Prometheus's comment to Panthea and Ione after gaining his freedom only serves to reinforce this suggested desire for an ideal Shelley could never attain: 'Fair sister-nymphs, who made long years of pain / Sweet to remember, through your love and care; / Henceforth we will not part' (*PU* III.iii.8-10). Despite the difficulties he witnessed inherent in the relationship between Mary and Claire, and his own difficulties in living with Harriet and her sister Eliza, Shelley's representation of sisters in *Prometheus Unbound* shows the sisters Asia, Panthea, and Ione as women both able and willing to live in harmony with each other despite their opposing characteristics. In a world that has been reformed by political revolution, the dominance of love – in all its forms – would ensure that these loving households of sisters would be possible.

iv. Patricide, Perfection, and Sisterly Love in *The Cenci*

The ministers of death
Are waiting round the doors. I thought I saw
Blood on the face of one . . . what if 'twere fancy?
Soon the heart's blood of all I love on earth
Will sprinkle him, and he will wipe it off
As if 'twere only rain. (*The Cenci* V.iv.123-28)

Shelley took up the topic of *The Cenci* after reading Mary Shelley's translation of the family history, which she had copied on 23 May 1818, and after a visit, almost a year later, to the Palazzo Colonna to see a portrait of Beatrice Cenci (*MSJ* 211; 259). The composition of *The Cenci* occurred in between Shelley's completion of the first three acts of *Prometheus Unbound* and the composition of Act Four, but at the time that Shelley took up *The Cenci* he thought *Prometheus* was complete as a three-act verse drama. On 6 April 1819, Shelley wrote to Peacock, 'My Prometheus Unbound is just finished' (*PBSL* ii 94), and after a gap of almost two months one of the first things Mary wrote in her newly resumed journal, on 4 August 1819, was 'S. write the Cenci'

(MSJ 294).⁵⁰ By 15 August Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt: 'I am also on the eve of completing another work, totally different from anything you might conjecture that I should write; of a more popular kind' (*PBSL* ii 108). He was evidently pleased with the work, and he wrote to Thomas Love Peacock of what he felt were its strengths:

It is written without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions, I having attending [sic] simply to the impartial development of such characters as it is probable the persons represented really were, [. . .] my principal doubt as to whether it would succeed as an acting play hangs entirely on the question as to whether any such a thing as incest in this shape however treated wd. [sic] be admitted on the stage – [. . .] the interest of its plot is incredibly greater & more real [than other contemporary plays], & [. . .] there is nothing beyond what the multitude are contented to believe that they can understand, either in imagery opinion or sentiment. (*PBSL* ii 102)

Likewise in the dedication letter to Leigh Hunt, Shelley belittles his 'other compositions', identifying in them 'the literary defects incidental to youth and impatience', calling them 'dreams of what ought to be, or may be' ('Dedication', *Cenci* 237). By representing the evil of a mind intent on the basest act of incest, Shelley is inverting his usual overt idealism; this, he feels, has allowed him to write without the influence of his own 'feelings and opinions' making their way into his text (Reiman 88). Yet Shelley explicitly states in his Preface that 'I have [. . .] sought to avoid the error of making [the characters] actuated by my own conceptions of right or wrong, false or true' ('Preface', *Cenci* 240). As proof of this effort, he offers the example of how the Cenci family are represented as strongly Catholic. To a Protestant, he claims, 'there will appear something unnatural in the earnest and perpetual sentiment of the relations between God and man which pervade the tragedy of the Cenci' ('Preface', *Cenci* 240). Considering Shelley's attitude to Christianity, this total blending (without criticism) of faith and life is surprising, to say the least. But although he does not

⁵⁰ This gap was the result of William Shelley's death on 7 June. On 10 June, Mary, Shelley, and Claire left Rome, and they were settled in the Villa Valsovano near Montenero a fortnight later. See *CCJ* 113-14.

outrightly criticise, through dialogue within the drama, the pervading dedication to religion, the tyranny which Shelley represents in *The Cenci* is embodied in Count Cenci and by implication in the Pope, and God.

But Shelley's comment to Peacock that *The Cenci* is free from the 'feelings and opinions' of his other compositions has misled many readers and commentators into taking his statement too literally. To take just one example, Earl Wasserman believes that Shelley has kept his personal opinions out of this drama, and that he has produced an objective portrait of tyranny and the lengths that the oppressed will go to to free themselves from their oppressors. 'In planning to publish along with the play a translation of that document' of the Cenci family history, Wasserman claims, Shelley's 'purpose was to demonstrate that what he had written was indeed "matter-of-fact" and not his invention, much less an ideal vision' (Wasserman 84-85). Wasserman discusses the play's 'paradigm of paternity as delight in tyrannic oppression' (Wasserman 88) without acknowledging Shelley's personal experiences with what he considered parental oppression: his own relationship with his father; Harriet Westbrook's escape, with Shelley's help, from the 'persecution' of her father; and William Godwin's refusal to have any contact with his daughter Mary after her elopement with Shelley, until Harriet's suicide allowed Shelley and Mary to marry. Wasserman considers *The Cenci* in its relationship to other Shelley works in order to offer a context in which to discover the meaning of the drama, but he accepts Shelley's claim that his personal ideals are absent from its pages. Shelley suggests, in letters to friends, in the dedication, and in the preface, that *The Cenci* is an objectively-rendered, factual history of a sixteenth-century Italian family; he claims that his radical philosophies and his personal creeds do not find expression among its pages. In fact, although Shelley does not proclaim outright his ideals in this drama,

they are everywhere implied through the effect of their absence. And, in the representation of Beatrice Cenci, through her feelings of responsibility to her family and especially her relationship to her youngest brother, Bernardo, Shelley is showing the behaviour of an ideal sister.⁵¹

Even before the play begins, in the Preface we are presented, almost literally, with a portrait of Beatrice as an ideal woman. Nowhere does Shelley suggest that murder is appropriate behaviour for an ideal woman, but having outlined her 'pernicious mistakes' of 'revenge, retaliation, [and] atonement', Shelley nevertheless claims that if Beatrice had lived her life according to non-violent principles, while 'she would have been wiser and better', she would 'never have been a tragic character' (*Cenci* 240). But Shelley recognises that it is precisely her flaws that have brought her to his attention, and his criticism is not severe. Shelley then presents a description of Beatrice's portrait, and Mary Shelley, in her 'Note on *The Cenci*', explains that Beatrice's 'beauty cast the reflection of its own grace over her appalling story' (in *MSWorks* ii 283). In the Preface to *The Cenci* Shelley himself praises the portrait as an 'admirable' work of art, but it is clear that he is overcome by the subject of the painting much more than the skill of the painter:

There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eye brows are distinct and arched: the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility

⁵¹ Compare also Marlon B. Ross, 'Shelley's Wayward Dream-Poem', op. cit.: 'despite all of Shelley's eloquent rhetoric about inspiration, imagination, and prophecy [in the *Defence of Poetry*], the actual work of making and reading a poem requires the use of what he calls "rational relations," all those particularities of time and place which constitute the peculiarity of any poem. Likewise, it is not possible to ban one's own conception of right and wrong, one's favored perception of relations, from a poem. Just putting pen to paper reveals something about the author's perspective. In order to advocate moral excellence without codifying and perpetuating his own moral stance, to provide forms of nourishment which feed and enlarge the mental appetite without prescribing a detailed diet, Shelley attempts to complicate the readers' relationship to the relations inscribed in the poem by making the readers self-conscious of how those relations function, or fail to function, in the poem' (p. 115). Although speaking specifically about *Prometheus Unbound*, Ross's comments can be applied to all of Shelley's writings.

which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic. (*Cenci* 242).

Shelley presents Beatrice as the epitome of the tragic heroine who suffered unspeakable torment at the hands of an evil tyrant. By detailing Beatrice's physical beauty, Shelley attempts to convince the audience that she is dignified in her tragic circumstances and that she deserves pity; and his efforts are essential because by the end of the play, this simple and dignified woman has become a patricide and a liar. As Shelley explained in his *Address to the Irish People* (1812), political institutions, represented in *The Cenci* by Count Cenci, have 'the greatest influence on the human character'.⁵² Beatrice's virtue and goodness could not withstand the polluting atmosphere of oppression.⁵³

Although Shelley offers a physical description of his heroine in this way, Beatrice is also described in terms typical of the praise offered to Shelley's sister-figures in the lyrics. There is mention of her 'bright loveliness / [...] kindled to illumine this dark world' and of the 'virtues [which] blossom in her as should make / The peace of life' (*Cenci* IV.i.121-22; 124-25). Individual qualities are highlighted: her 'love-enchanted lips', her 'fine limbs', and her 'life-darting eyes' (*Cenci* IV.i.133; 135).⁵⁴ But the person who introduces the audience to Beatrice's beauty is not Orsino, who would like to marry Beatrice, or Bernardo, whose intense connection with his sister is explored later. Instead, in a speech designed at once to alienate his audience

⁵² *An Address to the Irish People* 812-13, in *Prose* 29.

⁵³ See also *PUI*.449-51: 'Whilst I behold such execrable shapes / Methinks I grow like what I contemplate, / And laugh and smile in loathsome sympathy'.

⁵⁴ Compare the description of two women in Shelley's earlier works. The visionary woman in *Alastor* has 'glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil / Of woven wind', 'dark locks floating in the breath of night', and 'parted lips / Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly' (*Alastor* 176-77; 178; 179-80). Similarly, the first description of Ianthe in *QMab* mentions her 'sweet lips', 'dewy eyes', and 'golden tresses', and her soul 'all beautiful in naked purity' and 'instinct with inexpressible beauty and grace' (*QMab* 32; 33; 37; 41; 132; 134; in *Poems* I).

from the speaker and vindicate Beatrice's crime later on, Shelley puts the usually tender catalogue of the loved one's qualities into the mouth of Beatrice's father, Count Cenci, and her beauty is mentioned only in the curse that he calls down to spoil what he praises. In the same breath that Cenci refers to his daughter as a 'specious mass of flesh', 'my bane and my disease, / Whose sight infects and poisons me' (*Cenci* IV.i.115; 118-19), Cenci reveals that it is her very beauty that has inspired his intense hatred for his daughter. It is necessary to quote extensively from what Mario Praz calls Count Cenci's 'sacrilegious prayer'⁵⁵ to convey the full effect of the juxtaposition of the veneration and the curse:

God!

Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh,
 Which thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,
 This particle of my divided being;
 Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
 Whose sight infects and poisons me; this devil
 Which sprung from me as from a hell, was meant
 To aught good use; if her bright loveliness
 Was kindled to illumine this dark world;
 If nursed by thy selectest dew of love
 Such virtues blossom in her as should make
 The peace of life, I pray thee for my sake,
 As thou the common God and Father art
 Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!
 Earth, in the name of God, let her food be
 Poison, until she be encrusted round
 With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head
 The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,
 Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up
 Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs
 To loathed lameness! All-beholding sun,
 Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes
 With thine own blinding beams! (*Cenci* IV.i.114-36)

It is clear that it is Beatrice's *beauty* that inflames Count Cenci, who sees his daughter's destiny of being good, an inspiration to all, as a curse in itself. He states

⁵⁵ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd ed (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 115.

that her purity is the attribute of a 'devil / Which sprung from me as from a hell', and he prays that her beauty will be destroyed. He is not as intent on ending her life as he is on destroying that which both attracts him and promises to lead her to a life of goodness. Cenci's admission of Beatrice's hold over his mind (her 'sight infects and poisons' him) echoes Orsino's confession to Beatrice early on in the play that she is ever-present in his mind, too: 'Because I am a Priest do you believe / Your image, as the hunter some struck deer, / Follows me not whether I wake or sleep?' (*Cenci* I.ii.11-13). The fact that it is Count Cenci who catalogues his daughter's charms alienates him even more from the audience, even as it enhances sympathy for the beautiful Beatrice. And although she is described no more, and perhaps significantly less, than Shelley's other sister-figures, her beauty seems all the greater because it is able to inspire a man to love beyond the bounds of convention.

Shelley's heroines are always portrayed as physically attractive. Ianthe in *Queen Mab*, the visionary lady in *Alastor*, Cythna in *Laon and Cythna*, even the witch in *The Witch of Atlas* has such beauty that 'made / The Bright world dim' (137-38; *Poetry and Prose*), terms which echo Beatrice's 'bright loveliness / [. . .] kindled to illumine this dark world'. But it is always their actions, their speeches, what they believe in or represent, and almost uniformly their relationship to a brother or sister, that for Shelley embodies the full extent of their beauty. Within this framework of physical beauty, admirable action, rational and enlightened ideals, and the sibling relationship, Beatrice can be considered another of Shelley's ideal sisters.

Throughout the play Beatrice is presented as a courageous girl, unconcerned with the effects her actions will bring upon her, intent upon exposing her father as the tyrant he is. At the banquet during which Count Cenci celebrates the deaths of two of his sons, Beatrice pleads with the guests to do something to save her and the rest of

her family. She charges her father with 'tyranny and impious hate' (I.iii.100), and she urges the guests to 'think what deep wrongs must have blotted out / First love' (I.iii.108) to allow a father to rejoice in his sons' deaths. She presents herself as dutiful and obedient amidst the Count's abuse, explaining, 'I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand / Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke / Was perhaps some paternal chastisement! / Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt / Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears / To soften him' (I.iii.111-16). Finally, she warns the guests that if they do nothing to help her, they might find themselves attending a similar celebration of 'such merriment again / As fathers make over their children's graves' (I.iii.124-25). The Count attempts to diffuse the power of Beatrice's message not only by insinuating that because of her youth she has exaggerated her tale, but also by threatening his guests directly, leaving no doubt as to both his guilt and his inherent evil:

I hope my good friends here
Will think of their own daughters - or perhaps
Of their own throats - before they lend an ear
To this wild girl. (I.iii.129-32)

Yet unaware of her father's threatening invective, Beatrice continues her plea, explaining that if they do not believe her she wishes she 'were buried with my brothers' (I.iii.136). But when the Count interrupts her entreaties with the order to 'Retire to your chamber, insolent girl' (I.iii.145) Beatrice turns on her father and challenges him in a confrontational attack that contradicts her self-portrayal as a dutiful and obedient daughter. She retorts:

Retire thou, impious man! Aye hide thyself
Where never eye can look upon thee more!
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience
Who art a torturer? Father, never dream
Though thou mayst overbear this company,
But ill must come of ill. – Frown not on me!
Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks

My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat!
 Cover thy face from every living eye,
 And start if thou but hear a human step:
 Seek out some dark and silent corner, there,
 Bow thy white head before offended God,
 And we will kneel around, and fervently
 Pray that he pity both ourselves and thee. (I.iii.146-59)

Here Beatrice anticipates the words of the chorus in *Hellas*: 'revenge and wrong bring forth their kind' (729),⁵⁶ and she expresses contempt for the authority that she has heretofore observed in her father. Facing him squarely, she accuses him of disregarding the laws of God and of torturing his own family, and she charges the Count to pray to God for forgiveness and pity, assuring him that if he does, his family will kneel with him and pray for his redemption. But Beatrice's public defiance determines Count Cenci to complete the downfall he has planned for his daughter. Beatrice's willingness to stand up to her father, both here and in Act Four, where to the Count's repeated orders to come to him she repeatedly refuses, reveals an inner strength and a determination to reject the conventions of obedience she has formerly observed. This sudden moral resistance is Shelley's way of casting Beatrice in the mould of Cythna, his prototype of the ideal woman and sister (who like Beatrice endures rape and undergoes a period of madness as a result) and making Beatrice into one of his ideals. Yet in the Preface Shelley criticises Beatrice's decision to kill her father. He claims that 'no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another; and the fit return to make to the most enormous injuries is kindness and forbearance, and a resolution to convert the injurer from his dark passions by peace and love' (*Cenci* 240). But Beatrice does attempt this type of 'fit return' through her obedience, even in the midst of her confrontation when she begs the Count to pray for forgiveness, when she assures him 'we will kneel around, and fervently / Pray that he

⁵⁶ *Poetry and Prose* 430.

pity both ourselves and thee' (I.iii.158-59). However, once the Count has raped her she goes mad for a period and then determines that he must die. History cannot be changed; but what's more, the principles of non-violence cannot work in the face of tyranny. As Shelley would later write in *A Philosophical View of Reform*: 'tyrants themselves neither then, nor now, nor ever, left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood'.⁵⁷ Shelley's criticism of Beatrice, like his half-hearted censure and veiled support of the incestuous relationships in *Rosalind and Helen*, is more an expression of his awareness of the audience than of his own feelings about Beatrice's actions. So although Shelley states unambiguously that Beatrice's crimes of 'revenge, retaliation, [and] atonement are pernicious mistakes' ('Preface', *Cenci* 240), his portrayal of Beatrice's courage, her resistance to oppression, her attempts at a peaceful resolution, and her determination to put an end to the tyranny she and her family suffer, make it clear that Shelley does not condemn her for her action. Beatrice is, in fact, another of Shelley's ideal women.

The Cenci is most often discussed as a play which portrays, in Stuart Curran's words, 'the human spirit in revolt against all that is unjust and oppressive'.⁵⁸ Religion, too, is implicated as part of the machinery of the system of patriarchy in many interpretations, such as Michael Worton's, who recognises the Count as 'a member of the sinister triumvirate (Cenci, the Pope, and God) who oppress the world'.⁵⁹ Beatrice's resistance to this tyranny, a representation which humanises the effects of tyranny on the oppressed, clearly identifies her as a Shelleyan ideal. That Beatrice has several brothers and one sister (who is characteristically used as a foil against which

⁵⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), vii, 6.

⁵⁸ Stuart Curran, *Shelley's Cenci: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. xii.

⁵⁹ Michael Worton, 'Speech and Silence in *The Cenci*', *Essays on Shelley*, ed. Miriam Allott (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1982), p. 113.

to highlight Beatrice's virtues) seems to be inconsequential to the text apart from it providing the context in which to show Count Cenci as innately evil and cruel to his entire family. Yet a reading of *The Cenci* which focuses on Beatrice's relationship with her brother Bernardo reveals an undercurrent of Shelley's ideas of the 'perfect sister', showing again that *The Cenci* is not, as Shelley suggested, free from his own opinions. Although the plot conspires to destroy the perception of Beatrice as an ideal because in the end she refuses to admit to her role in the murder of her father, Shelley maintains the sense that Beatrice is admirable despite her lies. The interaction between Beatrice and her youngest brother Bernardo occupies only a small portion of the drama; but it is important because through this interaction it is possible to infer some of Shelley's views on the correct moral conduct of a sister to her family.

Throughout her life, Beatrice has been a buffer between the evil Count and the family, protecting them from both his anger and his physical abuse. This loyalty is part of Shelley's praise for Beatrice; and from almost her first words in the drama she expresses this fidelity as the main cause of her refusal to run away or seek refuge through marriage. In response to Orsino's suggestion that he might be able to obtain permission from the Pope to marry, Beatrice refuses: 'Nor will I leave this home of misery / Whilst my poor Bernard, and that gentle lady / To whom I owe life, and these virtuous thoughts, / Must suffer what I still have strength to share' (I.ii.16-19).

Lucretia, Beatrice's stepmother, corroborates this sense of loyalty in Beatrice when she later reminds her stepdaughter that 'thus have you ever stood / Between us and your father's moody wrath / Like a protecting presence: your firm mind / Has been our only refuge and defence' (II.i.46-9).

Shelley uses this sense of duty as a contrast to the actions of Beatrice's unseen but spoken-of sister. This sister managed to escape the household through making a

petition to the Pope, who gave her in marriage to a distant relative. In a discussion with her stepmother and Bernardo, Beatrice mentions this escape in juxtaposition to her own determination to share their suffering. Lucretia points out that it is *she* who is in the most pitiable position for being bound through marriage to stay with Cenci until death (a criticism of the institution of marriage which Shelley detested), and she tries to rouse Beatrice's hopes by reminding her: '*you* may, like your sister, find some husband, / And smile, years hence, with children round your knees' (II.i.84-5, emphasis added). To this Beatrice unhesitatingly protests against the suggestion of escape:

Talk not to me, dear lady, of a husband.
 Did you not nurse me when my mother died?
 Did you not shield me and that dearest boy?
 And had we any other friend but you
 In infancy, with gentle words and looks,
 To win our father not to murder us?
 And shall I now desert you? May the ghost
 Of my dead mother plead against my soul
 If I abandon her who filled the place
 She left, with more, even, than a mother's love! (II.i.88-97)

In this speech there is an explicit criticism of Beatrice's sister; Beatrice promises not to 'abandon' or 'desert' her stepmother in the way that her sister has. In labelling her sister's actions thus, Beatrice betrays her own sense of abandonment or desertion; her sister has chosen a husband over her 'true' family, in order to save herself from the cruelty of the Count. Beatrice, her step-mother, and her sister do not have any specific biographical identification in Shelley's life story, but it is possible to suggest that Shelley may have felt a similar sense of abandonment when his own sister, Elizabeth, turned against him and their 'shared' ideals in the aftermath of the Oxford expulsion, and it is not unreasonable to speculate that Fanny Godwin, left behind when Mary and Claire eloped to Europe with Shelley, actually did feel abandoned and deserted by her two younger sisters. Shelley's own feelings, however repressed, of having abandoned

Fanny, and his possible guilt over Fanny's suicide, may have influenced him to criticise an escape which, although Godwin was no Cenci, he himself helped Mary and Claire to accomplish. Beatrice, on the other hand, instead of abandoning her family to cope with her absence and their own fate, will loyally stay to protect her stepmother and brother from harm.

Shelley's portrayal of this family loyalty far exceeds the bounds of filial duty, for when it comes to the link between Bernardo and Beatrice, it becomes obvious that theirs is no common brother-and-sister bond. In this, Shelley reveals what the bond between a brother and sister *should* be. After Beatrice has been found guilty, the judge orders Bernardo, who has been present throughout the trial, to leave:

(Judge).

Linger not here!

Beatrice. Oh, tear him not away!

Judge. Guards, do your duty.

Bernardo (*embracing* BEATRICE). Oh! would ye divide

Body from soul?

Officer. That is the headsman's business. (V.iii.92-5)

Despite the officer's reply, (and a curiously placed joke at Bernardo's and Beatrice's expense), Bernardo is not in despair that Beatrice will be executed, that her death will divide her physical body from her incorporeal soul. Bernardo's words assert a connection with his sister that echoes the connections portrayed between Laon and Cythna, Rosalind and her brother, Prometheus and Asia, and Shelley and his sisters and sister-figures; in all these relationships there is a dependence on the loved one as the source of life. Laon describes his sister as 'mine own shadow [. . .], / A second self, far dearer and more fair' (*L&C* II.xxiv.874-75); and Cythna, when describing her despair in her prison, relates that she questioned herself in similarly dependent terms: "'And where was Laon? might my heart be dead, / While that far dearer heart could move and be?' (*L&C* VII.xxix. 3082-83). Bernardo and Beatrice, like Prometheus and

Asia, Laon and Cythna, and Rosalind and her brother, are so connected that one cannot imagine living without the other. Thus *body* and *soul* in Bernardo's plea represent the strength of their attachment; to separate one from the other is to destroy what makes each human.

Bernardo's last speech, after his unsuccessful attempt to attain a pardon from the Pope for the lives of his family, shows even more than the body-soul passage just discussed the full extent of his connection to Beatrice. In the final scene he laments that soon he will be without a family, and he dwells on the violence of the death as much as on the pain it will cause him:

The ministers of death
 Are waiting round the doors. I thought I saw
 Blood on the face of one . . . what if 'twere fancy?
 Soon the heart's blood of all I love on earth
 Will sprinkle him, and he will wipe it off
 As if 'twere only rain. O, life! O, world!
 Cover me! let me be no more! To see
 That perfect mirror of pure innocence
 Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good,
 Shivered to dust! To see thee, Beatrice,
 Who made all lovely thou didst look upon . . .
 Thee, light of life . . . dead, dark! while I say, sister,
 To hear I have no sister; and thou, Mother,
 Whose love was a bond to all our loves . . .
 Dead! The sweet bond broken! (V.iv.123-37)

Initially we might be misled by the possessive mode of 'heart's' juxtaposed with the encompassing 'all' in the same line, cursorily thinking that *all* the *hearts* of *all* the *people* whom Bernardo loves will shed their blood on the executioners. But a close reading clarifies that he is primarily concerned with the death of one person only: Beatrice. The actual place of the possessive apostrophe in 'heart's' makes it clear that it is the blood of *one* heart, and in this structure the 'all' denotes the singular use as 'the only thing'. Therefore, this part of Bernardo's lament can be paraphrased more clearly

in this way: 'soon the blood of the heart of the only person I love on earth (i.e., Beatrice) will sprinkle the executioner'.

The rest of Bernardo's expression of grief, which emphasises the connection between Beatrice and himself, also underlines that it is the death of Beatrice, first and foremost, that he mourns. They are not just close; Bernardo is a reflection of Beatrice, who is 'that perfect mirror of pure innocence / Wherein I gazed, and grew happy and good'. Bernardo is who he is, he says, because he has grown up under the influence of her innocence, which she has reflected back onto him. She is the 'light of life', at once the cause and the source of his existence.⁶⁰ It is interesting that Bernardo describes his dependence on his sister in terms usually associated with the mother: a source of life, the influence of his earliest days. Bernardo does acknowledge his stepmother, claiming that her love 'was a bond to all our loves'; but he only regrets, with her death, that the 'sweet bond [will be] broken'. The implications in the difference between a 'light of life' and a 'sweet bond' are extreme; Bernardo sees his stepmother's death as only breaking a bond, whereas Beatrice's death is portrayed more violently, when she will be reduced to 'dust' and leave her brother with a wish to 'be no more'. As the guards approach, Bernardo hastens with more than brotherly affection to 'kiss those warm lips before their crimson leaves / Are blighted . . . white . . . cold' (V.iv.138-139); and after Beatrice's last words to him, his response shows that her forthcoming death has already taken part of his life from him, that is, his ability to speak: 'I cannot say, farewell' (V.iv.157).

So the 'body and soul' connection between Bernardo and Beatrice, and Beatrice's overwhelming loyalty to her stepmother and her brother, illustrate the very

⁶⁰ Speaking in similar terms in what Stuart Curran calls 'not unconscious transference, but deliberate transvaluation' (*Shelley's Annus Mirabilis*, p. 121), Prometheus calls Asia 'thou light of life, / Shadow of beauty unbeheld' (*PU* III.iii.6-7).

'feelings and opinions' which Shelley claimed in his letter to Peacock were entirely absent from this 'matter-of-fact' drama. The facts of the Cenci story, combined with his experience of having written, and then having to alter, the incestuous relationship between Laon and Cythna as a means to promote the ideal relationship between a man and a woman (i.e., to be *as* brother and sister) may have led Shelley to minimise any hint of sexual involvement between Beatrice and Bernardo; the revision of *Laon and Cythna* into *The Revolt of Islam* taught Shelley a lesson. Yet the intense spiritual connection between brother and sister remains even in this drama. In fact, Shelley may have altered the character of Bernardo a great deal in order to portray him as an equal to Beatrice; according to Bertolotti's research into the Cenci family, Bernardo was exonerated of the murder because he was 'presented by his lawyer as an imbecile' (GY 399). However, Mary Shelley's translation of the Cenci manuscript, which Cameron suggests was taken from a 'seventeenth or eighteenth century "relazioni"', says nothing about this (GY 399). Instead, as Mary translated, 'Bernardo so closely resembled Beatrice in complexion, & features & every thing else that if they had changed clothes the one might easily have been taken for the other - His mind also seemed formed in the same mold [sic] as that of his sister'.⁶¹ Obviously Mary's translation of the story is Shelley's source for Bernardo's comment about dividing body and soul, and her translation shows that the source document stressed a connection between the siblings that would appeal to Shelley. But he also found, in this story of tyranny and oppression, a chance to put forth his view, which had changed significantly since his *Address to the Irish People*, that violence was an acceptable means of resistance – but only in a situation of injustice and tyranny. In such situations, as he shows in *The Cenci*, non-violent resistance is ineffective.

⁶¹ BSM x 70-1.

Shelley spent his whole life searching for perfect sympathy from a woman who could be all to him: as like to him as a sister to a brother, children of shared philosophies. He subtly presents in *The Cenci* one aspect of this perfect sympathy, showing what it is like to have, as well as to be, an ideal sister. As he was to reveal in the autobiographical *Epipsychidion*, sex need not be an integral part of an ideal relationship between a man and a woman. Although he requests 'Emily' to join him by sharing his name with his legal wife, and though he has claimed unequivocally and passionately that 'Emily, / I love thee', his request is ultimately Platonic: 'To whatsoe'er of dull mortality / Is mine, remain a *vestal* sister still' (42-43; 389-90; emphasis added). The *mingling*, whether between man and woman, or brother and sister, need not be sexual; their love can remain chaste and pure, and their lives and souls be thoroughly intertwined, as Shelley's portrayal of the relationship between Beatrice and Bernardo Cenci's was. This type of connection, as Shelley insinuated again and again, would be possible only in the aftermath of political reform, when customs and laws would be defined through the new moral order that would insure the everlasting effect of the revolution.

v. The Unnatural Love of Siblings

What is it that [Shelley] can propose to himself by his everlasting allusions to the unnatural loves of brothers and sisters? [...] Such monstrosities betoken a diseased mind. (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (June 1819))

In Shelley's lyric poems he returns repeatedly to the idea of a perfect companion. With the onset of each new passion he represented what he saw, trying to make each new love-object fulfil his ideas of the 'sister of his soul' that he first expressed directly to Elizabeth Hitchener in 1811. As Shelley continued to compose poems for and about these women, he presented them as similar, despite their differences, in some key areas; all of the poems to the sister-figures highlight the

power of their eyes and voice, their ability to influence Shelley and restore him to calm, and also Shelley's own sense of each woman as his life-source. From 'February 28th 1805: To St. Irvyne' (1810) to 'With a Guitar: To Jane' (1822), Shelley attempted to convert the experience of love into the poetry of emotion, the result being a traceable pattern of how Shelley viewed, and how he related to, the women he loved.

What Shelley was trying to make these women into, a soul sister of perfect sympathy, he created in the major poems of 1817-1819. In *Laon and Cythna*, *Rosalind and Helen*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Cenci*, Shelley translated his experiences with soul-sisters into a system of representation that focused on the connections between men and women that often simulated incest, which challenged the current moral view. No doubt his experience as the oldest brother to four obedient and adoring sisters contributed to his idealisation of the figure of the sister. Shelley created the relationships between Beatrice and Bernardo Cenci, Rosalind and her brother, and Laon and Cythna in a way that emphasised the intensity of their connection as well as their similarities as individuals. Just as he expressed repeatedly in his lyric poems, Bernardo, Laon, and Rosalind cannot imagine living without the other (and in a self-sacrificing act, Cythna implies the same by willingly joining Laon on his funeral pyre). The sibling/loved one is always described as the life-source of the lover, and Shelley suggests that this is how all loving relationships should be.

