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Romancing Experience: The Seduction of Mary Shelley's *Matilda*

IN THE DOZEN OR SO YEARS THAT MARY SHELLEY'S *MATILDA* HAS RECEIVED sustained critical attention, the eponymous character's fictional autobiography has been read persistently through the lens of Shelley's own life. Nothing new, this tendency dates back to one of the first critical accounts of the novel: Elizabeth Nitchie's 1943 introduction to the then unpublished manuscript. "Certainly," Nitchie asserts with confidence, "Mary is Mathilda."¹ More recently, critics have tempered their claims. If few have concluded, with Nitchie, that Shelley and her fictional character are synonymous, however, the biographical collapse of the author into her text remains a critical commonplace. One of the first critics to take seriously Shelley's "other" fiction, Anne K. Mellor reads *Matilda* as the author's expression in fantasy of her relationship to her father, William Godwin. In *Matilda*, Mellor suggests, "Mary Shelley both articulates her passionate devotion to her father and takes revenge for his cruelty toward her. At a psychobiographical level, the novella is pure wish-fulfillment. . . . But in her fantasy, Mary reverses the power dynamic of her relationship with Godwin. Now it is the father, not the daughter, who loves with an overwhelming and self-destructive passion."² Terence Harpold adopts a similar hermeneutic when he reads the story and its transmission as revelatory of the author's primal fantasy to replace her lost mother as object of her father's affection. The "submission of the novel to Godwin signals Mary's effort," Harpold maintains, "to engage him in the seduction fantasy" which the novel stages.³ Even readings of the narrative which pursue a more

1. Elizabeth Nitchie, "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*: An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance," *Studies in Philology* 40 (1943): 447-62 (454).

2. Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 194-95.

3. Terence Harpold, "'Did you get Mathilda from Papa?': Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," *SiR* 28 (1989): 49-67 (64).

nuanced understanding of the relation between text and life still presuppose the relative transparency of Shelley's motives in writing and in circulating the story.⁴ Tilottama Rajan suggests, for example, that *Matilda* "can be fully appreciated only with reference to the author's life."⁵ Arguing that Godwin is the text's "fictional subject" (60), and that, "however disguised its biographical origins might have seemed to its author, [*Matilda*] was clearly a daughter's accusation against her father" (49), Rajan reads Shelley's decision to send the manuscript to her father as a self-conscious act of abjection. Invoking the author's biography to broaden the text's historical and political significance, this kind of critical approach to the text simultaneously reinforces an image of Shelley that is, admittedly, appealing: in these readings, *Matilda's* author is seen to defy both the daunting influence of her family circle, and the reigning principles of Romanticism itself.⁶

If there has been a surfeit of psychobiographical readings of *Matilda* of late, this is hardly a new development in Shelley criticism. Mitzi Myers has observed, for example, that "*Matilda* [is] fast becoming the competitor of *Frankenstein* as overdetermined family romance."⁷ The proximity of Shelley's biography to the narrative details of much of her fiction has, of course, readily lent itself to a blurring of the bounds between text and life. This critical tendency is one which Shelley herself could be seen to sanction inasmuch as she draws, in her letters, explicit connections between events in her life and the substance of her writing. Certain kinds of political criti-

4. For a notable exception to this critical trend, see Mary Jacobus' reading of *Matilda* in *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 165–201. The details of *Matilda's* circulation are well known, although certain facets of the manuscript's history remain ambiguous. Having completed the novel in 1819, Shelley sent the manuscript to her father in 1820, ostensibly to help offset his debts. Godwin reportedly deemed its focus on father-daughter incest "disgusting and detestable" (Frederick L. Jones, ed., *Maria Gisborne & Edward E. Williams, Shelley's Friends: Their Journals and Letters* [Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1951] 44), and made no apparent effort to publish the text. In 1822, Shelley requested repeatedly that her father return the manuscript, but Godwin refused. There is some evidence, however, that Shelley retained a copy. *Matilda* remained unpublished until 1959, when Elizabeth Nitchie brought forward an edition (*Mathilda, Studies in Philology*, extra series: 3 [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1959]). For further details of the manuscript history, see Nitchie, "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*" 449–51, and Harpold 61–63.

5. Tilottama Rajan, "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*: Melancholy and the Political Economy of Romanticism," *Studies in the Novel* 26 (1994): 43–68 (48).

6. Innumerable critics have lauded Shelley's fiction, especially *Frankenstein*, for its incisive critique of the masculinist principles underlying much romantic writing. See, for instance, Anne Mellor's reading of *Frankenstein* in "Why Women Didn't Like Romanticism: The Views of Jane Austen and Mary Shelley," *The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. Gene W. Ruoff (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) 274–87.

7. Mitzi Myers, "Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley: The Female Author between Public and Private Spheres," in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000) 160–72 (165).

cism—feminist criticism not least of all—have raised the solidification of these connections, moreover, to the level of a critical imperative in attempting to oppose the unconditional occlusion of the author's life from consideration of her texts. Yet what are the implications of suggesting, as many readers of *Matilda* have, that the value of the text can be fully measured only with reference to the author's life? What function of literature do we thus presuppose? And how are we to ascertain what form the relation of text to life might, or ought to, take? More than merely questions that I would bring to my reading of *Matilda*, these questions are ones that Shelley's text itself forcefully poses and explores. Consequently, the exemplary power of *Matilda*, I shall argue, lies less in its status as yet another instance of thinly-veiled Shelleyan life-writing, than in the challenges it articulates to one of the most well-established interpretive modes through which Shelley's corpus has been received.

