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TU Conference Version

“A Picture an Artist Would Love to Paint:”

Female Bodies in Mary Shelley’s Tales and Stories

In the last decades of her life, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, in addition to her novels, wrote and published many, often unsigned, short romantic tales. These short stories appeared in various collections of morally instructive stories, such as *The Keepsake*, *Friendship’s Offering: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present*, and *The Tale Book*, suitable for gift-giving and parlor room display. As Charles Robinson explains in his Introduction to the 1976 edition of Collected Tales and Stories, *The Keepsake* was a “species of nineteenth-century gift books containing poetry and prose fiction illustrated by engraved plates” (xii). Often, the stories contained in these “Annuals” were “sentimental, contrived, and second-rate.” However, as Robinson points out, because the *The Keepsake* could sell as many as “fifteen thousand copies within a few months,” its impact on the development of the short story cannot be underestimated (xiii).

Although *The Keepsake*, as a genre, tended to relate entertaining stories of youth, exoticism and adventure, Mary Shelley uses and subverts this genre as guise for moral tale, in many of her short stories; she utilizes convention to sow messages of female significance and centrality. In the larger seminar paper from which this presentation has sprung, I examined five different examples of these short stories which demonstrate varied, though conventional, portraits of female bodies that Mary Shelley utilized in her later writing. These stories made use of several of these “portraits” or “types.” The

TWO examples which are the most directly engaged with questions/issues of intertextuality are the stories “The Dream” and “The Swiss Peasant,” which treat the conventional types: “young and beautiful” virgin and the recovered maternal figure. Shelley utilizes a wide range of female portraits, presenting their bodies and the action of those bodies, however, in an unconventional way. Although male bodies are inevitably present and are oftentimes important in the story being told, the female body is the overwhelming focus of the stories. Throughout her *Collected Stories and Tales*, Mary Shelley reiterates themes of female importance, while negotiating fictional conventions; in these tales, particularly “The Dream and The Swiss Peasant,” instances of detailed description, allusion to art or the visual medium, and intertextuality signal the importance of “picturing” the female body in question. Furthermore, Shelley adapts and utilizes the generic conventions of exotic locales, supernatural resolutions and morality as a means to her creative end, weaving a body of short stories which is both identifiable and subversive.

Another unique feature of *Keepsake* stories particularly, are the engravings which often accompanied the stories, and in some cases, preceded them. These engravings often appeared on the page which described the female character or contained the emotional climax of the story. With this in mind, we will also examine the relation of the physical “portrait” of the heroine in each of the selected stories, to the textual “portrait” or description which Shelley provides. We will be interested in modes of romantic portraiture and what this would have inevitably added for a contemporary reader of Shelley’s stories. The Introduction to the comprehensive art history tome *Nineteenth Century Art* notes, engraving, along with lithography and photography, as part of “new

reproductive media” accessible to all classes (Eisenman 9). As William Vaughan further notes in *Romanticism and Art*, the sensibility of the age is “felt most clearly in the image of man himself not as a type but as an individual, in the portrait” (Vaughan 52). Shelley, forced to use images of “types,” spins a unique tale for each of the engravings, creating a “portrait” of individuality and action for each of her heroines.

“The Dream” begins with a Shakespearean reference, as “the young and beautiful Countess [Constance] de Villeneuve” and her beloved Gaspar, a knight of King Henry’s court meet in the woods, where they had once “exchanged vows of constancy,” reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet’s pledging (Shelley 156). Constance intends to enter the convent; she is in deep mourning over her father and brothers, who were killed by members of Gaspar’s family. The young king comes to entreat Constance, hoping that “the genial spirit of youth would break through this cloud” of sorrow (155). As Gaspar and Constance despair separately, she is “suddenly” inspired to spend the night on “St. Catherine’s couch”— a narrow stone ledge above the Loire River (158). This is presumably a reference to St. Catherine of Sienna, the patron saint of Italy and those who are sexually tempted, among others; legend holds that those who “have led a pious and good life” will dream of their beloved or at least, the answer to their troubles, if they survive the night (158). As Constance goes to spend the night, Gaspar watches over her, rescues her life, that is, her body from rolling over the edge, as she dreams of saving him. They wed at dawn in the chapel above the cliff.