Yet although Shelley did not make a point of highlighting this constant representation of sibling connection, this discussion of the sibling relationships in these major poems shows that it was a subject which did concern Shelley. John Wilson, reviewer for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, noticed the same trend: that Shelley consistently represents sisters and brothers in relationships that are sometimes conspicuously, sometimes latently, incestuous. In his review of *Rosalind and Helen*

Wilson points out the lack of 'great moral flow' in any of Shelley's poems, condemning Lionel and Helen for violating the customs and laws of marriage and bringing children into the world who will surely live in 'poverty, sorrow, and humiliation'. Wilson continues his criticism:

But we have stronger charges still – even than these – against this poet. What is it that he can propose to himself by his everlasting allusions to the unnatural loves of brothers and sisters? In this poem there are two stories of this sort – altogether gratuitous – and, as far as we can discover, illustrative of nothing. Why then introduce such thoughts, merely to dash, confound, and horrify? Such monstrosities betoken a diseased mind; [. . .] God knows there is enough of evil and of guilt in this world, without our seeking to raise up such hideous and unnatural phantasms of wickedness – but thus to mix them up for no earthly purpose with the ordinary events of human calamity and rime, is the last employment which a man of genius would desire – for there seems to be really no inducement to it, but a diseased desire of degrading and brutifying humanity.⁶²

With the constant exploration of the sibling relationship Shelley was 'propos[ing] to himself the creation of an ideal partner for which he had been seeking unsuccessfully since the first emotional losses he faced: the loss of his cousin and potential lover, Harriet Grove, and his sister Elizabeth. But Shelley decided to put this exploration into the language of public expression for a reason. Desmond King-Hele states that '*Laon and Cythna* presents us with an unusual code of conduct in the hope that we shall admire and copy'.⁶³ Similarly, Kenneth Neill Cameron believes that in *Laon and Cythna* Shelley 'is projecting past and present patterns imaginatively into the future to illustrate what he believes will be the course of events, *hoping, in so doing, to influence present actions*' (GY 315, emphasis added). Shelley admitted in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* that he had a 'passion for reforming the world' (Preface 116-17, *Poems* 2, p. 475), and his exploration of the sibling relationship is a contribution to his program of moral reform.

⁶² *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (June 1819), v, 268-74. Reprinted in Barcus, pp. 152-60; 159. Also in White, *The Unextinguished Hearth*, pp. 158-64.

⁶³ King-Hele, p. 89.

Early in his career Shelley's aim was to encourage moral improvement as a way to bring about political reform. In 1812 he charged the Irish people to waste no time in adopting a virtuous lifestyle so that they may attain freedom from British rule:

If you think and read and talk with a real wish of benefiting the cause of truth and liberty, it will soon be seen how true a service you are rendering, and how sincere you are in your professions; but mobs and violence must be discarded. [. . .] This wisdom and this virtue I recommend on every account that you should *instantly begin* to practice. Lose not a day, not an hour, not a moment. – Temperance, sobriety, charity and independence will give you virtue; and reading, talking, thinking and searching, will give you wisdom; when you have those things you may defy the tyrant.⁶⁴

Shelley felt strongly, in 1812, that it was the people who needed to change before there could be any shift in the way that governments conducted themselves, and he assured the Irish people again in the same pamphlet emphatically: 'Before

Government is done away with, we must reform ourselves. It is this work which I would earnestly recommend to you, O Irishmen, REFORM YOURSELVES'.⁶⁵

However, he would soon come to change his views on this ordering of events after spending several months among the Irish. As he wrote to William Godwin, 'I had no conception of the depth of human misery until now. The poor of Dublin are assuredly the meanest and most miserable of all. [. . .] one mass of animated filth. [. . .] These were the person to whom, in my fancy, I had addressed myself: how quickly were my views on this subject changed; yet how deeply has this very change rooted the conviction on which I came hither' (*PBSL* i 268), and in his next letter he announced: 'I shall address myself no more to the illiterate, I will [. . .] make myself the cause of an effect which will take place ages after *I* shall have mouldered into dust' (*PBSL* i 277). Shelley later came to realise, as he wrote in *A Philosophical View of Reform*, that 'it is in vain to hope to enlighten [men] while their tyrants employ the utmost

⁶⁴ *An Address, to the Irish People*, 517-30, in *Prose* 20.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, (631-33), in *Prose* 25.

artifices of all their complicated engine to perpetuate the infection of every species of fanaticism and error from generation to generation'.⁶⁶ Only after the political reform has taken place will men exist in a society which would support the moral changes that Shelley supported: a society that conducted itself by the rules of virtue and love, instead of the laws of tyranny and oppression. In *Laon and Cythna* he asserted: 'virtue sees that justice is the light / Of love, and not revenge, and terror and despite' (*L&C* V.34.2024-25), and in *Prometheus Unbound* he states: 'Justice when triumphant will weep down / Pity, not punishment' (*PUI*.403-04). But the moral changes that would cause man to react with pity instead of a desire for injury, as Shelley realised, were not characteristics best suited to enact the overthrow of tyranny; as Harry White has said, 'Pity has no political force'.⁶⁷ The institutions of society must be changed *before* the moral improvement of man is possible. But by including portraits of the ideal connections that can exist between man and woman, Shelley is offering a vision of what is to come in a society of reformed institutions. He is not suggesting that all men will have incestuous relationships with their sisters; he is instead using the incest as a means of representing the intensity of the connection and to reassert the philosophical views that all people, men and women, will share in the reformed society.

Why did Shelley feel that the love of brothers and sisters was superior to love that was uncomplicated by the moral ties linked to the biological connection? In his essay 'On Love', written six months after the republication of *Laon and Cythna* as *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley explains love as 'a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our soul' (*Poetry and Prose* 474), a variation of the interchange between Shelley and Elizabeth Hitchener in which they

⁶⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, *op. cit.*, vii, 50.

⁶⁷ Harry White, 'Relative Means and Ends in Shelley's Social-Political Thought', *SEL* 22 (1982), p. 620.

identified each other as the brother or sister of their own soul.⁶⁸ The experience of love that Shelley describes in the following excerpt from 'On Love' explains the nature of the connection between brothers and sisters that Shelley intended to portray in *Laon and Cythna*, *Rosalind and Helen*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *The Cenci*:

If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another's; if we feel, we would that another's nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart's best blood.
(*Poetry and Prose* 473)

Shelley's lyrics to his many 'sisters', his portrayals of the sibling bond, and this passage all suggest that the foundation of love between two people is something that exists within the two people almost before their meeting and falling in love. Ideas are not necessarily communicated and understood, gazes are not received and returned. The sympathy presupposes the connection. To 'kindle at once and mix and melt' is a process whereby two beings can be made of the same material, melted together and separated to become twin siblings, made of the same material yet existing in two separate forms. Whether the two people are biological siblings or intimate companions, Shelley's later ideas on love developed to assert that the two people *become* siblings through the perfect sympathy they share. The mirror, 'whose surface reflects on the forms of purity and brightness', reflects the self, given back in an altered image, just as a twin might gaze into the face of his sibling and see the self reflected back in a slightly different, yet similar, form. This bond of perfect, mirror-like beliefs could most easily be found, Shelley felt, in a sister who, through a shared upbringing, would be sympathetic to one's core, central being.

The fact that Shelley's ideal lover is a sister is important, for this relationship suggests the common childhood in which two people may develop similar beliefs. But

⁶⁸ This also anticipates Bernardo's praise of his sister Beatrice.

that his ideal lover be a sister is at the same time not important, because for Shelley the relationship of siblings is not necessarily determined by biological parents. Shared philosophies or ideals become the parents of biologically unrelated people, and the bond between these 'intellectual' siblings is as close, and often closer, than that of biological siblings. Shelley shows a sister of a shared philosophy or ideal as a biological sister just to give her a label that suggests a closer communion than that denoted by the term 'lover', which for Shelley is a connection defined by sexual intimacy first and foremost. Shelley's ideal was not sexual, but spiritual and emotional communion – what he perceived as inherent in the sibling (whether biological or intellectual) bond; so he casts his ideal lover as a sister.

Shelley's ideal of a sister-lover is embodied in the character of Claire Clairmont, the half-sister of Mary Shelley. Claire Clairmont was born in 1797, the same year as Shelley, and was the daughter of William Clairmont, a French revolutionary, and his wife, Anne Shelley, the daughter of William Shelley, a wealthy English merchant. Claire Clairmont was raised in France and was educated in the same way as Shelley. She was a close friend of Shelley's and was the only woman to whom Shelley referred as a sister. In 1814, Shelley and Claire Clairmont fled to America with their young daughter, Mary Shelley, and were joined by Shelley's half-sister, Elizabeth Shelley. Claire Clairmont was a strong supporter of Shelley's ideal of a sister-lover and was the only woman to whom Shelley referred as a sister. In 1814, Shelley and Claire Clairmont fled to America with their young daughter, Mary Shelley, and were joined by Shelley's half-sister, Elizabeth Shelley. Claire Clairmont was a strong supporter of Shelley's ideal of a sister-lover and was the only woman to whom Shelley referred as a sister.

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3. A Tenacious Sisterhood:

The Relationship of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont

In 1882 Jane, Lady Shelley, the wife of Percy Florence Shelley, published *Shelley and Mary*, a four-volume collection of the journals and letters, many of them altered, of her husband's parents, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley. A strong defender of the Shelleys' reputations, Jane Shelley states in that work that '*the mother of Allegra was no relation whatever to either Shelley or Mrs. Shelley, as some have asserted*'.¹ Such a comment attempts to erase Claire Clairmont's existence from the Shelleys' lives. In this only mention of Claire Clairmont in the entire four volume collection, Jane Shelley refuses even to call her by her name; she is 'the mother of Allegra'. Events in which she played a vital part are re-written as if only Mary and Shelley experienced them. One example of Jane Shelley's manipulated representation of history involves the trip to Geneva in 1816 when Shelley met Byron for the first time. Although it was Claire who convinced Shelley and Mary to head to Switzerland in order that Claire could see Byron again², Jane Shelley relates that at this time that Mary and Shelley 'again visited Switzerland and made the acquaintance of Lord Byron for the first time'.³ Jane Shelley's declaration that Claire was not related to either Mary or Shelley is both accurate and misleading, for Claire and Mary were

¹ Jane Shelley and Richard Garnett, eds, *Shelley and Mary*, 4 vols (London: privately printed, 1882), i, 78.

² Claire Clairmont initiated a liaison with Lord Byron in London in March or April of 1816, shortly before he was to leave England (CC i 24). By the time he sailed for Europe she had determined to follow him, although he warned her not to come alone (CC i 40). On 6 May 1816 Claire wrote from Paris, 'so far I am on my Journey' (CC i 43), and she explained that she had convinced Shelley and Mary to come with her (CC i 43). They arrived in Geneva on 13 May 1816, where Byron had told Claire he was headed (CC i 46).

³ Shelley and Garnett, i, 70.

related through marriage; they were stepsisters. Although Jane Shelley's comment is not altogether false, the fact that these two women shared no blood connection is a technicality. Mary and Claire became stepsisters at a very early age, they were raised as sisters, in the years from 1814-1822 they lived in a close community more emotionally intense than many blood sisters endure, and the obligations of this sisterhood stayed with them long into their mature years before a break between the Shelley and Clairmont families ended their correspondence just two years before Mary's death in 1851. Due largely to misrepresentations of the Shelley legend that began with Jane Shelley, the relationship between Mary and Claire is usually presented as a Cinderella story, with Mary as the longsuffering heroine and Claire as the wicked stepsister. But evidence shows that their relationship fluctuated between the animosity that that portrayal conveys and, especially towards the end of Mary's life, a close friendship that each woman came to value.

This chapter will survey the changing nature of their relationship in order to provide a background against which to understand the way in which the sister bond is portrayed in several short stories written by Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont.

i. Memories of an unusual family

I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my father. (MSJ 554)

In our family if you cannot write an epic poem or a novel that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature not worth acknowledging. (CC i 295)

Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont were brought together by the boldness of Claire's mother, Mary Jane Clairmont. It is reported that she attracted William Godwin's attention by one day leaning over from her balcony, which adjoined his, and

calling, 'is it possible that I behold the immortal Godwin?'⁴ Another account states that she attracted his attention by walking in her garden while Godwin was out for his own evening walk, speaking to herself just loud enough for Godwin to hear: 'You great Being how I adore you'; when the philosopher 'ignored' this Mary Jane Clairmont then intercepted him on an evening walk and demanded that he must marry her.⁵ How accurate these speculations are is questionable, but whatever the manner of their meeting, soon William Godwin and Mary Jane Clairmont were spending much time together. Godwin's diary for 1801 shows that between 5 May, when he first records meeting Mary Jane Clairmont, and their marriage on 21 December, he saw her at least 87 times; on average, about once every three days.⁶

Godwin needed a wife. When Mary Wollstonecraft died in September 1797, she left him, then aged forty-one, with the care of two small daughters. Fanny, Wollstonecraft's illegitimate daughter by Gilbert Imlay, was just over three, and Mary, Godwin and Wollstonecraft's new-born child, was ten days old. Still in shock from Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin wrote to Wollstonecraft's friend Mrs. Cotton in October, expressing a lack of confidence in his ability to care for the children and his feeling that he is an unsuitable guardian to take sole charge of their education. He wrote feelingly:

The poor children! I am myself totally unfitted to educate them. The scepticism which perhaps sometimes leads me right in matters of speculation, is torment to me when I would attempt to direct the infant mind. I am the most unfit person for this office; she [Mary Wollstonecraft] was the best qualified in the world. What a change. The loss of the children is less remediless than mine.⁷

It is clear from this passage that Godwin took the education of his daughters very

⁴ C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin, his Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols (London: Henry S. King, 1876), ii, 58.

⁵ Rolleston, pp. 35-36.

⁶ See Abinger MSS Dep. e. 205, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁷ Paul, i, 279.

seriously, and that he considered the loss of their mother a tragedy to the two young girls. When his own mother died, Godwin expressed more clearly his feelings about the inestimable value of a mother to a child in a letter to his second wife, Mary Jane Godwin: 'While my mother lived, I always felt to a certain degree as if I had somebody who was my superior, and who exercised a mysterious protection over me. I belonged to something - I hung to something - there is nothing that has so much reverence and religion in it as affection to parents'.⁸ Godwin saw his own mother as a source of protection, the root that connected him to the world and his sense of belonging, and this is what he felt Fanny and Mary would now miss. By marrying Mary Jane Clairmont, Godwin was not trying to give Fanny and Mary, by then seven and four respectively, a new mother. But he needed someone to organise the household, arrange the girls' education, and be a friend and companion to himself, all of which Mary Jane took on willingly. So Godwin acquired a wife; and Mary and Fanny acquired a stepsister and a stepbrother.⁹

Prior to this second marriage, Mary Shelley enjoyed a childhood based on equality with the older Fanny, who apparently doted on her younger sister. In 1798 Louisa Jones, the girls' governess, reported to Godwin in a letter: 'I cant [sic] get

⁸ Paul, ii, 180. Abinger MSS Dep. c. 523 f. 26, Bodleian Library, Oxford. This expression of the sanctity of a child's feelings for his or her parents contributes to an understanding of Godwin's rejection of his daughter after she eloped with Shelley. To Godwin, this act would signal a lack of the 'reverence and religion' that he felt for his mother and that, until she met Shelley, Mary had indeed felt for her father.

⁹ This is not to suggest that Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont merely because he needed someone to care for the children. Despite Charles Lamb's memorable reference to Mary Jane Godwin as 'that damn'd infernal bitch' (*The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marris Jr., 3 vols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975-78), iii, 68), she was not bereft of charms. Aaron Burr, who visited the Godwins several times, described her to his daughter in 1808 as 'a sensible, amiable woman' and a 'charming lady' (Aaron Burr, *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Covici-Friede, 1929), p. 264). Harriet Shelley reported her first impression of Godwin's wife to her friend Catherine Nugent, writing: 'There is a very great sweetness marked in her countenance. In many instances she has shown herself a woman of very great magnanimity and independence of character' (*PBSL* i 327n). Although this favourable impression did not last, it is clear that Mary Jane Godwin was not the horrible woman that Lamb and others tried to make her out to be. For a defence of Mary Jane Godwin, see Harriet Devine Jump, "'A Meritorious Wife"; or, Mrs. Godwin and the Donkey', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* (1995), pp. 73-84, and *SC* i 296-98.

Fanny to send you a kiss only one to my Sister she says'.¹⁰ And Godwin, writing from Dublin in 1800, asked his friend James Marshall to tell Fanny: 'if she can save me a few strawberries and a few beans without spoiling, I will give her six kisses for them', adding in egalitarian style, 'but then Mary must have six kisses too, because Fanny has six'.¹¹ Godwin was loving and affectionate to his two daughters, and his letters to Marshall, who cared for the girls while Godwin was in Dublin, show the extent of his love for them.¹²

This marriage brought more changes than just the 'fuller rooms, louder voices, [and] vehement Claremont scenes' identified by Emily Sunstein in her biography of Mary Shelley.¹³ For all of the children involved, the union brought about changes in who was the oldest and, more crucially in family politics, who was the youngest.

Before the marriage, Mary and Claire were each the youngest in their family.

Suddenly, the family size had doubled, and by 1803 there was a new son, creating a family of five children no two of whom shared the same birth parents.¹⁴ William Beer discusses the effects of such family mergings and he points out that the loss of attention that results from losing the youngest-child status can cause rivalry that may continue into adulthood. The child who loses the place of the youngest becomes

¹⁰ Abinger MSS Dep. c 508, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹¹ Paul, i, 367.

¹² A touching letter is the following one from 2 August 1800: 'And now what shall I say for my poor little girls? I hope they have not forgot me. I think of them every day, and should be glad, if the wind was more favourable, to blow them a kiss a-piece from Dublin to the Polygon. I have seen Mr. Grattan's little girls and Lady Mountcashel's little girls, and they are very nice children, but I have seen none that I love half so well or think half so good as my own. I thank you a thousand times for your care of them'. Paul, i, 370-71.

¹³ Sunstein, p. 32.

¹⁴ Fanny Wollstonecraft, illegitimate child of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay, born 14 May 1794; Charles Gaulis Clairmont, born to Mary Jane Clairmont and an unknown, possibly Swiss, businessman, on 4 June 1795; Mary Shelley, born to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, on 30 August 1797; Claire Clairmont born to Mary Jane Clairmont and an unknown father, possibly on 27 April 1798; and William Godwin Jr., born to Mary Jane and William Godwin, on 28 March 1803. For more on the unknown father(s) of Charles and Claire Clairmont, see Herbert Huscher, 'Charles Gaulis Clairmont', *KSMB* 8 (1957) and 'The Clairmont Enigma', *KSMB* 11 (1960). See also the commentary in *SC* i 296-97.

resentful of the new youngest sibling, while the one who remains the youngest often looks up to and admires the new older sibling.¹⁵ Although Beer's psychological studies were conducted in the 1980s, strangely enough Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont's relationship illustrates what he has found in his contemporary studies. Mary, losing her position as the youngest child, came to express resentment over Claire's presence during her childhood; for her part Claire, who retained the status of the youngest child until the birth of William Godwin Jr. in 1803 and was always the youngest girl, admired Mary Shelley immensely until their falling-out at the end of the 1840s.

Commenting on Jane Williams' return to her mother's house after the deaths of Edward Williams and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley speculates that a similar return to her childhood home would cause 'the renewal of my girlish troubles' (*MSL* i 322). Mary's extreme hatred of her stepmother – noticeable in the second earliest letter surviving when she wrote to Shelley in October 1814 that Mrs. Godwin 'plagues my father out of his life [. . .] do you not hate her my love?' (*MSL* i 3) – may have exacerbated her feelings towards her new stepsister. Initially after the marriage, Godwin continued his interest in his children, drawing the new additions into his family with equal affection. When he was away he would mention them all in his letters, often suggesting exercises which they could do that would help them in their studies. For example, in 1805 he wrote to his wife, 'The children can find Clapham, & Merton, & Morden, & Ewel & Epsom (places that I shall pass through tomorrow) in the map of 16 miles round London. Tho in the map of Surrey in England Displayed they may also find Leatherhead & Bookham & Guildford & Godalming & Elsted;

¹⁵ See William R. Beer, 'Dynamics of Stepsibling and Half-Sibling Relationships', *Relative Strangers: Studies of Stepfamily Processes*, ed. William R. Beer (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988). See also William R. Beer, *Strangers in the House: The World of Stepsiblings and Half-Siblings* (New Brunswick, NJ and Oxford: Transaction Publishers, 1989), pp. 28-34.

places that I shall see to-morrow or the next day'.¹⁶ But this letter also hints at difficulties that existed in this large family; for he instructs Mary Jane Godwin: 'give a kiss for me to William, & to any other of the children to whom you can give it with a hearty good will'.¹⁷ What this comment admits is that Godwin realises Mrs. Godwin may not be able to kiss all of the children with the amount of affection which Godwin would desire. But it was not long before the open affection Godwin expressed towards Fanny and Mary was tempered and finally filtered through the girls' stepmother. Godwin's diaries show that after his marriage he continued to take his children on outings, to the theatre, dinners, and lectures, but he distanced himself and allowed Mrs. Godwin to take over the caretaker role. By 1812, as Elizabeth Hitchener observed to Harriet Shelley, Godwin 'lives so much from his family, only seeing them at stated hours' (Harriet Shelley to Catherine Nugent, *PBSL* i 320).¹⁸

Claire Clairmont would not have noticed the change in Godwin's behaviour towards his 'real' daughters, and she remained her mother's favourite despite the additions to the family. But being the youngest girl in the Godwin family could not win for Claire the attention she might have expected from her new father's friends, for they all showed a preference for Mary, the daughter of the radicals Godwin and Wollstonecraft. A comment made by George Taylor's wife reveals the type of feelings that many people may have had towards the young Wollstonecraft-Godwin child: 'so you really have seen Godwin had little Mary in your arms', Mrs. Taylor wrote to her

¹⁶ William Godwin to Mary Jane Godwin, 2 April 1805; Abinger MSS dep. c 523, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Katherine C. Hill-Miller, *'My Hideous Progeny': Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1995) offers a short history of Mary and Godwin's increasingly alienating relationship before exploring the father-daughter portrayals in Mary Shelley's novels. Hill-Miller felt it was Godwin's awkwardness in the face of his daughter's adolescence that finally divided the two, and that this separation drove Mary to turn towards Shelley for the kind of guiding and intellectual relationship which she had enjoyed as a child with her father.

husband, 'the only offspring of a union that will certainly be matchless in the present generation'.¹⁹ This is the interest and veneration that Claire would have seen directed at her new stepsister, which probably contributed to her own admiration of Mary. And, the Opie portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft that still hung in Godwin's study also would have contributed to Claire's feelings about her stepsister and made strong impressions on her.²⁰ She developed an almost worshipful admiration of her stepsister's mother,²¹ and she later boasted: 'I think I can with certainty affirm all the pupils I have ever had will be violent defenders of the Rights of Women. I have taken great pains to sow the seeds of that doctrine wherever I could' (CC ii 323).

Mary admitted in a letter to Maria Gisborne to an intense childhood attachment to her father which would have undoubtedly suffered under the conditions of the second marriage: 'Mrs Godwin had discovered long before my excessive & romantic attachment to my Father' (MSL ii 215). This comment takes on significance when read against Godwin's instruction to his wife in 1811, who was in Margate with Mary to obtain treatment for a skin condition Mary had developed, to: 'tell Mary I do not write to her more, because it will be most natural, & will come most easily, for me to write to her, when I shall no longer have occasion to write to you every day at the same place'.²² Although he himself had complained of not hearing from Fanny when she was away with Mrs. Godwin in 1806 even though Mrs. Godwin wrote to him faithfully, and although he wrote to Mrs. Godwin, 'I think it a little cruel of Fanny to have written to Charles & Jane, & not a line to her own sister', in this message to his

¹⁹ *The Autobiography of Henry Taylor, 1800-1875* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1885), p. 19.

²⁰ Robert Southey reportedly exclaimed, 'To take another wife with the picture of Mary Wollstonecraft in his house! Agh!' Quoted in Sunstein, p. 30.

²¹ Claire Clairmont always celebrated her birthday on 27 April, which was also Mary Wollstonecraft's birthday. Because there is no birth certificate to verify this date, it is possible that she adopted Mary Wollstonecraft's birthday as her own to forge a connection with the woman she so greatly admired.

²² William Godwin to Mary Jane Godwin, 4 June 1811; Abinger MSS Dep. c. 523, f. 31, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

daughter Godwin makes excuses for his lack of contact with her. Essentially, he admits that it is more 'natural' for him to write to his wife; and Mary may have felt more than ever how much she had lost her father by gaining a stepmother. With this instruction Godwin essentially declares that his priority is now Mary Jane Godwin.

This is not the only suggestion of difficulty in the Godwin household. In their later years, both Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley remembered other difficulties of their childhood household. In July of 1845 Claire Clairmont admitted to Mary Shelley her inability to speak her mind to her parents during the period when Shelley fell in love with Mary and then eloped with her and Claire to the continent. She explained:

... you must recollect what a coldness Papa and Mama took to Shelley because he could not resist the love you inspired him with. Because a young Poet fell in love with a beautiful and quite young girl and persuaded her to run away and marry him, such a very natural thing to do, a thing that is done every day these last six thousand years, they fell into a most violent state of disapprobation of him. In vain he made you happy in vain he wrote verses that immortalized you and made you the envy and the glory of your sex, nothing would mollify them - they could not work at getting you from him, because he had the good sense by a frank free step to forestall their machinations. So Papa took to being chilling haughty and stern, and Mama to being lively and furibonde I know they quite overawed me and though I was a most warm partisan of Shelley and wished to say some impertinences to them, yet I never dared utter one, so much they cowed me. (CC ii 447-48).

Although Claire fails to consider the fact that Shelley was a married man when all these 'natural' events occurred, she still conveys that there was, at this time, a lack of close communion between her and her parents; in 1814, at the age of sixteen, Claire was afraid to speak her mind. Claire once wondered in a letter to Jane Williams, 'what would [the Godwins] have done or said had their children been fond of dress, fond of cards, drunken profligate, as most people's children are?' (CC ii 327), giving the impression that the Godwins had high expectations for their children. But Mary, at least, felt that these expectations led to opportunities only for the Clairmont children. In her later years Mary Shelley was reported to have said to her daughter-in-law that

Mrs. Godwin asserted that '[Claire] might be well educated [. . .] but Mary could stay at home and mend the stockings'.²³ The truth of this recollection of Jane Shelley, the self-appointed guardian of Mary Shelley's posthumous image, is not as important as what it implies: that Mary Shelley was convinced that she had been denied the equality of position, after her father's second marriage, that she had shared with her sister Fanny in the period leading up to that marriage. This would explain the comment made in a letter to Leigh Hunt as Mary Shelley planned her return to England after Percy Bysshe Shelley's death; she writes: 'they all seemed in a fright at the idea of my being under the same roof as Mrs. G. they made me promise (readily enough) not to stay more than a few days' (*MSL* i 374). Later, after her tour of Europe in 1840 reawakened her love for Italy and her desire to live there, Mary Shelley significantly referred to her feelings for England in familial terms: e la mia situazione qui è così intollerabile, che non posso far di meno che lamentare e pregare dio che mi sia permessa di tornare in Italia e lasciare la *Matrigna* Inghilterra per sempre, o morire' [and my situation here is so intolerable that I can do no less than lament and pray to God that I may be permitted to return to Italy and leave the *stepmother* England forever, or die] (*MSJ* 570; emphasis added).

From the beginning Mary and Claire exhibited different and opposite temperaments. When Mary was only three weeks old, Godwin asked a friend, William Nicholson, to analyse her physiognomy. The report he made notes the signs of 'considerable memory and intelligence', a 'quick sensibility', and it concludes that 'her manner may be petulant in resistance, but cannot be sullen'.²⁴ This report offers a direct comparison to Claire's temperament when read against a letter of Godwin's to his wife, in which he criticises her own 'baby-sullenness for every trifle', calling this

²³ Rolleston, pp. 33-34.

²⁴ Quoted in Paul, i, 289-90.

characteristic 'the attribute of the mother of Jane', suggesting that Claire shared her mother's tendency to sulk.²⁵ Biographers have called Claire 'clever', 'volatile, childish and outgoing', with a 'propensity [. . .] to quarrel with nearly every one', and 'full of vivacity'.²⁶ Christy Baxter, with whom Mary exchanged visits in Dundee in 1813, speculated that Claire was 'probably rather unmanageable'.²⁷ Comparatively, Mary Shelley has been described as 'loving, precocious, sensitive and spirited', and she was prone to daydreaming, according to the Introduction to the second edition of *Frankenstein*.²⁸ 'I was nursed and fed with a love of glory', Mary wrote in her diary in 1838; 'to be something great and good was the precept given me by my father' (*MSJ* 554). Claire Clairmont, though she remembered many happy times of her childhood in Godwin's house, nevertheless asserted to Jane Williams that 'in our family if you cannot write an epic poem or a novel that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature not worth acknowledging' (*CC* i 295). Their opposite natures established early, these women developed a complicated relationship which was aggravated and yet necessarily suppressed by their life together. Consequently, their attempts to portray the sister relationship in their short stories reflect the ambiguity of affection for one another which they experienced throughout their lives.

²⁵ William Godwin to Mary Jane Godwin, 28 October 1803, Abinger MSS Dep. c. 523, f. 3, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

²⁶ Sunstein, p. 35; Gittings and Manton, p. 8; Holmes, p. 241; White, ii, 74; 184.

²⁷ Mrs. Julian Marshall, *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Bentley, 1889), i, 33-34.

²⁸ 'As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime during the hours given me for recreation, was to "write stories." Still I had a dearer pleasure than this, which was the formation of castles in the air - the indulging in waking dreams - the following up trains of thought, which had for their subject the formation of a succession of imaginary incidents' (*MSWorks* i 175).

ii. Life with Shelley: Silence in the Journals

We are disgusted with the excessive dirt of our habitation – Shelley goes to enquire about conveyances to Vesoul – (*MSJ* 13)

Jane & Shelley seek for a conveyance to Neufchatel. Two hours of the evening thus spent. Mary is alone & writes to Mrs. [?B.] (Percy Bysshe Shelley in *MSJ* 13)

I think Lear treats Cordelia very ill – "What shall poor Cordelia do – love & be silent" – Oh [th]is is true – Real Love will never [sh]ew itself to the eye of broad day – [I]t courts the secret glades – (*CCJ* 31)

There is no evidence that either Claire or Mary kept a journal prior to the elopement tour of 1814. Writing about the self is an act of putting the self forth, and generally for young women it was seen as the ultimate immodest act. In 1768, sixteen-year-old Frances Burney recorded the counsel given to her by a close friend of her mother's:

I have been having a long conversation with Miss Young on journals. She has very seriously and earnestly advised me to give mine up – [. . .] She says it is the most dangerous employment young persons can have – it makes them often record things which ought *not* to be recorded, but instantly forgot.

Burney then added Dorothy Young's words directly: 'depend upon it, Fanny, 'tis the most dangerous employment you can have'.²⁹ Although it is not likely that Godwin would have placed a ban on his children writing, nevertheless the cultural opinion was that girls writing diaries were putting themselves forward in an unladylike way.