In approaching these questions, I will suggest that it is precisely on the example which *Matilda* provides that we must resist any simple attributions of transparency or strict causality to the relation between the author and her text. Rather than presuppose its reference, Shelley's narrative itself is centrally concerned with the nature of the relation between text and life. In recounting her history, *Matilda* works to make sense of the events which have seemingly governed her fate; the connections that she draws among the traumas of her past, and the self-consciousness with which she reflects on this act of connecting, call into question the foundations of history, memory, and self-understanding. The text's thematic concern with problems of knowledge, moreover, extends equally to the generic register in which the tale unfolds. Shelley constructs this story not only in the first person, but as an autobiography, the specular structure of which accentuates the blurred boundaries between the text's subjects of knowledge: between *Matilda* as author of her life story, *Matilda* as author *in* her life story (as subject of her own understanding), and Shelley as author of *Matilda*, whose own history stands in such uneasy proximity to her text. By articulating this tale within a genre that necessarily foregrounds the relation between author, text, and reference, Shelley draws attention to the inherently unstable structure of self-knowledge, perception and understanding, and insists on the highly mediated nature of these relations.

Beyond raising these epistemological issues, the problem of genre in *Matilda* is important in its own right, and is one that demands to be considered on at least two registers. Most immediately, the autobiographical form of this text engages more directly than any of Shelley's other fiction the questions of biographical reference which have dominated criticism of her writing; because of the self-consciousness with which Shelley takes up these questions in *Matilda*, it provides an especially powerful site from

which to interrogate her investigation of the relation between the author's text and her life. More broadly, it is significant that Shelley's exploration of autobiography takes place through the extensive citation and redeployment of a range of generic forms and fictional tropes that are thoroughly familiar in the literary culture of the period. Her articulation, for example, of Matilda's life history by way of conventional romance structures and the virtually ubiquitous form of the incest narrative serves to foreground the fact that the process of Matilda's life-writing is—far from a search for an adequate narrative form within which to represent the singular and original character of her experience—a highly mediated affair.

In an important concluding episode of the autobiography, in which Matilda refers to herself as a “fragile mirror,” the text makes manifest the specular relation entailed in her perception of the landscape, and by extension, of herself. Having completed the narration of her life drama, Matilda addresses an apostrophic farewell to the scene outside her window:

Your solitudes, sweet land, your trees and waters will still exist, moved by your winds, or still beneath the eye of noon, though what I have felt about ye, and all my dreams which have often strangely deformed thee, will die with me. You will exist to reflect other images in other minds, and ever will remain the same, although your reflected semblance vary in a thousand ways, changeable as the hearts of those who view thee. One of these fragile mirrors, that ever doted on thine image, is about to be broken, crumbled to dust. But evertteeming Nature will create another and another, and thou wilt loose nought by my destruction.⁸

Literally addressed to the landscape, this apostrophe retrospectively presides over the narrative it concludes, and demands that the “Nature” it contemplates must be broadly understood. In addressing the processes through which nature is perceived and represented, that is, the implications of this passage pertain not only to the landscape which is its literal referent, but also to a wider range of phenomena which might be understood as existing on the thither side of representation—not least among which, as we shall see, is life experience. Nature can only be perceived, Matilda suggests, in the “reflected semblance[s]” of its actual state which are created by the minds of those “who view [it].” The landscape may “ever . . . remain the same,” but the specular relation in which it engages with those who stand before it will cause its “reflected semblance” to “vary in a thousand ways.” It is not only the perceiving subject who is positioned as a mirror in this

8. Mary Shelley, *Matilda*, in *Mary/Maria/Matilda*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Penguin, 1991) 149–210 (207). Subsequent references appear in the text.

specular system: nature similarly functions as a reflective surface. The landscape reflects back to those who gaze upon it the myriad images, or representations, which they project onto it. Matilda's critique foregrounds the complex specularizing process through which her perception of the world takes form. As her commentary implies, an awareness of this "strangely deform[ing]" visual process does not enable her to circumvent it. However conscious of the process she might be, her perception is invariably mediated by this series of "fragile" and distorting "mirror[s]." Matilda's schema supplants the romantic commonplace that the representations through which we know reality are inadequate to the objects of our perception. This passage figures her mind not simply as a mirror which reflects with a greater or lesser degree of adequacy the scene outside her window, but as a mirror which reflects a representation previously projected onto that scene, itself figured as a reflective surface. Matilda posits this perceptual schema, moreover, as a generalized condition through her assertion that the landscape will ever "exist to reflect other images" in innumerable "other minds."

Matilda's contemplation of her "strangely deform[ing]" perception of nature carries with it wider implications for her autobiography. Given the inescapability of the specular system made manifest here, the questions which this scene raises regarding the productivity of referential meaning must pertain equally to the representation of a life, as to the perception of a landscape. It becomes difficult, in light of this scene, to uphold a conventional notion of the relation between the autobiographical text, the life which it represents, and the life by which it has been generated. Rather than figuring the autobiographical text in terms of representational adequacy—presupposing the text, that is, as a perhaps less than entirely adequate representation of the unmediated life experience for which it stands—Matilda's commentary intimates that the referential relation between life and text functions reciprocally. *Matilda* invites us to consider the possibility that the narrative representation of a life history generates the life itself.

