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Mathilda: Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy

CHARLENE E. BUNNELL

IF the world is a stage and I merely an actor on it my part has been strange, and alas! tragical" (p. 245): so writes the eponymous heroine of Mary Shelley's 1819 novella, *Mathilda*.¹ This paraphrase from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is one of many dramatic references or conventions that Shelley's first-person narrator employs in writing her epistolary memoir. Indulging an excessively introspective sensibility, *Mathilda* constructs her autobiography as a dramatic tragedy that reveals an egocentric view of life as a stage on which she, a tragic actress, performs the leading role as an incest victim.² "All the world's a stage" may indeed be an apt metaphor to describe life; however, Shelley's text suggests that, if the metaphor loses its analogic function, as it does for *Mathilda*, the result can be disastrous.

Mary Shelley wrote *Mathilda* in the summer and fall of 1819, during a troubled period in her marriage following the deaths of her two children, one-year-old Clara in November 1818 and three-year-old William in June 1819.³ Unpublished until 1959, the novella has only recently generated critical attention, much of which offers psychoan-

1. This and subsequent references to *Mathilda* are from *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 175–246, and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

2. In his Preface to *The Mary Shelley Reader*, Charles E. Robinson notes that in *Mathilda*, "the reader will encounter a complicated persona who, in a strange state of mind, struggles as a self-conscious actress in a drama about the taboo subject of incest" (p. vii). My thanks to Robinson, who encouraged me to pursue this observation for this essay. I would also like to thank both Donald H. Reiman and Jerry C. Beasley for their editorial suggestions.

3. The losses severely strained the Shelleys' marriage, and Mary Shelley's despondency was further aggravated by Godwin's lack of sympathy for his grandchildren's deaths. Shelley begins her third Journal on 4 August 1819 with a bitter recollection of their recent tragedies: "We have now lived five years together & if all the events of the five years were blotted out I might be happy—but to have won & then cruelly have lost the associations of four years is not an accident to which the human mind can bend without much suffering" (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987], 1, 293); hereafter cited in the text as *Journals*).

alytical and/or biographical readings.⁴ Terence Harpold, for example, declares it a “profoundly autobiographical work,” and Anne K. Mellor describes it as an account of her “deepest and most ambivalent feelings toward her father.”⁵ Although intriguing, the psychobiographical approaches often do not acknowledge *Mathilda*’s literary merits and do tend to identify the narrative voice as Mary Shelley’s, thereby assuming that the overtly self-reflexive and hyperbolic style is hers. Unquestionably, the novella’s intense emotion derives in part from Shelley’s own, just as the power of Byron’s *Manfred* or Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* has roots in each author’s experiences and imagination. However, if we put aside Shelley’s personal experience and read the work as her first-person *narrator*’s memoir, then the theatrical rhetoric and intense subjectivity clearly reflect Mathilda’s artistic sensibility rather than Shelley’s. Such an approach forces us to re-evaluate judgments of *Mathilda* as “poor fiction . . . a simplistic, finally sentimental response to [Mary Shelley’s] involved ties to husband and father” or as a work “devoid of the professionalism which characterizes Shelley’s important novels.”⁶ The novella is neither simplistic nor lacking in professionalism; instead, it reveals Mary Shelley’s careful craftsmanship in creating a character who constructs her life as a dramatic text, thereby depicting the dangers of a debilitating confusion of life with art and reality with illusion.

Mathilda is a twenty-year-old woman, whose mother dies giving birth to her and whose father abandons his parental responsibility, leaving his daughter in the care of an aunt while he travels. Raised in Scotland, the lonely Mathilda is ecstatic when her father reclaims her sixteen years later. The happiness is short-lived, however; he confesses his incestuous love for her almost a year after their reunion. Left alone once again after the father’s death, Mathilda retires to a lonely heath where she meets the poet Woodville, whose attempts to eradicate her

4. Elizabeth Nitchie’s edition of *Mathilda* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959) was the first published text of Shelley’s novella.

5. Terence Harpold, “‘Did you get Mathilda from Papa?’: Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley’s *Mathilda*,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 28.2 (Spring 1989), 49–67, (52), and Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 193.

6. Quotations are from William Veeder, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 217, and Jane Blumberg, *Mary Shelley’s Early Novels* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 225, n20.

self-pity fail. Her physical and psychological health deteriorating, she records for Woodville the dramatic events of her life in a letter that is essentially an autobiographical memoir revealing her perception of the world as a stage, of her life as a theatrical production, and of herself as an actress in that production. Mathilda's conscious use of theatrical metaphors suggests her melodramatic self-indulgence. In the opening lines, she refers to the memoir as a "tragic history" (p. 175); later, she writes "I am a tragedy" (p. 233). As Mathilda nears the end of her epistle, she perceives not only the letter, but also her entire existence as a dramatic text: "This was the drama of my life which I have now depicted upon paper. . . . Now my tears are dried; the glow has faded from my cheeks, and with a few words of farewell to you, Woodville, I close my work; the last that I shall perform" (p. 245).