Writing of the impulse of several literary women to keep journals, Judy Simons concludes that 'given this context, it is not surprising that women's diaries of this period were often covert in their expression of personal identity'.³⁰

But identity is not revealed exclusively through a purposeful self-presentation, and often what is not said in a journal speaks volumes about the person who chose not to speak about what history has disclosed about that person. And although Christa Wolf warns that 'more is concealed [in the diary] than said',³¹ these gaps and silences

²⁹ *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Lars E. Troide and Stewart J. Cooke, 3 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988-94), i, 20-22.

³⁰ Judy Simons, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 3.

³¹ Christa Wolf, 'Diary – Aid to Work and Memory', *The Reader and the Writer: Essays, Sketches*,

are just as indicative of the diarist's self-identity as what is written. The inadvertency of what is revealed by these elisions provides a catalogue of what an individual diarist felt was taboo, material she felt was inappropriate to record – perhaps because of the wish to deny or even forget about certain painful events. As Harriet Blodgett observes, 'an intense moment for a diarist is more likely to elicit silence than statement'.³²

But by determining a theme for a diary – such as keeping a record of one's travels or of the growth of one's children – diarists might escape both what Nathaniel Hawthorne called the 'impropriety in the display of a woman's naked mind to the gaze of the world'³³ and the pressure possibly felt by having a space in which to reveal personal feelings.³⁴ These kinds of themed journals, to many diarists, dismiss the idea of the private diary. In her discussion of the implication of audience on the private diary, Judy Simons shows that 'by their choice of mode as written documents all diaries imply readership, even if the reader and writer are one and the same'.³⁵ But by keeping what would be seen as a record for others to read, diarists could free themselves of the pressure to represent aspects of their lives that they might feel uncomfortable in admitting in a completely private diary. Thus the presence of the

Memoires, trans. by Joan Becker (New York: International Publishers, 1977), p. 75.

³² Harriet Blodgett, *Centuries of Female Days: Englishwomen's Private Diaries* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 54.

³³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Salem Gazette*, 7 December 1830. Quoted in Simons, p. 6.

³⁴ Most modern scholars of the diary genre agree that the diary full of confessional secrets is a relatively modern construct, despite what the current, post-psychoanalytic period has invested into the act of keeping a diary. William Matthews, 'The Diary: A Neglected Genre', *The Sewanee Review* 85 (1977) states that 'passages of extended reflection are not so common in diaries as one might imagine' (p. 292). Harriet Blodgett, who read 88 diaries of English women for her study, found that 'the diary that deeply investigates the self and may function as therapy or emancipation provides neither the normative standard nor necessarily the epitome of style for diaries' (pp. 3-4). What these and other scholars found among the diaries they read confirms what Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in the only journal she ever kept, confessed in the first entry dated 4 June 1841: 'I wonder if I shall burn this sheet of paper like most others I have begun in the same way. To write a diary, I have thought of very often at far & near distances of time: but how could I write a diary without throwing upon paper my thoughts all my thoughts – the thoughts of my heart as well as of my head? – & then how could I bear to look on them after they were written?' Quoted in Simons, pp. 87-88.

³⁵ Simons, p. 10.

diarist in a diary becomes a *presentation* of the diarist, with full consciousness that she is making an impression.³⁶ By examining the travel diaries of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont with attention to both how they were constructing themselves and what they chose not to include in their daily entries, we can begin to see the development of their ambiguous sister bond. The subtle antagonism which I reveal in their short fiction most closely resembles the covert, coded signals of discomfort and dislike which each woman tried to hide in her journals.

When Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley began keeping a journal together, it was almost certainly with a plan to publish their observations as they travelled through post-Revolutionary Europe. Two weeks into the journey Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, who accompanied them in order 'to speak French' as she told a Swiss man on the journey (*SC* iii 351), began her own travel journal, probably with the same idea of publication. In 1817, the joint journal was published, along with some travel letters and Shelley's poem 'Mont Blanc', as *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*;³⁷ and sometime late in her life, Claire revised a portion of her journal into a considerably expanded version of the journey that was not, however, published in her lifetime.³⁸ These journals purport to offer an account of the people and places that this unusual travelling party encountered just after the continent was re-opened to English tourists in 1814, which they do in entertaining and descriptive ways. But what is equally obvious in the journals, and what remains part of the narrative of the day-to-day events of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont beyond their return to England and

³⁶ 'Common sense says that when a diarist has a live recipient for her words in view she will have to adulterate her self-expression considerably. She will have to present herself and can no longer just express herself in terms of a *personally* acceptable image'. Blodgett, p. 13 (emphasis added).

³⁷ Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) (Oxford and New York: Woodstock, 1991).

³⁸ The revised pages of Claire Clairmont's journal have been published, with a commentary by Gavin de Beer, in *SC* iii 342-75.

eventual return to Europe, is the strain between the stepsisters and the difficulties that dominated their relationship.

The first entry, written by Shelley, covers the events of the first two days of their flight from the girls' home, yet nowhere does he reveal that he is not alone with Mary. Shelley's record of their escape sounds like a gothic romance, complete with danger, illness, anxiety, terror, pursuit, delay, a perilous storm at sea that prompted reflections on death and love's eternity, and finally, as if Fate intervened, arrival at Calais under the broad and smiling sun. At the end of this long entry, Shelley describes their room at the inn and closes his inscription with the words, 'Mary was there'. Mary's first and very hesitant entry in this record of their journey foreshadows her reluctance to reveal very much in the journal; after Shelley's announcement of her presence in the room, Mary wrote, 'S.helley [sic] was also with me' (*MSJ* 7).

Mary's first impulse in writing in the diary was to codify her inscription, an attempt perhaps to conceal the full truth of the matter by using only the initial 'S'. She was reluctant to reveal all, and she did not write in the journal again for almost two weeks. And, although Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert feel that in Mary's elopement journal her 'habitual reserve was temporarily dormant' (*MSJ* xvi), there is still much that is not said. Recognising Mary's reluctance to elaborate in her journal on important events such as the deaths of her children, Feldman and Scott-Kilvert warn of the dangers of reading too much into these silences (*MSJ* xviii); sometimes, they assert, Mary was just too busy to write very much. Accepting their proviso, Mary Jean Corbett nevertheless puts forward the idea that the early elopement journal was purposefully a site of inscribed union, with Mary and Shelley transforming their individual subjectivity into a 'united "we"' and with Claire Clairmont as 'the placeless

third'.³⁹ Corbett continues by suggesting that the silences in Mary Shelley's entries in the journal could also 'represent her desire not to be divided either from her husband or within herself'.⁴⁰ Mary was concerned about her closeness to Shelley and like any adolescent in love, she did not want to be separated from him. But the silences in her journals can be decoded by reading Mary's entries against what both Shelley and Claire wrote about the same events. What becomes clear in doing so is that one thing that underlies the gaps in Mary's journal is the existent and growing antagonism she felt for her stepsister as Claire began impinging on Mary's time with Shelley, who seemed content to direct his attentions in both girls' directions.

Mary was not comfortable on this journey. Probably already pregnant (she would give birth to a seven-month-old baby on 7 February 1815), she was often tired and this may have shortened her patience and tolerance of the difficulties of travel on a limited budget. In her revised journal, Claire reported that 'Mary said the french seemed horribly rude people – but Shelley told her, as we had so little money, we had to lodge with the very lowest class of people' (*SC* III 345). Indeed, in the journal Mary was unsparing in her criticism of the French, as in this entry from 12 August:

[...] At Echimine [*for* Echimines] we rested – this village is entirely ruined by the Cossacs but we could hardly pity the people when we saw how very unamiable they were. – the Cabaret we rested at was not equalled by any description I have heard of an Irish Cabin in filth & certainly the dirtiest Scotch Cottage I ever entered was exquisitely clean beside it – [...] much wearied we arrive at Troyes and get into a dirty appartement [*sic*] of a nasty auberge to sleep – in this walk we have observed one thing – that the French are exceedingly inhospitable and on this side [of] Paris very disagreeable [*sic*]. (*MSJ* 13)

Other travellers in France in 1814 noticed the filth and rudeness of the French which so disgusted Mary. One lady wrote that 'comfortable' is 'a word not comprehended in

³⁹ Mary Jean Corbett, 'Reading Mary Shelley's *Journals*: Romantic Subjectivity and Feminist Criticism', in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. by Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 77; 79.

⁴⁰ Corbett, p. 81.

the *French language*',⁴¹ and Morris Birkbeck writes of the intolerable French habits of 'spitting [. . .] not confined to the gentlemen', 'the stench of the populous towns', and the 'frequent discharge from the windows'.⁴² But Birkbeck was not so critical of the French people, despite their habits, and his personal approach to his journey through post-Revolutionary France clarifies the tolerance which he exhibits throughout his travel narrative. Late in his travelogue he explains: 'on entering France we endeavoured to lay in a stock of good humour which might last the journey; and I am happy to say we succeeded. This is the grand secret of travelling, as it is of living; the better your temper the greater your enjoyment'.⁴³ Even Mary Wollstonecraft offered a warning to travellers that Mary would undoubtedly have read while travelling through Europe, if not before:⁴⁴

Travellers who require that every nation should resemble their native country, had better stay at home. It is, for example, absurd to blame a people for not having that degree of personal cleanliness and elegance of manners which only refinement of taste produces, and will produce every where in proportion as society attains a general polish. The most essential service, I presume, that authors could render to society, would be to promote inquiry and discussion, instead of making those dogmatical assertions which only appear calculated to gird the human mind round with imaginary circles, like the paper globe which represents the one he inhabits.⁴⁵

Mary Godwin could have benefited from adopting a similar attitude to the one that her mother recommends here. Instead, her reaction to the foreign people and customs was shaped to a great extent by her own sense of what she was doing in France, and her representation of her reactions was influenced by the knowledge that she was presenting an image of herself in the pages of her joint diary which Shelley, probably

⁴¹ *Letter from a Lady to her Sister, During a Tour to Paris, in the months of April and May, 1814* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown, 1814), p. 6.

⁴² Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey through France, from Dieppe through Paris and Lyons, to the Pyrennees, and back through Toulouse, in July, August, and September, 1814* (London: 1815), p. 104.

⁴³ Birkbeck, pp. 113-14.

⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft's travelogue was among the books taken on the journey through Europe; see *CCJ* 33.

⁴⁵ *WMW* vi 266 (letter v).

Claire, and possibly other friends might see.⁴⁶ It is important to remember that she was a young woman just short of seventeen years old who had run away from her family with a married man whom she had been forbidden to see, a man who had left behind him a pregnant wife. Mary Poovey considers this aspect of the elopement as key to Mary Shelley's later development as a novelist, and she suggests that the autobiographical characters, especially in her last three novels (*Perkin Warbeck*, *Lodore*, and *Falkner*), 'serve primarily to revise the real Mary Shelley's past inadequacies and indiscretions' in order to re-present herself as an 'ideal of feminine propriety'.⁴⁷ Although Percy Bysshe Shelley's encouragement, coupled with the example of her mother, would have made it easier for Mary to go against her more restrained instincts, when it came to recording in the seemingly permanence of the written word her actions and reactions, Mary was concerned even at a young age not to appear improper. Poovey emphasises the pressure of both mother and lover on Mary's sense of self and the conflicts it raised:

Wollstonecraft's example of courage and independence, which was reiterated and rendered even more immediate by Percy Shelley, symbolised one compelling model of behaviour for the young Mary Godwin. But this model was always at odds with the ideal of feminine propriety that was endorsed at nearly every level of early nineteenth-century society and that was reinforced, in Mary Shelley's case, by her father's conservative principles.⁴⁸

Two examples will suffice in conveying the social attitudes of the time, and in revealing the censure that Mary could expect upon her return to English society. In fiction, Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet laments her sister's fate when she learns that Lydia has run away with Wickham: 'she has no money, no connections, nothing that

⁴⁶ As Harriet Blodgett says in *Centuries of Female Days*, 'the problem of possible observers is particularly acute for women because they are, as a rule, self-conscious about the image they cut, trained to believe that they must always create a good impression on others' (p. 59).

⁴⁷ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 117.

⁴⁸ Poovey, p. xvi.

can tempt him to [marry her] – she is lost for ever'.⁴⁹ And, representative of the conduct manuals prevalent in the decades leading up to Mary's elopement, a woman writes to her daughter: 'this [chastity] lost, every thing that is dear and valuable to a woman, is lost along with it; the peace of her own mind, the love of her friends, the esteem of the world, the enjoyment of present pleasure, and all hopes of future happiness'.⁵⁰ For Jane Austen, it is Lydia who is lost by running away with Wickham; for the mother, the loss of chastity means a woman loses everything: friends, esteem, and pleasure, both now and in the future. One can only imagine the condemnation a woman who runs away with a married man, as Mary did, would receive.⁵¹

Conscious of this impetuous act of improper love, Mary may have become even more aware of the gap that separated the educated families of polite society from the rest of the population. This awareness channelled any misgivings she may have had as to her position as a married man's lover into a critical observation of all that surrounded her as she travelled through Europe, and her journal entries centre on a disgust at the lack of cleanliness they encountered. A sense of cleanliness was a mark of civility and respectability to Mary, who saw that the foreigners the trio encountered did not live up to her middle-class expectations.⁵² Little travelled before this time, when Mary criticises an inn because it is dirty, she is no doubt comparing it to the standards of the boarding house in Ramsgate where she stayed in 1811 for salt-water treatments for a skin problem on her hand; and when she compares the French inns to

⁴⁹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, 3rd rev. edn, 5 vols (1923; London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) ii, p. 277 (Book III, chapter 4).

⁵⁰ *The Polite Lady: Or a Course of Female Education, in a Series of Letters, from a Mother to Her Daughter*, 2nd edn (London: Newberry and Caran, 1769), pp. 186-87.

⁵¹ When the trio returned to England, they made no effort to hide their situation. Mary was now pregnant, as was Harriet; and Claire, unconventionally, chose to stay with Shelley and Mary because she preferred their lifestyle to the Godwins'. By late September, Shelley received a letter from Godwin who refused 'with bitter invective & keen injustice all further communication with me' (PBSL i 398).

⁵² Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 8.

a dirty Scottish cottage she must have in mind scenes from her tour through the lowlands of Scotland with the Baxter family in 1813.⁵³ Combined with the pressure to live up to her mother's reputation and the instinct to behave more like her conservative father was another, possibly equal, determination that influenced Mary's reactions: that was the determination to be different from Claire. Claire's journal does not reveal the same self-consciousness of propriety, and she seems to have taken the inconveniences of foreign travel a little more in stride. This may have been because she did not feel the weight of impropriety that Mary did; or, it may have been that she wanted to prove that she was more bold and adventurous than her reserved stepsister. In a letter to John Taylor, William Godwin dramatically over-emphasises the differences with which the world would view the actions of his two daughters, although they both ran away with a married man. Godwin writes, 'Jane has been guilty of indiscretion only [. . .] Mary has been guilty of a crime'.⁵⁴ While Mary was engaged in a sexual relationship with a married man, Claire had merely run away. Although Claire does occasionally mention the dirt of an inn or the filth of the people, she does not convey the sense of disgust in her journal that Mary does; she is not so concerned with constructing herself as a proper lady. Instead, Claire's journal entries focus largely on her engagement with the scenery around her; with this difference she asserts her difference from her stepsister.

Throughout the journal Mary is unsparing in her condemnation of the French villagers and verbose in her grievances about all aspects of the journey, so it comes as a surprise that in an 1826 article published in the *Westminster Review* Mary recalled this journey through France with nostalgic delight:

In the summer of 1814, every inconvenience was hailed as a new chapter in the romance of our travels; the worst annoyance of all, the Custom-house, was

⁵³ For a brief discussion of Mary's five month visit with the Baxters in Dundee, see Marshall, i, 29-30.

⁵⁴ *The Elopement of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*, (op. cit.), p. 16.

amusing as a novelty; we saw with extasy [sic] the strange costume of the French women [. . .] looked with curiosity on every *plât*, fancying that the fried-leaves of artichokes were frogs; we saw shepherds in opera-hats, and post-boys in jack-boots; and (*pour comble de merveille*) heard little boys and girls talk French: it was acting a novel, being an incarnate romance.⁵⁵

In the travel journal, however, there is no record of the charming 'shepherds in opera-hats' or 'post-boys in jack-boots'; instead, there is criticism and condemnation of almost everything she sees.⁵⁶ She states that at Langres they were 'obliged to sup at our inn with tout le monde & certainly a more disgusting world I never came among' (*MSJ* 14); and a fortnight later she focuses harshly on the 'horrid & slimy faces' of their companions in the boat headed for Basle, calling them 'uncleansable animals' and 'loathsome creepers' (*MSJ* 20-21). The foreign people are creatures, monsters in Mary Shelley's eyes. And, even in the revision of the journal she shows little mature understanding, stating only that her travel through the ravaged countryside and her experience with the disagreeable French people has 'give a sting to my detestation of war'.⁵⁷ Unable to express any sympathy for the foreigners, her observations only reflect back to herself and her political views. The manner of representing the foreigners in the elopement journal suggests that Mary never looked at the innkeepers or the foreign travelling companions beyond the moment in which she judged them as vulgar. In her journal they all remain as faceless as the figures in a landscape painting: they are there to reveal scale and to define what surrounds them – in this case, Mary

⁵⁵ Mary Shelley, '[The English in Italy]', *MSWorks* ii 147.

⁵⁶ In her 1803 and 1822 tours of Scotland, Dorothy Wordsworth carefully noted the dirt, the offensive smells, and the neglected state of the places in which she was obliged to rest or sleep during the course of her journey with much the same sensibility as Mary Shelley on her elopement tour. In the narrative of the 1803 tour there are no less than thirty specific complaints of the people, the houses, and the lodgings that she encountered, twenty-five of which specifically mention 'dirt'. The three journals written from the 1822 tour all contain references to dirt, increasing from 22 in each of the first two journals to 47 in the expanded narrative, over half of which use words such as 'dirty', 'filthy', 'slovenly', or 'miserable'. In *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics* Elizabeth Bohls asserts that Dorothy Wordsworth, 'a broad minded lady but a lady still, [. . .] links dirt to class prejudice against the coarse and lazy lower orders' (p. 200). Such a charge could also be levelled at Mary Shelley; both women's attention to dirt became how each defined the foreigners as 'other', as different to herself in their social class as in their strange culture.

⁵⁷ Shelley and Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, p. 19.

and her companions – as majestic and grand.

Despite Mary's willingness to vocalise her disgust with the French people, her annoyances with her stepsister are less overtly communicated in the journal. This illustrates Harriet Blodgett's findings mentioned previously that intense events often are marked with silence. But there are signs of the disharmony that Mary felt from Claire's presence, and the silence of a single entry can be read as laden with antagonism and jealousy when the following day's, or week's, entries are read with it. For example, the entry for 13 August was recorded by both Shelley and Mary, the one illuminating what the other conceals. Mary wrote first:

We are disgusted with the excessive dirt of our habitation – Shelley goes to enquire about conveyances to Vesoul – He sells the mule for 40 francs & the saddle for 16 & in all our bargains about ass – mule – & saddle we loose [sic] more than 15 napoleons – money we can but little spare now. – (MSJ 13)

Shelley's entry for the same day is more revealing, and it renders more significant what Mary left out considering Mary's strained relationship with Claire:

Jane & Shelley seek for a conveyance to Neufchatel. Two hours of the evening thus spent. Mary is alone & writes to Mrs. [?B]. – They return having bought a voiture for 5 napoleons & engaged with an aubergiste to send a mule with the carriage to Neufchatel. Remove to the Inn where we hired the mule, & sleep there. (MSJ 13-14)

What Shelley's record reveals is not only that he spent two hours in town with Claire while Mary was left alone in a dirty inn. It also reveals that Mary did not want to record that she was left alone and that her lover had gone off with her stepsister. And, the fact that Claire's journal begins the next day in a notebook which Shelley had been using previously, hints that a new camaraderie may have been developing between Shelley and Claire.

This growing friendship between Claire and Shelley could be the reason for the imagery that is repeated in both Claire's and Shelley's journal entries. Like Mary, Claire notices the 'French inhospitality' and the dirtiness of the inns – for example in

Mort, where 'perhaps never dirt was equal to the dirt we saw' (CCJ25). But when she began her journal Claire seems to have wanted to concentrate on describing the landscape, inspired perhaps by the descriptive passages of Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, about which Claire confessed, 'This is one of my very favorite [sic] Books', praising its language as 'so very flowing & Eloquent' and calling it 'altogether a beautiful Poem' (CCJ33). Claire put her effort into artfully describing the scenes of the European countryside; and it seems certain that although the three travellers certainly talked about the scenes together, Claire and Shelley must have particularly shared an interest in finding ways to describe the landscape because so many images are repeated in their journal entries. For example, in her first journal entry for 14 August Claire notes: 'one ray of red light alone marked where the sun had set' (CCJ24); on 18 August, Shelley repeats the image as he describes the effect of the sunrise on a mist-filled valley: 'a ray of red light lay on the waves of this fluctuating vapour' (MSJ 15). On the same day, Shelley notes, 'we walked into the forest of pines. It is a scene of enchantment where every sound & sight contributed to charm. One mossy seat in the deepest recesses of the wood was enclosed from the world by an impenetrable veil' (MSJ 16); and Claire's record for this day, though more fragmented, is similar: 'We go into the Wood climb through a most beautiful retired glen which ascends & the pines hang [so] thickly over that it forms a deep & ne[arly] impenetrable shade' (CCJ26).

These 'textual intersections'⁵⁸ are not evidence of Claire copying Shelley's descriptions; if we are to accept the chronology of the journal entries, Claire was the first to use the 'ray of red light' on the 14th, while Shelley did not use it until the 18th.

⁵⁸ Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers, The State University, 1987), p. 14. Levin discusses the repeated imagery in Dorothy Wordsworth's journals and William Wordsworth's poetry and challenges the view that Dorothy was 'linguistically dependent' on her brother. Instead, Levin posits a theory of a 'mutual development of vocabulary' (p. 14).

Instead, these shared images show the interactive vocabulary that occurs in community; discussions and experiences will give rise to different interpretations and representations, while maintaining similar, or even the same, language of description. If Claire had wanted to borrow images from Shelley to put into her descriptions, it is unlikely that she would have continued writing in her journal for the next sixteen years, painting word pictures of the countryside around Moscow and Naples. In the elopement journal, Shelley used many eloquent phrases to describe what he saw around him. If Claire was simply copying him, why would she limit herself to the use of rays of red light or impenetrable veils when more striking phrases appeared in Shelley's descriptions, such as 'vast and frowning mountains' (*MSJ* 14) and the 'horned moon' that 'hung in the light of sunset' (*MSJ* 16)? The fact that more of Shelley's phrases do not appear in Claire's journals gives her own writing a modest integrity.

If the errand of finding transportation established a closer friendship between Claire and Shelley, it also may have set Mary slightly on edge about her stepsister's presence on her elopement tour. From this point on Mary carefully indicates in her journal entries when she and Shelley are alone. On the 15th and 16th, Mary writes, 'Shelley & I take a walk just outside the town' and 'Shelley & I walk to the riverside' (*MSJ* 14-15), then she is silent for three days. When finally she writes again on 21 August, she notes: 'Shelley & Jane talk concerning J's character [. . .] Shelley & Mary go to the much praised Cathedral & find it very modern & stupid' (*MSJ* 18). Then, on 24 August, after having found a house, Shelley notes, 'M. & S. walk to the shore of the lake & read the description of the siege of Jerusalem in Tacitus' (*MSJ* 19). On the same day, Claire also notes: 'M & S- go out & read Taci[tus]', adding cryptically, 'Very curious dreams or perhaps they were realities' (*CCJ* 30).

These inscriptions – noting when Mary and Shelley were alone, the talk between Shelley and Claire about her character – are signs of the disintegrating relationship between Mary and Claire, and it may explain why the story that Mary began writing on 10 September was called 'Hate'.⁵⁹ Certainly something began to disturb Claire deeply as the trio decided to return to England and made their way up the Rhine. It is a speculative suggestion that Claire was falling in love with Shelley, yet her response to reading *King Lear* on the 27th makes that speculation tempting. Claire says, 'I think Lear treats Cordelia very ill – "What shall poor Cordelia do – Love & be silent" – Oh [th]is is true – Real Love will never [sh]ew itself to the eye of broad day – [I]t courts the secret glades –' (CCJ 31). Cordelia's inability to express the depths of her feelings may have resonated with Claire if she did have growing feelings for Shelley. Tempting as his theories of unrestrained love were, at this early date Claire did not feel able to admit, perhaps to herself more than to either Shelley or Mary, that she was falling in love with her stepsister's lover. This passage in Claire's journal is followed by several words which have been crossed out, the last ones thoroughly obliterated: 'Go to bed after [*five words thoroughly crossed out*]' (CCJ 31). Mary's journal entry for the same day exposes what Claire wished not to reveal; Mary writes: '[. . .] read Shakespeares [*sic*] – Interrupted by Jane's horrors' (MSJ 20). Whatever was disturbing Claire, it was deep enough to cause further bouts of emotional disturbances once the trio had returned to England which Mary continued to call 'horrors'.

Once the trio returned to England, the difficulties surrounding Claire's presence increased amid the stresses of money problems, the Godwins' rejection, and, for a period, the very real threat of Shelley's arrest. Claire's journal shows that

⁵⁹ On 10 September Shelley wrote: 'Mary begins *Hate*. & gives S. the greater pleasure' (MSJ 24).

repeatedly she and Shelley stayed up late at night after Mary had gone to bed, often telling ghost stories which brought on more disturbances from Claire.⁶⁰ There is also record of an argument between Claire and Shelley which leads to the speculation that Claire was still suffering from what she felt were inappropriate feelings towards him.

On 14 October Claire writes:

Get up late – Go down in a very ill humour – Quarrel with Shelley – But to know one's faults is to mend them – perhaps this morning though productive of very painful feelings has in reality been of more essential benefit to me than any I ever yet passed – How hateful it is to quarrel – to say a thousand unkind things – meaning none – things produced by the bitterness of disappointment – ~~I hate these feelings~~ (CCJ 50-51).

Shelley's record of this argument, which invokes his philosophical beliefs, suggests that previously there may have been some physical negotiations involved in their interchange:

Jane's insensibility & incapacity for the slightest degree of friendship. The feelings occasioned by this discovery prevent me (Shelley) from maintaining any measure in my severity. This highly incorrect – subversion of the first principles of true philosophy. Characters particularly those which are unformed may change. Beware of weakly giving way to trivial sympathies. Content yourself with one great affection, with a single mighty hope: let the rest of mankind be the subjects of your benevolence your justice: & as human beings of your sensibility. But as you value many hours of peace never suffer more than one even to approach the hallowed circle. Nothing should shake the truly great spirit which is not sufficiently mighty to destroy it. (MSJ 35)

What this self-directed injunction seems to say is 'be happy with one single love; be benevolent and just to all others, but if you want peace do not have more than one lover'. The 'hallowed circle' could be the realm of sexual desire. Late in her life Claire told Edward Silsbee that Shelley used to call bedrooms 'chambers of horrors [because] they were so jealously guarded – [. . .] apropos of her bedroom & his own & infer [sic] other superstition or ban upon entering them' (Silsbee MSS Box 7 File 3). This could have been in reference to her own tendency to have nightmares or 'convulsions',

⁶⁰ For example, on 7 October Claire and Shelley both record the events of the night which, according to Shelley's account, eventually brought on 'dreadful convulsions' in Claire (MSJ 33; CCJ 48-49).

but it could also be a reference to the difficulties Shelley encountered in trying to put into practice his theory of sharing lovers; of a *ménage à quatre* which he seriously attempted with Mary, Claire, and his university friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg in this period following their return from Europe.

The textual evidence of the jealousy that existed between Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley is plentiful. Besides the concerted effort to record when she and Shelley were alone together, Mary's journal entries from the period after their return to England show obvious signs of Mary's jealousy. Edward Silsbee recorded Claire's claims that Shelley often turned to her as a sort of replacement for Mary: 'In some respects C. claims to have known more of Shelley than his wife . . . She walked with him when his wife cd not a fine walker when his wife cd not' (Silsbee MSS Box 8 File 4). Mary's journal for the period of their return to England shows that as her pregnancy advanced Shelley did, indeed, spend increasingly more time with Claire; from 30 November the entries noting Claire and Shelley's outings appear almost daily: 'Clary & Shelley go before breakfast to Parkers [. . .] in the evening Shelley & Clary go in search of C.[harles] C.[lairmont]' (30 November, *MSJ* 48); 'Shelley & Clary go in search of C.[harles] C.[lairmont] [. . .] S. & C.[lary] walk home with C.[harles]' (1 December, *MSJ* 49). More acerbically on 5 December, Mary writes, 'Clary & Shelley go out all day to heaps of people' (*MSJ* 49). By 14 January 1815, Mary could no longer contain her irritation with the frequency of these outings or the attention Shelley was giving to her stepsister, despite the fact that she was herself corresponding affectionately with Shelley's friend, Hogg.⁶¹ Her entry for this date

⁶¹ Only a week before, Mary wrote to Hogg: 'My affection for you although it is not now exactly as you would wish will I think dayly [sic] become more so – then what can you have to add to your happiness – I ask but for time – time which for other causes beside this – phisical [sic] causes – that must be given – Shelley will be subject to these also – & this dear Hogg will give time for that love to spring up which you deserve and will one day have' (*MSL* i 8). Betty Bennett believes that this acknowledgement that Mary's pregnancy must delay a sexual union 'indicates that such a relationship was at least

records: 'Shelley and Clary out all day – forget', followed by a bold jagged line across the page. Three pages have been torn from the journal at this point (*MSJ* 61). Later journal entries show that her patience was wearing thin; 'Shelley & Clary explain as usual', she wrote on 29 January, after Shelley's inscription of his 'walk in Kensington Gardens with Clara' (*MSJ* 61-62).⁶² And, after the birth of her baby on 22 February, Mary still repeatedly records the linked 'S. & C.' in various and frequent activities – sleeping, eating, walking – while Mary read and nursed her baby.⁶³ On 6 March the child died, and the following day Claire and Shelley went to town to arrange the baby's burial (*MSJ* 68), a necessary errand that nevertheless probably added insult to injury. By the 11th, Mary's journal reveals that changes were in the making: 'talk about Clary's going away – nothing settled – I fear it is hopeless – she will not go to Skinner St. – then our house is the only remaining place – I see plainly – what is to be done' (*MSJ* 69). But a month later, it seems that things had been settled. On 16 April Mary records, 'go upstairs to talk with Shelley'; this is followed by five strategically placed dots. Periodically throughout the following weeks, it is apparent that purchases were being made for Claire's departure.⁶⁴ On the 12th, Mary's inscription makes it clear that Claire's presence had become detestable, and her references to her stepsister are full of sarcasm: 'S. goes out with his friend [. . .] S. & the lady walk out [. . .] S. & his friend ~~indulge in~~ have a last conversation' (*MSJ* 78). On the next day, Claire

discussed' (*MSL* i 9 n.2). She is quick to add, however, that there is no evidence that Mary and Hogg ever consummated their relationship.