Before further elaborating the implications of Matilda's farewell address to her landscape, it will be necessary to consider two other important features of her narrative: namely, the text's exploration of memory, and the strange recurrence of prophecy in her story. Matilda's autobiography details the many tragic experiences that befall her during her short life: her mother dies in giving birth to her; overcome by grief, her father abandons her; she is raised in virtual isolation by a cold, distant aunt; finally returning to her sixteen years later, Matilda's father falls in love with her, confesses his incestuous desire, and abandoning her once again, commits suicide. Matilda stages her own death so that she may spend her remaining days in

seclusion; three years following her father's death, she falls ill, writes her life story to leave as a memorial for her one friend, Woodville, and, we are to assume, quickly dies. Having beset its heroine with such a dismal personal history, one of the text's principal concerns is to explore how she makes sense of this array of catastrophes. At the outset of her autobiography, Matilda suggests that the traumatic nature of these events poses difficulty neither to her comprehension of her experience, nor to her narration. In explaining to Woodville her decision finally to reveal to him the secret of her past, she observes: "You have often asked me the cause of my solitary life; my tears; and above all of my impenetrable and unkind silence. In life I dared not; in death I unveil the mystery. . . . My fate has been governed by necessity, a hideous necessity. It required hands stronger than mine; stronger I do believe than any human force to break the thick, adamant chain that has bound me" (151-52). By identifying in her history a fatal causality which has determined her experiences, Matilda absolves herself of responsibility for that which has befallen her, and renders coherent and comprehensible the myriad tragedies to which she has been subjected. At this point in her narrative, she thus invites the readers of her autobiography to regard her life as a mere consequence of the traumas that have punctuated it. Her hesitancy to narrate her life story has been born, she assures Woodville, not of any difficulty in making sense of what has befallen her, but rather of her conviction that "there was a sacred horror in [her] tale that rendered it unfit for utterance" (151).

It is on the evidence of this narrative logic that numerous of *Matilda's* contemporary readers have identified in this text the story of a beleaguered young woman who overcomes her traumatic history through her last act of self-narration. Various critics suggest that, faced with her imminent death, Matilda finally comprehends the causality which has governed her tragic life, and on this basis organizes her past into a coherent narrative. Susan Allen Ford contends, for example, that this "orphaned daughter," who is defined by a "powerlessness and isolation that contribute to [her] lack of self-love, even of self," "begins and ends in isolation, her only power and her only connection the force of the tale she can leave for her friend Woodville."⁹ Matilda's narration of her history, according to this line of argument, constitutes a deliberate assumption of agency; by drawing her experiences into an intelligible autobiographical narrative, she claims for herself the sense of self which, until the act of memorialization, she has lacked. Mapped on this model, her story performs the recuperative function usu-

9. Susan Allen Ford, "'A name more dear': Daughters, Fathers, and Desire in *A Simple Story*, *The False Friend*, and *Mathilda*," in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, eds. Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994) 51-71 (57-58).

ally ascribed to more contemporary forms of life writing: through the act of narration, Matilda discovers and substantiates the truth of her selfhood.¹⁰ Insofar as Shelley's own situation in writing *Matilda* approximates that of her heroine, moreover, this recuperative function is frequently attributed to the narrative acts of both authors, Mary and Matilda alike.¹¹

If Matilda initially offers as an explanation of her fate the insurmountable force of a "hideous necessity," she elsewhere carefully signals the process through which this reading of her experiences has taken shape. She marks, for example, how the pall which overshadows her at the end of her life influences her recollection of the past. Remembering the brief period of happiness which she enjoyed immediately following her father's return, she exclaims: "O, hours of intense delight! Short as ye were ye are made as long to me as a whole life when looked back upon through the mist of grief that rose immediately after as if to shut ye from my view" (163). Beyond simply recognizing how emotion colors memory, Matilda questions the origin and constitution of her memories more generally, particularly insofar as they contribute to her self-understanding. "I am in a strange state of mind," she notes as she begins her tale.

10. The line of criticism which reads Shelley's text as an early example of life-writing is consistent with the genre of feminist criticism inaugurated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979). While Gilbert and Gubar do not consider the case of *Matilda*, their readings of *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* exhibit the same faith in the recuperative force of self-narration as that posited by various of Shelley's more recent critics.