Stepping outside the boundaries of Mathilda's memoir for a moment, we can place Mary Shelley's use of such overtly theatrical references within a tradition of narrative fiction.⁷ For example, William Godwin's haunted and hunted protagonist Caleb Williams employs the same metaphor in the opening line of his epistolary memoir: "My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity."⁸ In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Mary Hays' heroine sees her life as a literary construct: "And is this all of human life—this, that passes like a tale that is told? Alas! it is a tragical tale."⁹ Although *Mathilda's* the-

7. For detailed studies on theatrical conventions in fiction, see David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, DeFoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); John Richetti, "Richardson's Dramatic Art in *Clarissa*" in *British Theatre and the Other Arts, 1660–1800*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1983), pp. 288–308; and Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

8. William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. David McCracken (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 3. Shelley had, of course, read both of her parents' works and was also familiar with other novelists, such as Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Dacre, who frequently incorporated dramatic conventions in their fiction. Feldman and Scott-Kilvert note the specific titles of novels and drama that both Mary and Percy Shelley read in *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, II, 631–84.

9. Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 198. Hays was a close friend of both William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. It is not known whether Shelley read this novel; however she was aware of Hays' work and admired her, closing an 1836 letter to her with, "your name is of course familiar to me as one of those women whose talents do honor to our sex" (*The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett, 2 vols. [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980–1988], II, 269–70). For a critical overview of Hays, see M. Ray Adams, *Studies in the Literary Backgrounds of English Radicalism* (Lane: Franklin and Marshall Press, 1947); Katharine Rogers, "The Contribution of Mary Hays," *Prose Studies*, 10 (1987), 131–42; and Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* (London: Virago, 1989).

atrical conventions clearly belong within this narrative tradition, they function in a way that demonstrates their roots within a dramatic tradition as well. Shelley's protagonist employs melodramatic language and theatrical metaphors much as characters do in Romantic drama. In *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama*, Daniel Watkins explores the relationship between power and language, and specifically how characters manipulate the power of discourse or become victims of such manipulation.¹⁰ Frequently, Watkins argues, the end result is that the story is privileged above life: "Rather than experience providing the basis for . . . assessments of linguistic expression, stories come to provide the basis for . . . assessments of experience" (p. 14).¹¹ What occurs, essentially, is a conflation of "experience" or reality and "linguistic expression" or storytelling, precisely the conflation that Mathilda creates as she records her dramatic autobiography. She not only manipulates language, but, more dangerously, is manipulated by it. For Mathilda, life and theater are no longer distinct concepts: the world is a stage, and life is a dramatic production.

Of course Shelley would also have been familiar with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor by way of Renaissance drama. By 1820, she had read most of the plays by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, both of whom famously employ this convention.¹² She attended the theater as often as possible, enjoying contemporary drama and opera as well as Renaissance revivals.¹³ Furthermore, she even attempted to write plays, encouraged by her husband, who, as Emily Sunstein notes, felt that she had a "gift for drama" (p. 138). At Percy Shelley's suggestion, she began research on the Cenci family in 1818 with idea of writing a play about them, and in 1820, she composed two mythological dramas, *Proserpine* and *Midas*.¹⁴ Inspired by Edmund Kean's performance

10. Daniel P. Watkins, *A Materialist Critique of English Romantic Drama* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).

11. Although this observation is applicable to many Romantic dramatic characters, Watkins is here referring specifically to those in Wordsworth's *The Borderers*.

12. For detailed background on the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in literature, see Thomas B. Stroup, *Microcosmos: The Shape of the Elizabethan Play* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

13. Godwin began taking his daughter to the theater when she was young, and as an adult struggling with her finances, Shelley continued to attend performances, often with complimentary admission from her friend, the American playwright John Howard Payne; see Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), p. 256.

14. Mary Shelley gave her notes on the Cenci family to her husband, who wrote his drama, *The Cenci*,

in *Richard III* at Drury Lane (1824), Shelley began a tragedy in blank verse.¹⁵ Given this variety of influences, it is not surprising that Shelley so readily incorporated dramatic conventions into her novella, finding them an effective means by which to delineate Mathilda's egocentric and theatrical rendition of her own life.

Returning again to Mathilda's memoir, we can trace the narrator's dramatic perception of life in part to an acutely introspective sensibility that had been cultivated in years of near-solitary existence on an isolated Scottish estate. Her guardian aunt, who forbade her to play with neighboring children, possessed a cold restraint that denied the emotional nurturing crucial for a child to develop self-confidence and stability. About her aunt, Mathilda writes, "I believe that without the slightest tinge of a bad heart she had the coldest that ever filled a human breast: it was totally incapable of any affection. She took me under her protection because she considered it her duty" (p. 182). Despite being virtually abandoned and then ignored, Mathilda believes herself to be the "offspring of the deepest love" and exhibits "the greatest sensibility of disposition" (p. 183). She loves animals and revels in the outdoors, treasuring "all the changes of Nature; and rain, and storm, and the beautiful clouds of heaven [that] brought their delights with them. When rocked by the waves of the lake [her] spirits rose in triumph as a horseman feels with pride the motions of his high fed steed" (p. 184). In many respects, Mathilda is a Wordsworthian child of nature: she hikes through the mountains, rows a skiff on the lake, and gathers flowers by a stream.¹⁶ She also indulges her imagination the way many children do, discovering literature and theatrics as a source of entertainment and then immersing herself in stories and daydreams through role-playing and invention. However, without playmates or mentors, she has no one to direct or moderate

when she became preoccupied in writing her historical novel, *Valperga*, which was published in 1823 (Sunstein, pp. 155–64).

15. Her father, William Godwin, discouraged her from completing it and harshly criticized the draft, calling her characters "mere abstractions" (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, II, 475, n1). We are unable to judge his assessment since the play is not extant. Shelley later regretted not finishing the play, writing to Maria Gisborne, "I think myself that I could have written a good tragedy" (*The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, II, 246).