⁶² Mary seems to have felt close enough to Hogg to reveal to him some of the antagonism she felt towards Claire; five days earlier Mary ended a letter to him: 'Shelley & Clar[e] are talking beside me which is not a very good accompaniment when one is writing a letter to one, one loves' (*MSL* i 9).

⁶³ Marion Kingston Stocking generously labels Mary's feelings exhibited in these entries as 'not jealousy or resentment but a wistful, unresigned self-pity' (*CCJ* 67). But the vehemence of the jagged line coupled with the later sarcasm attached to her references to Claire as Shelley's 'friend' or 'the lady' points towards a direct antagonism that self-pity usually does not contain.

⁶⁴ See for example: 18 April (in Shelley's hand), 'Jefferson & the Maie go for bonnets after dinner with Clara'; 20 April, 'after dinner C goes to buy things'; 9 May, 'walk out with Clary in the morning to buy things' (*MSJ* 75-77).

left; and Mary's last entry in the journal discloses her relief: 'I begin a new journal with our regeneration' (*MSJ* 79).

But this separation from Claire Clairmont was not to last, and although Mary had once written to Shelley 'give me a garden & absentia Clariae and I will thank my love for many favours' (*MSL* i 22), Shelley was always eager to have Claire in his household, as chapter one shows. After initiating a love affair with Lord Byron, Claire convinced the Shelleys, who were contemplating another journey to Europe, to travel with her to Geneva so that she could resume her relationship with the poet. And later, after Shelley's chancery suit to gain custody of his children after the death of Harriet was decided against him, part in fear of his children by Mary being taken from him and part because Claire's daughter by Byron needed to be delivered to her father in order to have a better upbringing than Claire as a single mother could provide, the trio again set off for Europe – and this time they expected to remain. There are many examples of tension between the two stepsisters in the biography of the Italian period; but reflective of Harriet Blodgett's findings that often emotional experiences are elided in women's diaries, the diaries of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont from this period of their lives reveal almost nothing of their strained relationship. When Mary and Shelley's daughter, Clara, died after an arduous journey from Este to Venice in order that Byron might not discover Shelley had lied to him when he told him that his family was nearby in order to win for Claire a visit from Allegra, all that Mary writes in her journal is 'Thursday 24th [September 1818] This is the Journal book of misfortunes [. . .] On Thursday I go to Padua with Clare – meet S there – we go to Venise [sic] with my poor Clara who dies the moment we get there' (*MSJ* 226-27). She makes no reference to the fact that all of the journeys recently undertaken, which had made Clara so ill, were for Claire's benefit. And the complicated situation in what

has come to be known as the 'Neapolitan Mystery', where Shelley was accused and threatened with blackmail by a former servant of having a child with Claire Clairmont in December 1818, Mary inscribes in her journal with only a symbol of a crescent moon, which Feldman and Scott-Kilvert speculate Mary used to signify trouble. On the same date Claire wrote, 'Oh Bother' (*CCJ* 150). Only Claire revealed, albeit infrequently, anything of the troubles between her and Mary during this period of their cohabitation. On 4 July 1820 she wrote, 'Heigh – ho the Clare & the Ma / Find something to fight about every day –' (*CCJ* 153). Mary's journal entry for this day is characteristically silent on anything to do with Claire; all she notes is her study of Greek and what she and Shelley read (*MSJ* 325).

But it is clear that the friction between the stepsisters was increasing to the point that Mrs. Mason urged Claire to leave the Shelleys, and she arranged for Claire to stay as a paying guest at the house of Dr. Antonio Bojti (*CCJ* 179; *PBSL* ii 218; 241-42). Mary noted Claire's departure with a drawing of a sun and the inscription 'S. goes to Florence' (*MSJ* 336), and only a few days later recorded 'letters from [sun symbol] complaining of dullness' (*MSJ* 338-39). Sun symbols appear a few more times in Mary's journal as some personal code most likely referring to her stepsister, but they achieve what Mary intended, which was to conceal strong feelings. Claire came and went from the Shelley's household for the next two years, and Mary's journal makes no comment on these visits except to mark her arrival and departure. In the spring of 1822, when Claire was strongly convinced that something terrible was going to happen to Allegra, who had been placed in a convent by Byron, Mary may have come to sympathise with Claire's misery at being separated from her child; but her own depression and her strained relationship with Shelley occupied her emotionally. Mary extended an invitation to Claire, at Shelley's urging, to come stay

with the Shelleys and the Williams who were planning a move to Lerici. While she was with them the news came that Allegra had died in the convent (*MSJ* 408); within three months Shelley had drowned off the coast of Lerici as he and Edward Williams returned from Livorno welcoming Leigh Hunt and his family to Italy.

iii. Separation and Sisterhood:

The Correspondence of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont, 1822-1836

Claire always harps on my desertion of her – as if I could desert one I never clung to. (*MSL*ii 271)

Recollecting [Mary's] conduct at Pisa I can never help feeling horror even in only looking at her. (*CCJ* 432)

After the deaths of Edward Williams and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary, Claire, Jane Williams, and the children (Rosalind and Edward Medwin Williams and Percy Florence Shelley) returned to Pisa. Decisions and arrangements had to be made. Mary explained their situation to Maria Gisborne in a letter written on 27 August 1822: 'Mrs Williams Claire & I live all together, we have one purse, & joined in misery we are for the present joined in life' (*MSL* i 253). But in a little over two weeks, all plans were settled and Mary and Jane travelled to Genoa accompanied by Trelawny and soon to be joined by the Hunts and Byron. They left on the evening of Tuesday the 11th, and depressed by their departure Claire began a letter which she headed '1/2 past 2 Wednesday morning':

My dear Mary,

You have only been gone a few hours – I have been inexpressibly low-spirited – I hope dear Jane will be with you when this arrives. Nothing new has happened – what should – to me there seems nothing under the Sun, except the old tale of misery, misery. (*CC* i 177)

Claire goes on to explain to Mary that the financial arrangements which they had

settled now appeared to be insufficient,⁶⁵ drawing the response from Mary: 'I wish when I was in Pisa that you had said that you thought you should be short of money & I would have left you more – but you seemed to think 150 francesconi plenty' (*MSL* i 258). This was only the first of many instances of Mary and Claire sharing what little money they had if the other was in need.⁶⁶

Claire's letter anticipates the structure of most of the letters she would write to Mary for the rest of her life. In it she focuses largely on herself, for as she wrote at a later date, 'I cannot bear a letter that talks to me mostly of myself – and I suppose you think the same – it is folly to imagine others know more of oneself than one does oneself, or can give one any new lights on that subject – a letter to be interesting should treat of the writer not of the writtee (as I believe they call the person written to) for that is the absent and unknown person and therefore the person of whom one desires to hear of' (*CC* ii 340). Mary, on the other hand, often felt that speaking of herself would place a burden on the recipients of her letters. She knew how clearly her letters conveyed her misery. Just after Jane Williams's departure for England in September 1822, Mary wrote to her, 'Ever since you quitted me I am overpowered by a melancholy & misery no human words can describe and no human mind long support. I am irritated against all I feel, or see or hear, this must end soon, & probably when utterly exhausted by grief I shall sink into lethargy – but now I repeat only – "Pain, pain, ever & forever pain!" – & my heart is full to bursting. Well, my best girl I

⁶⁵ Claire explained that her plans were to travel to Vienna to join her brother Charles, and that 'the consequence is that it will be double as much as I am to go alone' (*CC* i 177). Additionally, the arrangements that Shelley had negotiated with Byron who wished to pay for a translation of Goethe seemed uncertain; in Claire's prejudiced view, she states: 'now he [Byron] has mumbled & grumbled and demurred and does not know whether it is worth it and will only give forty crowns' (*CC* i 178). But earlier Shelley had praised her work: 'I am much pleased with yr. translation of Goethe which cannot fail to succeed if finished as begun' (*PBSL* ii 401). Byron had not been told who was undertaking the translation, however (*PBSL* ii 403), and it appears that once he realised that Claire was his translator he lost interest in the project.

⁶⁶ See also *MSL* iii 100, 117; *CC* i 245, 268, 385n, 386n.

will not irritate your many sorrows by talking of mine' (*MSL* i 263-64). In the midst of a long letter to Maria Gisborne written at the end of November, Mary explains her reticence to communicate with friends more fully:

No one ever writes to me. Each day, one like the other, passes on and if I were where I would that I were methinks I could not be more forgotten. I cannot write myself, for I cannot fill the paper always with the self same complaints – or when I write them, why send them, to cast the shadow of my misery on others. [. . .]

Pardon me, my dear Mrs Gisborne, that I still write to you in this incoherent and unletterlike manner. But I strive in vain to do better. [. . .] I put off writing from day to day endeavouring to catch the moment when I shall feel less, but the pen in my hand the same spirit guides it, & one only thought swells the torrent of words that is poured out. Perhaps it would be better not to write at all; but the weakness of human nature is to seek for sympathy: – I think but of one thing – my past life – while living (do I live now?) I loved to imagine futurity, & now I strive to the same – but I have nothing desirable to imagine, save death; & my fancy flags or sleeps or wanders when it endeavours to pursue other thoughts. – I imagine my child dead & what I should do then – never does the idea of peaceful futurity intrude itself – I feel that my whole life is one misery – it will be so – mark me – I shall never know peace: – my only safeguard is in not seeking it, for so surely as I do shall I be cast wounded, helpless & lacerated on the barren rocks of my most cheerless life[.]

Again why do I write this. Let me say something else. [. . .]
(*MSL* i 290-91)

But contemplating her journey to Vienna, Claire falls into pathos tempered by a humour that at this early date, at least, Mary is unable to feel. She tells Mary, 'imagine all the lonely inns – the weary long miles – If I do observe whatever befalls in life – the heaviest part, the very dregs of the misfortune fall upon me' (*CC* i 177-78).⁶⁷

Claire offsets this self-pity, however, with self-mockery, and she jokes:

I mean to chew rhubarb the whole way as the only diversion I can think of at all suited to my present state of feeling, and if I should write you scolding

⁶⁷ Claire followed this announcement with four lines from Coleridge, misquoted from memory: 'Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone upon a wide wide Sea / And Christ would take no mercy / Upon my soul in agony' (*CC* i 178). Mary included a misquotation of the same lines in the penultimate entry in her journals, dated 16 April 1841: 'Alone – alone – all – all alone / Upon the wide, wide sea – / And God will not take pity on / My soul in agony!' (*MSJ* 573). The lines are from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, first published in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798: 'Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone on a wide wide sea; / And Christ would take no pity on / My soul in agony' (224-27). *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).

letters, you will excuse them knowing that with the Psalmist "Out of the bitterness of my mouth have I spoken." (CC i 178)⁶⁸

Perhaps it was this self-directed humour which drew from Mary her sympathetic response to Claire, despite the fact that she herself had just lost a husband and the father of her child. But Claire, too, had suffered loss; and one that Mary could fully comprehend: the loss of her daughter, Allegra. Byron had placed their child, against Claire's wishes, in the convent at Bagnacavallo in January 1821, where she died of typhus just over a year later, shortly before Shelley's death, in April 1822.⁶⁹

In this first letter following their separation Mary expresses both sympathy and, in the extent to which she reveals herself, a trusting affection. A long passage from her letter best conveys her expressions of affection for her stepsister:

My dear Claire,

I do not wonder that you were & are melancholy – or that the excess of that feeling should oppress you. Great God! What we have gone through – what variety of care and misery, all closed now in blackest night. And I – am I not melancholy? – here in this busy hateful Genoa where nothing speaks to me of him, except the sea, which is his murderer. – Well I shall have his books & manuscripts & in those I shall live & from the study of those I do expect some instants of content. In solitude my imagination & ever moving thoughts may afford me some seconds of exaltation that may render me both happier here & more worthy of him hereafter. Such as I felt walking up a mountain by myself at sunrise during my journey – when the rocks looked black about me & a white mist concealed all but them – I thought then that thinking of him and exciting my mind my days might pass in a kind of peace – but these thoughts are so fleeting – & then I expect unhappiness alone from all the worldly part of my life – from my intercourse with human beings – I know that that will bring nothing but unhappiness to me. If indeed I except Trelawny who appears so truly generous & kind.

But I will not talk of myself. You have enough to annoy & make you miserable – & in nothing can I assist you. But I do hope that you will find Germany better suited to you in every way than Italy – & that you will make friends – & more than all, become really attached to some one there. [. . .]
(MSL i 258)

Free from the acid sarcasm of the early journals, Mary Shelley's letter reveals kindness and a sincere desire that Claire might find the devotion and affection in

⁶⁸ Claire parodies *Job* 10:1: 'I will speak in the bitterness of my soul'.

⁶⁹ *BL&J* viii 91; *CCJ* 216, 284n; *MSL* i 235.

Germany that she had not found in Italy. The extent to which she reveals her deepest thoughts is obvious when compared to her journal following Shelley's death. In November Mary confided to her journal the same sentiments that she expressed to Claire in this letter: 'I shall write his life – & thus occupy myself in the only manner from which I can derive consolation. That will be a task that may carry some balm' (*MSJ* 444-45). The similarity of sentiments reveals that Mary felt close enough to Claire, in the aftermath of the tragedy, to reveal her deepest thoughts.

In talking of herself in this letter, Mary uses the language that became characteristic of the journal she began in October 1822 that she titled, 'The Journal of Sorrow'. The journal, like the letter to Claire, expresses the sense of solitude that Mary felt; despite the fact that she was living in a household full of people (the Hunts had six children) she feels completely isolated from the human beings from whom, as she told Claire, she expects only unhappiness.⁷⁰ She talks of Shelley – notably, without mentioning his name – and she reveals her innermost thoughts as she would continue to do in the journal for the rest of her life.⁷¹ Immediately after their separation, Mary felt an attachment to her stepsister that encouraged this open confidence, similar to what she would write to Jane Williams. Indeed, although it was to Jane that Mary wrote, after detailing the disharmony that existed between herself and Leigh Hunt, 'So, my own Jane, we two creatures compare notes of misery' (*MSL* i 305), this description also characterises the letters exchanged between Claire and

⁷⁰ In the journal, Mary wrote: 'Alas! I am alone – no eye answers mine – my voice can with none assume its natural modulation, to none all is shew – & I but a shadow' (*MSJ* 429). Earlier, Mary described her mode of living in a letter written 17/20 September: 'Those about me have no idea of what I suffer; for I talk, aye & smile as usual – & none are sufficiently interested in me to observe that though my lips smile, my eyes are blank, or to notice the desolate look that I cast up towards the sky in anger – that I have smiled' (*MSL* i 251).

⁷¹ For example, 7 June 1836: 'What a lot is mine – marked by tragedy & death – tracked by disappointment & unutterable wretchedness . . .'; 11 January 1841: 'Perso ogni Amico – contornata la gente disgraziata – dubitando cosa fara p[er] il mio figlio – sperando mulla – infelice – tradita, solitaria!' [I have lost every friend – Surrounded by wretched people – uncertain about what will happen to my son – hoping for nothing – unhappy – betrayed, alone!] (*MSJ* 548; 570-71).

Mary. They each related their difficulties, and they responded to each other's sufferings with sympathy and compassion. But in this letter, her parting salutation reveals an intention to keep up the connection through correspondence: 'Adieu my dear Claire – write to me often as I shall to you. Affectionately Yours, Mary WS' (MSL i 259).

Despite this promise of continued correspondence, by 24 October Claire told Jane Williams, 'I have heard little or nothing from Mary since she left Pisa' (CC i 201). Now living near her brother Charles in Vienna, Claire had entered Viennese society and began looking for a situation as a governess. Claire's description of her life in a letter to Jane Williams contrasts sharply to Mary Shelley's self-portrait of her lonely existence in Genoa. Claire writes, 'I have made numerous acquaintances, all rich & fashionable and have been received with the greatest politeness and hospitality – I am perpetually in company – at the theatre, the Corso or dinner parties'. She delighted in her brother's company who, she told Jane, was 'so quiet, good, and mild, that we quite suit one another; and then he allows me to be as wild, and extravagant [sic], as I please, in my theories' (CC i 200-01). But despite these distractions, Claire still felt her losses, saying that all the social outings are 'things which destroy me' and lamenting, 'I have lost my dear den that I had with you where I soothed and recovered my spirits by songs and thoughts which approached or drew me towards the world of imagination, so different from the real round substantial globe we inhabit' (CC i 200).

Following some difficulties with the police in Vienna,⁷² Claire arranged to travel to St. Petersburg as the companion of the fourteen and sixteen year-old daughters of Countess Zotoff, daughter of one of the Russian ministers. By the spring of 1824, Claire was in Moscow working as a governess for Zachar Nicolaiivitch, a

⁷² Charles Clairmont's lively account of his dealings with the police in this matter is printed in CC i 202-09.

prominent Russian lawyer (CCJ297). Meanwhile, Mary remained in Genoa for a time, living on the proceeds of the auctioning of the boat in which Shelley drowned and on what she earned writing for *The Liberal*, the journal which Hunt had come to Italy to start with Byron and Shelley, and copying for Byron.⁷³ But she finally left Genoa for England in July 1823,⁷⁴ and after struggling to arrange an annuity of £100 per annum from Sir Timothy Shelley which included the prohibition of Mary bringing Shelley's name into print (which prevented her from receiving income from the sale of a collection of his works or a biography), she eventually settled in Kentish Town to be near Jane Williams.⁷⁵

Leaving Italy did not obliterate or even mollify the acute grief that Mary felt, and by May 1824, Mary was at work on *The Last Man*, with the portraits of Shelley and Byron in the characters of Adrian and Lord Raymond.⁷⁶ On 14 May 1824 Mary wrote of her feelings of being the last of a 'race' of companions from whom she was now separated: '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 –' (MSJ 476-77). After hearing of Byron's death on the following day – which she called 'the "coming event" that cast its shadow on my last night's miserable thoughts' (MSJ 477) – Mary wrote of feeling even more cut off from the world, and at the age of twenty-six she reported, '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' (MSJ 478). Mary had already formed two of the characters of *The Last Man* from Byron and Shelley, but Byron's death most certainly would have influenced the warm tribute that

⁷³ MSL i 281; BL&J x 11; MSL i 285.

⁷⁴ MSL i 349.

⁷⁵ MSL i 425; 428.

⁷⁶ In 1827 Mary wrote to Teresa Guiccioli, 'Have you read my Last Man – You will find in Lord Raymond and Count Adrian faint portraits but I hope not displeasing to you of B. and S. – but this is a secret' (MSL i 566).

was given to Lord Raymond in the novel:

What a noble creature was Raymond, the first among the men of our time. By the grandeur of his conceptions, the graceful daring of his actions, by his wit and beauty, he won and ruled the minds of all. [. . .] Now his death has crowned his life, and to the end of time it will be remembered, that he devoted himself, a willing victim, to the glory of Greece. Such was his choice: he expected to die. [. . .] While the earth lasts, his actions will be recorded with praise. Grecian maidens will in devotion strew flowers on his tomb, and make the air around it resonant with patriotic hymns, in which his name will find high record.

(*MSWorks* iv 161-62; book II chapter iv)

In this novel Mary allowed herself to indulge in writing the grief that she had tried to keep in check in her correspondence. This measured eulogy of Lord Byron conveys her true affection for the man whose voice, she claimed, always led her to expect Shelley's voice to follow. But Mary also used the novel to express the grief she felt over the loss of Shelley; and Lionel Verney's fragmented lament for the loss of Adrian contrasts starkly with the composed sentiments on the loss of Lord Raymond. Initially, Verney eulogises Adrian in terms that must speak of Mary's feelings in losing her husband, stating 'The best years of my life had been passed with him. All I had possessed of this world's goods, of happiness, knowledge, or virtue – I owed to him. He had, in his person, his intellect, and rare qualities, given a glory to my life, which without him it had never known. Beyond all other beings he had taught me, that goodness, pure and single, can be an attribute of man' (*MSWorks* iv 349; book III chapter x). Throughout the final two chapters Verney bewails again and again Mary's own feelings of being, as she stated in her journal entry, the 'last relic of a beloved race' (*MSJ* 477), calling the world a 'universe of misery' (*MSWorks* iv 345; book III chapter ix) and claiming that 'one living man – one companion in my weary solitude, [would] be worth all the glory and remembered power' of the ancient relics of Rome. (*MSWorks* iv 359; book III chapter x). Verney conveys to the page on which he has written the history of the last man on earth the difficulty of his task that Mary

undoubtedly felt, which makes this section of *The Last Man* a clear extension of her 'journal of sorrows':

my hand trembles – my heart pants, and my brain refuses to lend expression, or phrase, or idea, by which to image forth the veil of unutterable woe that clothed these bare realities. O, worn and beating heart, may I dissect thy fibres, and tell how in each unmitigable misery, sadness dire, repinings, and despair, existed? May I record my many ravings – the wild curses I hurled at torturing nature – and how I have passed days shut out from light and food – from all except the burning hell alive in my own bosom? (*MSWorks* iv 361; book III chapter x)

With these lamentations Mary was able to publicly express the loss that she felt compelled to hide from her closest friends, and she faced a future in which, as she has Verney state, 'loneliness is my familiar, sorrow my inseparable companion' (*MSWorks* iv 362; book III chapter x). Like her letter to Maria Gisborne in which she expressed that she felt her 'whole life is one misery [. . .] I shall never know peace' (*MSL* i 290).

In the meantime Claire, still in Russia, also had the past in mind. She had had to stop writing to Mary and her mother, as she explained to Jane Williams, because the names of Shelley and Godwin would have raised suspicion and started rumours among Claire's employers and their friends.⁷⁷ Claire's success as a governess depended upon her reputation remaining unblemished; when her connections with Godwin and Shelley finally reached the Russian society among whom she worked and lived, through no fault of her own, she responded with real concern tempered by her characteristic humour:

I sent you a letter [she writes to Jane Williams] by Miss Trewin because I knew your name would excite no suspicions; but it seems my mother got hold of Miss T – sought her out and has thereby done me a most incalculable mischief. Miss T – has come back full of my story here, and though she is very friendly to me, yet others who are not so have already done me injury. The Professor at the University here [. . .] has a great deal of friendship for me because as he says very truly, I am the only person here besides himself who

⁷⁷ Claire wrote explaining the restriction placed on her communication because of these names, and asked Jane: 'Pray tell them this, that it may not seem coldness on my part. [. . .] I have no inclination to let the name of Shelley and Godwin go through [the hands of the man who posted Claire's letters for her]' (*CC* i 225-26).

knows how to speak English. He professes the most rigid principles and is come to that age when it is useless to endeavour to change them; I however took care not to get upon the subject of principles and so he was of infinite use to me both by counselling and by protecting me with the weight of his high approbation. You may imagine this man's horror when he heard who I was; [that] the charming Miss Clairmont, the model of good sense accomplishments and good taste was brought up, issued from the very den of free thinkers. I see that he is in a complete puzzle on my account, he cannot explain to himself how I can be so extremely delightful and yet so detestable; the inveteracy of his objections is shaken[.] [T]his however has not hindered him from doing me serious mischief; I was to have undertaken this winter the education of [. . .] the child of a very rich family, where the professor reigns despotic; [. . .] now all is broken off, because the scruples of my Professor do not allow of it. God knows he says what godwinish principles she might not instil [. . .] (CC 239-40)

By losing this opportunity, Claire was condemned to remain in the household of the Galitzins where she was overworked and where, as she explained to Jane Williams, the 'mark of [. . .] dignity here is that you dare dispute and upbraid [the Galitzins]' (CC 235). By the end of 1826 Claire's health began to suffer, possibly as much from the emotional strain of having to disguise her past as from the harsh conditions. She began using the term 'run' frequently in her journal at this time to describe all her movements around Moscow, asserting how busy she had become.⁷⁸ But a pair of journal entries at the turn of the year reveals the emotional toll her silence was taking on her. On 27 December Claire described a dinner conversation which culminated in her breaking her silence on a subject close to her heart: 'The Prince Alexander and the Count Rastopshin dined. It was very disagreeable for me. The latter praised Albè up to the skies and reviled our dearest Shelley – I would not bear this and defended him' (CCJ 403). A month later, after reading Medwin's *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron*,⁷⁹ she confessed her distress to her journal:

When I was in bed, I wept a great deal because my reading of to-day had brought back Shelley vividly to my mind. – It is cruel to think how his merit was lost upon the world, how that impostor Byron was admired for his

⁷⁸ For example: 'I ran home to dress' (6 January 1827); 'Got up early and ran away to breakfast' (7 January 1827); 'Got up late and ran off to Kaisaroff's' (8 January 1827). (CCJ 407).

⁷⁹ Thomas Medwin, *Journal of the Conversations of Lord Byron* (London: Henry Colburn, 1824).

imposture, how tenderly they relate of him that he declared he could not leave his monkeys behind because strangers could not take care of them, whilst he left his daughter to the care of ignorant bigoted mercenaries and let her die for want of care. (CCJ 409-10)

For several days after this Claire reports in her journal that she is 'excessively unwell' (CCJ 410), and on 30 January, without making any arrangements with the Galitzins or even telling them of her plans, she went to her friends the Kaisaroffs, who nursed her back to health and then employed her as a companion to Madame Kaisaroff and as a governess to twelve-year-old Natalie Kaisaroff.

By 1828, Claire was talking of returning to England and from there finding a job as a companion in a warmer climate (CC i 248). Her health had deteriorated, and her doctor predicted that she would become an invalid if she did not leave the country. But Claire did not want to come to England only to be a burden on the Godwins, whose financial situation was still bad. Already in August 1827, out of what appears to be sincere concern, Mary invited Claire to come and live with her, as she revealed to Jane Williams: 'I have written to poor dear Claire – As I wrote, my heart melted within me at the thought of her dreariness, and I was impelled (& do not repent my impulse) to make her, if she could not contrive an Italian journey, a cordial invitation to share my fortunes here' (MSL i 572).⁸⁰ But as Claire began seriously to consider returning to England, the former tensions resurfaced in Mary's comments to Jane Williams as she faced the prospect of providing Claire with a home once again. 'I shall be very glad to contribute to [Claire's] happiness, even at the expense of my liberty', Mary wrote perhaps more kindly than she felt. In her next letter, the sense of duty and obligation outweighs her previous compassionate desire to help: 'Have you heard from Claire? – She is reasonable, yes – I doubt not – but one's dear liberty – the

⁸⁰ Mary had recently arranged an allowance of £250 per annum from Sir Timothy Shelley upon the death of Shelley's son by Harriet, Charles, which left Percy Florence Shelley sole heir to the estate (MSL I 550).

difference of having one with whom one cannot sympathize, & being alone – But I ought not to indulge in these thoughts – I will do as I ought, & leave the rest to fate' (*MSL* ii 48). As happened several times in the past, Mary's house became Claire's residence out of a combination of necessity and a sense of duty on Mary's part, but in this letter to Jane, Mary finally admits that she cannot sympathise with her stepsister, probably meaning to emphasise their differences more than to suggest that she has no feelings for Claire in her troubles.⁸¹

Sometime during the period of 1828-32 Claire began a sketch of Mary Shelley's character in a leaflet of journal papers that betrays her own negative feelings towards her stepsister. 'She has given up every hope of imaginary excellence,' Claire wrote, adding 'would to God she could perish without note or remembrance, so the brightness of [Shelley's] name might not be darkened by the corruptions she sheds upon it' (*CCJ* 432). Claire aimed this attack at Mary's attempt to reintegrate herself into English society, at 'pleasure of trifling with triflers', but she characteristically noted what she also felt was worthy in her stepsister: 'the surpassing beauty of her mind' (*CCJ* 432). It is clear that at this time the negative feelings that Claire held towards Mary were focused on Mary's friendship with Byron:

Recollecting her conduct at Pisa I can never help feeling horror even in only looking at her – the instant she appears I feel not as if I had blood in my veins, but in its stead the sickening crawling motion of the Death Worm. What would one say of a Woman [. . .] who should go and gaze upon the spectacle of a Child led to the scaffold, one would turn from her with horror – yet she did so, she looked coolly on, rejoiced in the comfortable place she had got in the shew, chatted with her neighbours, never winced once during the exhibition and after all was over, went up and claimed acquaintance with the executioner and shook hands with him. (*CCJ* 432-33)

Claire's extended metaphor casts Byron as the executioner of Allegra, whose sentence was her being placed in a convent, and Mary as the eager audience of the 'show'.

⁸¹ Sympathize: 'To have an affinity; to agree in nature, disposition, qualities, or fortunes; to be alike; with *with*, to be like, resemble' (*OED* xvii 459).

Contrasting Mary's behaviour with Shelley's, whose 'sad countenance betrayed how painful was the duty imposed upon him' of remaining friendly with Byron after he had placed Allegra in the convent (CCJ 433), Claire reveals her feelings of repugnance at Mary's willingness to socialise with Byron during the winter of 1821 at Pisa, when Claire was staying with the Botji family in Florence.

But although sometime around this visit Claire recalled her feelings of abhorrence towards Mary, Claire also apparently benefited from her stay with Mary. After only a month she sounded calmer than in her frantic letters from Russia. She wrote to Trelawny, 'Do not think the melancholy you see sometimes upon me, is the sign of hopeless wretchedness, I am happy – it is only the shadow of former days, which throws its deep gloom over my mind, which is not yet passed away' (CC i 258). She was much changed; Trelawny called her 'horridly prudish – and sister-like insensible', and he signed one letter, 'Adieu old aunt'⁸² – a result of the image she had been cultivating in Russia to obtain respectable positions as a governess. But after only nine months in England she returned to the Kaisaroffs who, seeking a cure for their daughter's illness, were currently living in Dresden. In a letter to Trelawny Mary's explanation of Claire's departure focuses on the benefit it would give Claire:

She returns to Dresden to an agreeable [sic] situation and I envy any one who quits this sad land too much not to congratulate her on her departure: poor herself, surrounded by needy & in some cases unamiable relatives – she finds here not one of the necessary comforts of life – she began to vegetate, & to become content with vegetation – she is torn from this, and in society of persons agreeable [sic] to her in Germany, will arrange a mode of life very far to be preferred to the one she is doomed to here. (MSL ii 82)

But there may have been a touch of jealousy in Mary's feelings – she longed to leave England herself – as well as relief that Claire was gone. And as their correspondence continued into the 1830s, so too did traces of the tension between them.

⁸² *Letters of Edward John Trelawny*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 116.