11. In remarking Shelley's text as an exemplary piece of life writing, several critics go so far as to declare the novel a prototype of the contemporary incest survivor's narrative. For instance, pointing to various of *Matilda's* narrative structures, such as the heroine's early loss of her mother, her obsessive feelings of guilt, and her inability to "respond to other men," Katherine Hill-Miller commends the novel for "the very accuracy with which it represents what we have come to recognize as the contradictory feelings of actual victims of father-daughter incest" ("*My Hideous Progeny*": *Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship* [Newark: U of Delaware P, 1995] 103). Challenging Harpold's reading of the text as Shelley's primal fantasy, Caroline Gonda similarly contends that "there is no inherent reason to assume that *Mathilda* must be read as seduction fantasy rather than as an incest survivor's narrative. I am not suggesting," she notes, "that *Mathilda* offers evidence that Godwin sexually abused his daughter, or indeed that such evidence is available elsewhere—merely that what the text itself offers is as consistent with that notion as with patterns of seduction fantasy" (*Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709–1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996] 169). In remarking the consistency with which either of these patterns could be mapped onto *Matilda*, Gonda perhaps unintentionally signals the arbitrariness with which such ahistorical narrative analogies are drawn. To posit *Matilda* as a survivor narrative is not only to assign to this text a literary form peculiar to the later 20th century, but also to disregard the 18th-century narrative topoi with which Shelley engages—most notably, as we shall see, the ubiquitous trope of highly eroticized father-daughter relations.

I am alone—quite alone—in the world—the blight of misfortune has passed over me and withered me; I know that I am about to die and I feel happy—joyous.—I feel my pulse; it beats fast: I place my thin hand on my cheek; it burns: there is a slight, quick spirit within me which is now emitting its last sparks. I shall never see the snows of another winter—I do believe that I shall never again feel the vivifying warmth of another summer sun; and it is in this persuasion that I begin to write my tragic history. (151)

“Persua[ded]” that she will soon die, Matilda dares to reveal the source of her misery; her approaching death functions as both the impetus and the licence to tell her story. Yet the “persuasion” in which she finds herself could refer equally to her “strange state of mind.” The construction of the paragraph leaves uncertain the reference of this “strange state”; if it modifies all that follows in its wake, are we to infer that her “tragic history” is a product of her singular frame of mind? While in one moment, Matilda disregards the instability of self-knowledge by pointing to the “hideous necessity” that has decided her fate, she concurrently raises the possibility that this fatalism has itself generated the particular narrative of which it is intended to be merely the conclusion.

Matilda remarks a similar uncertainty about the motives governing her self-perception when, toward the end of her narrative, she contemplates the effect of her severe isolation: “horrible to my own solitary thoughts did this form, this voice, and all this wretched self appear; for had it not been the source of guilt that wants a name? This was superstition. I did not feel thus frantically when first I knew that the holy name of father was become a curse to me: but my lonely life inspired me with wild thoughts” (204). Although she dismisses the perception of her horrific nature as a product of superstition, the frequency with which Matilda similarly remarks in her narrative a perceptual instability produced by the extreme circumstances of her life tends to keep this question in play. That she composes her story while still confined to this “lonely life,” moreover, allows us to query the reliability of all the perceptions articulated in her autobiography. The ambiguity surrounding her frame of mind renders uncertain both the process through which she recollects and reconstructs her history, and the incontrovertibility of the self-knowledge premised on that recall. Her acknowledgment of the strange state in which she operates destabilizes the ground of experience on which life writing is presumed to depend, and thus makes of her last act of self-narration something other than a simple recuperation of the hitherto buried truth of her life.

The subtle ambiguities surrounding Matilda’s state of mind and her account of past experiences serve to foreground the process through which

the memories that comprise her history take form. The uncertain influence of her mental persuasion on her narrative suggests that both her access to the past, and the self-understanding enabled by that access, are premised on a representational system analogous to that articulated in the landscape scene. As her apostrophic farewell to nature makes manifest, the doubly specular exchange entailed in perception—whether of the landscape or of her own history—brackets any unmediated access to an original. Matilda knows her own past only by means of the representations of events which have been formed at later periods of her life, and which are subject, in their very formation, to unpredictable persuasions. The scenes of her experience have of course occurred, but the process of remembering necessitates that she continually remake them, without ever having access to the originals around which her memories of those events are constructed. On Matilda's account, conscious memory is structured by the lack endemic to all representational systems.

Musing subsequently on the narrative form in which her cognitions themselves materialize, Matilda presses yet further this suggestion that neither in memory nor through self-reflection can she gain full access to original experience. "[M]y thoughts," she observes, "through long habit would for ever connect themselves into one train, as if I shaped them into words" (207). The explicit context for her comment is the companionless seclusion in which she has passed much of her life; her thoughts have remained largely unuttered because of her isolation, but "through long habit," still shape themselves into "one train" in her mind, as if being recounted to another. The implications of her comment, however, resonate beyond this immediate context. Matilda's observation suggests that not only her understanding of the past, but her thoughts themselves are set into a certain narrative relation, or "train," in the process of coming into existence. A particular narrative structure dictates, that is, the form in which her thoughts materialize. In the instance on which Matilda reports, her thoughts emerge in the form of narrative speech, addressed to an absent interlocutor. Long before she self-consciously organizes and verbalizes the memories of her life experience in a cohesive autobiographical narrative, her very thoughts are mediated by the narrative forms which order and shape them.

