

POLITICAL REFORM AND MARY SHELLEY'S SHORT FICTION

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"I have been so often abused by pretended friends for my lukewarmness in 'the good cause'...of the advancement of freedom and knowledge...that, though I disdain to answer them, I shall put down here a few thoughts on this subject" (Shelley, *Letters* (Jones) 204).¹ Thus begins Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley's Journal entry for 8 March 1831. Anyone who has ventured into Shelley scholarship has read excerpts from this Journal and been perplexed by critical response to it.

Some critics, like Anne Mellor and William Veeder, quote this entry as evidence of Shelley's conservatism (Mellor 211, Veeder 11), while others, like R. Glynn Grylls, cite the identical lines to prove the author of *Frankenstein's* liberalism (207-8). This dichotomy of opinion illustrates the tenacity of Shelley's centrism, for the author resists easy categorization as either liberal or conservative. Moreover, this critical disagreement serves to highlight the tenuousness of the moderate position Shelley strove to occupy, a position which says much about her thinking on political reform.

For Shelley, political reformers fall into two categories. Her Journal continues: "Some have a passion for reforming the world." These include her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, people who reform with "disinterestedness, toleration, and a clear understanding." In the second category, Shelley places demagogues who corrupt ideals for selfish motives. Her Journal goes on: "I am not for violent extremes, which only bring on an injurious reaction" (Jones 204). As a Whig moderate, Shelley navigates through a political geography that includes

¹ Please note: In this article, "Shelley" refers to Mary Shelley, unless otherwise indicated.

ideal reformers and potentially violent radicals, yearning to trust the first, while feeling dismay at the prospects of the second. According to Mellor, Shelley's critique of nineteenth century politics offers an "ideology grounded on a new conception of the bourgeois family as ideally egalitarian" (xii). I agree, but would extend Shelley's model of the ideal family to the public at large. Doing so sheds light on Shelley's vision of political reform, both the dangers she saw and the more democratic monarchy she advocated.

As we will see, in both her politics and fiction, Shelley collapses distinctions between private and public spaces as a way of underscoring the dangers implicit in all hierarchies, those in the family as well as those in the monarchy. As her Journal quote above indicates, Shelley remains cognizant that reformers can be either ideal or demagogues. She recognizes that the distance between the two can be small, with the constant danger of one turning into the other. Attentive reading of such short fiction as "The Sisters of Albano" and *Mathilda* reveals Shelley's anxieties about violence like the Pentridge Rising and the Peterloo Massacre, about demagogues like Napoleon, and about reformers—or, as she sees them, radicals—like the Chartists.

Shelley favored the Reform Bill of 1832, the Whig call for a more democratized monarchy. In a 22 March 1831 letter to Edward John Trelawny, she wrote: "The Whigs triumphed gloriously in the boldness of their measure—England will be free if it is carried" (Shelley, *Letters* II 133). The letter reveals much about the moderation of Shelley's politics. The reform bill, not particularly "bold," doubled the number of voters. It extended the franchise to male owners of ten pounds property, eliminated some rotten boroughs, and distributed votes more equally according to population (Briggs 261-5). While Ultra-Tories resisted any change, radicals wanted universal male suffrage. Shelley's position falls in the middle.

Frequently, Shelley's tales and stories present conflicts between pairs of characters, with a third mediating between them. Those narratives which involve triangulations of characters dramatize the difficulties of centrism and focus on the dangers inherent in maintaining middle positions. I believe that Shelley uses this strategy in her short fiction to draw parallels between the public and private spheres and to emphasize the risks of political confrontation. For example, in Shelley's tales, we see Domenico mediating between the two "Sisters of Albano." A woman mediates between two men in "The Swiss Peasant," the story of a 1787 Swiss rebellion against the Napoleonic French, in "Fernando Eboli: A Tale," which takes place

during the Napoleonic wars in Italy and Russia, and in “Euphrasia,” set during the 1821 Greek Revolution and reflecting Shelley’s fears about the Chartist movement and its potential for violence. For me, the significance of these triangulations lies in the fact that the mediation takes place between the public and private spaces: erotic, familial, governmental. As a case in point, consider Domenico’s mediation between the two “Sisters of Albano.”

Shelley’s 1828 tale “The Sisters of Albano” reveals her apprehensions about popular insurrection. While the author does not exactly date the action, I believe that the story takes place in Napoleonic Italy between 1797 and 1799. The French invaded Rome on 15 February 1797 (Doyle 338). Shelley sets the story at a time when France controlled Rome, so we know it takes place after that date. Napoleon came to power and changed France’s anti-Catholic stance early in January-February, 1800 (Herold 130). Since the story specifies that the soldiers lack respect for the clergy, I see it as likely set before Napoleon’s ascendancy, thus between 1797 and 1799.