16. See Meena Alexander's *Women in Romanticism* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1989), pp. 160–66, which suggests the influence of Wordsworth's Lucy poems on the characterization of Mathilda.

her sensibility, and, as she matures, she continues to possess a child-like, egocentric view of life.

The danger of such an inner-directed sensibility is a dominant theme in late eighteenth-century literature, especially the gothic. As William Walling notes, "*Mathilda* is concerned primarily with one of the most prevalent themes in English literature since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century—the exploration of the conflict between the individual sensibility and the demands upon it implicit within the context of social existence."¹⁷ Walling's observation links *Mathilda* to a narrative tradition with which Shelley was well acquainted. By the 1790s, the gothic novel had established itself as a psychological genre for exploring the dark side of a sensibility that often resulted in a debilitating subjectivity devoid of reason and altruism.¹⁸ Perhaps the best description of such a sensibility is found in the following excerpt from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which Shelley read in 1815, a year before beginning *Frankenstein*. On her deathbed, the speaker Signora Laurentini confesses her past crimes and rues the consequences of her self-centered passions:

Beware of the first indulgence of the passions; beware of the first! Their course, if not checked then, is rapid—their force is uncontrollable—they lead us we know not whither. . . . Then, we awaken as from a dream, and perceive a new world around us. . . . Remember, sister, that the passions are the seeds of vices as well as of virtues, from which either may spring, accordingly as they are nurtured. Unhappy they who have never been taught the art to govern them.¹⁹

Laurentini is speaking for a generation of late eighteenth-century novelists, who agree that a lack of guidance, a narrow education, and

17. William Walling, *Mary Shelley*, Twayne English Author Series (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), p. 111.

18. See G. R. Thompson's "Introduction: Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition" and Robert D. Hume's "Exuberant Gloom, Existential Agony, and Heroic Despair: Three Varieties of Negative Romanticism" in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G. R. Thompson (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974), pp. 1–10, 109–127.

19. Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 646–47.

an undisciplined, passionate nature lead to self-destruction. If unchecked by reason and if inwardly rather than outwardly directed, such a sensibility results in self-indulgence, isolation, and the confusion of reality with illusion, leading to madness and suicide.

Of course, neither *Mathilda* nor these gothic novels suggest that their authors regarded sensibility or introspection as an inevitable precursor to self-destruction. In fact, Shelley's novella demonstrates through Mathilda's aunt that a lack of sensibility often results in a cold, dispassionate nature, an equally unenviable state. When moderated by reason and benevolence, introspection generally encourages compassion and enlightened self-knowledge, which Shelley exemplifies in Woodville, who comes to the heath to recover from his loss and engages in self-exploration as part of his healing process. However, he does not resort to Mathilda's self-pity and remains sympathetic to the needs of others. Not having learned to moderate her passion with reason or sympathy, Mathilda, on the other hand, is either unwilling or unable to benefit from emotional and psychological soul-searching. Recognizing the consuming effect of her sensibility, Woodville tells Mathilda, "do not despair. That is the most dangerous gulph on which you perpetually totter" (p. 240). Initially he is able to moderate Mathilda's extreme melancholia, encouraging her to emerge from the throes of her sensibility. His words, she writes, "had magic in them, when beginning with the sweetest pity, he would raise me by degrees out of myself and my sorrows until I wondered at my own selfishness" (p. 232). However, when he leaves to care for his ailing mother, she cannot remain "out of [her]self" but once again slips into histrionic self-pity.

Mathilda's introspective sensibility draws her deeper and deeper into a self-created world that, unlike reality, fulfills her dreams and desires. Consequently, the boundary between the imaginary world and the actual world becomes for her dangerously blurred. As a child, Mathilda views art as life; as a young adult, she views life as art. Janet Todd has noted that a significant convention of sensibility "is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of a mimetic depiction of reality but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one. So liter-

ary conventions become a way of life.”²⁰ Literary conventions indeed become a “way of life” for Mathilda; more dangerously, life becomes a literary experience—specifically a drama—as she perceives literature first as entertainment and then as a mode by which to live.

In her aunt’s library, Mathilda reads, among other authors, Shakespeare, Milton, and Livy, all of whom substitute for “human intercourse.” To escape her loneliness, she journeys into a world of fancy populated by fictional characters. Imaginative daydreams that would be harmless to most children’s development soon lead to the confusion of illusion and reality for Mathilda, and she begins simply to equate art and life.

I brought Rosalind and Miranda and the lady of Comus to life to be my companions, or on my isle acted over their parts imagining myself to be in their situations. Then I wandered from the fancies of others and formed affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain—but still clinging to reality I gave a name to these conceptions and nursed them in the hope of realization. (p. 185)

In this passage, Mary Shelley’s choice of texts is significant, revealing much about the narrator’s character. Unlike Mathilda, whose father first neglects and then incestuously desires her, *The Tempest’s* Miranda has a loving and caring parent, Prospero, who carefully (albeit overbearingly) ensures his daughter’s protection and her eventual happiness in marriage. The Lady in Milton’s masque, *Comus*, has two brothers who retrieve her after her abduction. Rosalind, the spunky heroine of *As You Like It*, disguises herself as a boy, Ganymede, in order to search for her beloved father, banished from his land. Also longing for her father, Mathilda sees herself as a dramatic Rosalind, dreaming of how she too will adopt disguise to find him: “My favourite vision was that when I grew up I would leave my aunt, whose coldness lulled my conscience, and disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world” (p. 185).