Although at one moment she attributes her history to a cruel fate, Matilda's simultaneous identification of the perceptual processes through which causal narratives themselves take form helps in some measure to account for the shifting terms in which she represents her role in, and responsibility for, the tragedies that have plagued her. Her implication in her father's incestuous desire poses a particular problem for her history: Matilda alternates throughout her narrative between absolving herself of blame, and condemning herself for that which she alone has caused. She vacillates con-

tinuously between identifying herself solely as a victim of her father's monstrous passion, and assuming full responsibility for its annihilation of them both. The difficulty that Matilda evidences in arriving at a definitive explanation of this facet of her experience bears witness to transformations during the romantic period of the concept and function of memory. Frances Ferguson argues, in her essay on "Romantic Memory," that, in conjunction with concurrently shifting notions of morality and of individual action in the period, memory comes to require "a continual review of actions through the lenses of a variety of different sets of consequences."¹² The "special pressure that romanticism brings to bear on memory," Ferguson suggests, "is the pressure of an expanded moral obligation, an obligation to reexamine one's own past actions to see if their value has been altered by subsequent events" (527). Moving beyond the critical commonplace of the centrality of memory to so much romantic writing, Ferguson's argument turns, rather, on the period's shifting conceptual ground of individual action itself, with which memory is intricately bound. "What is at issue" in romantic memory, she contends, "is not the possibility that other people will judge one differently from the way in which one judges oneself. It is, rather, that the impact of one's actions on other people come to cause one to reevaluate what one's actions were" (523). At an historical moment in which, as James Chandler argues in *England in 1819*, concepts of history, causality and casuistry were undergoing profound transformations, issues surrounding "motivation, agency, and choice" were equally affected by these larger "changes in modes of explanation."¹³ Rather than read the contradictions in Matilda's life story as prototypical of the modern incest survivor's narrative, as have some of the text's contemporary readers, a more historicized analysis might locate in the representation of Matilda's conflicted sense of responsibility Shelley's timely exploration of crucial issues of individual action, consequence, and the protean notions of agency which these produce.

The contradictions in Matilda's sense of responsibility for her father's incestuous desire manifest themselves plainly from the text's opening pages. In introducing her life story, she declares: "I record no crimes; my faults may easily be pardoned; for they proceeded not from evil motive but from want of judgement; and I believe few would say that they could, by a different conduct and superior wisdom, have avoided the misfortunes to which I am the victim" (152). Representing her actions as born of ignorance, rather than design, she easily dismisses them as blameless. When she

12. Frances Ferguson, "Romantic Memory" *SiR* 35 (1996): 509-33 (527).

13. James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 196, 40.

recounts the traumatic scene of her father's confession, however, Matilda's sense of culpability shifts dramatically.

[My father's] paroxisms [*sic*] of passions were terrific but his soul bore him through them triumphant, though almost destroyed by victory; but the day would finally have been won had not I, foolish and presumptuous wretch! hurried him on until there was no recall, no hope. My rashness gave the victory in this dreadful fight to the enemy who triumphed over him as he lay fallen and vanquished. I! I alone was the cause of his defeat and justly did I pay the fearful penalty. (169)

Immediately upon her father's return to England after his sixteen-year absence, father and daughter enjoy several blissful months together. His behavior toward Matilda inexplicably shifts, however, shortly after she enters into London society; as she later learns, he has recognized the true nature of his affection for her once she has become the object of another's desire. Dismayed by the change in her father's behavior, Matilda presses him to share with her his secret grief. After much resistance, he finally complies, admits his desire, and shortly thereafter, commits suicide. Entirely ignorant of the nature of her father's secret before he confesses it, Matilda could not have anticipated the consequences that would ensue from her persistent queries. Yet in the wake of the event, she reviews her own actions and frequently finds herself responsible. Reflecting on the scene of confession anew, Matilda suggests: "I wonder at my pertinacious folly; I hardly know what feelings resistlessly impelled me. I believe it was that coming out with a determination not to be repulsed I went right forward to my object without well weighing his replies: I was led by passion and drew him with frantic heedlessness into the abyss that he so fearfully avoided" (172). Although this ascription of motive to an inexplicable, depersonalized drive has been cited as a common means by which 18th- and 19th-century women novelists deflected agency, and thus blame, from their female protagonists,¹⁴ Shelley grants this version no more explanatory force than any of the heroine's alternative accounts. As she summarizes her life story, for example, Matilda locates responsibility for the event much more particularly: "It was May, four years ago, that I first saw my beloved father; it was in May, three years ago that my folly destroyed the only thing I was doomed to love.

14. See Hill-Miller's use of Gilbert and Gubar's notion of "trance-writing," for example, to account for Matilda's frequent invocation of a mysterious impulse as the motive behind numerous of her actions, including her decision to narrate her tale (118). For Hill-Miller, Matilda's deflection of responsibility for her own actions is synonymous with Shelley's ambivalence about the "deeply subversive message" (118) of this text. Such a reading fails to attend, however, to the substantial range of explanatory logics by means of which Matilda attributes responsibility variously for her history and her actions.

May is returned, and I die" (209). Even if her deed is bred of folly, rather than some more deliberate motive, her act, as she redefines it in light of its consequences, is one of destruction. It was she who drove her father to confess his desire; it was her action, she insists, that ruined them both. The "fearful penalty" which she pays for this action, she asserts, is "just." She closes her tale, nonetheless, with the same assertion of blamelessness with which she opened it: "I am about to die an innocent death" (207). This continual reevaluation of her guilt never decisively concludes. In the struggle to remember and make sense of her experience, Matilda revisits the question of responsibility for what has befallen her unfortunate family, and reattributes the blame variously.