In this tale Shelley features and subsumes several generic conventions; most significantly, they are intertextual literary and artistic references, as well as superstitious elements. The overall premise alludes to *Romeo and Juliet*, as the lovers are separated as

a result of feuding families. More directly, Constance's grief over her father's and brother's death is likened to Shakespeare's "Lady Olivia from *Twelfth Night*, vow[ing] herself to loneliness and weeping" (Shelley 155). Robinson notes the connection to Keats' *Eve of St. Agnes* (published 1820) in terms of its heroine, "uncertain about human love" and who is "separated from her lover by a family feud and who employs a superstitious religious ritual in order determine the future object of her love" (383). Also, Keat's narrative poem has been illustrated by the famous painting, by William Holman Hunt (1848)[PROVIDED IN YOUR HANDOUT AS FIGURE 1], with parts of the poem displayed with the initial canvas. In keeping with this connection, there art references throughout the tale, but, like the Hunt painting, *illustrate* the climax of the tale. Gaspar gazes upon "the uncovered head of his beloved. Her hands were folded on her bosom' her dark hair fell round her throat and pillowed her cheek; her face was serene..." The narrator continues, comparing Constance to statuary, "no statue hewn of marble in monumental effigy was ever half so fair..." yet claiming, typically, she is more beautiful than even a statue (163). As Robinson notes, the superstitious ritual of placing one's body and thus one's future, in the care of a saint is not an uncommon theme in literature. However, this is a slight departure for Shelley in that it is a superstitious action rather than an overt supernatural intervention. However, Shelley continues to play with and within conventions.

While Mary Shelley did play with the conventional elements, she did have to alter her stories for them, at times. This intrusion of generic convention is illustrated most clearly in this particular tale. The engraving, WHICH I HAVE PROVIDED FOR YOU [SEE FIGURE 2], and which accompanies this story illustrates the opening scene: it

features Constance seated on a rock, surrounded by a glade of trees, gazing mournfully; indeed, still with black mourning ribbons on her rich gown, a letter in her hand¹. The narrative on the facing page explains that the letter is from King Henry announcing his impending visit. The bulk of the tale occurs after the illustrative piece. However, the focus in the engraving on Constance's body, in its dejection, isolation and delicateness, signal that there is more to the story than we are being told. This opening scene, while it is structurally important, has been altered. According to Robinson's sleuthing, "Constance originally preferred night to day and her own darkened room to the 'lighter shews of nature—her darkened casements, her black hung rooms, were more in unison with her feeling than the flowering earth and laughing sky'" (383). Were this original scene written, Constance then would seemed less "young and beautiful" in a "gloomy" setting. Robinson notes "a structurally important scene in a gloomy setting had to be rewritten had to be rewritten to accommodate a painting of the heroine in a lovely bower" (xvi). More specifically, Robinson claims that the rewriting causes Shelley to change "both character and structure: Constance, encountering Gaspar during the day in a setting reminding her of past love, seems less likely to resist Gaspar's suit than she did at night in her 'black hung rooms'; and the natural beauty of the bower less effectively prepares the reader for the events of St. Catherine's couch than did the original scene..." (383). Although Shelley may have significantly changed the setting of the story to fit the accompanying engraving, the story which she tells well beyond the engraving is more powerful.

"The Dream" utilizes several conventional elements; most prominent among them, supernatural/superstitious elements in Constance's determination to know her

¹ Figure 2

romantic fate through risking her body. Although the setting is not as removed as in some of her other tales featuring locales such as Italy and Persia, it is set in France (a fairly exotic land) more importantly, set primarily outdoors. The opening scene and the climax both take place in nature, in the wooded bower and above the river on a cliff, respectively. Shelley's own feature of intertextuality and focus on art are prominently displayed in this tale. In this tale, we most clearly see that even Mary Shelley sometimes bowed to conventional requirements, in rewriting Constance's initial portrait.

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In the next tale, "The Swiss Peasant" Shelley's focus is on the recovered maternal body and on the family unit, literally, outside of social bounds.

The narrative structure of "The Swiss Peasant," like "The Elder Son," is slightly awkward. "The Swiss Peasant" introduces the characters and then utilizes both frame tale and flashback to tell the story. Robinson describes this particular tale as being enclosed in an "artificial and incomplete frame" though it "attempts a structural unity" (382).

Although the frame tale was tired convention, Shelley attempts to weave in these other narrative techniques. Because the short story as a genre was still in development, the appearance of such a tale in *The Keepsake* gives credence to Robinson's earlier claim that the *Keepsake* has been important to the development of literary genres.

This tale is opens with disaffected male youths who go to paint in the mountains of Switzerland. They meet a young mother, Fanny, who takes them to meet her husband, Louis Chaumont. Their relationship is noted as unusual because "though their child was five years old, Fanny and her husband were attached to each other with the tenderness and passion of early love" (Shelley 138). The couple then relates their story of how they

came to be united and came to live in a cabin in the mountains. Like “The Dream” the bulk of the action of the tale occurs after the engraving has been presented and incorporated; the engraving in “The Swiss Peasant” literally causes the story to be told. Although Fanny Chaumont’s “tale” is a typical one of “joy and woe” complete with natural disasters and coincidental meetings, the opening of that story is more worthy of examination rather than the story itself (382).