Mathilda’s childhood dreams and longings are natural and understandable, given her lonely situation. Mary Shelley recognized the human tendency to indulge imaginary fancies; indeed, she often did

20. Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 4.

so herself as a young girl. As she wrote later in the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, “I had a dearer pleasure than [writing stories], 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” (*The Mary Shelley Reader*, p. 167). However, whereas Shelley understood the distinction between “imaginary incidents” and actual life, Mathilda does not; she “nurse[s]” these conceptions “in the hope of realization” (p. 185). Stimulated by heightened sensibility, Mathilda’s youthful predilection for fusing illusion and life only intensifies as she grows older. Before she meets her father upon his return, Mathilda comments that she has been only an observer of life, not an actor in it: “The earth was to me a magic lantern and I [a] gazer, and a listener but no actor; but then came the transporting and soul-reviving era of my existence: my father returned and I could pour my warm affections on a human heart; there was a new sun and a new earth created to me” (p. 245; emphasis added). A “new sun and a new earth”: essentially, Mathilda has created a world for herself, a world that centers her and her father and one in which they will blissfully exist as she has always imagined they would. That world, however, is shattered, along with Mathilda’s long-held hopes for happiness. Her recourse is to perceive her life as a tragic play that, fostered by her sensibility, accords her a starring role as a victim of fate. By the time she constructs her memoir/letter to Woodville, Mathilda’s fusion of life and art is complete:

I am, I thought, a tragedy; a character that [Woodville] comes to see act: now and then he gives me my cue that I may make a speech more to his purpose: perhaps he is already planning a poem in which I am to figure. I am a farce and play to him, but to me this is all dreary reality: he takes all the profit and I bear all the burthen. (p. 233)

Mathilda protests that her life is a “dreary reality” and that it is Woodville who sees her as a play; however, she transfers to Woodville her own perception of her existence, for it is she, not he, who refers to life as a drama. Planning a double suicide, she is careful to arrange the setting for what she describes as “the last scene of my tragedy” (p. 235). Such frequent use of theatrical metaphors reveals Mathilda’s

perception of life to be that of a performance that can be constructed as a dramatic text. Furthermore, as a performer, she requires an audience, and although she claims to direct the memoir to Woodville, she expects others to read her history: "I do not address [these thoughts] to you alone. . . . Others will toss these pages lightly over: to you, Woodville, kind, affectionate friend, they will be dear" (p. 176).

Mathilda's propensity to confuse art and life is a familiar theme in many eighteenth-century and Romantic works. Characters as diverse as Charlotte Lennox's *Arabella*, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Lydia Languish*, and Charlotte Dacre's *Cazire* depict their authors' warning that art may lead to a distorted perception of the actual world and human behavior if one fails to recognize the boundary between the illusory world and the actual one, between the stage and life itself.²¹ Mary Shelley echoes her mother's warning in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* about the possible dangers of fiction when she contrasts the reading of Mathilda's mother and father.²² The mother Diana "read no novels"; however, she was well-versed in traditional Greek, Roman, and English literature and history (pp. 178–79). Mathilda's father had discarded such texts, indulging himself instead in fiction: "Novels and all the various methods by which youth in civilized life are led to a knowledge of the existence of passions before they really feel them, had produced a strong effect on him who was so peculiarly susceptible of every impression" (p. 178). Both the father's education and upbringing ill-prepare him for life:

By a strange narrowness of ideas he viewed all the world in connexion only as it was or was not related to his little society. He considered queer and out of fashion all opinions that were exploded by his circle of intimates, and he became at the same time dogmatic and yet fearful of not coinciding with the only sentiments he could consider orthodox. To the generality of spectators he appeared careless of censure; but . . . [he] never

21. From *The Female Quixote*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); *The Rivals*, ed. George H. Nettleton and Arthur E. Case (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), pp. 789–830; and *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

22. Mary Wollstonecraft argues that novels often impede intellectual reasoning and promote an "overstretched sensibility," *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Charles W. Hagelmann, Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 105.

dared express an opinion or a feeling until he was assured that it would meet with the approbation of his companions. (pp. 177–78)²³

As a novelist herself, Shelley certainly does not advocate avoiding novels or any other art form, and indeed she uses this narrative genre as a vehicle to educate her own audience. Nevertheless, *Mathilda* does demonstrate how insidiously art and illusion can come to supplant life and reality for characters who are reluctant or unable to reconcile their fate in the “real” world.

Mathilda's dramatic tendency is also evidenced by the structure of her narrative and by the arrangement of its events. Including Woodville as a *dramatis persona* highlights Mathilda's role as a tragic heroine and provides her audience with a sense of closure to the dramatic tragedy, which is patterned after a traditional five-act play. Chapters 1 and 2 comprise act I, an exposition including the pre-plot history of Mathilda's parents and her own childhood up to her father's return. The rising action of act II (chapters 3 and 4) portrays Mathilda's meeting her father and their life together in London. Chapters 5–8 form act III, with the climax of her father's confession of his incestuous love and his apparent suicide. The falling action of act IV (chapters 9–11) includes her move to the solitude of the heath, her friendship with Woodville, and the failed dual suicide. The last chapter, act V or the *denouement*, provides the obligatory summary of the action with a recounting of each memorable event and its date.