Matilda's variable ascription of cause raises questions about the process through which events become history, as well as the means through which acts are recognized as such. The implication of Matilda's perpetual reevaluation is that if her father had responded differently to her queries about his secret grief—if the consequences of their interaction had been different—not only would her history be written differently, but her sense of the actions that she had taken would be substantially transformed.¹⁵ If, as Ferguson suggests, this romantic obligation continually to review the "value of one's actions" in light of subsequent events "may seem to make action look like an especially fragile notion" (524), Matilda's narrative renders this problem of an ever-expanding sense of culpability yet more acute by introducing into the process of reevaluation an additional temporal register. Specifically, Matilda's history is punctuated by a strange series of prophetic acts. Whereas her variable admission of guilt pertains primarily to the retrospective function of memory, her prophecies entail a different set of temporal relations, and attach quite different stakes to the notion of consequence. Her most concrete premonitions, and those which she openly acknowledges, occur in relation to her father's death. Her ability to anticipate events that befall her later in life, however, seems to exceed her own cognizance. It is with regard to these premonitions that Shelley's exploration of both her heroine's agency, and of the relation of text and life, proves most interesting. The faculty of prophecy is associated historically with the supernatural, insofar as it implies an ability, in its divine manifestation, to foretell future events, and in its more infernal form, to bring about

15. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of the victor's history, Ferguson suggests that "there are a host of ways in which external circumstances operate to cause one to change one's sense of the value of an act that one has already committed. . . . The sense that history might have been written differently if a war had turned out differently, like the sense that a crime would be punishable in one place and go unrecognized in another, may seem to make action look like an especially fragile notion" (524).

or cause them. Retrospection presupposes a ground of experience, however contested, in relation to which the text represents the life; prophecy, in contrast, allows the text in some sense to anticipate or prescribe the life. In foregrounding her sibylline talents, Matilda's narrative moves beyond the question of her responsibility for her father's "monstrous passion" (177), and, as I will argue, defends instead for its heroine the possibility of her own desire.

The first premonition that Matilda recounts comes to her in a dream. The night following her father's revelation of his incestuous desire, she has a "frightful" dream in which her father, clothed in shroud-like "flowing garments of white," beckons to her, but flees on her approach: "I pursued him: we sped over the fields, and by the skirts of woods, and on the banks of rivers; he flew fast and I followed. We came at last, methought, to the brow of a huge cliff that over hung the sea. . . . I had just reached him; just caught a part of his flowing robe, when he leapt down and I awoke with a violent scream" (176). Matilda's dream proves, of course, to be prophetic. Directly upon waking from the dream, she learns that her father has left her, and has vowed never to return. Divining that he has "determined to die" (181), she pursues him, and a lengthy chase ensues. When she learns that he has taken a road leading to the sea, she reports that, "My dream recurred to my thoughts; I was not usually superstitious but in wretchedness every one is so. The sea was fifty miles off, yet it was towards it that he fled. The idea was terrible to my half crazed imagination" (182). The superstitious nature of her fears in no way lessens their uncanny accuracy. She recounts that, before she reached the cliffs,

A strange idea seized me; a person must have felt all the agonies of doubt concerning the life and death of one who is the whole world to them before they can enter into my feelings—for in that state, the mind working unrestrained by the will makes strange and fanciful combinations with outward circumstances and weaves the chances and changes of nature into an immediate connexion with the event they dread. It was with this feeling that I turned to the old Steward who stood pale and trembling beside me; 'Mark, Gaspar, if the next flash of lightning rend not that oak my father will be alive.' (182–83)

As if flexing her prophetic muscles, Matilda utters this bizarre, negative prediction. Instantly, "a flash . . . followed by a tremendous peal of thunder descended on [the tree]; and when my eyes recovered their sight after the dazzling light," she recalls, "the oak no longer stood in the meadow" (183). Matilda resumes her pursuit, but she has prophesied correctly: her father throws himself into the sea before she can reach him. The "strange and

fanciful combinations” that her mind has made thus prove to be inexplicably productive; they have foretold, if not brought about, the tragic events which ensue.

Although these predictions of the precise circumstances of her father’s death are uncanny, they prove rather less unsettling than Matilda’s third foretelling, which pertains to her father’s incestuous desire. Following her mother’s premature death in childbirth and her father’s initial withdrawal from her, Matilda’s childhood is profoundly secluded. Raised by a strict, unaffectionate aunt on a remote Scottish estate, Matilda turns to her imagination for companionship. “I . . . formed affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain,” she explains, “but still clinging to reality I gave a name to these conceptions and nursed them in the hope of realization” (159). Among the most affective of these “aerial” relations is that which she forms with her imagined father. By nursing fantasies of a real relationship with him, Matilda cultivates the idea of her future life.