Their time together left Claire with a renewed affection for her stepsister in addition to the admiration she already felt for Mary's talents. Claire wrote lively letters back to England, true to her edict of writing about herself since 'that is the absent and unknown person and therefore the person of whom one desires to hear' (CC ii 340). She obviously had no sense that these enthusiastic narratives of her social activities might affect Mary, who during this period admitted in her journal, 'I suffer a great deal from solitude & disappointment & consequent depression of spirits' (MSJ 516). One letter in particular may have seemed to Mary that Claire was flaunting her gaiety; in it she itemised and emphasised the variety of social engagements in which she was obliged, as part of the Kaisaroff household, to attend:

We had dejeuners dansants, soirees dansants (diners dansants are considered as de trop by order of the physicians) bals pares, theatres, operas, grands diners, petits soupers, concerts, visites de matin, promenades à ane, parties de campagne reunions litteraires, grands circles, promenades en bateau coteries choisies, [. . .] thunder storms from the sea, and political storms from France, in short if we had only had an Earth quake, or the shock of one, we should of run through the whole series of modifications of which human existence is susceptible. (CC i 279)

Unaware of the contrast she was revealing between her own life and Mary's, Claire acknowledged the melancholy that dominated Mary's life and that infused her letters in a comment meant to express how important their correspondence was to her: 'Your last letter, although so melancholy, gave me much pleasure, merely therefore because it came from you' (CC i 279). But the gaiety of her letters must have contributed to the depression that Mary described in her journal: 'I have felt my solitude more entirely but never more painfully than now', she wrote a week after Claire wrote this letter. 'I seem deserted – alone in the world – cast off – the victim of poverty & neglect – Thus it is – to be poor & so cut off from society – to pass my days in seclusion' (MSJ 517). Claire's letter would have arrived shortly after Mary wrote this in her journal, and there is no doubt but that Claire's busy social life would have emphasised to Mary her

own lonely existence.

Mary had much to worry about at this time. Besides her own expenses, Godwin's continuing financial difficulties weighed heavily on her mind.⁸³ Additionally, she experienced some difficulties in her friendship with Isabella Baxter Booth which she notes in the journal with the terse lines, 'she was ever false yet enchanting – now she has lost her fascinations – probably, because I can no longer serve her she take[s] no more trouble to please me –' (*MSJ* 517). By February 1831, Mary confessed to John Howard Payne that she intended 'giving up parties as too expensive, I being desperately poor' (*MSL* ii 126). Hearing of Claire's social life at a time when she was forced to give up society must have contributed to the return of Mary's old resentment of her stepsister. When Claire wrote petulantly to Mary, 'you may think how glad I should have been to have had a letter [of introduction] to an English person in Florence in my present difficulties, but nobody thinks for me, nor will they even do the little I ask them' (*CC* i 282), Mary responded quickly with letters introducing Claire to her friends Mrs. Hare and Teresa Guiccioli. But by June the antagonism again surfaced in a letter to Trelawny, to whom Mary wrote, 'Have you seen Claire? She never writes except on special occasions when she wants any thing' (*MSL* ii 139).

Much of the correspondence between Mary and Claire for the next several years has not survived, but there is evidence of the continuation of these same feelings: affection, admiration, and dependence on Claire's part, duty and indignation on Mary's. Upon hearing that Mary intended to enrol Percy Florence in public school, Claire confessed, 'I think in certain things you are the most daring woman I ever knew. There are few mothers who having suffered the misfortunes you have, and

⁸³ See *CC* i 281: 'what you tell me of the state of family resources has naturally depressed my spirits'.

having such advantages depending upon the life of an only son, would venture to expose that life to the dangers of a public school' (CC i 292). And in response to Mary's declaration that 'next Friday is my birth-day and before another comes I shall be translated to paradise' (MSL ii 193), Claire reveals her confidence in Mary's care for her as she expresses her anticipated sense of loss: 'How shall I describe all I should feel were you to die [. . .] Few are the persons who express or shew an atom of interest in my welfare and you it appears to me are one of the few – conceive what I should feel were I to lose you' (CC i 299).

Claire was also particularly supportive of Mary's literary efforts. In a long passage of praise for Mary and censure for other writers, Claire wrote indignantly of Mary's 'genius unappreciated nay almost passed over in silence, whilst a troop of smatterers [. . .] in literature as inferior to you as a pigmy is to a Giant in stature' received admiration (as well as income) for their writings. Claire continued her praise, which nevertheless contained criticism of Mary's own conduct:

To seek to ennoble and illustrate one's name by honourable deeds and to be rewarded by even worse than neglect, [. . .] would shatter the most iron nerves and wound to death the most spirited heart. A noble and philosophical indifference to the concerns of oneself would not preserve one from feeling such a situation; [. . .] yet one must suffer and sink beneath the conviction of the vileness of human Nature that ever licks the dust before superficial merit and pelts with mud genuine merit. In one respect I think you are to blame in your way of conducting yourself with the English public: you sit down too meekly beneath its indignities and shower upon it without a reproach all your best gifts: such saint like humility and sweetness is all lost upon a people of so base a character as the English: you should give them to know in your writings that you are well aware of your own value and of their ingratitude and that Posterity will avenge the insult and make of the Adversity and neglect they heap upon you, their eternal shame. This is no trope no vain boast – who that knows any thing of history, and of the history of literature but must perceive that of all of these crowds of flimsy authors that the last century fifty years has produced, not only few names will live, but that yours and that of Shelley will be the great luminaries of Posterity. [. . .] one needs be no prophet to affirm that the Byrons, the Scotts, the Southneys those adorers and cementers of every error, those flatterers of the defects of their century, will be discarded, and adoration succeed for the first founders and champions of the new faith. (CC i 331)

Claire's suggestion of what Mary should do in the face of society's scorn for her talents is more reflective of her own temperament than Mary's, who always felt, as she indeed wrote to Claire Clairmont several years later, that 'the best thing to do is to pursue your course as if nothing had happened' and to 'take refuge in ignorance & silence & let the storm blow over' (*MSL* iii 57). Instead, Claire urges Mary to speak out against her ill treatment and to let the public know that she recognises her own worth. This suggestion would go strongly against Mary's nature which, as Mary Poovey has explored, was dominated by a desire to maintain the identity of a 'proper lady' in society.⁸⁴ Claire's letter continues in the same tone to criticise Mary's 'muttony character' (*CC* i 332), and in another letter, in response to news of Mary's poor health, Claire also criticises the tendency of 'geniuses' to 'refuse to take the least dose of physic' and begs 'descend from your altitudes in this one only respect – do as the herd do, take care of yourself and live' (*CC* ii 335).

But all these expressions of admiration and affection, distorted as they are with criticism and censure, may have felt like an added weight to Mary, who in the first half of this decade had many difficulties to overcome. In 1832, she took it upon herself to try and protect Claire's reputation, as well as her own, when she heard that Lady Blessington was going to publish an account of her conversations with Lord Byron. Mary wrote to Teresa Guiccioli: 'It frightens me very much to think that Lady Blessington should mention Claire [. . .] Therefore I wrote to M. Bulwer, and milady has assured me that she will not speak of that poor woman' (*MSL* ii 168).⁸⁵ In 1833, Mary wrote of her present worries to Maria Gisborne, 'money is the Alpha & Omega

⁸⁴ Poovey, pp. 116-17.

⁸⁵ Despite this assurance, Lady Blessington maligned both Claire and Mary in her conversations. See *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), Introduction pp. 95, 99; pp. 53, 100, 156.

of my tale' (*MSL* ii 182). In 1834, it was solitude that affected Mary most strongly: 'I live in a silence & loneliness – not possible any where except in England where people are so islanded individually in habits – I often languish for sympathy – & pine for social festivity [. . .] Those I loved are false or dead – those I love absent & suffering – & I absent & poor can be of no use to them' (*MSL* ii 208). Combined with these worries Mary continued to reflect on the betrayal of Jane Williams; on 14 November 1833 and again on 14 April 1834 Mary's journal contains comments regarding the pain she had suffered when she learned of Jane's gossip about Mary's failure as a wife to Percy Bysshe Shelley.⁸⁶ Claire's assertion of her love, and her expressions of admiration for Mary, may have seemed to Mary, who always felt a duty towards her stepsister, like reminders of Claire's dependence on her.

Apart from the letter foretelling her death within the year, no letters survive from Mary to Claire from the decade. However, it is probable that her letters to her stepsister were full of the same concerns that can be found in the long letters Mary wrote to Maria Gisborne. The main theme of these letters is Mary's sense of solitude; she suffered from loneliness because she did not have enough money to entertain and as she explained to Maria Gisborne she was too far away, in Harrow, to expect visitors from London. In 1834 she recorded in her journal her hope 'to leave a solitude, very unnatural to any one, & peculiarly disagreeable [sic] to me', and she confessed, 'I like society – refined, good society, where wit, & god humour, & talent, & the art of pleasing reign; I enjoy its pleasures – [. . .] But life is over for me' (*MSJ* 541-42). Trelawny mistook this desire for society for worldliness and a love of gossip, and he complained of Mary to Claire: 'her disease grows upon her with years – I mean her pining after distinction and the distinguished of fortune'.⁸⁷ But all of the sufferings

⁸⁶ See *MSJ* 502-03n for details of this betrayal.

⁸⁷ *Letters of Edward John Trelawny*, p. 194.

that afflicted Mary led her to confess to Maria Gisborne that 'the many sorrows & cares I have – & the very little good that is sprinkled over my melancholy existence, renders me blameably [sic] intolerant of annoyance' (*MSL* ii 213).

If Mary was particularly susceptible to annoyance, then Claire's letters of this period probably annoyed her. While Mary was at Harrow suffering from the solitude brought on by that move, Claire wrote a letter that most certainly would have irritated her stepsister:

You make me laugh – smile I should say (a smile I do not know whether it is of contempt for you or of contempt for myself more probably the latter) when you lament your dull life at Harrow and I compare it to mine. You come up to the first capital in the world; you enjoy its most brilliant spectacles; not to mention those you have your father and Jane to dine with you frequently – and you talk of being dull. Oh! Mary I would recommend you to try being a governess for a month or two – all drudgery and never one moment of leisure – as for pleasure or even innocent relaxation you would risk being turned out to starve if you ventured to hint at such a thing – endure this for a month or two and then return to your present life; you would think it paradasaical [sic]. (*CC* i 312)

Most of Claire's letters from this period narrate the difficulties of her life. The struggles of being a governess were real.⁸⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, governess to Margaret, Lady Mountcashell, who would befriend the Shelleys in Pisa in 1819, asserted in 'Thoughts on the Education of Daughters' that most governesses suffer from the treatment of unreasonable mothers and disrespectful and insolent children.⁸⁹ Ellen Wheeton, who was a governess for much of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, gives an accurate picture of the odd situation of most governesses in a letter to her friend, Mrs. Dodson: 'A *governess* is almost shut out of society; not choosing to associate with servants, and not being treated as an equal by the heads of the house or

⁸⁸ Speaking of a woman with whom Claire anticipated running a boarding house with in Odessa, who decided their plan would not work and subsequently committed suicide, Claire wrote to Jane Williams, 'I who knew her thoughts have no doubt the horror of entering again as a governess, made her resolve upon this as the only means to escape it' (*CC* i 229).

⁸⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, in *WMW* iv 25.

their visiters [sic], she must possess some fortitude and strength of mind to render herself tranquil or happy'. In her journal, she was more explicit about her experience as a governess:

It is well that I have so little time for reflection, or otherwise I should almost weep myself into the grave; for my present situation is a most painful one! Forgotten, as it seems, by every relative, and almost every friend at a distance, and totally secluded from all rational society here, I must sink into melancholy if my days were not so completely occupied as almost to preclude thought. The little leisure, or rather the little time I have to myself, is a good deal employed in repairing my clothes, writing letters sometimes; and sometimes I sit with my face resting on my hands, indulging in melancholy, weeping bitterly; for no one interrupts me, no voice soothes, advises, or pities.⁹⁰

Certainly Claire experienced these same feelings in some of the houses in which she was engaged. Her letters show that her health was not good, and her lamentations may have made Mary bitter as she listened to the complaints that probably sounded hollow to her. In a letter dated 15 March 1836, Claire offers an account of herself and her troubles that echoes the passage from Ellen Wheeton's diary:

You need not however if you are inclined bestow any thought upon me: it would be useless trouble. [. . .] You cannot suppose that any scheme can remedy the injury done to me by the last fourteen years of my life; in which I have toiled every day beyond my strength already shattered and incapable of effort, forced to do what to others would have been heavy, but to me were Herculean tasks, and all this long time abandoned by every body, by relations, by friends, without a single helper or the feeblest protection of any kind, without even having a kind word from any body, nothing but the voice of blame or the voice of command, no joys, not one pleasureable [sic] sensation has ever visited my heart during this long period, nothing but toil and hardship [. . .] To think about me is useless – it is giving yourself unnecessary pain. Think rather of your own pleasures. (CC ii 343)

It was the common experience of governesses to suffer from feelings of neglect, for their positions in the household made them almost invisible, as many of the studies on governesses assert. But it is a credit to Claire that she was able, in so many of her situations, to participate more directly in the social life of the family, often acting the

⁹⁰ *Miss Wheeton: Journal of a Governess*, ed. by Edward Hall, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), ii, pp. 62; 87.

part of companion to the mother as much as of instructor to the children. Claire's journals and letters, besides outlining the struggles that she faced as an intellectual woman who was restricted in society because of her position as a governess, also show joy, pleasure, close friendships and frequent correspondence as well as illness, manic occupation, responsibility, and sorrow. But these letters of the middle 1830s carry a subtext of dependency on Mary, which Mary's strong sense of duty towards her stepsister would have detected and, probably, resented. What Mary identified as an 'intolerance of annoyance' finally exploded against Claire in a letter to Trelawny written shortly after this self-pitying expostulation of Claire's. Mary wrote:

Claire always harps on my desertion of her – as if I could desert one I never clung to – we were never friends – Now, I would not go to Paradise, with her as a companion – she poisoned my life when young – that is over now – but as ~~I never~~ we never loved each other, why these cruel complaints of me. I respect her now much – & pity her deeply – but years ago my idea of an agreeable world Heaven was a world without a Claire – of course these feelings are altered – but she still has the faculty of making me more uncomfortable than any human being – a faculty she, unconsciously perhaps, never fails to exert when I see her – (*MSL* ii 271)

Although speaking of feelings she had in the past, the thirty-eight year old Mary Shelley felt the lingering resentment sufficiently enough to want to change the initial description of a Claire-less existence from an 'agreeable world' to 'Heaven'. To live without her stepsister in her life seemed to Mary like the idea of Heaven on earth. But it is also significant that initially Mary wrote that she never loved Claire; changing it to read that they 'never loved each other' tempers the negative emotion towards her stepsister that she expresses. Saying that they never loved each other removes blame from Mary, who wanted to confess that she never loved her stepsister.

iv. The 'wicked' stepsister

You deserve every kindness – generous, & good & open hearted as you are – I will hold no communication with any member of my family who has any thing but hostile intercourse with the Shelleys.

By the mid-1840s, Mary's feelings towards Claire had clearly shifted from antagonism to affection. This was probably due in part to Claire's help in the Gatteschi affair. While visiting Claire in Paris in 1843, Mary was impressed by this young Italian exile. Luigi Ferdinando Gatteschi had joined the Carbonari and fought in the 1830-31 insurrection against Austria.⁹¹ Mary was impressed by his heroism, his pride and his good looks, and she was also moved by his poverty. She borrowed money from Claire to loan to him (*MSL* iii 85), and she engaged him to write a history of the insurrection for her *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*.⁹² Mary returned to London in August determined to start writing again, as much for providing for Gatteschi as for raising money for herself (*MSL* iii 85). In her enthusiasm for Gatteschi Mary revealed events of her past in letters which Gatteschi later threatened to make public if Mary did not purchase them from him (*MSL* iii 207). Mary confessed her indiscretion to Claire and the two of them turned to Alexander Knox, a friend of Percy Florence's from Cambridge who now lived in Paris, for help. Almost miraculously, Knox managed to convince the French police to arrest Gatteschi and seize all of his papers; Knox then went through the papers and removed all letters by Mary, and also by another friend of Claire's who had become Gatteschi's lover and a source of finances, Lady Sussex. When Mary wrote to Claire to tell her that Knox had finally got her 'stupid nonsensical letters' from Gatteschi's 'villainous hands', she also thanked Claire for her 'sympathy & great kindness[;] I

⁹¹ Carlo Guitera, 'Appunti autobiografica', in *Lo Hymen Hymenae* (Rome: [no publisher], 1897), pp. 7-27. Summarised in Sunstein, p. 360.

⁹² published by Edward Moxon in 1844. In the second volume, Letter XIV entitled 'The Carbonari' was taken from his account. (*MSWorks* viii 314-23).

shall never forget it' (*MSL* iii 233-34).⁹³

But this gratitude was not the sole reason for Mary's growing affection for her stepsister. Despite Mary's comment to Trelawny in 1836, by the 1840s the correspondence between Mary and Claire shows that they both felt a strong attachment and feelings of friendship. While travelling with Percy Florence through Europe in 1842, Mary was eager to arrange a visit with Claire, and she stated that if Claire could join them in Florence 'it would certainly add to our pleasure' (*MSL* iii 44). In a statement that reveals a sentiment markedly changed from previous years, Mary expressed the wish of being able to help her stepsister, adding: 'you deserve every kindness – generous, & good & open hearted as you are – everyone ought to welcome you with kindness & be eager to pour balm on the wounds you have received' (*MSL* iii 57). And after her return to England Mary recalled 'with gratitude the quiet month spent under your pleasant roof' (*MSL* iii 88). It seems that in their maturity the old resentment was forgotten; and as Mary toured through Europe for the first time since Shelley's death twenty years earlier, revisiting many of the places where she had lived with both Shelley *and* Claire, Mary saw Claire as one of the lasting connections with that time of her life. Claire's persistent admiration of and praise for Mary, it seems, finally won her stepsister over to feelings of sisterhood and affection.

Likewise, after her own visit to Mary in London in 1845, where Claire went in order to arrange the receipt of her inheritance from Percy Bysshe Shelley's will on the

⁹³ For more on the Gatteschi affair, see Sunstein, pp. 360-72; Gittings and Manton, pp. 190-94. Sunstein minimises the role that Claire had in 'rescuing' Mary from blackmail; Gittings and Manton emphasise it. The only letters on the subject that survive are Mary's to Claire; Mary destroyed all of Claire's letters that mentioned the Italian and asked Claire to do the same of hers, a request that Claire did not honour. These letters indicate that Claire's help was more emotional than practical, and that Mary genuinely, and deeply, appreciated Claire's kindness when she could just as easily have scolded her for her imprudence. See *MSL* iii 207; 211.

death of Sir Timothy Shelley in April, Claire wrote of her pleasure in staying with Mary. She called this visit 'the only bright episode in my life' and asserted that she was 'truly happy there'. Claire's letter continues with the praise for Mary that is characteristic of her correspondence yet none the less sincere for its recurrency:

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 [. . .] And then your conversation so wise and so universal draws one out of the narrow cares for self, which my mind is so apt to indulge in to its utter destruction. (CC ii 428)

Because of the happiness she felt while visiting Mary, when Claire returned to Paris she found it depressing and lonely, and she wrote to Mary, joking as usual and referring to her friends' tendency to confide their miseries to her, that 'My life in this gay Paris is a constant drive in a Mourning coach' (CC ii 436). Even the prospect of seeing Mary again, who was contemplating another visit to Paris, left her more depressed than cheery. As she told Mary in another letter, seeing Mary made their separation more painful to her because she knew that the visit would only be temporary (CC ii 450-51). These feelings urged Claire to contemplate a return to London to be near Mary (*MSL* iii 293); and by the summer of 1847 she was settled in a house near Regent's Park.

In the autumn of 1847, Mary met her future daughter-in-law at the house of a neighbour. The two women became good friends, and in less than a year Jane was married to Percy Florence Shelley. Lady Shelley's recollection of her first meeting with Mary Shelley suggests that she might have 'fallen in love' with the mother more than with the son; and the attraction of marrying Sir Percy Florence was no doubt enhanced by the attachment she felt for Mary.⁹⁴ Eventually Jane, Percy Florence, and Mary settled at Field Place, and Mary began urging Claire to come for a visit. As

⁹⁴ See Rolleston, pp. 27-28.

delays continued to thwart their efforts to see each other, Mary at one point wrote: 'we should be most happy to have you for a long visit in November but shall be much disappointed if you do not come before – both that we may see you – & that you may see Field Place before the leaves are gone' (*MSL* iii 347). But by February 1849 Claire had still not been to Field Place, and she expressed the difficulties of coming now that she was arranging for her nephew, Willy, to become a paying apprentice at a farm in Kent in order to learn the farming trade (*MSL* iii 355).⁹⁵

Despite their inheritances, both Mary and Claire continued to suffer from financial difficulties. Claire had lost much of her money in an investment into an opera box, and the estates which Percy Florence had inherited were debt-ridden.⁹⁶ Additionally, the expense of the Gatteschi affair had not been slight, for Mary had paid all of Alexander Knox's expenses as well as paying off his substantial debts in a show of gratitude (*MSL* iii 267-68). In response to a letter in which Claire outlined her poor financial situation, Mary responded with an account of her own lack of money: 'I know from experience that any difficulties of richer people seem, & are, so very unreal compared to those of one poorer – still as for long I have not had a penny to command' (*MSL* iii 364). Mary was aware that Claire's situation was much worse than her own, and yet she wanted to see her stepsister and she urged Claire to bring the two children of Charles with her, stating affectionately, 'I shall be very desirous to see Clarikin' (*MSL* iii 364).

Claire's response to Mary's invitation reveals how much she sensed the gap that separated them socially. She states that she will only come if she can be assured

⁹⁵ In order to relieve her brother's financial burdens, Claire undertook to provide for the education of Charles's son, Wilhelm Clairmont (Willy). She also agreed to look for a position in a school for her niece, Clari, who was due to arrive in England at the end of April.

⁹⁶ For more on the opera box investment and loss, see *CC* 443-44; 449-50; for Mary's account of the condition of the Shelley estate, see *MSL* iii 190.

that there will be no other visitors at Field Place, more on account of Willy and Clari than herself:

I am so afraid of their not pleasing and incurring the criticisms of your super-fine set. And poor dears – they have to earn their livelihood – and are such well disposed young people and it would be a pity to turn them from the right path and make them miserable for Life; which often happens, when poor people frequent the society of the rich. (CC ii 497)

Across the top of this letter Claire wrote, 'Our clothes are very shabby that I warn you of (CC ii 497); she was intent on preparing Mary for the arrival of the 'poor relations'. Mary seems to have understood Claire's concerns, and she responded thoughtfully, when a change of plans occurred, that it might be best for them to delay their visit because a ward of Lady Shelley's would be with them and Mary felt that he would not be 'an eligible companion' for Willy (MSL iii 366). But by the end of April Mary was anxious for Claire to overcome her objections and settle her plans to visit, and she exhibited her willingness to do whatever Claire preferred in order to arrange the visit:

Pray come with [Clari] as soon as you like – just writing the day before – that your room may be ready. You say – "perhaps you will let her come without me" & Willy with her that he may not be left alone – Certainly if you like – arrange it just as you like – & as you & she will sleep together, after your visit to town come here & join them – after or before, just as you like. (MSL iii 367)

Mary is accommodating in her eagerness, displaying her desire to see her stepsister and her stepbrother's children. Yet her next letter announces an event that Mary knew would cause problems: Shelley's sisters, Hellen & Margaret, were due to visit on their way to town and this would coincide with Claire's projected visit. Mary is apologetic as she conveys this mix-up, and she appeals to Claire's sympathies in understanding her situation. 'I fear so much to offend you', she writes, but in this letter she also makes her feelings clear: 'I want you to come' (MSL iii 369; 368). There are no further letters existing between the stepsisters, and shortly after this Claire cut off all communications with the Shelleys and never saw Mary again.

The details of the estrangement are as follows. Claire sent her niece, Clari, to visit the Shelleys at Field Place alone. In a letter to Mary, Claire had described this niece as 'very nervous: she weeps for annoyances, gets melancholy, can't bear society, has no ambition, no wish to shine or to please: won't take any care of her dress, but sits reading all day poetry' (*CC* ii 457). At the same time, Alexander Knox was also a guest at the Shelley estate, recovering from the collapse of his engagement to be married to a woman named Mary; Mary wrote to Claire that 'his misery will be most painful to witness' (*MSL* iii 353-54). In their biography of Claire Clairmont, Robert Gittings and Jo Manton romanticise that 'the park of Field Place in spring offered retreat to these troubled spirits. [. . .] In the privacy of the park, Alexander and Clari shared their overwrought emotions, finding what seemed a miraculous sympathy'.⁹⁷ Lady Shelley recalled the events leading up to the marriage between Knox and Clari, which was the cause of the break between Claire and the Shelleys, in a conversation with Maud Rolleston that characteristically, and without evidence, asserts Mary

Shelley's dislike of the Clairmonts:

A friend came to stay with us who was in an unhappy frame of mind. He had had some serious love trouble, and he used to walk about the house looking disconsolate and wretched. One day he came to me and said, 'I am miserable, and that poor girl [meaning Clari] seems unhappy too. Life does not hold much pleasure at present for either of us; why should I not marry her and try at least to make some one a bit happier? I shall be doing something then.' [. . .] When I told Mary she was much troubled, and said, 'Don't allow it, dear, don't allow it; they don't love each other, and the Clairmont blood always brings misery.'⁹⁸

As self-appointed preserver and reformer of the Shelleys' reputation, Lady Shelley attempted to assert Mary's negative feelings towards both the marriage and the Clairmonts. But the letters discussed in this section refute the insinuation that at this time Mary felt any animosity towards the Clairmonts, and a letter written by Charles

⁹⁷ Gittings and Manton, p. 211.

⁹⁸ Rolleston, pp. 44-45.

Clairmont to his sister disputes Lady Shelley's claim that Mary disapproved of the marriage. In response to Claire's letter announcing that his daughter had eloped with a friend of the Shelleys', Charles states that her news came as a 'thunder stroke' because Mary's letter had announced that the forthcoming marriage was to take place with Claire's consent (CC ii 503). It is unlikely that Mary's letter would have appeared benign, especially in contrast to Claire's non-extant thunderous letter, if she had not approved of the match or at least honoured the young people's decision.

There is no single reliable account of what happened at Field Place that encouraged Knox and Clari to marry on 16 June 1849. But what is clear, in accounts of Claire's reaction and in her behaviour towards the Shelleys, is that she over-reacted to an event that was less radical than the events of thirty-five years before – in which Claire herself participated – that brought together seventeen-year-old Mary and twenty-two year old, married, Percy Bysshe Shelley. In 1845 Claire had observed in a letter to Mary her mature beliefs on the parental role in children's love affairs:

I think when children come to the falling in love age, the Parents ought to be forced to read Shakespear [sic] all day long till the children are married. In his works they would see Love in full action and in its full nature, what it impels to, and all this represented in a way that excites no blame: and so the Parents would accustom their minds to expect their children would do pretty much as Shakespear's heroes and heroines do, and they would not be so very furious because their fifteen year old daughter talks like Juliet from a Balcony with her lover, or takes a sleeping draught in order to be buried and when she awakes be married. (CC ii 448)

Claire would have done well to remember this advice as she faced the marriage of Knox and Clari. But even if her reaction was only to the haste with which the affair was concluded, a justifiable objection to the union, her continued and vehement insistence that the Shelleys had led her niece astray and that Clari had been turned against her by Jane Shelley was extreme.

Reports in family letters reveal how widely Claire was sowing seeds of

discontent against the Shelleys and the newly-married Knoxes. In a letter to her husband's sister Antonia Clairmont recalls Claire's demand that she side with Claire against her daughter, and she reveals that Claire wanted Willy to reproach Sir Percy Florence Shelley for his ingratitude to Mrs. Godwin for 'protecting' his mother in her youth (CC ii 532n). Shortly after the marriage Willy wrote to his parents that Claire was 'running about among all her acquaintance, even those that have been quite laid by and tell[ing] them all the whole affair in the least favourable light' (CC 509n). He also mentioned that although he felt Clari had been wrong to marry so hastily without approval or permission, he also felt compelled to 'mitigate [Claire's] accusations [. . .] to a little degree' (CC ii 509n). He explained that his aunt was 'extremely imperious and despotic' and that she always felt that others were plotting against her, and he cited her usual objections to any explanation: 'she only says that she has been very much in this world, knows human nature thoroughly, has an eye as sharp as an eagle, and that you are much to[o] young to deceive her' (CC ii 508n). Finally, Willy suggests that Claire may have behaved this way towards Clari oftener than to him because she had less confidence in her niece's intelligence (CC ii 508n). Whether Claire drove her niece to seek an escape from her 'despotic' nature or not is impossible to know. What is certain is that Claire felt she had been injured by the Shelleys and she refused to communicate with them until 'they have made reparation for their insolence to [the Clairmonts]' (CC ii 533).

Several months after her brother's death in 1850, Claire was still dedicated to her feelings of being wronged by the Shelleys. She expressed her surprise to learn that Charles's wife had recently written to Mary Shelley, and she chastised her heartily, writing, 'is it possible that you can be so devoid of all due pride, as to hold any communication with Mrs. S after the bitter contempt she has shewn our family last

year', and adding firmly, 'I will hold no communication with any member of my family who has any thing but hostile intercourse with the Shelleys' (CC ii 532). But by this time Antonia Clairmont had tired of Claire's complaints of the Shelleys and her censure of her daughter. In her response to Claire's hostile letter, Antonia declared, 'I detest family quarrels', and she added that she would not take part in continuing the feud that Claire continued to instigate between the Shelleys and the Clairmonts. Antonia reveals that Claire was still trying to draw support from the Clairmont family for her hatred of the Shelleys: 'I have just had a letter of [Clari] telling me of the letter you made Pauline⁹⁹ write to Mrs. S in consequence of which the two sisters are in discord' (CC ii 534n). But Antonia put an end to it all in a letter written on 30 May 1854 when she threatened to reveal to Alexander Knox all the stories Claire had been telling about his position in the Shelley family¹⁰⁰ and his bad character.

Claire's sense of being wronged through the marriage of Clari and Knox appears to have ended with Clari's death of 'pulmonary consumption' on 5 March 1855 (CC ii 548); in her surviving letters she never again spoke with anger towards the Shelleys. In fact, in her renewed correspondence with Edward Trelawny, she again exhibits her admiration of her stepsister and she defends Mary Shelley against Trelawny's intense criticism of her.

The split that Claire initiated between herself and her stepsister was made permanent by Mary Shelley's death on 1 February 1851.¹⁰¹ Claire's letter of

⁹⁹ By 1851 Pauline Clairmont, Clari's older sister, was living with Claire Clairmont (CC ii 535). In the 1870s Pauline returned to her aunt's house with her illegitimate daughter, and was the basis for Henry James's character Miss Tina in *The Aspern Papers*. For more on Pauline Clairmont's unusual life, see Marion Kingston Stocking, 'Miss Tina and Miss Plin: The Papers Behind *The Aspern Papers*', *The Evidence of the Imagination: Studies of Interactions between Life and Art in English Romantic Literature*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, Michael C. Jaye, and Betty T. Bennett (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. 372-84.

¹⁰⁰ Claire accused him of being 'kept' by Mary Shelley and of being with Jane Shelley shortly after her marriage to Percy Florence (ii 503 &n5; Silsbee box 7 file 3).