Mary Shelley further emphasizes Mathilda's penchant for the dramatic through the revised structure of the novel. Originally Shelley planned that the story of Mathilda, like that of Victor Frankenstein, would be set within a frame tale. Initially entitled “The Fields of Fancy,” this early draft introduces the frame tale's first-person narrator, who is mourning the loss of loved ones.²⁴ A spirit, Fantasia, transports the narrator to the Elysian fields where she meets a Socratic instructor, Diotima, who counsels grieving and guilt-ridden individ-

23. This passage also reveals the father's own sense of theatricality, which is fostered by his sensibility and education. He is obviously the actor for the spectators, an actor who is well-attuned to the audience's demands, altering his performance to suit them, and his sense of life as a dramatic performance for others functions as a mask that prohibits self-knowledge.

24. The first chapter of the “Fields of Fancy” draft is found in Elizabeth Nitchie's edition of *Mathilda*, pp. 90–104.

uals by stressing the need for friendship and self-knowledge. As the narrator listens to Diotima speak to a group, she notices a young woman, Mathilda, who later relates her sad history. Shelley's decision to abandon the frame-tale structure that she effectively employed in *Frankenstein* suggests that perhaps she wished to spotlight her protagonist and heighten the novella's dramatic quality by allowing Mathilda to recount her life to the audience directly. The revision recalls Shelley's own words later recorded in her journal: "[life] is as a change from a narrative to a drama" (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, II, 452), and it suggests that Shelley recognized that the novel's new structure reinforces her character's perception of life as theater.

In any first-person narrative, the telling of events and the description of characters both depend upon how the narrator perceives them and how she chooses to adjust factual information to suit her purpose. Mathilda's self-dramatization clearly demonstrates her manipulation of character, setting, and language. For example, she embellishes the facts of her parents' lives and their personalities with dramatic skill. Although she has most likely learned about her parents from both her aunt and father, Mathilda recreates this knowledge of their childhood, courtship, and marriage with carefully selected details and with a purposeful arrangement that one would expect of a dramatist or novelist. The language that Mathilda employs confirms her skill: "Diana had torn the veil which had before kept him in his boyhood"; "Diana filled up all his heart"; and "It was through her beloved lessons that he cast off his old pursuits and gradually formed himself to become one among his fellow men" (p. 179). The passions of Mathilda's sensibility find voice in her choice of language and reveal her "role" as playwright as well as tragic actress.

Living in her own imagination as a child, Mathilda constructs an ideal image of her father, an image that she preserves into adulthood and that disastrously deconstructs when reality shatters the illusion. She envisions how he will act, what he will say, how he will feel. Authors of both gothic fiction and novels of sensibility in the late eighteenth century explored how sensibility affects characters who create or re-create events and personages (self and other) according to an image. For some characters, the construction happily correlates with reality. In *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Mary Woll-

stonecraft's heroine creates an image of a man based on his own marginal annotations in books lent to her.²⁵ Reading these notes, Maria constructs the character of Darnford before even seeing or meeting him, and "fancy, treacherous fancy, began to sketch a character, congenial with her own, from these shadowy outlines" (p. 34). She creates an image to suit her perception of what that individual should be: "Every glance afforded colouring for the picture she was delineating on her heart" (p. 39). Maria is fortunate; the real Darnford corresponds to the ideal. For other characters, however, this version of the Pygmalion theme proves detrimental, as in the case of Mary Hays' heroine, Emma Courtney, who becomes obsessed with a man, Augustus Harley, by gazing at his portrait: "I accustomed myself to gaze on this resemblance of a man, in whose character I felt so lively an interest, till, I fancied, I read in the features all the qualities imputed to the original by a tender and partial parent."²⁶ Emma soon invests Harley with attributes that she desires him to have, but which he does not possess. Her obsession prevents her from accepting the "real" Harley for who he is. The danger of such wish-fulfillment is that imaginative speculation creates an illusion of an object that often has little relationship to its reality.

Mary Shelley employs the same technique to voice this theme in *Mathilda*. Long before the father returns to England, Mathilda essentially constructs his image from a picture, a letter, and some history: "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" (p. 185). This image possesses the ideal qualities she desires. She repeats his words recorded in the letter; she dreams that she will be his "consoler" and "companion"; and she determines that he will love her, for the image that the lonely child constructed could not do otherwise. Mathilda actually composes a mini-drama portraying a sentimental reunion of father and daughter:

My favourite vision was that . . . disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world. My imagination hung upon *the scene of recogni-*

25. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975); hereafter cited in the text.

26. Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, p. 59.

tion; his miniature, which I should continually wear exposed on my breast, would be the means and 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!" What extatic moments have I passed in these dreams! (p. 185; emphasis added)

This passage also reveals the young Mathilda's adeptness at creating what she desires and in constructing a dramatic scene. Irony adds to the drama as her father's words, "My daughter, I love thee," foreshadow the much later scene when he confesses his incestuous love and proclaims, "My daughter, I love you" (p. 201). Note also the language in this passage: "vision," "imagination," "image," "dreams." Mathilda's words demonstrate her insistence on recreating events and characters as she wishes them to be, not as they necessarily are. Distorted though her perceptions may be, she employs language with a purpose and is well aware of its impact upon the audience.