[The] idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination. I bestowed on him all my affections; there was a miniature of him that I gazed on continually; I copied his last letter and read it again and again. . . . My favourite vision was that when I grew up . . . disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world. My imagination hung upon the scene of recognition. . . . I imaged the moment to my mind a thousand and a thousand times, perpetually varying the circumstances. Sometimes it would be in a desert; in a populous city; at a ball; we should perhaps meet in a vessel; and his first words constantly were, ‘My daughter, I love thee!’ (159)

While she never realizes the dream of “disguis[ing herself] like a boy,” Matilda’s childhood fantasies do anticipate, with remarkable accuracy, her later life experience. The particular terms of affection around which all the imagined scenes of reunion with her father revolve are, notably, those which precipitate her ultimate tragedy: it is with precisely these words—“My daughter, I love you!”—that her father confesses to her his incestuous desire (173).

The pivotal scene of Matilda’s tragic history is indeed disconcerting. The coincidence of her father expressing his desire in precisely the phrase that she once uttered wishfully on his behalf is at the very least cruelly ironic. Her father’s extraordinary iteration of the words she scripted for him in childhood fantasies raises the possibility, more disturbingly, that her prophecies are self-fulfilling. The implication of this uncanny coincidence might be that in eliciting and securing her father’s affection in later life, she has realized her childhood dream, and ensured, albeit at great cost, that what was

mere imaginative fiction would become prophecy. This ascription of Matilda's complicity in the incestuous relation would seem at odds, however, with the narrative's extended and, I have argued, ultimately inconclusive interrogation of her culpability. She does not acknowledge the singular recurrence of her father's phrase, "My daughter, I love you," nor reflect on the disruption that it effects in her narrative. Despite the absence of narratorial guidance, nonetheless, the text offers substantial means by which to attend to this strange, mutually implicating relation between Matilda's life and the fiction of her imagination, and by which to forestall the conclusion that she somehow brings upon herself the cruel tragedies that befall her.

One of the most striking aspects of Matilda's unsettling childhood fantasy is that it is unoriginal. Her reveries of an affectionate reunion with her father, that is, are staged in a form that explicitly invokes a long line of generic precedents. It is through this invocation of formal precedence that Shelley enables a more nuanced reading of her heroine's agency and desire. The "aerial creations" with which Matilda amuses herself in childhood revolve perpetually, she suggests, around the scene of discovery wherein her father recognizes and embraces her. This was, she claims, her "favourite vision" and that around which her imagination always "hung." A common topos in 18th- and early 19th-century fiction, the scene of recognition or discovery obviously dates back to classical literature, and served as a staple of both Renaissance and Restoration drama. Beyond its ubiquity toward the end of the 18th century in the tortured family relations of gothic fiction, the recognition scene is also put into the service of sentimental plots of parent-child reconciliation, as in Frances Burney's *Evelina*.¹⁶ That the pivotal scene of Matilda's tragedy, in which her father confesses his desire, entails an actualization of the familiar topos of the recognition scene seems rather to insist on the text's engagement of its narrative antecedents. Shelley positions Matilda as yet another orphaned child who longs to set out on a narrative quest to stabilize her identity and fortune, and reconcile her fractured family. If her dreams of future happiness draw directly on this romance trope, however, the more obvious generic precedent that the cru-

16. *Evelina* proves a particularly interesting antecedent to *Matilda*, for Burney's heroine anticipates the scene of reconciliation with her father in strikingly similar terms to those evidenced in the later text. Finding herself disowned by her father after her mother has died in childbirth, Evelina constructs an analogous fantasy sequence of the much-anticipated reunion with her father. As Matilda will do after her, Evelina repeatedly restages the crucial moment of recognition: "My imagination," she explains, "changes the scene perpetually" (Frances Burney, *Evelina, or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance in the World* [New York: Norton, 1998] 109).

cial confession scene invokes is that which provides a key context for the question of the heroine's desire: namely, the threat of incest. As Carolina Gonda suggests, "The threat of incest—whether that threat was fulfilled or not—had become such a standard literary device by the late eighteenth century that Mary Alcock could offer it as one of the stock ingredients of fiction in her satirical poem 'A receipt for writing a novel'" (*Reading Daughters' Fictions* 38–39). From *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones* and *Moll Flanders* to *The Italian* or *The Monk*, from a staple of comic resolution to the common locus of gothic terror, the threat of incest arises so often in the century's fiction as to be one of its defining narrative characteristics. Yet few novels written in Britain prior to *Matilda* actually represent a consciously incestuous desire, "especially," Gonda observes, "between father and daughter" (34). Even taking into account the more licentious generic bounds of gothic, it is far more common in 18th- and early 19th-century fiction for incest to remain a terrible possibility, which, if realized at all, occurs only accidentally, committed in ignorance of family members' true identities. Shelley thus pushes to its extreme a well-trod narrative topos with which readers in the period would have been highly familiar.¹⁷

In underscoring *Matilda's* generic antecedents precisely at the moment of the heroine's most horrifying discovery, Shelley signals the narrative conventions that this text takes up and openly reworks. Beyond actualizing the threat underlying the power-laden and erotically-charged relationship of fathers and daughters in 18th-century literature, *Matilda* refuses the polarized positions that are made available for daughters in virtually every one of the text's precursors, including those to which the narrative explicitly alludes. In most treatments of father-daughter incest, the daughter is positioned either as the innocent victim of a monstrously desiring father, or as herself the heinous aggressor. The daughter is either denied an autonomous sexual role, and, like Percy Shelley's Beatrice in *The Cenci*, cast as "a creature formed to adorn and be admired," who suffers a "perpetual contamination both of body and mind"¹⁸ from her father's violent realization of his own desire; or, alternatively, she is reduced to her aberrant, appetitive sex-

17. In addition to its antecedents in British fiction, *Matilda* also alludes to a range of classical and contemporary European literary treatments of incest. As numerous critics have noted, these references position *Matilda* in contradictory and sometimes compromising ways. She refers to herself in the narrative's opening pages, for example, as Oedipus; in a later exchange preceding her father's confession, *Matilda* mentions approvingly Alfieri's father-daughter incest tragedy, *Mymha*, in which a daughter kills herself after inadvertently revealing to her father her desire for him.