The tale tells of two sisters: Maria, who joins a convent, and Anina, who falls in love with Domenico, a bandit. When French troops surround the bandits and try to starve them into surrender, Anina risks her life to bring them food. The French discover Anina and condemn her to death. Maria visits her, exchanges her nun’s habit for her sister’s clothes, and allows Anina to escape. The soldiers then capture Maria and sentence her to death. The bandits fight a futile battle to rescue her, but the French execute her and kill all the bandits. In the end, Anina takes Maria’s place in the convent.

“The Sisters of Albano” opens with a stanza from *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Shelley, *Tales* 51), in which Byron describes his travels through the same regions of Italy where Shelley has set her tale. More significantly, the quoted stanza (IV.174) follows close after Byron’s elegiac remembrance of the popular Princess Charlotte, who died in childbirth. P.B. Shelley also wrote a response to her passing, “On the Death of Princess Charlotte.” Since Charlotte’s death coincided with the trial and execution of the Pentridge Rising conspirators, however, he elegizes those hanged and not the princess (Holmes 384). In 1817, about three hundred men initiated an insurrection in Nottingham in hopes of precipitating a national revolution. Arrests followed, with thirty-five men being charged with high treason. The prosecution had ten lawyers, while the defense had only two. The prosecution’s hand-picked jury found four rebels guilty and sentenced them to be hanged; the others confessed their guilt to escape capital punishment (Thompson 663-4).

Shelley's citation of Byron, her awareness of her husband's writings, and her own political concerns suggest that we might search fruitfully for parallels between the Pentridge Rising and her tale "The Sisters of Albano." First, note the intertextual parallels. In Shelley's tale, the virtuous Maria displaces her imprisoned, subversive sister Anina, who brings food to her bandit beloved. Similarly, in P.B. Shelley's poem, the revolutionary leaders of the Pentridge Rising displace Byron's Charlotte, "the fair-hair'd Daughter of the Isles... / The love of millions!" (*Childe Harold IV*. 170). Intriguingly, the sisters in the tale displace each other as well. Initially, the narrative identifies Maria and Anina with spiritual and erotic love, respectively. The similarities in the names Maria and Anina and the ease with which they exchange roles, however, makes them seem malleable to the point of being unable to retain essential identities. The sisters' narrative interchangeability leads readers to see their identities not as inherent, but as stemming from the context of their social roles as nun or lover. Furthermore, like Princess Charlotte's death in childbirth, which gains resonance only when displayed in the public space of Byron's poem, the sisters' acts of love and sacrifice gain resonance only when introduced into the public sphere of civil insurrection.

Another parallel between Shelley's tale and the government prosecution lies in their mutual challenge to the distinction between law and criminality. For example, in "The Sisters of Albano," the law-enforcing "French are merciless" (Shelley, *Tales* 57) and their cruel punishments more arbitrary than the bandits' thefts. The law, lacking justice and mercy, seems more criminal than the actions of the bandits. When Maria begs for Anina's freedom, the officer in charge responds, "were she but nine years old, she dies...and were the criminal his own daughter he must enforce his orders" (Shelley, *Tales* 59). The officer compares Anina with a nine year old, locating her in the private world of childhood, at the same time thrusting his own daughter into the public sphere of marshal law and execution. In the same way, the British government's use of a spy and agent provocateur named Oliver to motivate and then convict the Pentridge radicals violated their private space. The government's actions so smacked of entrapment that outraged jurors subsequently acquitted conspirators in the related Glasgow and Folley Hall risings (Thompson 662). In both the tale and the trial, distinctions between justice and criminality no longer seem viable.

Further, both Shelley's tale and the Pentridge Rising revolve around material concerns, predominantly hunger. In "The Sisters of Albano," one villager discussing the bandits laments that "it is horrible

to think what these men suffer; they...are literally starving" (Shelley, *Tales* 57). During the Rising, which has been called a "Levelution" intending to level social distinctions and equally redistribute wealth, rebel leader Bandreth sang: "No bloody soldier must he dread, / He must turn out and fight for bread." After their arrest, the prisoners were "held for weeks on bread and water" (Thompson 660, 663-4). Finally, the tale and the Rising also echo the same imperial dynamics, where there seems little inherent connection between national identity and military policy. In the story, the French, fighting to extend Napoleonic control to Italy, attack the bandits. During the Rising, Hussars, Germans fighting for Britain, captured the Pentridge rebels.

As we see in "The Sisters of Albano," war and rebellion destroy any hopes Anina has of happiness with Domenico. With his death and that of her sister Maria, Anina retreats to a convent. For these characters, changing events force the reevaluation of existing belief systems. These tales dramatize the choices people face in situations in which neutrality becomes impossible and show the difficulties of negotiating between absolute ideological positions.