As she structures the events of her drama, Mathilda is very conscious of setting's significance as backdrop to the action and characters. Frequently she breaks from the narrative portion of her memoir to set up a scene or *tableau* to intensify the dramatic effect. Perhaps the two most memorable scenes that Mathilda orchestrates to her full advantage are those of her proposed joint suicide with Woodville and of her meeting with her father for the first time. Envisioning a romantic and melodramatic denouement comparable to a Renaissance tragedy, Mathilda painstakingly prepares the suicide scene in chapter 11:

I planned the whole *scene* with an earnest heart and frantically set my soul on this project. I procured Laudanum and placing it in two glasses on the table, filled my room with flowers and decorated the *last scene of my tragedy* with the nicest care. . . . Now all was ready and Woodville came. I received him at the door of my cottage and leading him solemnly into the room, I said: "My friend, I wish to die. I am quite weary of enduring the misery which hourly I do endure, and I will throw it off. What slave will not, if he may, escape from his chains? Look, I weep." (p. 235; emphasis added)

This passage indicates that Mathilda deliberately constructs her story

as a drama and that she was aware at the time the event occurred of the dramatic impact her "last scene" would have. Her use of theatrical terms and her painstaking arrangement of props illustrate her skill at setting the stage. Even the first sentence of her greeting to Woodville demonstrates her ability to maximize the dramatic effect of a single line: "My friend, I wish to die."

The other example occurs when Mathilda is sixteen. Upon hearing that her father has returned to England and will be coming for her, Mathilda is understandably excited and is unable to express "the tumult of emotions" within her. She can "only relieve [her] transports by tears, tears of unmingled joy" (p. 186). The day he is to arrive, Mathilda still fantasizes about him: "At day break I hastened to the woods; the hours past on while I indulged in wild dreams that gave wings to the slothful steps of time, and beguiled my eager impatience" (p. 186). Returning, she loses her way despite her familiarity with her surroundings: "My father was expected at noon but when I wished to return to meet him I found that I had lost my way . . . in the intricacies [*sic*] of the woods, and the trees hid all trace by which I might be guided. I grew impatient, I wept, and wrung my hands but still I could not discover my path" (pp. 186–87). This delay, intentional or not, increases Mathilda's intense anticipation, heightens her sensibility, and adds to the dramatic effect that she has envisioned upon meeting her father for the first time. An inherent sense of the theatrical dictates the action of the scene, and Mathilda's skill as both actor and director reveals itself in her use of setting to optimize the effect of her "entrance" when she finally discovers the way home:

It was past two o'clock when by a sudden turn I found myself close to the lake near a cove where a little skiff was moored—It was not far from our house and I saw my father and aunt walking on the lawn. I jumped into the boat, and well accustomed to such feats, I pushed it from shore, and exerted all my strength to row swiftly across. As I came, dressed in white, covered only by my tartan *rachan*, my hair streaming on my shoulders, and shooting across with greater speed tha[n] it could be supposed I could give to my boat, my father has often told me that I looked more like a spirit than a human maid. I approached the shore, my father held the boat, I leapt lightly out, and in a moment was in his arms. (p. 187)

This scene is self-conscious but exceptionally well-played. Despite the spontaneity and passion, Mathilda completely controls the action and atmosphere of the dramatic meeting. Her flair for theatrics may seem strange when juxtaposed with the solitary and unworldly existence that she has led. Yet it stems from her familiarity with literature and from her powers of sensibility, which can either create imaginary characters to delight a child in play or obsess a young woman with a world of illusion, a world capable of destroying her.

Mathilda's *tableaux*, or freeze-frame moments, enhance the melodramatic quality of her narrative. In the climactic pursuit of her father through the thunderstorm, Mathilda spies an oak tree. Making full use of this dramatic setting, she writes, "Once, overcome by fatigue, I sunk on the wet earth; about two hundred yards distant, alone in a large meadow stood a magnificent oak; the lightnings shewed its myriad boughs torn by the storm" (p. 213). Inspired by the scene, she tries her hand at prophecy, an important element in tragedies and the gothic; addressing her servant, she says, "'Mark, Gaspar, if the next flash of lightning rend not that oak my father will be alive'" (p. 213). The tree is indeed struck in the next instant: "I had scarcely uttered these words than a flash instantly followed by a tremendous peal of thunder descended on it; and when my eyes recovered their sight after the dazzling light, the oak no longer stood in the meadow" (p. 213). An artist could easily transpose this scene into a dramatic landscape painting focusing on the rent tree and the blinded heroine. Another example occurs as Mathilda closes her drama. She sets the scene for her soliloquy, creating a *tableau* that intensifies her words:

I rose and walked slowly to the window; the wide heath was covered by snow which sparkled under the beams of the sun that shone brightly through the pure, frosty air: a few birds were pecking some crumbs under my window. I smiled with quiet joy; and in my thoughts, which through long habit would for ever connect themselves into one train, as if I shaped them into words, I thus addressed the scene before me. (p. 243)

Again, she provides detail of the surroundings from the bright sun to the little birds. The window itself is symbolic: she is inside, a prisoner of her sensibility, looking out on the tranquillity of nature. But the

window also provides a proscenium frame for the focal object of this *tableau*: Mathilda.

Cognizant of the power of setting to enhance the dramatic effect of an event, Mathilda strategically selects the places where actions will occur. When she decides to discover the reason for her father's altered behavior, she deliberately chooses an Edenic wood, whose peaceful surroundings, like its biblical and Miltonic predecessors, sharply contrast to the temptation scene that will occur. The season is the end of spring when "the woods were clothed in their freshest verdure, and the sweet smell of the new mown grass was in the fields" (p. 198). Mathilda painstakingly describes the details so that we may visualize the setting as she perceived it: the tree trunks are "slim and smooth" and "wound round by ivy whose shining leaves of the darkest green contrasted with the white bark"; the grass "was mingled with moss" and "covered by the dead leaves of last autumn"; the leaves were "gently moved by the breeze"; and the sky appeared through the leaves' "green canopy" (p. 198). She manipulates the action and setting as skillfully as a stage director would: "I chose therefore the evening . . . I invited him to walk with me . . . I seated myself with him on a mossy hillock" (p. 198). Once again, Mathilda imposes herself upon the scene. The purpose here is to discover the father's secret; therefore, the spotlight should be on the father. However, the repetition of "I" clearly indicates that although Mathilda assumes the role of director, she also appropriates center stage.