¹⁰¹ See *MSL* iii 389-90 for an account of Mary Shelley's final illness and death.

condolence is more a passive-aggressive display of her injured feelings than a note of sympathy,¹⁰² more a letter of criticism, and it sounds almost ironic when set against Claire's complaints of the Shelleys since the Knox wedding. 'I have no wish to add any thing to your affliction', she begins, continuing nevertheless with expressions of both self-pity and scorn:

indeed it was most unkind in you never to let me know she was ill. Most unkind. Now I shall never see her more! [. . .] Though I am no toady and resent insult, though I am poor and will not put up with indignity from the rich – yet I have as much feeling as others and the loss of an old friend has afflicted me most sensibly. (CC ii 536)

In this insensitive letter Claire praises Percy Florence as a good son and then scolds him for encouraging Clari to marry Knox, bringing up again the tortured events that turned her against the Shelleys. She invokes her long connection to him – 'I saw you born – I nursed you as my own Child – I ever loved you as my Child' – only to state that his disregard of her and Charles's feelings has deeply hurt her. The close of her letter is a juxtaposition of expressions of censure and sympathy that in the end communicates nothing more than callousness: 'The subject makes me so unhappy – it is such irremediable misery - we cannot alter Mrs. Knox's disposition - we cannot bring back the dead – It is better therefore to join them' (CC ii 537). It is ambiguous whether the 'subject' which Claire calls 'irremediable misery' is the betrayal of Clari Knox or the death of Mary Shelley; but the bulk of the letter suggests that Claire used the opportunity of Mary's death only to speak her mind to the family with whom Claire had broken off all communications almost two years before.

¹⁰² Claire previously wrote this kind of two-faced communication in a letter about Lord Byron to Mary Shelley in 1836, calling him a 'compound of Vanity, folly, and every miserable weakness that ever met together in one human Being'. Next claiming, 'I do not want to be severe on the poor man because he is dead and cannot defend himself', she nevertheless continues her acidic criticism: 'never was a nature more profoundly corrupted than his became, or was more radically vulgar than his was from the very outset', ending with an assertion of his lack of 'moral Greatness' (CC ii 341). Similarly, when she sent some much needed money to her brother's family, she included with it an 'unkind and reproachful letter' (CC ii 532n).

Claire reminded her brother's wife, Antonia, of the events at Field Place in 1853 after Antonia evidently expressed a dislike of family feuds. Claire asserts that she suspects Antonia blames her for the estrangement that developed between the families, and she attempts to refresh her memory with her account of what happened that led her to end all communication with her stepsister's family:

The moment your daughter declared she would marry Mr. Knox, she altered completely to me; every moment of the day that she had to spare from Knox, was devoted to shewing towards me an excess of coarse insolence that no lady ever practices, under whatever provocations; not knowing that she intended to marry Mr. Knox after seven days courtship, I bore with her impertinence and contempt, hoping that in a week or fortnight her ill-humour would abate, and leave her open to better, more practical impulses. [. . .] She gave herself no time for repentance, or duty to her parents, or consideration for the feelings of others, or deference for the common decencies of life; she had Knox all day long by her side, I never opposed or offered the least hindrance to their intercourse; she did just what she liked; notwithstanding these gratifications to her wishes; she seemed to think Heaven knows what – that she must marry him then and there, after a weeks courtship directly, that very day, and that very hour. And she put on her bonnet and walked off to marry Knox just as if she had been going a shopping. (CC ii 543-44)

This narrative must be understood as Claire's view after five years of harbouring resentment and feeling wronged by the Shelleys. Her long antagonistic feelings towards Byron attest to her ability to maintain violent negative opinions that seem to intensify with time.¹⁰³ But although she consistently portrayed the lack of respect she received from her niece, it was Mary Shelley whom she seems to have blamed most.

By the end of the decade which saw the deaths of Charles Clairmont and Mary Shelley, Claire moved to Florence, where, as she told Dina Hunt Williams, 'you can be happy here without any happiness in your own personal fate – for the beautiful crops up all around and gives you pleasure, and draws you out of the sphere of self, and prevents your brooding over your personal sorrows', adding, 'in England there is no escape of this kind' (CC ii 595). Soon after this she resumed her correspondence

¹⁰³ As late as 1870 Claire wrote to Trelawny, 'never, never, neither here nor in Eternity can I, nor will I, forgive the injuries he inflicted upon my defenceless Child' (CC ii 612).

with Edward Trelawny, whose opinion of Mary Shelley had cemented into contempt, and she also met the American, Edward Silsbee, who recorded their conversations about her life with the Shelleys and Byron, a tale that inspired Henry James to write *The Aspern Papers*. Yet when Trelawny complained of Mary Shelley to Claire, asserting that 'Mary was the most conventional slave I ever met – she even affected the pious dodge, such was her yearning for society'¹⁰⁴ Claire was quick to come to her stepsister's defence and wrote in reply some earnest praise:

I can at least tell you what I know with regard to Mary Shelley's religious beliefs. We often talked on the subject; I never saw the smallest appearance of hypocrisy in her on this point, and I believe in her attendance at Church she followed the impulse of her convictions and feelings. What is more natural when one's happiness lies in ruins around one than to hope there is a better world? Had not Mary sense enough to perceive that on earth no Joy may ripen and that the human heart must not dare to cling to any felicity. (CC ii 614)

By the end of her life Claire reached a feeling of equanimity for her stepsister that resembled the admiration, only to a lesser degree, that she consistently displayed for Mary Shelley throughout her life. Gone are the hagiographic praises for her intellect, her conversation, and her courage. Additionally, she revealed her feelings that the Shelleys had led her astray in her youth and had been the cause of much of her struggles in life.¹⁰⁵ Yet when faced with criticisms of Mary, Claire was quick to defend what she felt were misunderstandings of her stepsister's character.

It is clear that the relationship between Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont was complex. Their natures were very different, and yet biographers have steadily misrepresented their feelings – especially Mary Shelley's feelings for Claire Clairmont. The evidence shows that although understandably aggravated by Claire's presence in her household with Shelley from 1814-22, Mary eventually came to

¹⁰⁴ *Letters of Edward Trelawny*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁵ In 1856 Claire wrote to her sister-in-law, 'I made the most terrible mistakes so long as I was with the S's – they were young and I was young – as soon as I got into Lady Mountcashell's hands (who was fifty two) I succeeded in all I undertook' (CC ii 578).

appreciate her stepsister's particular strengths and to value her friendship. This later amicability has been consistently overlooked, and in representations of the stepsisters' relationship Claire seems to have acquired the role of the wicked stepsister to Mary's blameless Cinderella. But it is obvious that each woman's feelings were fraught with ambivalence, fluctuating between anger and dislike, duty, acceptance and admiration on Mary's part, and admiration, criticism, and eventually outright disapproval on Claire's. Stepsisters are difficult relations, brought together and expected to maintain the positive links of what we signify as 'sisterhood' without the bond of blood ties or chosen connection. Mary and Claire experienced their relationship in vastly different ways, but their experiences unite in a single point: in their representations of sisters in fiction, there is a subtext that reveals the ambiguity of their feelings for one another that reflects their real-life difficulties with each other.

4. 'How can I exist apart from my sister?': Conflicting Sisterhoods in the Short Fiction of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont

Mary Shelley's novels are full of motherless characters. From Victor Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, and the creature in her first novel *Frankenstein* (1818), to Elizabeth Raby, Rupert Falkner and Gerard Neville in *Falkner* (1837), her last fictional work, Mary Shelley's main characters often suffer the fate that she herself suffered: the loss of the mother at an early age. And what is more, her minor characters also frequently have missed out on the nurturing care of a mother: Victor Frankenstein's mother Caroline Beaufort, Agnes deLacy, and Saphie are all equally motherless, as is, essentially, Justine, whose mother, 'through a strange perversity [. . .] could not endure' her daughter¹. In *Mathilda*, both Mathilda and her father lost their mothers at an early age. Lionel Verney and his sister Perdita are without the care of a mother in *The Last Man*, and Perdita's suicide after the death of Lord Raymond renders their daughter, Clara, an orphan, as well. Euthanasia and Beatrice in *Valperga* are also without maternal care. Even in *Lodore*, which contains Mary Shelley's only representation of a mother-daughter relationship in a full-length novel, Ethel is taken from her mother at an early age, and both Lodore and Edward Villiers appear to have lost their mothers early. This 'prevalence of absent mothers', as Katherine C. Hill-Miller has rightly observed, 'certainly reflects Mary Shelley's personal sense of the deprivations of growing up without a mother'.²

¹ *Frankenstein*, *MSWorks* i 45 (chapter v).

² Hill-Miller, p. 179.

But as I have shown, the sister relation was also one of ambivalence and complexity for Mary Shelley, and considering her frequent treatment of the mother-daughter relationship in her works it comes as a surprise that in all of her writings she focused on the sister bond in only three short stories. 'The Sisters of Albano'³ focuses on a pair of sisters and the intricacies of love and loyalty in their relationship. Published in 1829, during the period in which Mary fluctuated between a sincere desire and an inherent and unwanted sense of duty to provide a home for her stepsister as she had done so many times when with Percy Bysshe Shelley, the subtext of antagonism in the representation of the sister's feelings towards each other reflects Mary's own ambivalent feelings towards Claire Clairmont. And two other stories from only a few years later, 'The Trial of Love' (1834)⁴ and 'The Parvenue' (1836)⁵, reveal more of the struggle that Mary felt in this relationship which was forced upon her and which she evidently could not, and would not allow herself, to shake. 'The Trial of Love', while without a pair of biological sisters, nevertheless represents a pair of women whose childhood circumstances rendered them siblings, not by marriage, but by circumstance, and their friendship is represented in sisterly terms. As they become entangled in a love triangle the main heroine selflessly relinquishes her prior claim on the man in order to let the 'sister' of her heart find what happiness she may with him. 'The Parvenue' plots a sister's devotion to her family – mainly to her mother and twin sister – against her duty to her aristocratic husband, and again the heroine forfeits her marriage relationship in order to fulfil what she sees as her duty to her family. In

³ 'The Sisters of Albano', in *The Keepsake for MDCCCXXXIX*, ed. by Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London: Hurst, Chance, and Co., [1828], pp. 80-100. ['The Author of "Frankenstein"']. Reprinted in *Tales* 51-64.

⁴ 'The Trial of Love', in *The Keepsake for MDCCCXXXV*, ed. by Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman [1834]), pp. 70-86. ['The Author of "Frankenstein"']. Reprinted in *Tales* 70-86.

⁵ 'The Parvenue', in *The Keepsake for MDCCCXXXVII*, ed. by The Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman [1836]), pp. 209-21. ['Mrs. Shelley']. Reprinted in *Tales* 209-21.

1835, already planning her novel *Falkner*, Mary Shelley wrote to Maria Gisborne of her opinion that 'as I grow older I look upon fidelity as the first of human virtues' (*MSL* ii 260). The relationship between Elizabeth Raby and Rupert Falkner in that 1837 novel is characterised by Elizabeth's immense and unshakeable loyalty to her adopted father, but the virtue of fidelity was something Mary had been exploring in the context of sister relations for several years before coming to write *Falkner*. Mary Shelley's years of silent self-sacrifice where her stepsister was concerned clearly influenced these tales of female connection and representations of 'sisterhood'; but she alters the situations and does not frame her stories around any particular event. Yet what remains of her personal experiences in these stories is a strong sense of the conflict a woman feels over the duty towards her sister and her own happiness.

When Claire Clairmont finally dedicated herself to writing fiction, she embraced the opportunity to create a pair of stepsisters that mirrored her own relationship with Mary Shelley more directly than any of Mary Shelley's sister representations. Initially, however, her inspiration for writing was her desire to earn some money from her pen as Mary had been doing. Sending an unfinished draft 'about a Pole' to her stepsister in 1832, Claire wrote: 'I should never think of writing knowing well my incapacity for it, but I want to gain money. What would one not do for that since it is the only key to freedom[?]' (*CC* i 287). At this time in her life Claire was living with 'Mrs. Mason', Lady Mountcashell, Mary Wollstonecraft's former pupil and friend of the Shelleys and Claire from 1819. The familiar surroundings in Pisa and the good friends who knew her history would have allowed Claire to speak openly of her past connections, a subject about which she had had to remain silent during her years in Russia. On 5 March 1832, Claire wrote a letter of introduction for friends to Mary, describing her acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Gaskell, who brought

back memories of happier times: 'I thought myself restored to old times and could almost have fancied Shelley was alive again, they thought and spoke so much in his own style' (CC i 284). Just under three weeks later, Claire sent the draft of the story 'The Pole' to Mary, asking her to finish it and promising, 'if it should get any money, half will naturally belong to you' (CC i 287), and it appeared in two parts in the *Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée* in August (pp. 64-71) and September (pp. 129-36).⁶ With the familiar surroundings and the sympathetic company around her, it is not surprising that Claire's mind would be turned towards her life with the Shelleys; and she, too, resorted to a representation of sisters that also suggests, though less overtly, the struggles that she experienced in her relationship with Mary Shelley.

i. The Fact that is in Fiction:
Autobiography, Antagonism, and Sisters in 'The Pole'

... you will soon see me in Paris, for how can I exist apart from my sister? (*Pole* 365)

Claire Clairmont's representation of the stepsisters in 'The Pole' recounts the reunion of two stepsisters, Marietta and Idalie, the love story between one of the sisters and a Polish soldier, and a planned assassination that plots the girls' brother, Giorgio, against the Pole, Ladislas. The biographical aspects of this story are unmistakable, the main characters obvious representations of the author, Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Byron. Consequently, the subtext of sororophobia, the difficulty of the relationship between the two stepsisters, underlies this fictional tale. By both pointing out the biographical details of Claire Clairmont's only published story and allowing for some re-emphasis on the representation of the sisters' relationship this discussion

⁶ 'The Pole', in *The Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée* 1 (August and September 1832), pp. 64-71; 129-36 [the Author of "Frankenstein"]. Claire Clairmont's story is reprinted in *Tales* 347-72, along with an editorial note explaining her certain authorship and the reason for its inclusion in the edition.

acknowledges Georges Gusdorf's proposal for a kind of dual interpretation of autobiography: 'there are two guises or two versions of autobiography: on the one hand, that which is properly called confession; on the other hand, the artist's entire work, which takes up the same material in complete freedom and under the protection of a hidden identity'.⁷ This is not to say that 'The Pole' recounts any specific incident in Claire's life with Mary and Shelley – it is not an autobiography – but the autobiographical elements of the story reveal how Claire chose to remember her relationships with Mary and Shelley when they lived together. As Gusdorf comments about the art of autobiography, it shows the person 'not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been'.⁸

The hero of 'The Pole' is an obvious representation of Shelley. Ladislav is twenty-two years old, the age Shelley turned during the elopement tour in 1814. He is described as 'sufficiently tall to give an idea of superiority to his fellow mortals', and his 'form presented a rare combination of youthful lightness and manly strength'. Even more like Shelley:

His countenance, had you taken from it its deep thoughtfulness and its expression of calm intrepid bravery, might have belonged to the most lovely woman, so transparently blooming was his complexion, so regular his features, so blond and luxuriant his hair. (*Pole* 347)

This representation anticipates what Silsbee recorded of Claire's descriptions of Shelley which figure him in feminine terms. Silsbee notes Claire's mention of Shelley's 'marble forehead', his beauty, and his colouring, which she claimed was 'so like a rose'. Silsbee also outlines an anecdote which Claire told about Shelley once being mistaken for a woman: 'Once a vetturino bargaining with [Shelley] as he with

⁷ Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie', *Formen der Selbstarstellung* (Berlin: Duncker and Humboldt, 1956), p. 121. Reprinted as 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', trans. by James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 46.

⁸ Gusdorf, p. 45.

him replied signora & once Signorina – Shelley said why do you address me so? Don't you see I am a man or [*said*] something of the sort'.⁹

This representation of Shelley in the character of Ladislav – his distinct sensitivity and almost feminine characteristics – resembles the characters whom Mary Shelley also modelled on Shelley. Most like Ladislav is Adrian from *The Last Man*: 'a tall, slim, fair boy, with a physiognomy expressive of the excess of sensibility and refinement [. . .]; the morning sunbeams tinged with gold his silken hair, and spread light and glory over his beaming countenance'.¹⁰ Gerard Neville, also a Shelley portrait, is described with attention to details that are more typically highlighted when delineating a woman's characteristics, with 'long dark lashes', a 'brow of extreme beauty, over which clustered a profusion of chestnut-coloured hair', and a physical presence 'light and graceful as a sculptured image'.¹¹ But although the physical description of Ladislav echoes Mary's portraits of Shelley, there is more in his actions that show how much Claire was indebted to the poet for her main character.

When Ladislav first hears the unseen Marietta singing beneath his balcony, his reflections on the source of the song emphasise his likeness to Shelley. The description of the effect of Marietta's patriotic Polish song on Ladislav echoes Shelley's tribute to Claire's voice in 'To Constantia'. Both texts assert the permeating quality of the voice. Claire writes '[Ladislav] could almost have believed that the spirit of that divine scene had assumed a human voice and human words, to soothe his melancholy, so floating and airy had been the strain' (*Pole* 349); likewise Shelley's lyric emphasises how the voice seems to emanate from the beautiful surroundings:

Whilst, like the world-surrounding air, thy song
Flows on, and fills all things with melody:

⁹ Silsbee MSS Box 7, File 3; Box 8, File 4; Box 8, File 4.

¹⁰ *The Last Man*, *MSWorks* iv 23 (Book I chapter ii).

¹¹ *Faulkner*, *MSWorks* vii 45 (Book I chapter vii).

On which, as one in trance upborne,
 Secure o'er woods and waves I sweep
 Rejoicing, like a cloud of morn:
 Now 'tis the breath of summer's night
 Which, where the starry waters sleep
 Round western isles with incense blossoms bright,
 Lingering, suspends my soul in its voluptuous flight. ('To Constantia', 13-22)

The song coming from the surroundings permeates the emotional depths of the listeners; the poet of 'To Constantia' and Ladislas, who hears a voice yet cannot find the source, are alike enraptured by the spectral songs they hear. Like the visionary woman in *Alastor*, whose voice 'was like the voice of [the poet's] own soul' (153), Marietta's song in 'The Pole' conveys 'the thoughts of [Ladislas's] own mind' (*Pole* 349).

The comparison between the song heard by Ladislas and its effect on him with the poem 'To Constantia' reveals deeper affinities between Shelley and Claire Clairmont's portrait of him as Ladislas. As Judith Chernaik demonstrates, 'To Constantia' is more than just a compliment to Claire's singing; it is a 'free lyric flight from its occasion'.¹² The poet, first lulled into a trance-like state, is released from his physical form as he joins with the source of the trance-like symptoms. He grows wings so that he can follow the song beyond the heavens which have opened due to the power of the song, but in the end fear compels him to bid the singer to cease; he is afraid the ecstasy that is the consequence of hearing the song will lead him to death. Chernaik describes the poem as 'an anatomy and an imitation of the experience of romantic inspiration, as Shelley conceived it: the dissolution of self, the spirit's flight into vision, and its terrifying descent'.¹³ In line with this experience, Ladislas displays

¹² Chernaik, p. 53.

¹³ Chernaik, p. 54.

some of the same symptoms as the poet of 'To Constantia' in response to the songs that Marietta sings for him while he eats.

Having been saved from her bullying brother by Ladislas, Marietta offers a serenade; she strategically places herself in a dark corner of the room which allows the illusion of the incorporeal song that emanated from the 'divine scene' to continue. The source unseen, Marietta's voice can be perceived as disembodied, again like the voice in 'To Constantia', which 'slow rising like a Spirit, lingers / O'ershadowing [the poet] with soft and lulling wings' (1-2). Marietta's voice is praised for its 'natural beauty' and it is distinguished by a 'profound melancholy in its intense sweetness' (*Pole* 351). Like the poet, who is 'dissolved in these consuming extacies' ('To Constantia', 11), so too does Ladislas lose himself in the song, though not from joy; Marietta's voice 'dissolved the soul of the traveller in grief' (*Pole* 351). By the power of song, Ladislas is transported to scenes of his past, 'the joys of home, and childhood, the tenderness and truth of his first friendships, the glow of patriotism' (*Pole* 351).¹⁴

Marietta's voice, and her songs, have the power to transport Ladislas from his present melancholy to the joys of the past; and, as the poet in 'To Constantia' notices, voices with such power can both raise one to the heights of ecstasy as well as lower one to the depths of despair. For Ladislas, 'every cherished hour, every endeared spot, all that he had loved, and all that he had lost upon earth, seemed again to live and again to fade, as he listened to her strains' (*Pole* 351). Through Marietta's songs, Ladislas must relive again and again the possession and loss of all that was dear to him in his homeland of Poland. The poet of 'To Constantia' recognises the dependence of the ecstasy upon the persistence of the voice; fearing the fading of the euphoria, he bids the singer to stop her song to end his flight of fancy, for 'such wild lessons

¹⁴ See chapter 1 and 2 for more on Shelley's emphasis on the power of a woman's voice.

madmen learn: / Long thus to sink, – thus to be lost and die / Perhaps is death indeed' (34-36). Ladislav does not fear the fluctuation of his transport as does the poet, so he listens to Marietta singing throughout the evening as if the repeated sense of loss of all he loved, with the fading of each song, was vindicated by the sense of remembrance sustained during each song's endurance.

One final similarity between Shelley's poem 'To Constantia' and this scene from 'The Pole' is the power attributed to the singer as well as to the song. As Judith Chernaik states, 'in "To Constantia" Shelley endows the physical reality [. . .] with divine and magic possibilities'.¹⁵ Similarly in 'The Pole' Marietta is invested with a magic of her own. In the poem, the 'blood and life' in the singer's 'snowy fingers / Teach witchcraft to the instrumental strings' ('To Constantia', 3-4); it is the 'invisible principle of life within the visible flesh' which is being communicated from singer to instrument.¹⁶ Like Constantia, Marietta also has a power:

Without paying any attention to [Ladislav], and apparently without any effort to herself, she breathed forth melody after melody for her own pleasure, like some lone nightingale, that, in a home of green leaves, sings to cheer its solitude with sweet sounds. (*Pole* 351)

This description of the power of Marietta's voice is taken almost verbatim from Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* in a passage which clarifies the power that Claire means to convey:

A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.¹⁷

Marietta's hidden position allows her song to be heard as just such a 'melody of an unseen musician'; she has the power to bring back the past to Ladislav through her

¹⁵ Chernaik, p. 56.

¹⁶ Chernaik, p. 56.

¹⁷ *Defence, Poetry and Prose*, p. 486.

song just as Constantia transports the poet to beyond the heavens. All of these echoes of Shelley's poetry and prose reveal the extent to which Claire Clairmont's story was influenced by her memories of the Shelley community; but even in her representation of Ladislas's behaviour Claire aligns the Pole with Shelley.

Ladislas shares with Shelley an inherent violence of passion that is at times staggering. The passion with which Ladislas recognises and declares his love for Idalie is overwhelming and potentially destructive. Sitting alone in the Villa Reale the day after he has seen, and yet still not spoken with, her, Ladislas declares that he will accept nothing less than death if he cannot have Idalie. He raves wildly:

I sought her not! I had renounced life and all its train of raptures, hopes and joys. Cold, and void of every wish, the shadow of death lay upon my heart; suddenly she stood before me, lovely as an angel that heralds departed spirits to the kingdom of eternal bliss. Fearless, but mild, she poured the magic of her gaze upon my soul. I speak the word of the hour. She shall be mine – or I will die! (*Pole* 354)

This vehement assertion of desire and self-destruction echoes the often-repeated and yet unreliable tale of Mary Jane Godwin's of the pressure that Shelley put on Mary to elope with him in 1814. According to Mrs. Godwin's account to Lady Mountcashell, in a letter which survives in a copy in Claire Clairmont's hand, overcome by his passion for Mary, Shelley one day burst into the schoolroom where Mary and Claire were sitting. He approached Mary and said, according to Mrs. Godwin,

'They wish to separate us, my beloved; but Death shall unite us,' and offered her a bottle of laudanum. 'By this you can escape from tyranny; and this,' taking a small pistol from his pocket, 'shall reunite me to you.' Poor Mary turned as pale as a ghost, and my poor silly [Claire] . . . filled the room with her shrieks.¹⁸

These and other comments made by Mary Jane Godwin are generally disparaged by scholars today, although William St Clair suggests that her letters 'undoubtedly

¹⁸ Mary Jane Godwin to Lady Mountcashell, August or September 1814; in Dowden ii 544.

contain genuine material'.¹⁹ But the truth or fiction of this anecdote does not change the fact that Claire's copy of her mother's letter represents Shelley's passionate intensity in a way that coincides with the Pole's vehement passion for Idalie. A more substantial likeness in this declaration of Ladislav's that aligns him with Shelley is his suggestion that seeing Idalie has re-awakened Ladislav's will to live. He states that 'the shadow of death lay upon my heart' and he makes it clear that seeing Idalie has restored him to life. His claim that 'She shall be mine – or I will die' betrays a dependence upon Idalie that Shelley similarly asserts in both his lyrics to sister-figures and his representation of siblings which I have already discussed. Idalie has inspired Ladislav to life, but the result is paradoxical: if he cannot have her, he will die.

One final instance that aligns Ladislav with Shelley is the Pole's desire to convince Marietta first to live with Idalie, and later, to join him and Idalie after their elopement. After hearing Idalie's repeated requests for Marietta to stay with her and Marietta's firm rebuttals, Ladislav enters into the conversation 'with the affection and unreserve of a brother' (*Pole* 357). Not only does this call to mind Shelley's initial relationship with Claire, which was described by her mother as a 'brother and sister friendship'.²⁰ As chapter one illustrates, Shelley was constantly surrounded by sisters. In his childhood, he had four sisters; after his marriage to Harriet, they were joined by Harriet's sister Eliza; when he eloped with Mary, her stepsister Claire came along; and for his entire life he searched for, and often thought he found, a 'sister of his soul' in various other women. Ladislav is eager to have Idalie's stepsister living with them and with his power of persuasion and financial strength he is able to have his way.

¹⁹ St Clair, p. 549.

²⁰ White ii p. xii, n. 5.

Just as Ladislas is obviously taken from Shelley, likewise there is no doubt of the foundation of the character of Giorgio. When the Princess Dashkoff explains Idalie's family, the brother Giorgio is described as 'a complete ruffian', 'brave as a Pole and unprincipled as an Italian'. He is 'a villain quite varnished in picturesque, like one of your Lord Byron's corsairs and giaours' (*Pole* 354). In another context, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore have observed that 'naming [. . .] is never a neutral act'.²¹ By naming Byron, Claire insists upon an association between Giorgio and Byron's well-known villainous heroes from *The Giaour* (1813) and *The Corsair* (1813-14). Both of these characters have committed crimes in the past that remain unrevealed, but mentioned, in the poems. The giaour recalls a 'life of pain, [and] an age of crime', and his evil aspect is described in definite terms: 'If ever evil angel bore / The form of mortal, such he wore'.²² And Conrad, in *The Corsair*, admits 'Well have I earned – nor here alone – the meid / Of Seyd's revenge, by many a lawless deed', and after his disappearance, the narrator states that Conrad 'left a Corsair's name to other times, / Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes'.²³ Despite their crimes, however, these men are not completely evil. The giaour's and the corsair's ability to love draws sympathy for them as Byron urges the reader to forgive these men for the villainy. By specifically naming these two poems, Claire Clairmont calls into her text, and into the character of Giorgio, the secret crimes alluded to both in Byron's poems and, by association, in his life.

Claire could not have been unaware of the gossip that circulated about Byron, both before and after her connection with him. But a letter that she wrote to Trelawny

²¹ Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, 'Introduction: The Story so Far', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, 2nd edn, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (1989; London: MacMillan, 1997), p. 13.

²² *The Giaour*, 264; 912-13, *BCW* iii 48; 68.

²³ *The Corsair* III.viii.286-87; III.xxiv.695-96, *BCW* iii 199; 214.

in 1870 suggests that she may have been told by Byron himself of his relationship with his half-sister, Augusta-Leigh. Claire reveals that once Byron asked Claire if she thought he was bad, and her reply was no: 'Shelley says your imagination is over excited, so you see visions and have hallucinations and cannot help romancing'. In an attempt to show Claire that Shelley 'is a goose', Byron showed her several letters he had from Augusta; she saw that after several paragraphs of only common news, 'then came long spaces written in cyphers of which he said, only he and she had the key. He asked me, if I believed now [that he was a bad person]'. Then, thinking that a letter was missing and accusing Claire of taking it, Byron discovered the missing letter and spoke only once more, Claire reveals, 'on the subject of his sister and then it was to make me promise never to mention to anyone what he had revealed' (CC 607-08).

Giorgio is meant to be menacing, and Claire's possible knowledge of Byron's 'secret crimes' – as well as the evocation of the *giaour* and the corsair and their unspecified crimes – informs her characterisation of him. Although Giorgio is an officer, he is also the head of a group of bandits, and he seems to be forever trying to lead his younger sister, Marietta, astray into his criminal life. After Ladislas saves her from being dragged away by her brother, Marietta says, 'what is it to him if I like my liberty, and prefer wandering about, singing here and there, to being his unhappy par-' (*Pole* 350). But here Giorgio interrupts her, threateningly warning her not to speak ill of him, and his interruption leaves Marietta's word unfinished. Later she details his pursuit of her, watching her from the pit of the orchestra, and causing her to spend nights 'in the great wide Maremma, beset by robbers, buffaloes, and wild boars' (*Pole* 356). Knowing the dubious reputation that a travelling opera singer has, Marietta nevertheless asserts that her present mode of life 'is innocence itself compared with the crimes [Giorgio and Princess Dashkoff] were leading me into' (*Pole* 357). The

fact that Marietta would rather risk her safety amid unhealthy marshes and wild animals and robbers than return to Giorgio's care only hints at the severity of his treatment of her. The unfinished word which would define Marietta's relationship to her brother hangs there, enticing the reader to complete it in order to understand this relationship and the crimes that Giorgio was trying to encourage Marietta to commit. 'Partner' is only the most blameless of the options; words such as 'parvenue' and, still more corrupt, 'paramour' also come to mind, especially with the later reference to the secret crimes of Byron and his poetic creations.

Although Shelley, Mary and Claire all used Byron as a model for characters in their works, it is predictable that Claire's Byron-character differs substantially from the Byron-inspired characters in both Shelley's poetry and Mary's novels. It is widely accepted that Count Maddalo in Shelley's poem *Julian and Maddalo* is based on Byron, and the characteristics attributed to the Count reveal Shelley's friendly relationship with Byron in 1818. In the Preface to the poem Count Maddalo is described by the narrator as 'a person of the most consummate genius' and he states 'no human being can be more gentle, patient, and unassuming [. . .]. He is cheerful, frank, and witty'. Maddalo does have some faults, however, and the narrator points them out delicately. He is proud, ambitious, and apprehensive 'of the nothingness of human life'. Maddalo, who is 'capable, if he would direct his energies to such an end, of becoming the redeemer of his degraded country',²⁴ is more akin to the eventual Lord Protectorate Lord Raymond in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* than to Giorgio in Claire's short story.