The initial appearance of Fanny and her child coming to bathe in the river are the supposed impetus for the story. The narrator and his friend, Ashburn, discuss the commonness and boredom of life. In a favorite Shelleyan move, they directly reference Shakespeare and Goethe and allude to Byron as well, by mentioning “Prisoner of Chillon” (137,136). Ashburn asserts “the meanest peasant will offer all the acts of a drama in the apparently dull routine of his humble life,” to which the narrator responds, “Put it to the test...talk, for example, yonder woman descending the mountain path”(137). Fanny is then obliquely described, not by the narrator or any narrative voice, but by Ashburn, with the eye of an artist. He exclaims, “What a figure!...oh that she would stay thus but one quarter of an hour!—she has come down to bathe her child—her upturned face—her dark hair—her picturesque costume—the little plump fellow bestriding her—the rude scenery around” (137). Ashburn wishes to paint her in such an aspect, which he does with his words and which the editors of the *Keepsake* did by including an engraving which exactly mirrors this narrative. What is more interesting is that he is creating the back-story to Fanny’s appearance, like Shelley had to do in order to write the story and incorporated the engraving.

The engraving itself does feature a mother and child walking down a path to a body of water.² The focus of the engraving is clearly on the bodies represented. The mother, barefoot and short-skirted, gazes up at the child, who gazes back down. She is dressed commonly. Indeed the title of the engraving is “The Swiss Peasant” not her proper name, as has been common with the other tales we have examined. The story does not name the child or refer to it again; Fanny is the focus. The landscape which surrounds the pair is wild and mountainous, yet not overpowering. The stream to which they are walking down, peeps at the frame of the picture, allowing the audience to feel closer to the scene, and thus Fanny’s unnamed yet obviously maternal body than would be probable.

Artistic references are extended in a further description of Fanny. The narrator describes her features: “the smooth candid brow, the large hazel eyes, half soft, half wild; the rounded dimpled cheek, the full sensitive mouth, the pointed chin, and as *framework to the picture* the luxuriant curly chestnut hair, and voice which is sweetest music” (138, emphasis mine). Even when described in contrast with her husband, Fanny is “painted” with expression of beauty. The husband is described as with words such as “handsome,” “lively,” “active,” “ferocious,” “vivacious” and “sternness.” Conversely, Fanny is detailed, from her “finely formed brow, her majestic person, and large expressive eyes...” The narrator says “there was something incongruous in the pair”; he can hardly believe one so lovely can live in a rural cabin in the woods or that she should be a mother (138).

Shelley’s willingness to use as the heroine of this romantic tale, a woman who is now a mother, demonstrates her continued subversion of the genre. Although the bulk of

² Figure 5

the tale relates Fanny's history as a virgin/young woman, the resolution of her narrative finds its place in motherhood, which is the state that prompts Ashburn and the narrator to seek an acquaintance. Robinson asserts this tale, specifically, as evidence of Shelley's "talents as an artist and the restrictions of her medium" (382).

Critics have been largely unimpressed with Mary Shelley's stories and tales. George Levine in his review of Robinson's edition of *Collected Tales and Stories*, talks about some of the conventionalities which Shelley invariably included in her tales, several of which we examined, including "conventional and usually embarrassing rhapsodies about the joys of nature, the purity of the hero or heroine...almost all of the stories are set far away in the East in a distant past. Medieval Italy is a favorite; Greece and Albania do very well" (Levine 488). [And Pasty Stoneman, in another review, refers to "A Mortal Immortal," in a somewhat offhand manner, as a "moral tale" on the same level as Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*.] As Herbert F. Tucker notes in his essay on Romantic poetry in the 1820s, *The Keepsake*, as a genre was "lush yet prim, intimate yet presentable, readily digested in its bite-sized genres, tonic in its carefully monitored spectrum of poignancy and uplift" (Tucker 526). This is what Shelley worked with and against as she published in the more conventional genres of romance and tale seen in *The Keepsake*.

The connection of an engraving to the five stories in question adds another dimension and complication to these stories. These, at times, overwrought and awkwardly integrated engravings connected the audience more deeply to the tale. Jonathan Richardson, writer and painter of the Romantic period, said in 1715 "A portrait painter must understand mankind, and enter into their characters, and express their minds

as well as their faces” (qtd. Vaughan 52). This high evaluation of portraiture extends to the literary arts, as well. Mary Shelley combined the visual tale represented in a portrait with the power of words to give her audience a full portrait of the heroines that we have examined. In order to spin a tale around an engraving, she conveys her “heroes and heroines... writ larger than life, but they never falsify the human experience” (Robinson xv). It is Mary Shelley’s creative use of these engravings which stretched her, and by extension, her audience’s imagination.

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