In the above as well as in other passages, the pronoun "I" maintains the focus on the subject, Mathilda. Its prevalence in a personal narrative is expected, but Mathilda uses it excessively. In one short paragraph in chapter four, she writes "I" eleven times (p. 193); in another, ostensibly about her father and herself, nine times (p. 190). Shelley knew full well how to let her character reveal her own subjectivity. This excessive use of the pronoun indicates that Mathilda cannot refrain from directing attention away from another character and toward herself. After meeting Woodville, she provides background on her new friend for the reader of her drama. However, immediately upon revealing Woodville's untimely loss of his fiancée Elinor, she turns the occasion to lament her own fate:

In two months Elinor would be twenty one: every thing was prepared for their union. How shall I relate the catastrophe to so much joy. . . . But why should I repine at this? Misery was my element, and nothing but what was miserable could approach me; if Woodville had been happy I should never have known him. And can I who for many years was fed by tears, and nourished under the dew of grief, can I pause to relate a tale of woe and death? (pp. 225–226)

Mathilda's question at the end of this passage reflects not only her inability to sympathize with another who experienced loss of a loved one, but also her fear that his story may upstage her own.

The memoir's poetic and stylized language is frequently hyperbolic and emotionally charged, enhancing the text's theatricality. Mathilda describes the pages of her letter as "precious memorials of a heart-broken girl," and she envisions that Woodville's "tears will fall on the words that record [her] misfortunes" (p. 176). Recalling the happiness of their relationship, she relies on personification and poetic pronouns for effect: "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. Alas! he were the last of happiness that I ever enjoyed" (p. 190). Recalling her father's sudden and unexplained silence, she writes:

But days of peaceful melancholy were of rare occurrence: they were often broken in upon by gusts of passion that drove me as a weak boat on a stormy sea to seek a cove for shelter; but the winds blew from my native harbour and I was cast far, far out until shattered I perished when the tempest had passed and the sea was apparently calm. (p. 193)

Such metaphorical excesses reflect Mathilda's style, not Mary Shelley's.²⁷ This heightened, poetic language, full of elaborate images, similes, and metaphors, demonstrates Mathilda's love for the dramatic. Her aunt is "as a plant beneath a thick covering of ice; I should cut my hands in endeavouring to get at it" (p. 183). Love is "a ghost, ever

27. For example, contrast Shelley's effectively concise prose in her nonfiction, such as the biographical entries in the *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain, and Portugal* and *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France*, and her characters and narrators who reject a literal *theatrum mundi* view of life, e.g., Katherine Gordon in *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, or the narrator of *Lodore*, who do not resort to such melodramatic language.

hovering over my father's grave" and "woe had stamp't its burning words telling me to smile no more" (p. 215). Mathilda describes herself as "tender as the sensitive plant, all nerve" (p. 222) and as having "been hardened to stone by the Medusa head of Misery (p. 223). She not only has "learned the language of despair," but she *is* despair: "a strange being am I, joyous, triumphant Despair" (p. 236).

In a passage that suggests madness as much as it reveals stylized language, Mathilda produces a soliloquy of intense dramatic effect.

There was too deep a horror in my tale for confidence; I was on earth the sole depository of my own secret. I might tell it to the winds and to the desert heaths but *I must* never among my fellow creatures, either by word or look give allowance to the smallest conjecture of the dread reality: *I must* shrink before the eye of man lest he should read my father's guilt in my glazed eyes: *I must* be silent lest my faltering voice should betray unimagined horrors. Over the deep grave of my secret *I must* heap an impenetrable heap of false smiles and words: cunning frauds, treacherous laughter, and a mixture of all light deceits would form a mist to blind others and be as the poisonous simoon to me. (p. 216; emphasis added)

The controlled repetition of "I must" enhances the melodramatic quality of this passage, revealing Mathilda's command of language to evoke pathos. The irony in this passage is not lost on the reader. Mathilda protests that she can never reveal her father's secret, that she must be silent. Why, then, this letter, this tragic memoir of events which she claims she must carry to her grave? Because Mathilda's dramatic presentation of her father's incestuous love elevates her to a tragic heroine like those of Renaissance and Romantic tragedies, such as Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and Percy Shelley's *Beatrice Cenci*, and so engages the reader's sympathy.