Shelley's 1819 novella *Mathilda* raises similar issues, but instead of relying on triangulation, employs an intricate pattern of literary and political allusion to connect private sexual relations with public events and consequences. *Mathilda's* references to 1790's anti-war poetry introduce a political dimension into a family tragedy of incestuous desire. The novella tells the story of a father struggling to resist incestuous feelings for his daughter, Mathilda, who reminds him of his deceased wife. Fearing he will be tempted to abuse her, he runs away. She follows, but arrives too late to prevent his suicide. Distraught, she fakes her death, disappears from society, and eventually dies. Shelley alerts the reader to the ways incest destabilizes the social fabric in a series of allusions to *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. Mathilda compares herself directly with Oedipus and describes herself as "a living pestilence" (Shelley, *Reader* 176, 239), calling to mind the plague which struck Thebes because of Oedipus's maternal incest. Like the murdered King Hamlet, Mathilda has had the poison of "unlawful and detestable passion" poured into her ear (Shelley, *Reader* 229). The sufferings of both Oedipus and Hamlet result from the violation of a sexual taboo, and both put the body politic at risk.

Mathilda's discussion of her dead father in terms of Prime Minister William Pitt directs the reader's attention to the ways power relations in the private sphere reproduce those in the public sphere.

Shelley introduces these ideas by incorporating lines from Coleridge's 1798 poem, "Fire, Famine and Slaughter: A War Eclogue." The poem condemns Pitt for Britain's war against revolutionary France and for reprisals against Irish rebels (Holmes 175). After her father's death, relatives console Mathilda, characterizing her father as mad. They do not say this directly, but rather, in lines adapted from Coleridge, "Whispered so and so / In dark hint soft and low" (Shelley, *Reader* 217). Her relations whisper to Mathilda about her father as Famine whispers to Slaughter about Pitt. Like Mathilda's father, whose feelings changed from paternal love to incestuous desire, Pitt's political views changed from reformist to reactionary in the face of the French Revolution. Here, Shelley concerns herself primarily with the danger of betrayal: as the good father can become incestuous, so the good reformer can spawn political reaction. Further, in the face of repression, peaceful reformers like those who demonstrated at St. Peter's Fields could turn insurrectionary, like the Irish rebels mentioned in Coleridge's poem.

Thematic connections link her novella *Mathilda*, completed 9 November 1819, with the Peterloo Massacre, which occurred 16 August of the same year. In both, we see the potential instability inherent in hierarchical power, and the danger possible when chaos erupts. Both evidence failures of public sphere paternalism, where the social elite look out for the lower classes as a parent would for a child, and private sphere patriarchy, where fathers supervise wives and children, presumably for their own good. In the same way that the benevolent monarch can become a tyrant in the public sphere, however, so too the good father can become the incestuous desirer in the domestic sphere. If incestuous behavior in *Mathilda* exemplifies an abuse of patriarchy, the violence at Peterloo also stems from an abuse of political paternalism. In both cases, the supposed protector—the father or the king—becomes the aggressor. In both, the domestic space becomes politicized and violated. The Shelleys, though in Florence in 1819, kept informed of British political activism and remained aware of the enormous gatherings supporting parliamentary reform and expanded suffrage. When the newspaper reports arrived, they read with horror about the Peterloo Massacre, in which forty yeomen cavalry disrupted one of those gatherings, riding into a crowd of more than thirty thousand peaceful demonstrators, wielding their sabers, killing eleven and injuring four hundred. Peterloo caused outrage and became a compelling national symbol, not least because the massacre was witnessed by the representatives of the press. Newspaper reports emphasized the women and children in the crowd, and coverage of Peterloo became gendered.

Periodicals carried “a flood of caricatures showing fat, drunken soldiery hacking down a defenseless throng of women and children” (Reid 221-35). Whigs and Tories alike felt that Britain verged on revolution. Mary Shelley would have been reading about Peterloo in those newspapers as she finished copying a draft of *Mathilda* (Jones 124), shortly before P.B. Shelley completed his poetic response to Peterloo, “The Mask of Anarchy.”

Mary Shelley’s writing, neither naive nor utopian, underscores the dangers of hierarchical power generally. In “The Sisters of Albano,” war and rebellion destroy any hopes Anina has of happiness with Domenico, and with his death, she retreats to a convent. *Mathilda* too ends tragically. In these and other tales, the causes of ideal reformers fail outright or become corrupted by demagogues. Radical reform seems impossible, and all revolutionary solutions lead to destruction. The outcomes of Shelley’s tales reflect her political reservations about radical reform and reinforce her belief in slow, incremental change. If her politics advocate government modeled on an idealized bourgeois family, these tales critique that ideal and show how difficult it may be to achieve that ideal. In these and other tales, Shelley refuses to acknowledge stable distinctions between erotics and power, between the public and the private. The themes of these works illustrate the social instability that Shelley feared, and help to explain her anxiety about political innovation that leads her to support the Reform Bill, but to distrust reformers.

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