Mary Shelley's opinion of Byron remained more or less favourable from the day Claire took her to meet him in April 1816 to Mary's death in 1851, despite her

²⁴ *Julian and Maddalo, Poetry and Prose*, p. 112-13.

brief frustration with Byron's unwillingness to settle any money on Claire in 1823 when her health was particularly bad. Shortly after their first meeting, Claire wrote to Byron, 'Mary is delighted with you as I knew she would be; [. . .] She perpetually exclaims "How mild he is! How gentle! So different from what I expected"' (CC i 40). Byron appears in almost all of Mary's novels in some veiled form, perhaps most notably as Lord Raymond in *The Last Man* and as the title character of *Lodore*. Lodore and Lord Raymond are not faultless Byrons by any means; but Mary does create them as admirable despite their flaws – similar to the *giaour* and the *corsair* – quite the opposite to Claire's Giorgio. Claire strongly criticised Mary for her continual use of Byron in her novels:

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, now as Castruccio, now as Raymond, now as Lodore. Good God to think a person of your genius, whose moral tact ought to be proportionably exalted, should think it a task befitting its powers to gild and embellish and pass off as beautiful what was the merest compound of Vanity, folly, and every miserable weakness that ever met together in one human Being. [. . .] I shall be curious to see if the hero of your new novel will be another Beautified Byron. (CC ii 341)

When Claire came to represent Byron in her own fiction, then, it is not surprising that he is in all ways different from the Byronic characters in Mary's novels. Although 'with the fond patronage of an elder brother [Giorgio] had procured [Marietta] the only indulgences her orphaned childhood had ever known' (*Pole* 362) – thereby drawing Marietta's love and a sense of devotion to her brother – in the end he is betrayed by both of his sisters and eventually killed by Ladislas.

In creating Giorgio, Claire painted a portrait of her own version of Byron that contrasts sharply with Mary's and Shelley's Byrons: Giorgio is evil, he is physically rough, he is a liar, and he is an assassin. These are all charges that Claire levelled at Byron at one time or another. He grabbed her arm roughly when he thought she had

taken a letter of Augusta's (Claire revealed to Trelawny that Byron 'grasp[ed] me by the arm so fiercely it had given me great pain' (CC ii 607)). He lied when he told her that he would make sure she could see her daughter, Allegra, at regular intervals if Claire surrendered the girl to his care. And, with his decision to place Allegra in the convent at Bagnacavallo against their verbal agreement that the child 'should never be away from one of its parents' (CC i 163), he indirectly caused her death; in a passage in her journal Claire would figure him as an 'executioner' who 'led [their child] to the scaffold' (CCJ 433; 432). Marietta, based on Claire herself, had 'a heart exquisitely alive to the sufferings of others' (Pole 362). Though once devoted to, and under the power of, her brother, in the story Marietta is now free from him and able to assert her independence. At one point, Marietta must choose between her 'fraternal love' for Giorgio, who had 'played with and caressed her in infancy', and her 'gratitude' to Ladislas for enabling her to escape from Giorgio. Hesitating an instant to consider the 'secret which involved the life of two persons' (Pole 362), Marietta decides to tell Ladislas about Giorgio's plot to kill him even though she is aware that by saving the Pole she is destroying her brother. Marietta chooses to take the side of Ladislas, and warns him of the plot; biographically, it is Claire choosing Shelley over Byron.

Although Giorgio is based on Lord Byron, Claire is careful not to glorify his character in the way that Mary does in her novels; and, in a symbolic act of revenge against her former lover, Claire has Giorgio injured at the end of the story by Marietta's – and her own – champion: the Shelleyan Ladislas.²⁵

²⁵ Claire sent an unfinished draft of this story to Mary, and it is uncertain how much of the ending is Mary's addition. Marion Kingston Stocking points out that 'the last scene [in which Giorgio finally dies] is brief and bloody, somewhat out of keeping with the rest of the tale' (CC i 289n). This might mean that although Claire wrote the story up to the point of Ladislas injuring Giorgio as he tried to assassinate him, Giorgio's final death was rendered by Mary in the brief two paragraphs she wrote to end the tale.

Without a doubt, Idalie is Claire's representation of her stepsister Mary. In describing Idalie physically, Claire focuses on her 'hair, of a golden and burnished brown (the colour of the autumnal foliage illuminated by the setting sun), [which] fell in gauzy wavings round her face, throat, and shoulders' (*Pole* 353). In a passage written sometime between 1828 and 1830 in a collection of pages entitled 'Anecdotes, Remembrances, &c. &c', Claire worked on this image of Mary's hair several times over:

Mary's hair is light brown, of a sunny and burnished brightness like the autumnal foliage when played upon by the rays of the setting sun; / it sets in round her face and falls upon her shoulders in gauzy wavings and is so fine it looks as if the wind had tangled it together into golden network / she wore it in its natural state, flowing in gauzy wavings round her face and throat, and upon her shoulders ~~as if it had been tangled by the wind into a golden network.~~ and it was so fine the slightest wind or motion tangled it into a golden network / it was rather short and she ~~wore it~~ let it fall into its natural state like golden network ~~about~~ round her face and throat, and half way down her shoulders and it was so fine, one feared / to disturb the beauty of its gauzy wavings with a breath / lest the slightest breath should disturb the beauty of its gauzy wavings. (*CCJ* 431-32)²⁶

It is possible that Claire worked on this description of Mary's hair specifically for the description of Idalie, but it is more likely that she turned to her journal, where she knew she had carefully perfected the imagery of her description, when she was writing the story. Also like Mary, Idalie is noted for her 'small clear forehead, gleaming with gentle thought' (*Pole* 353), reminiscent of the 'light thine ample forehead wears' that Shelley notes in the introductory stanzas of *Laon and Cythna* which are dedicated to Mary (*L&C* 94). These echoes of descriptions of Mary Shelley in Claire's story suggest that Idalie is indeed a characterisation of Claire's stepsister.

There can be no doubt that Marietta is based on Claire. There is never any physical description of Marietta, and apart from her beautiful singing voice – similar to Claire's – she receives praise only for the potential of her beauty:

²⁶ The slash marks are Claire's.

Her countenance and figure would have been beautiful, had they been more fully developed. They resembled those sketches of a great artist in which there are only a few lightly-traced lines, but those are so full of spirit and meaning, that you easily imagine what a masterpiece it would have been when finished. (Pole 351)

In contrast to Idalie, who in similar artistic references is described as 'lovely as one of Raphael's Madonnas; [. . .] like them, there was a silent beauty in her presence that struck the most superficial beholder with astonishment and satisfaction' (Pole 353), Marietta is portrayed as an incomplete painting. But this half-presence, her beauty underdeveloped and incomplete, does not hide the fact that Marietta resembles her creator, although all the tale reveals about Marietta directly is that she is the child of a Polish man by 'a second wife, an Italian' (Pole 354). This suggests that Marietta may have had Italian features, and in this she resembles Claire Clairmont who, according to Tom Medwin, 'might have been mistaken for an Italian, for she was a brunette with very dark hair and eyes'.²⁷ But it is not just physically that Marietta resembles the author, for Marietta's actions, and others' opinions of her, highlight the similarities between character and author.

Twice in the story characters make judgements on Marietta's behaviour that reveal this likeness. The Princess Dashkoff describes Marietta as a 'most uncontrollable little creature, who chose to pretend my house was insupportable, and ran away into Calabria or Campagna, and set up as a *prima donna*' (Pole 354). Ladislas, although he has known Marietta not more than a few days, assures Idalie that the letter revealing Giorgio's intention to murder the Pole cannot be as serious as it sounds. He suggests that it is from 'the vivacity of Marietta's imagination, which had made her attach a monstrous import to some angry expressions of her brother', or

²⁷ Thomas Medwin, *Memoir of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1833), p. 281.

else it is 'some merry device which she had contrived, in order to frighten them'. And, to calm Idalie, he assures her that he expects 'they should shortly see her wild sister return laughing, and full of glee at the success of her plot' (*Pole* 360). Biographers of Shelley, Mary, and Claire unite in their opinions of Claire's temperament being opposite to Mary's more serious demeanour. With various words and phrases, not all of them flattering, Claire appears in these biographies as lively, (over)excitable, and in the case of the Byron affair, bold. In 1828 Claire wrote to Mary pleading, 'Do not reproach me, as you used formerly to do for my mysteries, for involuntarily your letters and Jane's too are filled with mysteries for me' (CC i 250-51), suggesting that Mary thought that Claire had a tendency to play mysterious tricks for fun, just as Ladislas suspects of Marietta in Claire's story. These characteristics also describe Marietta, who is labelled 'wild' more than once in the story. Ladislas's suspicion of her letter as a joke, and her impetuosity in following Giorgio to the meeting place of the banditti, the catacombs, in order 'to find out what [she] can' (*Pole* 359), present a character no less jovial and audacious than the biographers, and Claire Clairmont's own letters, reveal her to be. It is clear that as Claire wrote this story, she drew on the people with whom she had lived for so long, Mary and Shelley, to form the characters of her story; the triangle of stepsisters Marietta and Idalie and Idalie's lover Ladislas couldn't be more clearly based on Claire, Mary, and Shelley.

But the sisters in 'The Pole' are more than just physical embodiments of Claire and Mary, Marietta the energetic, impulsive, dark, and gypsy-like girl with a beautiful singing voice, and Idalie the sweet, sombre girl with a light complexion who is the object of Ladislas's love. This relationship between fictional sisters is further complicated by Claire's feelings towards her own stepsister and by her idealised vision of what the Shelley community could have been like, or what she wished it had

been like. The ambiguousness of the sister representation often echoes the complicated triangular relationships between Claire, Mary, and Shelley. For instance, the short-lived but idyllic day of togetherness, before the assassination plot is discovered, suggests the position that Claire had on the elopement tour. At Idalie's hermitage on the Bay of Baia, the trio meet, 'affectionate as old friends' (*Pole* 357) though they have only known each other a few days. Yet almost immediately they separate: Ladislas sits with Idalie while she draws, telling her about Poland's resistance to Russian occupation, and Marietta goes to the beach to 'join some fisher boys who were dancing the tarantella' (*Pole* 357). Probably included to suggest Marietta's youth, there is a sexual dimension to her disappearing with a group of 'fisher boys' who are dancing on the beach. Idalie sits with her lover, Marietta goes to find companions to substitute for her own lack of a lover. Although Claire could not have anticipated that the posthumous characterisations of her and Mary by biographers would pit her as the wicked stepsister against Mary's unblemished Cinderella, there is a subtext of sororophobia, of antagonism and strife, between the two sisters in Claire's only published work.

The story does not reveal how long the stepsisters have been apart, but when they are first reunited there is almost immediately a sense of friction between them. As Amy K. Levin suggests, the silence in regard to information about the sisters' childhood prevents the reader from understanding the nature of the sisters' relationship as well as from witnessing the development of their opposite qualities. The tale of Marietta's and Idalie's childhood is glossed over, disclosing nothing of their life together before Marietta ran away to join a travelling opera company. However, their communication resulting from their reunion hints strongly at the

difficulties they may have had in the past, and suggests that there is still some lingering antagonism in their feelings towards one another.

Hearing Marietta's voice, although Idalie 'fold[s] the speaker to her bosom', Idalie's first words are actually to scold Marietta:

Marietta, – my dear little Marietta! at last you are come back again. *Cattivella!* now promise to stay with me. You know not how miserable I have been *about* you. (*Pole* 355; final emphasis added)

The choice of the word *about*, instead of the expected *without*, is significant.

Reprimanding her like a wayward child, Idalie intimates that Marietta's absence has caused her few feelings of emotional loss (as in 'I have been miserable *without* you'). Rather, Idalie implies that her stepsister's absence has been a source of worry and trouble to her. But to this reproach Marietta quickly refuses her stepsister's request to stay at home and be good; her unhesitating reply asserts her independence from her stepsister: 'No, I cannot promise any thing of the kind [. . .] I choose to have my liberty' (*Pole* 355).

Idalie's response to this refusal is sisterly enough; her 'arms sunk, and her eyes were cast upon the ground when she heard the cold and decided tone in which this refusal was pronounced' (*Pole* 355). But when Idalie suddenly notices that Marietta's companion is Ladislas, who Idalie had first seen and fallen in love with the previous evening, she is overcome with an emotion that is unnamed, but that can be identified as jealousy. Idalie's eyes fill with 'unconquerable emotion' as Ladislas, 'partaking her feelings', begins to stammer an explanation as to why he is walking alone with Marietta. Again, Marietta's youth may be meant to remove any suggestion of impropriety of her and Ladislas being together unchaperoned, but Marietta's independence – as well as the potential of her beauty – all contribute to Idalie's suspicions. Ladislas's excuses begin feebly and are not calculated to be entirely

convincing: 'I met your sister here a few minutes ago [. . .] and having been so fortunate the other day as to render her a slight service —' (*Pole* 355). Marietta, interrupting Ladislas's excuses with a detailed account of her encounter with Giorgio, Ladislas's assistance, and her impromptu concert during his evening meal, realises by the looks on their faces that Idalie and Ladislas are in love. But instead of simply reassuring her stepsister quickly and clearly that there is no attachment between herself and Ladislas, Marietta delays her explanation just long enough to continue Idalie's agony.

In her response Marietta teases her stepsister. She speaks 'with an arch smile' and she says, 'but don't be frightened, Idalie [. . .] not a word of praise did the Sarmatian bestow on me' (*Pole* 356). This coy smile is not just a result of Marietta's recognition of the love between Idalie and Ladislas; combined with her admission that despite their long evening together Ladislas showed absolutely no interest in her, Marietta is teasing Idalie with the knowledge that it would not have been implausible for Ladislas to have found Idalie's younger stepsister attractive. Idalie's response to Marietta's coy assurance – '*Then* come and live with me, dear Marietta, and I will praise you as much and more than you desire' (*Pole* 356, emphasis added) – disguises the conditions implicit in the invitation. The 'if' that accompanies the 'then' of Idalie's statement reveals tension between the stepsisters that must, and does, remain unstated and therefore unnamed. What Idalie's silence as to the conditions of her invitation implies is '*if* the Pole really did not praise you, *then* come and live with me'. She will only accept her stepsister into her house once she is sure there is not any romantic attraction between Marietta and Ladislas. As Anthony Wall states, 'silence is [. . .] the discursive tactic adopted for covering up everything that is either undesirable or

strange, everything which does not fit into the homogenous mould of predictability²⁸. Like the silences in the journals, the strategic reluctance to speak her thoughts allows Idalie to deny her own feelings even as she recognises that there is something in the situation that is undesirable.

Idalie's silences are not the only ones that speak loudly of difficulties between the two stepsisters. The words of Marietta, too, are interspersed with gaps that are charged with meaning. After spending the night in the catacombs listening to Giorgio's plot to assassinate the Pole, Marietta returns to Idalie's cottage to find that her stepsister has disregarded her letter urging her to convince Ladislav to leave the country immediately. Marietta's reproach, when read in the context of an earlier statement by Idalie, also reveals a subtext of antagonism between the stepsisters:

"Why is he yet here?" said [Marietta] to her sister. "You foolish blind Idalie, why did you not mind my letter – too proud I suppose to obey any but yourself; but mark, you would not hear my warnings – we shall lose him, and you will feel them in your heart's core." (*Pole* 361)

The central part of this speech, set off by dashes, is the core of Marietta's criticism; what she says to Idalie, in effect, is that the older girl is selfish and doesn't listen to her younger sister when she warns her of trouble. There does seem to be some foundation to the charge that Idalie does not always believe her stepsister's warnings. Previously, when Marietta explained that her reluctance to live again with Idalie was because of the attempts of Princess Dashkoff and Giorgio to lead her into a life of crime, Idalie's response was, 'some suspicion of this did once cross my mind, [. . .] but I rejected it as too horrible' (*Pole* 356). Distrustful of her suspicions, and unwilling to jeopardise her own position in the Princess's household by questioning Marietta's treatment, Idalie apathetically did nothing to help her stepsister. What is behind Marietta's reprimand is a more personal attack. Marietta's accusation of Idalie's pride

²⁸ Anthony Wall, 'Silence as Weapon of Authoritarian Discourse', *Critical Studies* 1 (1989), p. 216.

and determination to do only what she wants, like Idalie's charge that she has been miserable *about* Marietta, has an alternative reading. In effect, Marietta is accusing Idalie of selfishly ignoring her stepsister's suffering under the care of the Princess and their brother so that she could remain a part of the household.

Equally notable in this passage is Marietta's shift in pronoun use. Although Idalie and Ladislas are the lovers, Marietta asserts that 'we shall lose him'. Her assertion that she will suffer from the loss of Ladislas as equally as her stepsister is an assertion of her own place in the relational triangle, equal to that of her stepsister. This may be a coded comment on Claire's perception of her place in the Shelley community – that she had as much claim on Shelley as Mary did – and that she has suffered from the loss of Shelley as much as Mary. Marietta's further comment to her stepsister is a cruel reminder that Idalie's reluctance to listen to Marietta's warning will be the sole cause of his death. She places the blame on her stepsister with the curse-like statement, '*you* will feel [the truth of my words] in your heart's core'.

Towards the end of the story, when it becomes necessary for Ladislas to leave the country, he devises a plan for himself and Idalie to marry and escape to France. But then he immediately thinks of Marietta and says to Idalie, 'We seem to have forgotten the future destiny of our dear Marietta, all this time. The friendless condition in which we shall leave her fills me with anxiety' (*Pole* 365). But in response Marietta, 'the wild girl', replies, 'Fear not for me [. . .]; it is necessary I should remain behind to arrange those things which Idalie's sudden departure will leave in sad disorder; but you will see me soon in Paris, for how can I exist apart from my sister?' (*Pole* 365). For all its expressed dedication, this last assertion 'how can I exist apart from my sister' has a hollow ring. Previously, before Idalie could respond to Ladislas's proposal of their marriage and flight – and it is worth noting that she

never does consent for herself – Marietta interrupts by accepting Ladislas's offer for her sister, insisting, 'She consents! she consents! Do not ask anymore, she has already yielded' (*Pole* 364). Marietta is obviously accepting the Pole's proposal for her sister, but there is a sense in which she is also accepting it for herself. Marietta conducts all the business necessary to arrange the marriage with the energy and eagerness of an excited bride, contrasting sharply with the 'bashful conscious Idalie' who could not have done without her stepsister's help. In this last scene in which Marietta appears in the tale, it becomes increasingly unclear as to who is getting married:

Marietta busied herself about all; won over the priest to the sudden marriage, contrived to put up articles of dress for the fair bride's journey, and thinking of every thing, with far more watchfulness and care than if her own fate had depended on the passing hour, seemed the guardian angel of the lovers. Ladislas arrived at the convent; he had been successful with the master of the steam-packet, and all was prepared. Marietta heard this from his own lips, and carried the happy news to Idalie. *He did not see her till they met at the altar, where, kneeling before the venerable priest, they were united for ever.* And now time, as it sped on, gave them no moment to indulge their various and overpowering feelings. Idalie embraced her sister again and again, and entreating her to join them speedily in Paris, made her promise to write, and then, escorted by her husband, proceeded to the Sully [. . .]. (*Pole* 365, emphasis added)

Marietta is conducting all the business for her sister to be married to Ladislas. But it is interesting that at the moment of the marriage, the pronouns become ambiguous enough to momentarily confuse the understanding of who is being married to Ladislas. The emphasised sentence states that 'he', clearly Ladislas, did not see 'her' until they met at the altar; in this scene there are two women, so the 'her' could refer to either of them. It is only later in the passage when Idalie is 'escorted by her husband' does the text make unambiguously clear that it is Idalie who has married. The story has made the marriage clear enough, but at the moment of representation the ambiguity of who is 'united for ever' with Ladislas is significant.

It is important to understand that Claire Clairmont did not write 'The Pole' as an episode of her autobiography. Fundamentally, the story is a work of fiction. But the fiction does have roots in Claire's past, and in the story she presents the atmosphere, if not the specific events, of the triangular community in which she lived with Mary and Shelley. 'The Pole' is autobiographical in its representation of the three characters based on this triangle and in the subtext of ambiguous affection that exists between the two stepsisters in the story. In discussing the art of autobiography, Georges Gusdorf maintains that experience is the basis for *all* creation and not just for life stories. He asserts: 'one can exercise imagination only by starting from what one is, from what one has tried either in fact or in wish'.²⁹ So in creating a story 'about a Pole' (CC i 287) Claire began with what she knew best: the machinations of a community of young people, two of whom are lovers and the third being and becoming a sister to them both. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has discussed, the 'conversion of life into story reflects the human need to declare not only the identity but the larger-than-life significance of the self'.³⁰ In her representations of the Shelley community in 'The Pole' Claire figures herself as part of the love between Shelley and Mary and she creates a world in which the three of them exist in a harmony that is free from the antagonism that existed for her in real life.

But Claire's representation of the community relations in 'The Pole' disregards the complications that Claire well knew existed when a passionate young man lives with his beautiful, reserved lover and her potentially beautiful, energetic, and forward stepsister. The difficulties that Claire witnessed, experienced, and caused while living with Shelley and Mary seem to disappear in the idealistic portrayal of Marietta,

²⁹ Gusdorf, p. 45.

³⁰ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 18.

Ladislav, and Idalie in the same way that these same problems disappear in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.³¹ It is only by scrutinising the communication between the stepsisters that the subtext of tension is revealed. But this altered representation, based on her memories of living with Mary and Shelley, is not a lapse in Claire's recollection, and this reading of the subtext of sororophobia in 'The Pole' reveals that, consciously or not, Claire *was* revealing the tensions that existed in her experience of living with Mary and Shelley. But this selective and fictionalised representation of the Shelley community in 'The Pole' reveals how the memory presents the past to the present.

In a study of the theories of what is characteristic of autobiographical writing, James Olney states simply his view that the categorising of a text as 'autobiographical' is unstable, asserting that 'few things [. . .] are more impure than memory'.³² Olney asserts that the present moment in which a person begins to reflect on their past with a view towards recording that past has a determining effect upon both what is remembered and how it is remembered. Essentially, in attempting to write about the self, the autobiographer draws from the imagination a picture of a person who no longer exists, and these memories are both fanciful and inaccurate, although based on experience:

Memory distorts and it transforms; [. . .] it apologizes and it justifies, it accuses and it excuses; it fails to recall anything and then recalls much more than was ever there – indeed, memory does virtually everything but what it is supposed to do: that is, to look back on a past event and to see that event as it really was.³³

³¹ See chapter 2.iii of the present study.

³² James Olney, 'Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography', in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 254.

³³ Olney, p. 254.

Olney criticises our reliance on memory to bring back to us an objective rendition of our past. He distrusts memory; in essence, according to Olney, memory is just another form of imagination.

So for Claire to 'remember' her life with the Shelleys and to portray it as a peaceful and happy triangle of two lovers and a sister that live together in harmony, as it appears to do in 'The Pole', she is neither forgetting the tension that existed between herself and Mary, nor misrepresenting the past by eclipsing those difficulties. The autobiographical elements of the community in 'The Pole' is actually a wishful memory. It is a memory of the nature of the relationships within the community and the shadow of anxiety that existed projected into a narrative of how she wished the community with the Shelleys could have been: pleasant, with each pair of relationships independent of the other, and all living together as siblings and as friends. In this Claire may have been picking up on Shelley's projection at the end of *Prometheus Unbound* of the happy community of Prometheus, his lover, Asia, and her two sisters, bold Panthea and shy Ione. By attempting to conceal the difficulties inherent in the relationship between stepsisters, between young lovers, and between a man and a wife's blossoming younger sibling, Claire is able to conjure for herself a world in which she, Mary, and Shelley could live 'happily ever after'.

ii. The meaning of sisterhood in Mary Shelley's short fiction

I would endure any misery [for my sister]. (*Trial* 232)

Mary Shelley's short fiction also exhibits symptoms of sororophobia in the few representations of sisters that she created. In many ways, Mary's fictional sisters highlight the differences between the two predominant significations of the term 'sister'. This word is used to refer to either a member of a sisterhood – a sister by

choice – or a biological sister. Yet many literary critics end up erasing the important differences between these two meanings. One such example of this erasure is Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women*. Although Auerbach begins her study promisingly by evoking the *Graie* in Greek mythology and pointing out their biological connection as sisters, she quickly cites this group of biological sisters as an example of *sisterhood*. By the time Auerbach turns to the Bennett family in *Pride and Prejudice*, with its group of very different sisters who exhibit both antagonism (Elizabeth and Lydia) and affection (Elizabeth and Jane), and where she includes women outside of the Bennet family as examples of sisters (Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas), Auerbach has elided the differences between a sisterhood that is enforced and one that is elected.

The primary meaning of the word 'sister' is a blood tie between two women who share the same biological parents. However, women also refer to friends as sisters, and in religious communities the women are called sisters. These last two types of sisters, representing relationships that are *chosen* rather than predetermined, are more properly referred to as sisterhoods: the state of being related *like* blood sisters. But even this connotation overlooks the possibilities of difficulties among biological sisters. As Amy Levin has claimed, this is the kind of denial in the strife that exists between sisters that studies of female relationships in literature favour; it 'allows critics to avoid discussing the frequent friction among biological sisters that is so much at odds with ideals of sisterhood'.³⁴

In 'The Sisters of Albano' Mary Shelley holds the blood relationship between women up against the bond of sisterhood created when a woman commits herself through faith to a religious order. On the surface the sisters have an uncomplicated,

³⁴ Levin, *The Suppressed Sister*, p. 16.

mutually loving relationship, yet the spectre of sororophobia lurks beneath the representation of their actions, as it lurked in the communication between the sisters in 'The Pole'. The tale of 'The Sisters of Albano' suggests that the only true sister is a nun who has committed herself by choice to the religious sisterhood – for blood sisters more often than not put their lover before their sister to the peril of all.

Maria, the older of the two sisters in the title, joins the sisterhood of the convent of Santa Chiara, trading her blood sister Anina for a group of nuns who respected and admired Maria for her attention to her dying mother. Maria visits her father and sister in Albano once or twice a year, at which time she 'gave sage and kind advice to Anina, and sometimes wept to part from her'; but she has chosen her new sisters and her 'piety and her active employments for the sick reconciled her to her fate' (*Sisters* 54). On the other hand, Anina's life is further complicated by her sister's permanent absence. She 'was more sorry to lose her sister's society. The other girls of the village did not please her: she was a good child, and worked hard for her father, and her sweetest recompense was the report he made of her to Maria, and the fond praises and caresses the latter bestowed on her when they met' (*Sisters* 54). So while Maria was so occupied with her charity work that she only '*sometimes* wept to part from [Anina]' (*Sisters* 54; emphasis added), Anina's affection for her sister was strengthened by the lack of a substitute to take the place of the sister she once had.

Although it would appear that Anina's love for Domenico is the immediate cause for the rising difficulties between the sisters, a close reading of the first mention of Anina's passion for him offers an alternative explanation. The growing gap between the sisters is presented as follows:

It was not until she was fifteen that Anina showed any diminution of affection for *her sister*. Yet I cannot call it diminution, for she loved her perhaps more than ever, though her holy calling and sage lectures prevented her from reposing confidence, and made her tremble lest *the nun*, devoted to heaven and

good works, should read in her eyes, and disapprove of the earthly passion that occupied her. (*Sisters* 54; emphasis added)

Although initially referred to as 'her sister', by the end of the passage Maria is neutrally referred to as 'the nun'; in effect, the church has come between them. Anina is afraid that her secret will draw disapproval and critical lectures from Maria, and she realises the extent to which she has lost her only sibling. Maria will act as a nun before she will act as a sister; the sisterhood of the church has become more important to her than family.

Despite this separation, throughout the story Anina depends on Maria to right all of her wrongs; the fact that Maria attempts to do so reveals her selflessness, but it does not reveal any overbearing devotion to Anina. Anina is forever confident that her sister Maria can and will solve all her problems. During one of Domenico's frequent absences, Anina becomes uneasy as much time passes without a word from him; she does not realise that he is a robber, and his plausible excuses for the extent of his free time and his frequent absences 'blind[ed] the innocent girl to its obvious cause' (*Sisters* 55). While her concern for Domenico's extended absence grows, Anina learns also that Maria is to come home for a rest to recover from the malaria she had contracted at the convent. Ready to bear the brunt of a holy lecture, in her despair Anina resolves 'to disclose every thing to her sister, and during her long visit she doubted not but that she [Maria] would contrive her happiness' (*Sisters* 57).

Before she has a chance to speak to Maria about her dilemma, in the festivities of welcoming Maria home a few of the villagers discuss a band of robbers who have barricaded themselves in the nearby Rocca Giovane, surrounded by French soldiers. Anina is horrified to hear that Domenico is one of them. The villagers exchange three tales relating to the situation: one of the suffering of the bandits who are 'literally starving'; one of the bandits' plan of taking hostages in the hope that they will be able

to exchange them for leniency from the French government; and one of a man who was found within the area the French had cordoned off, with food under his jacket for the starving bandits, who was 'shot on the spot' for disobeying the French orders (*Sisters* 57). All this is too much for Anina, who faints and is put to bed by Maria. Early in the morning, without consulting Maria as she had vowed, Anina gathers a basket of food and determines to deliver it to her starving lover. She had barely crossed the French military line when she is discovered by a soldier.

After Anina has been taken prisoner, Maria suggests to her father that *she* should go to plead for Anina's release. Although this is a chance to reveal a deep affectionate bond for her younger sister, through her thoughts and words Maria instead reveals that it is nothing more than a *duty* to save her sister, reflecting Mary Shelley's own sense of duty towards Claire Clairmont that manifested itself in offers of support and a home with Mary and Shelley. But despite this sense of obligation to her sister, not once does Maria exhibit any distress at Anina's fate. Their father suffers 'frantic desperation' at the news of Anina's forthcoming execution, but Maria remains calm: 'Maria heard [the] tale with horror; but an hospital is a school in which to learn selfpossession and presence of mind' (*Sisters* 58, 59). Hearing of her sister's impending death has no more effect on Maria than tending to ill patients in hospital. Assuming that her 'holy character' will sway the men (despite her later thoughts that 'the French had shown small respect for the monastic character'), she begs the French captain to have mercy on her sister. 'She knelt; she vowed she would not depart without her sister; she appealed to Heaven and to the saints', but to no avail (*Sisters* 59; 60; 59). She is allowed only a short visit with Anina before her execution in two hours time. But Maria's entreaties do not signify love for Anina; rather, they are evidence of Maria's feeling of obligation to her younger sibling: 'Maria had felt

herself, since their mother's death, the natural protectress and support of her sister, and she never deemed herself so called on to fulfil this character as now' (*Sisters* 60). This is not sororal attachment; rather, it is a role, a part she took on at the death of their mother and which she was now called upon to play. Maria does not expect her attempts to save her sister to be a self-sacrifice; as she says to her father, 'my holy character will awe [the soldiers], my tears move them' (*Sisters* 59). She believes she will be able to free her sister. Even her response to the appearance of the confessor, after she has changed costumes with Anina, reveals no love or strong feelings for her sister, except in reference to her existence as a nun: she thinks, 'perhaps I am fitter to die than my sister is' (*Sisters* 60).

In the end, the switch backfires on the sisters. The French take no pity on the Catholic nun; as the narrator of the tale explains, they 'did not venerate her holy vocation; one peasant girl to them was the same as another' (*Sisters* 63).