The dramatic effect of Mathilda's narrative is also highlighted by frequent verb-tense changes. At several points, Mathilda jumps from past to present tense in order to address the reader, much as an actor speaks an aside to the audience. For example, in chapter iv, Mathilda recounts in the past tense her father's sudden change toward her and then introduces a scene using present tense: "There are many incidents that I might relate . . . but I will mention one" (p. 192). In concluding this chapter, Mathilda again addresses the audience. Referring

to her father's unexplained behavior, she writes, "But still do I flatter myself that this would have passed away" (p. 197). She also uses the present tense to re-enact emotions or events as she relates them in her letter. Telling how she pondered her father's confession, she repeats the curse she uttered three years earlier in the present tense:

To this life, miserable father, I devote thee!—Go!—Be thy days passed with savages, and thy nights under the cope of heaven! Be thy limbs worn and thy heart chilled, and all youth be dead within thee! Let thy hairs be as snow; thy walk trembling and thy voice have lost its mellow tones! Let the liquid lustre of thine eyes be quenched; and then return to me, return to thy Mathilda, thy child, who may then be clasped in thy loved arms, while thy heart beats with sinless emotion. Go, Devoted One, and return thus!—This is my curse, a daughter's curse: go, and return pure to thy child, who will never love aught but thee. (p. 204)

Later, Mathilda writes, "Oh never, never, may I see him again. . . . The mutual link of our destinies is broken" (p. 205). Although such tense shifts are standard conventions of first-person narratives, they also illustrate Mathilda's command of theatrical language and gesture as well as her consciousness that her history is a dramatic construct. Use of the present tense dramatizes these "lines," which are patterned after soliloquies so common in melodrama and Renaissance tragedies. As she concludes her letter, Mathilda cannot resist another soliloquy, the lengthiest of her drama: "I salute thee, beautiful Sun, and thou, white Earth, fair and cold! . . . I am about to leave thee" (p. 243). She continues the farewell speech for three paragraphs, investing it with melodramatic rhetoric rich in metaphor and stylized imagery: "thou, oh, Sun! hast smiled upon, and borne your part in many imaginations that sprung to life in my soul alone, and which will die with me"; "One of these fragile mirrors, that ever doted on thine image, is about to be broken, crumbled to dust"; and "Receive then the grateful farewell of a fleeting shadow who is about to disappear" (pp. 243–44). In these soliloquies, Mathilda assures us that she can act—or overact—the part as well as any contemporary actress on the London stage.

Guilt-ridden and devastated over her father's death, Mathilda believes that she has been the cause of it. Although the father's final letter to her is ambiguous and may suggest that he plans to wander

the continents, she interprets his words as a death wish and so assumes the drowning was a suicide. Her assumption is a valid one, given her father's history of irresponsibility regarding his actions. However, what better way to heighten her tragedy and embellish the characterization of her drama than to paint the father's death as a suicide because of the crime against his daughter.

Mathilda's depiction of her father resonates with theatrical qualities; he, too, can play the tragic victim, as he gives full rein to a self-centered, introspective sensibility which becomes, to use Syndy Conger's description, "no longer a means to any other end . . . but an end in itself."²⁸ Unchecked by reason and discipline, sensibility warps his sense of reality, shatters his relationship with Mathilda, and ultimately leads to both of their deaths. Diana's dying after Mathilda's birth devastated the father: "From the moment of my mother's death until his departure [my aunt] never heard him utter a single word: buried in the deepest melancholy he took no notice of any one; often for hours his eyes streamed tears or a more fearful gloom overpowered him" (p. 180). However, Diana's death becomes a vehicle to indulge an extreme sensibility that transformed understandable grief into the maudlin self-pity revealed in his departing letter to his sister. He begins with "Pardon me . . . for the uneasiness I have unavoidably given you"—as if his abandonment of Mathilda were but a minor consequence out of his control. He continues with Werther-like melodrama, "I must break all ties that at present exist. I shall become a wanderer, a miserable outcast—alone! alone!" (p. 180). His last words regarding Mathilda were "Take care of her and cherish her: one day I may claim her at your hands; but futurity is dark, make the present happy to her" (p. 181). If he so desires and is able, he "may" assume his role as her father. His selfish actions destroy the family unit and deny Mathilda a childhood conducive to fostering the virtues of sensibility. Mathilda indulges her grief in a similar manner after her father has drowned at sea: "since his death all the world was to me a blank except where woe had stamp'd its burning words telling me to smile no more" and "warm tears once more struggled into my eyes soothing yet bitter; . . . I sank once more into reverie" (pp. 215–16).

28. *Sensibility in Transformation*, ed. Syndy McMillen Conger (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), Introduction, p. 13.

She, too, breaks all ties, by feigning her death so that her London relatives do not look for her and by seeking out a desolate cottage on a Northern English heath “to find that solitude which alone could suit one whom an untold grief is seperated [*sic*] from her fellow creatures” (p. 216).

The final setting in Mathilda’s drama is a lonely house on the heath in Scotland, a location that mirrors the self-imposed isolation and alienation resulting from her disabling sensibility: “In solitude only shall I be myself,” she writes (p. 218). Although she claims she is not “misanthropic,” Mathilda cannot bear even the sight of other people and so chooses the heath location because she can “wander far without molestation from the sight of [her] fellow creatures” (p. 219). She has too long indulged her sensibility, and not even the genuine care and friendship of Woodville can redirect it. Mathilda began her narrative by referring to her life as a “tragic history” (p. 175) and concludes it by reflecting that her part on life’s stage “has been strange, and alas! tragical” (p. 245). In this, her last act and last action, Mathilda sums up the events of her short life in the evocative, melodramatic language that she has perfected: “So day by day I become weaker, and life flickers in my wasting form, as a lamp about to lose its vivifying oil” (p. 246). Haunted and unhappy for most of her life, she now feels peace, knowing that death is near and brings with it a union with her father. Her last words are a fitting epilogue to her drama: “Farewell, Woodville, the turf will soon be green on my grave; and the violets will bloom on it. *There* is my hope and my expectation; your’s are in this world; may they be fulfilled” (p. 246). And so the curtain drops, and the drama ends, with the spotlight on the play’s leading lady—Mathilda.

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