18. Percy Shelley, Preface, *The Cenci, Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2002) 141.

uality, and positioned as instigator of the incestuous relation. In either instance, the daughter most frequently takes her own life immediately upon revelation of the desire.¹⁹ By raising questions of Matilda's responsibility and complicity throughout her history, but refusing conclusively to resolve them, Shelley's text complicates the gendered, sexualized roles of the conventional incest narrative.

That Matilda's childhood fantasies appear as self-fulfilling prophecy only reinforces this pattern: through its repeated exploration of relations of cause and consequence, *Matilda* takes up questions of agency, responsibility, and the origin of desire, but refuses to pin its answers to the traditional subject positions deriving from romance. While the text declines finally to blame Matilda for her father's desire, neither does it position her solely as a passive, subjugated victim of it. Indeed, the nature of her own affection for her father is left persistently ambiguous. In yet another assertion of her blamelessness, for example, Matilda inverts the conventional roles of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "I lament now, I must ever lament," she exclaims, "those few short months of Paradaisical bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! my companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall" (162). If her insistence on her dissimilarity to Eve attests to her innocence, the analogy with the biblical couple nonetheless positions Matilda as wife, rather than daughter, and thus intimates ambiguity of her relationship with her father precisely where her narrative ostensibly works to forestall it. Toward the close of her narrative, moreover, Matilda proclaims that it is in anticipation of being eternally united with her father that she eagerly awaits her death. "[N]o maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire," she declares, "than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part" (208). Matilda's mother has been essentially removed, or repressed, from the affective family dynamic early on; she is clearly not expected to participate in this marriage-like reunion after death. While Shelley is obviously concerned with the devastating effects on Matilda's life of her father's "unlawful and monstrous passion" (177), she distinctly complicates her character's traumatic history. Without incriminating her in her father's betrayal, the text defends for Matilda the possibility of her own desire. Her narrative emphatically resists, I would suggest, any formulation of desire which positions her as either pure, desexualized victim or aberrant, appetitive agent.

19. See Chandler on Beatrice Cenci's interesting exception from this pattern (498–507), as she undergoes, by means of the "murky medium of casuistry" (505), the dramatic transformation that leads to self-justified parricide.

If the strange actualization of her imaginative childhood fictions contributes to the narrative's refusal of the filial positions conventionally made available in incest tales, it simultaneously figures as a distinct interruption of the coherent narrative chain that Matilda seeks to forge among her misfortunes. Working counter to the organic, teleological history that the autobiographical text is presumed to construct, the wishful fiction of her childhood fantasy seems to appropriate the very reality of her later life experience. It is as if life and fiction enter, at least for this instant, into a mutually determining relation. As with Matilda's prophecies of his suicide, her anticipation in childhood of her father's fateful utterance asserts a causal relation between narrative events—a relation for which her history is unable fully to account. The temporality of prophecy stands outside the retrospective register in which autobiographies conventionally operate, and introduces an entirely other arena of consequence into the historical account of action and experience. The uncanny recurrence of the phrase, "My daughter, I love you," moreover, disrupts a representational model that posits the life as a stable ground of experience on which the text builds, and to which it constantly refers. Rather than presuppose the life as a fixed referent in comparison to which the textual rendering of the life can be read and evaluated, *Matilda* marks the incommensurate relationship between the life and any form of reductive figuration. Like the continual reevaluation of her actions which the faculty of memory obliges her to undertake, Matilda's narrative presents a relation of text and life which is inherently unstable, and which therefore requires perpetual refiguration. Shelley herself marks the instability of referential relations when she suggests, in a letter to her friend Maria Gisborne, that her fiction has anticipated with uncanny accuracy her actual life experience. Writing to Gisborne a year after Percy Shelley drowned during a storm at sea, Shelley muses, with reference to her novel *Valperga*, "Is not the catastrophe strangely prophetic";²⁰ the novel, completed shortly before Percy's death, concludes with the heroine's drowning at sea. "But it seems to me," Shelley continues, "that in what I have hitherto written I have done nothing but prophecy what has arrived to. Matilda foretells [*sic*] even many small circumstances most truly—and the whole of it is a monument of what now is" (*Letters* 336). Rather than receive Shelley's observation as further justification to read her novels biographically, we might regard this assertion of a prophetic link between her fiction and her life as a reminder of the inadequacy and instability of the figures by which we understand both the life and its renderings. In its persistent questioning of the distinctions among author, text

20. Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 336.

and reference, Matilda's narrative remarks the importance of thinking a relation between them, yet simultaneously disrupts any reading (whether her own or her readers') that would find in her story the definitive truth of her life.

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