Fundamentally, for all their differences, Maria and Anina are indistinguishable when it really matters. Anina is saved by donning the nun's habit, and Maria is shot in her place. Ironically, Mary Shelley turns some sympathy towards Anina now that she is in the costume of a 'true' sister. Disobeying Maria's orders to go to their father who will devise her escape, Anina decides instead to go to her confessor, fearing the lecture that she will get from her parent. On the way to the confessor, however, Anina is mistaken for a nun and taken captive by the bandits in the hope that 'with a nun in their hands, they might obtain any terms' (*Sisters* 61). Hearing of the switch between Anina and Maria, Domenico rallies his comrades with a more conscience-ridden battle cry than they are probably accustomed to hearing:

"You hear her story. She was to have been shot for bringing food to us: her sister has substituted herself in her place. We know the French; one victim is to them as good as another: Maria dies in their hands. Let us save her. Our time is up; we must fall like men, or starve like dogs: we have still

ammunition, still some strength left. To arms! let us rush on the poltroons, free their prisoner, and escape or die!" (*Sisters* 62)

Thankful for Anina's efforts to bring them food, all the robbers agree to help free her sister. Here Mary Shelley subverts the idea of the power of religion as she contrasts each sister's attempt to save the other. Maria's plan depended upon the anticipated respect of a disrespectful French army for an Italian religion; Anina's efforts, instigated by her lover, are backed by the power of weapons.

With this ending Mary Shelley offers her original opinion of sisters and sisterhood. Religion defines the sister relation, and Anina remains true to her words that 'God has saved me in this dress [i.e., Maria's nun's habit]; it were sacrilege to change it: I shall never quit Santa Chiara' (*Sisters* 62). Through her ordeal, and the loss of her blood sister, it appears that Anina becomes her sister – she becomes a 'true' sister: a nun. Yet even as a nun she cannot reach the level of dedication to the sisterhood achieved by Maria. As the narrator of the tale reveals, although 'constant acts of benevolence and piety have inspired her with calm and resignation' (an almost identical description of Maria's 'piety and her active employments for the sick [which] reconciled her to her fate' (*Sisters* 54)), she is more like Eloisa in her religious worship: 'Her prayers are daily put up for Domenico's soul, and she hopes, through the intercession of the Virgin, to rejoin him in the other world' (*Sisters* 63-64).

Anina has realised the letter of sisterhood, but not the spirit; she has become a nun, but the only prayers mentioned are for her lover. She has become her sister, yet she has maintained her individuality; she is still the younger sister, Anina. No mention is made of Anina's regret over the loss of her sister; with this silence Mary Shelley reveals the inability of Anina's religious vows to penetrate her heart, and she criticises the younger sister's lack of devotion to her blood sister *and* to the religious sisterhood. In contrast is Maria's fidelity to sisterhood, her piety and religious commitment which

were authentic, and her willingness to give her life in order to save her younger sister. At the same time, Mary Shelley implies the futility of offering up oneself to one's sister; in her eyes, the result is only a pseudo-piety that hides both ingratitude and irreverence. It could be read that the fundamental message in 'The Sisters of Albano' is that it is unrewarding to try to help your blood sister.

But if helping a younger sister becomes, literally, a self-sacrifice in 'The Sisters of Albano', in 'The Trial of Love' the sacrifice that Angeline makes for Faustina in the end turns out to be for the best. The two girls in this story are not sisters, nor are they stepsisters; but by the death of Faustina's mother, Angeline's mother moves into the villa to help care for the motherless children of the aristocratic Count Moncenigo. Angeline and Faustina, therefore, grew up together, and when Angeline's mother died the two girls were sent to a nearby convent to be educated. After a year, however, Faustina was sent to a 'very celebrated convent in Venice, whose aristocratic doors were closed against her ignoble companion' (*Trial* 232). After a year in Venice Faustina's education was complete, and she returned to her father's villa outside of Este to live until a marriage could be arranged for her. Her return to her father's house marks the beginning of the story.

During her separation from Faustina, Angeline and Ippolito met and fell in love. The nature of their feelings helps to contrast their sensibilities; Angeline's feelings were 'earnest and passionate; and yet, she could regulate their effects', while Ippolito's affection was 'fiery and impetuous' and he was unwilling to allow anything from preventing him from obtaining his desires (*Trial* 233). His father requested that if the lovers could endure a trial of separation for one year, he would consent to their marriage even though Angeline was not of a noble family; he believed that in this year his son would find another, more suitable, attachment. Angeline and Ippolito

made their vow of 'silence and separation' in front of the cross, and Ippolito immediately set off for Paris (*Trial* 234). By the time Faustina and Angeline are reunited, there is just one month until the end of their trial.

In this story the two girls are presented conventionally as opposites. Angeline is 'of humble birth' (*Trial* 231), while Faustina is the daughter of a nobleman.

Angeline's subdued demeanour encourages her preference for contemplation and thoughtfulness, and she has 'an intelligent and thoughtful expression of countenance' (*Trial* 231). Faustina, on the other hand, is 'vivacious, and self-willed' (*Trial* 231).

Physically, the girls contrast with one another, but in an unexpected manner.

Although conventionally the 'good' girl is usually light and the 'bad' girl dark, Mary Shelley subverts these pairings and creates Angeline with dark features and Faustina with light ones. Angeline has 'large black eyes', 'dark silken hair', and a 'clear, delicate, though brunette complexion' (*Trial* 231); her Italian looks contrast sharply with Faustina's 'laughing blue eyes', 'brilliant complexion', and her 'auburn hair' (*Trial* 231). Faustina is described in detail; she has a 'sylph-like form, slender, round, and springy', and she is described as 'the loveliest little thing in the world', 'very pretty [. . .] with a thousand winning ways, that rendered it delightful to yield to her' (*Trial* 231-32). As Angeline approaches the villa, her recollection of Faustina's 'sweet arch smile' also hints at Faustina's flirtatiousness. Angeline, on the other hand, is not so clearly delineated. Her clothes are mentioned ('she was dressed with simplicity and taste' (*Trial* 231)) and the fact that her 'faziola covered her head and shoulders' as she walked up to the villa suggests that she is as modest as the nuns among whom she lives at the convent. But these descriptions only further obscure her form. Finally, their names suggest something more of their characteristics. Angeline is obviously an angelic figure, which is made more obvious by her name. The name Faustina may

suggest Marlowe's *Faustus* or Goethe's *Faust*, both of which Mary Shelley undoubtedly knew. But the Italian word *fausto/fausta* complicates the dichotomy which Mary is exploiting, for the word means 'happy'. Still, the descriptions of Angeline emphasises her angelic attributes – kindness, purity, beauty – and her decorum; Faustina comes across as carefree, playful, and flirtatious in comparison.

Although clearly not biological or even step sisters, there is a strong sororal attachment on Angeline's part for the younger Faustina, which reinforces Mary's paradoxical praise for and criticism of Angeline. It is stated plainly that 'Angeline was like an elder sister' (*Trial* 232). As she contemplates Faustina's life at the Venetian convent, Angeline reveals more of how she behaves around her younger 'sister', which contributes to an understanding of the behaviour of a dedicated sister which Mary Shelley wished to suggest and, in the end, criticise. Angeline thinks to herself, 'I wonder if she found anyone at her Venetian convent to humour and spoil her, as I did here – to take the blame for all her faults, and indulge her in her caprices' (*Trial* 232).

Angeline is completely and selflessly dedicated to Faustina:

[Angeline] waited on Faustina; she yielded to her in every thing; a word or smile of hers was all powerful. "I love her too much," she would sometimes say; "but I would endure any misery rather than see a tear in her eye." (*Trial* 232)

This observation of Angeline's of the extent of her own love for Faustina proves prophetic, for when by a twist of fate Faustina falls in love with Ippolito, Angeline cannot bring herself to tell Faustina about her own connection to Ippolito and their mutual commitment. Angeline's determination to selflessly put her 'sister' before herself, in the end, becomes a sort of tragic flaw as her silence allows Faustina to cultivate her attraction to Ippolito until her father arranges for the two to be married. However, by the end of the tale Mary turns the tables on this tragedy, showing that although the dedication which Angeline shows towards both her vow to avoid all

contact with her lover and towards her 'sister' leads to disappointment for Angeline, it is in fact for the best. Ippolito proves himself unworthy by his 'light, inconstant nature' which 'inflicted a thousand wounds in [Faustina's] young bosom' (*Trial* 243), and in the end, it is reported, they lived the 'usual life' of an Italian couple: he 'gay, inconstant, careless', she 'consol[ing] herself with a cavaliere servente' (*Trial* 243). The tragedy of losing both her lover and her 'sister' to one another transforms into a blessing for Angeline. As the narrative states, Angeline, 'with her deep feelings, and exalted ideas of honour, [. . .] should have been even more dissatisfied than Faustina' with the inconstancy that Ippolito showed, in his marriage to Faustina, was a dominant element of his nature.

There are several instances when Angeline's willingness to put Faustina before all else is quite literal, and it serves to emphasise both Angeline's dedication to Faustina and the eventual tragedy that this both causes and yet in the end saves Angeline from experiencing. As she walks up the hill to see Faustina for the first time since her return home, Angeline's musings on whether Faustina has experienced love leads her to think about her own love for Ippolito, of the vow they have made, and of the termination of their year of 'trial' in only a month. Angeline wonders if Ippolito has been true to her, but then she consciously turns her focus back to Faustina; 'I will not think of that, I will only think of Faustina – sweet, beloved Faustina' (*Trial* 232). Then, after her reunion with Faustina Angeline focuses her thoughts on Faustina; on her way back to the convent, she 'thought of [Faustina], at first, to the exclusion of every other idea' (*Trial* 233). Although a turn in the road 'recalled her thoughts to herself' (*Trial* 233) – which implies that her thoughts of Faustina are self-less, not concerned with herself in any way – the self-possessed thoughts brought on by the turn in the road are still in part focused on Faustina; Angeline thinks, 'O, how too

happy I shall be [. . .] if he prove true! – with Faustina and Ippolito, life will be Paradise!' (*Trial* 233). Again prophetic, Angeline's desires purport to envision a triangle of two 'sisters' and one lover. But in an ironic twist, the statement could be read that Angeline will be happy if Ippolito proves true to *Faustina*, for then their life together 'will be Paradise'.

Faustina has a different idea of the future. Reunited again, she explains to Angeline that she is to be married as soon as a suitable husband can be found. Yet there seems to be no place for Angeline in Faustina's projection of her marriage, and she reveals that the husband will in effect be a replacement for Angeline. Faustina tells Angeline that her father wishes her husband to be rich and of a noble family, but Faustina has other demands: 'I say he must be very young and very good-tempered, and give me my own way, as you have always done, Angelina carina' (*Trial* 233). In other words, Faustina wants a man who will treat her just like Angeline always has.

By the end of the tale, she has found someone to do just that: Angeline's lover, Ippolito. Injuring himself by saving Angeline and Faustina from a stampeding buffalo, Ippolito is taken to Faustina's villa where he spends the remaining month of his trial of separation and silence from Angeline. This creates the conditions for Faustina to fall in love with Angeline's lover, and Angeline, assured of his dedication to her, is worried only for her young 'sister's' feelings. When Faustina tells Angeline that her father has proposed Ippolito as a suitable husband for her, she questions whether he loves her and asserts: 'if he does not love me, I would not have a word said [of the proposed marriage] [. . .] I would not marry him for the world!' (*Trial* 239). But although Faustina feels sure that Ippolito does love her, Angeline feels differently; yet characteristically her thoughts are only for her 'sister': 'She did not doubt her lover's fidelity, but she feared for her friend's happiness, and every idea

gave way to that' (*Trial 239*). Yet when she went to visit Faustina at the villa again, she noticed that Ippolito avoided her, and she almost began to doubt his love:

"He would keep his vow," thought Angeline; but she was cruelly disturbed on her friend's account, and she knew not what to do. Faustina could only talk of her cavalier. Angeline felt conscience-stricken; and totally at loss how to act. Should she reveal her situation to her friend? That, perhaps, were best, and yet she felt it most difficult of all; besides, sometimes she almost suspected that Ippolito had become unfaithful. The thought came with a spasm of agony, and went again; still it unhinged her, and she was unable to command her voice. (*Trial 239*)

As she visits the villa again and again, noticing Ippolito's avoidance of her and listening to Faustina's tales of his affection for her, Angeline wonders what she should do. The strain of her conflicting loyalties undermines her health, and an illness develops which prevents her from visiting the villa, conveniently removing her from the confrontation of her desires and her fears about Ippolito, herself, and her 'sister' Faustina. Finally she determines that she must write to Ippolito to warn him of Faustina's growing love for him so that he might change his conduct in order not to encourage the young girl.

Yet her decision to break her vow of silence and separation is not for her own interests; it is her love for her 'sister' that encourages her to act:

[. . .] miserable at the thought of Faustina's fate, she came to a resolve to write to Ippolito. [. . .] Her vow forbade the act; but that was already broken in so many ways; and now she acted without a thought of self; for her dear friend's sake only. (*Trial 241*)

It is significant that worry over Faustina causes Angeline's illness, and that the breaking of her vow regains her her health. The very next day she determines to go up to the villa to 'discover what effect her letter had created' (*Trial 241*). Feeling an inexplicable misery, she wishes she could see Ippolito to hear his explanation.

Although Ippolito had endeavoured to speak to her both when she returned from her first visit to Faustina (before the incident with the buffalo) as well as while Angeline

watched over him in his illness, she had remained true to her vow and would not allow anything more than greetings and enquiries of health to be spoken between them. But now she actively wishes to break her vow – only a day before the end of their trial – so that she can assure herself of Ippolito's fidelity.

Predictably, the effect of her letter is not what she intends. When she arrives at the villa she finds Faustina, whose 'eyes flashed fire' (*Trial 241*), reading her letter. Forgetful of the dedicated care which Angeline had always shown towards her, Faustina reacts thoughtlessly and strongly to the letter which Angeline had written to Ippolito:

Why you wrote it – what it means – I do not ask: it was at least indelicate, and I assure you, useless – I am not one to give my heart unasked, nor to be refused when proposed by my father. Take up your letter, Angeline. O, I could not believe that you would have acted thus by me! (*Trial 241*)

In the face of Faustina's accusations – and the news that 'Ippolito has written to his father for his consent to marry me' (*Trial 242*) – Angeline retreats from the villa and returns to the convent. The following day Ippolito comes to see her yet she refuses to come down, so he resorts to writing a letter to explain all that happened at the villa.

Ippolito's letter to Angeline making excuses for himself attempts to shift the responsibility of his engagement to Faustina onto Faustina. Yet by implication it also places the blame on Angeline. Ippolito suggests that Angeline's own letter played a large part in cementing his unintentional engagement to Faustina. He writes: 'I received your letter in Faustina's presence – she recognized your handwriting. You know her wilfulness, her impetuosity; she took it from me, and I could not prevent her' (*Trial 242*). Angeline's dedication to her vow of silence and separation from Ippolito, combined with her dedication to and indulgence of Faustina, can be seen as the sources of her own tragedy. Determined not to break her vow early in the tale, she would not assure Ippolito of her own fidelity in order to give him the strength to

endure the last month of their trial. And, by obliging Faustina in all her wishes, Angeline has created Faustina into the wilful girl that in the end intercepts the letter and forces the quick engagement. Angeline states early in the story, 'I would endure any misery rather than see a tear in her eye' (*Trial* 232). In a sense, Faustina is Angeline's creature; like Victor Frankenstein, Angeline has created something which she can no longer control and which causes her suffering and the loss of her loved ones.

In the end, however, Angeline's loss of Ippolito is fortunate. Ippolito is not true to either Angeline *or* Faustina, and the story concludes with Angeline's own thoughts: 'Angeline, dedicated to heaven, wondered at all these things; and how any could so easily make transfer of affections, which with her, were sacred and immutable' (*Trial* 243). Though ostensibly about her feelings for Ippolito, this comment applies equally as well to the affection between the 'sisters' Angeline and Faustina. Angeline had sacrificed her own love for Ippolito and put her 'sister' before herself. Angeline's dedication to Faustina is not reciprocated by the flighty younger girl, but the selfless Angeline never appears to consider that throughout the story. She will only act in the way that will cause the least harm to her 'sister'. Early in the story is a statement delineating Angeline's greatest virtue which can also be read as her greatest fault: 'It was Angeline's character to concentrate her feelings, and to nurse them till they became passions; while excellent principles, and the sincerest piety, prevented her from being led astray by them' (*Trial* 232). Her passion for both Ippolito and Faustina are superseded only by her dedication, both to her 'sister' and to her vow to have no communication with her lover for one trial year. By the end of the story, as in 'The Sisters of Albano', Angeline has become a nun – the visible expression of becoming a 'true' sister, which Angeline has been all along. Yet the

'trial' of the story is more than the trial separation which she and Ippolito endure at the behest of his father. Mary Shelley reveals in this story, as she did more extremely in 'The Sisters of Albano', that caring for a sister is unrewarding and, indeed, a trial.

In a final story which contains a pair of sisters, Mary Shelley continues the undercurrent of suffering that comes to a woman who puts her family before herself. 'The Parvenue', one of the shortest of Mary Shelley's short stories, was written in 1836 and published in *The Keepsake* for 1837. Fanny, the woman to whom the title refers, and her twin sister Susan are the daughters of a man and his second wife; his first wife had several other children, so the twins had a large and loving group of half-siblings. There is none of the conventional discord between half-siblings; Fanny recalls that 'My elder sisters were kind; we were all linked by strong affection' (*Parvenue* 266). Susan and Fanny are complete opposites in temperament; Susan is 'robust, chubby, full of life and spirits', and Fanny is 'tall, slim, fair, and even pale', and she would tire quickly and retreat to her mother's side (*Parvenue* 267). The relationship between Fanny and her mother is emphasised strongly at the beginning of the story, one of the few instances of a positive mother-daughter relationship in all of Mary Shelley's works.

But this loving family, and Fanny's dedication to it, is revealed to be less than ideal when she marries the lord of the local estate. Lord Reginald, who has admired Fanny for many years, offers her family a cottage on his own estate after their own burns down, and he provides them with food and flowers to brighten up their home. When her mother expresses her concern to Lord Reginald that he will 'make [Fanny] miserable for life, by implanting an attachment that could only be productive of unhappiness', his response is to marry the peasant girl (*Parvenue* 268). The difference in their social class seems to make no difference to Lord Reginald; he is 'satisfied with

all', is 'tender, assiduous, and kind' and 'seemed to adore [Fanny's] mother'. Additionally, he 'became a brother' to Fanny's twin sister Susan and convinced her parents to allow her to marry the local carpenter, with whom she was in love (*Parvenue* 268). His attention to her family brings them all happiness, and Fanny is proud of his attentiveness. As Fanny leaves with her new husband for their two year honeymoon abroad, she glances back at her family and feels joy in the happiness she was able to bring them through her husband. She thinks to herself, 'I loved them all. I thought, I make them happy – they are prosperous through me! And my heart warmed with gratitude towards my husband at the idea' (*Parvenue* 269). Fanny only feels that she has benefited her family once she has married a lord; her gratitude to her husband is instigated only by his service to her family. Like Mary Shelley's other sister-protagonists, Fanny is completely selfless and concerned only for others. Although Emily Sunstein emphasises that in this story 'Mary condemned both father & husband',³⁵ Mary Shelley also criticises her main character. Fanny never once gives a thought to herself and her own desires, and again, Mary shows that this selflessness is the source of her ruin. It is important to remember that when Mary wrote 'The Parvenue' she was also working on *Faulkner*, in which she explores the virtues of fidelity; it seems that while viewing Elizabeth Raby's fidelity to her father-figure as the ultimate virtue, Mary simultaneously, in 'The Parvenue', viewed Fanny's dedication to her family with a more critical eye.

Telling her tale in retrospect, Fanny recognises that her devotion to her family and her sense of duty to them is the cause of her downfall. She interjects this judgement in the midst of her story:

Was I right? I firmly believe that there is not one among the rich who will not affirm that I did wrong; that to please my husband and do honour to his rank, was my first duty. Yet, shall I confess it? even now, rendered miserable by this

³⁵ Emily Sunstein, p. 334.

fault – I cannot give it that name – I can call it a misfortune – it is such to be consumed at the stake a martyr for one's faith. Do not think me presumptuous in this simile; for many years I have wasted at the slow fire of knowing that I lost my husband's affections because I performed what I believed to be a duty. (*Parvenue* 269-70)

Fanny rightly identifies her dedication to her family as the cause of her separation from her husband; again, Mary Shelley suggests that putting family before self results in a great sacrifice. But it is significant that she compares herself to a martyr burned for her faith. Fanny sees herself as being punished for her devotion to her family, and indeed, her sense of duty to her family amounts to religious dedication. But it is the lack of real faith – the absence of the sisterhood of nuns prevalent in Mary Shelley's other stories discussed here – that renders Fanny unable to conceive of any escape from her self-inflicted martyrdom apart from suicide.

Fanny's marriage to a wealthy man encourages her family to consider her a source of money, and during the honeymoon several of her siblings, as well as her father, asked Lord Reginald for money. Not troubling his bride with the knowledge that her family was soliciting him for support, he supplied them with almost everything they need without telling Fanny about their 'exorbitant demands' (*Parvenue* 270). Yet upon their return to England, when Fanny expresses her wish to see her mother, Lord Reginald tells her of the gifts of money he had made to her family in order to forewarn her that she might be petitioned for more. And, he makes his decision to stop giving money to her family clear to Fanny:

He told me that he had no wish to raise my relatives from their station in society; and that, indeed, there were only two among them whom he conceived had any claims upon me – my mother and my twin sister: that the former was incapable of any improper request, and the latter, by marrying Cooper, had fixed her own position, and could in no way be raised from the rank of her chosen husband. (*Parvenue* 270)

Fanny agrees with her husband and answers his concerns with compliance: 'I had no wish, and would never consent, to supply any extravagant demands on the part of

persons, however dear to me, whose circumstances he had rendered easy' (*Parvenue* 270). With this assurance, Fanny reveals that she will put her husband's wishes before her family, again showing herself to be selfless, and, more importantly, submissive.

But upon arriving at Margate, where her family is residing for her mother's health, Fanny's shock at her mother's condition weakens the strength of her acquiescence to her husband's decision. Although the rest of the family 'talked and laughed around her', only Fanny seems to be close enough to her mother to understand that 'she had not long to live' (*Parvenue* 270). While in Margate, as Lord Reginald suspected, Fanny is beset by requests by her family for money; her father 'had embarked in a speculation which required a large capital' and 'many families would be ruined, and himself dishonoured, if a few hundreds were not advanced' (*Parvenue* 270). Likewise, all her half-siblings had married and 'trusted to their success in life to Lord Reginald's assistance [. . .] they were all in difficulty – all needed large assistance – all depended on [Fanny]' (*Parvenue* 270-71). Susan, also, asks for money; but her request is so small that Fanny gives her twenty pounds from her own purse. But when Fanny hears from her mother the truth of the family's situation she recognises the conflict she faces as well as her own inability to keep her promise to her husband. Fanny's mother counsels her to 'summon courage and resist these demands' of her half-siblings and her father. But Fanny is unable to do as her mother suggests: 'I listened with grief – I saw the torments in store for me – I felt my own weakness, and knew that I could not meet the rapacity of those about me with any courage or firmness' (*Parvenue* 271). Learning that an argument between her mother and father, in which she had said Fanny must not be asked for money and he returned that Fanny was 'undutiful', had brought on a serious attack of convulsions that seriously endangered her mother's life, Fanny, true to her self-suspensions, is

unable to withstand the requests for money. Confronted with the knowledge that denying her father money would bring about her mother's death, Fanny writes to her husband asking for money to aid her family. Her determination to show her devotion to her husband by refusing her family is irresolute; she cannot put anything before her family.

Predictably, the answer he returns to her request to help her family is a refusal. But Fanny's father works on her sense of duty and in an underhanded way appeals to her devotion to her mother in order to pressure her to try again; he says, 'Do you think, Fanny[. . .] that your mother will survive the knowledge of my miserable end?' (*Parvenue* 271-73). Learning that the sum needed – one thousand pounds – is due in two days, Fanny returns to London to beg her husband to provide the money that she feels will save her mother. Putting her family before her duty to her husband and all that they had agreed upon concerning her family's financial needs, she 'extorted' the money from him and 'saw his very heart closed on [her] as he wrote the cheque' (*Parvenue* 273).

As Fanny remembers the events that led up to her separation from her husband, she reveals that during her visit to Margate, Susan had used the twenty pounds Fanny had given her from her own money to travel to London and 'throw herself at [Lord Reginald's] feet, and implore his compassion' (*Parvenue* 273). Susan's husband, 'rendered absolutely insane by the idea of having a lord for a brother-in-law, [. . .] had launched into a system of extravagance, incredible as it was wicked' (*Parvenue* 273). True to his opinion that only Fanny's mother and twin sister had any claims upon Fanny, Lord Reginald supplied Susan with two hundred pounds to 'preserve [Susan's husband] from an ignominious end' after having committed forgery when Lord Reginald had previously denied him more money; and five hundred

pounds more were provided to pay the cost of their relocation to America to settle 'out of the way of temptation' (*Parvenue* 273). So Fanny is separated from her twin sister, whose parting words may have struck a chord in Fanny's ears: "Ah! had we remained in virtuous poverty," cried my broken-hearted sister, "I had not been forced to leave my dying mother" (*Parvenue* 273).

Appealed to again by her father for more money, Fanny once more recognises that her mother's life is dependent upon her providing the means to get her father out of debt. Yet when she asks her husband again for money, he consents – but with an ultimatum. He demands, 'either give up your parents and your family, whose rapacity and crimes deserve no mercy, or we part for ever' (*Parvenue* 273). Promising to give her an ample allowance with which she can maintain the whole family, he insists that either their names are never mentioned to him again or else he and Fanny must part forever. Fanny's reaction to this ultimatum shows that she considers that her duty to her mother takes priority to her duty to her husband. Calling his demands 'selfishness', Fanny recalls: 'I rushed to my room, and that night in a sort of delirium of grief and horror, at my being asked never again to see my mother, I set out for Margate' without a word to her husband (*Parvenue* 273). Soon after, both her parents die, and after receiving a letter from Susan explaining her husband's reformed nature and their happiness in America, Fanny determines to go to her and – ultimately – to kill herself.

The missing ingredient in this story of family loyalty, compared to Mary Shelley's other stories discussed here, is religion. In 'The Parvenue' there is no contrast between the chosen sisterhood of nuns and the sororal bond. Instead, Mary Shelley has her heroine struggle with conflicting duties – to family and to husband – and the choice she makes ends up causing, as she explains in the tale, 'misery frightful, endless, unredeemed' (*Parvenue* 273). Fanny is loyal to the people who mean the

most to her – her mother and sister – and when they are gone she attempts to initiate a reconciliation with her husband. His rejection of this proposal places the blame of their separation on the choice she made to stay with her family; his letter of refusal reminds Fanny that '[she] had [herself] torn asunder the ties that united [them], they never could be knit together again' (*Parvenue* 274). Instead of being rewarded for her fidelity, as Elizabeth Raby is at the end of *Faulkner*, Fanny is punished through the loss of all her loved ones: mother, sister, and husband. And without the comfort of faith in the face of this rejection, Fanny can see no other option but suicide. If Fanny was an Italian woman, as in 'The Sisters of Albano' and 'The Trial of Love', she might have turned to the religious sisterhood as a place in which to fulfil her sense of dedication and duty. But she is English, and has no such automatic source of comfort. But even in her determination to kill herself, she is not acting for herself; it is also for Lord Reginald that she acts. He has fallen in love with a 'highborn girl', Fanny has heard, and he 'openly curses our union as the obstacle to his happiness' (*Parvenue* 274). She ends her narrative with the assertion that she acts to attain his happiness as much as to end her own suffering: 'He will be free. Soon will the hand he once so fondly took in his and made his own, which, now, flung away, trembles with misery as it traces these lines, moulder in its last decay' (*Parvenue* 274). In this story, the selfless, dutiful sister whose devotion to her family caused her to sacrifice her husband and her happiness for no reward, can see no other end to her suffering than to end her life.

In all three of these stories Mary Shelley emphasises the duty felt by one sister to serve or help another, certainly at least in part a reflection of the duty she felt towards Claire Clairmont throughout her life. It may also allude to Mary's sense of failing in her duty to care for her sister Fanny, of whom she wrote in 1816, after her

marriage legitimised her connection with Shelley, 'Poor dear Fanny if she had lived until this moment she would have been saved for my house would then have been a proper assylum [sic] for her' (*MSL* i 24). Yet in these stories she criticises the duty that sisters feel towards sisters by revealing its often extreme and ultimately destructive consequences. 'The Sisters of Albano' contains echoes of the sororophobia that Mary felt intensely both during her life with Claire and Shelley and again in the decade after Shelley's death. Yet although 'The Trial of Love' is empty of any underlying antagonism between the 'sisters' (until, of course, the scene when Faustina reads Angeline's letter to Ippolito) it is not free from criticism of the sister bond, for in this story Mary both criticises the selfless dedication of the older 'sister' to the younger and reveals that sisterhood can indeed become a trial. 'The Parvenue' traces the effects of Fanny's extreme devotion to her family, which in the end leaves her alone and intent on suicide. Without a hint of trouble between the Fanny and her twin sister Susan, this tale nevertheless suggests that too much dedication can have catastrophic consequences.

iii. Conclusion

'The Pole', 'The Sisters of Albano', 'The Trial of Love', and 'The Parvenue' all have roots in their author's pasts. Claire Clairmont's and Mary Shelley's lives were clearly shadowed by a struggle for independence and separation from a sister. Yet the representation of the sister relations in these stories attempts to erase the complications of sisterhood. The complications that arose from Claire Clairmont's presence in the Shelley household seem to disappear in the romantic portrayal of Ladislas, Idalie, and her stepsister Marietta; yet Claire Clairmont's representation of the girls' communication suggests that there is friction between them. The antagonism

that existed between Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont is not acknowledged outright by either Maria or Anina, and it is entirely absent in the sisterly connection between both Angeline and Faustina and Fanny and Susan; yet Mary Shelley clearly shows that overt and excessive dedication to the sister bond causes much hardship. These stories, and their silences, suggest that the contradictory emotions of love and antagonism that exist between sisters do not blend easily in a single text. But by reading the subtext of Claire Clairmont's and Mary Shelley's stories in the context of the facts of the authors' lives, the conflicting emotions of sisterhood are revealed. As Patricia Meyers Spacks asserts, 'putting a life into words rescues it from confusion, even when the words declare the omnipresence of confusion, since the act of declaring implies dominance'.³⁶ Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont attempt to exert control over the confusion of conflicting emotions which they experienced as sisters first living in community with Shelley and later negotiating the sister bond which they could neither embrace whole-heartedly nor sunder completely. These altered representations of sister relations are not simply lapses in recollection, and the difficulties in the relationship between the two authors shows that unconsciously Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley *were* revealing, in these stories, the tensions that existed between themselves and their 'sisters'. In examining Charlotte Brontë's method of 'recounting her personal experiences through the history of Lucy Snow' in *Villette*, Gilbert and Gubar declare that Brontë 'alters her past in order to reveal it'.³⁷ In these short stories Claire Clairmont and Mary Shelley do the same, revealing the tensions that existed between them in their models of sisters and the behaviour that characterises women connected by the often-difficult sororal bond.

³⁶ Spacks, p. 21.

³⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 416.

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