Chapter Four: A Tragedy of Incest

Trauma, Identity, and Performativity in Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*

> "But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing."
> (MARY SHELLEY, *FRANKENSTEIN*)

In the opening of Mary Shelley's 1819 novella *Mathilda*,[1] the eponymous narrator gloomily declares that the text chronicles the "precious memorials of a heartbroken girl" on the verge of death (6). The narrator sets out to write her "tragic history," her tale of "mystic terrors," on a dark and frosty winter afternoon in her desolate cottage, where "no voice of life reaches [her]" (5). Mathilda's melancholy prelude describing how and why she is writing her life-story introduces the dominant mood of the novella, a narrative of multiple trauma, fatal repetition, and continuous cycles of suffering. The determining events in the life of Mathilda, the autodiegetic narrator of this fictional memoir, are the early loss of her mother, a sad and lonely childhood, an incestuous father-daughter relationship, and her father's suicide.

Shelley wrote *Mathilda* at a time when death overshadowed her own life. She had lost her daughter Clara Everina in Venice in September 1818 and her son William in Rome in June 1819. Her letters written after the death of her second child express how deeply the loss affected her. On 24 September 1819, she wrote to Leigh Hunt "I can assure you I am much changed – the world will never be to me again as it was – there was a life & freshness in it that is lost to me" and concluded "in fact I ought to have died on the 7th of June last" (*Letters* I 108). It was in this

1 Pamela Clemit calls attention to Shelley's inconsistencies in the spelling of "Matilda" versus "Mathilda": "Although the heroine's name is spelled 'Mathilda' in rough draft and fair copy, Mary Shelley in her published remarks refers to the work's title as 'Matilda'" ("Introductory Note" 2). I follow Tilottama Rajan and other critics in adopting the spelling "Mathilda" for both the title of the novella and the name of its protagonist-narrator.

state of mind that Shelley began the first version of the novella.[2] Given this context, it is not surprising that biographical, psychoanalytical, and psycho-biographical readings remained the dominant approaches to the novella for many years after its first publication in 1959.[3] However, by the mid 1990s, the focus had finally shifted, and several critics expressed scepticism about narrowly biographical readings.[4] Like Graham Allen, who calls Shelley an "overly simplified, overly 'translated' author" (183), I contend that *Mathilda* demands a multi-layered approach that moves the critical emphasis from biographical to textual levels.

The core concern of the text is tracing the destructive impact of father-daughter incest and the loss of a father. The novella explores how the trauma of incest manifests itself in a series of physical symptoms and depicts a nuanced psychopathology of trauma that puts special emphasis on Mathilda's complex identity crisis, calling attention to the tensions and paradoxes within an identity disrupted by trauma. On the one hand, the text highlights the ruptures of identity through its depiction of the protagonist's pathological mourning and her indulgence in self-destructive, depressive, and suicidal tendencies; on the other hand, it connects the protagonist's struggle of identity to performativity and self-fashioning. Drama metaphors pervade the novella: Shelley has Mathilda stage herself as a tragic heroine and her life as a trag-

2 Shelley finished the first version of the novella, entitled *Fields of Fancy*, in mid-September 1819. The fair-copy version of the novella *Mathilda* is dated "Florence Nov. 9th 1819" but was probably completed in February 1820 (see *Journals* 308). Through Maria Gisborne, she sent the novella to her father in May 1820, asking him for help to get it published. Godwin, however, finding the subject of the novella "disgusting and detestable," not only rejected her request but also refused to return the manuscript (see Nitchie 450). *Mathilda* was not published until 1959 in the edition by Elizabeth Nitchie.

3 It was probably Nitchie's reading of the novella, centred on an enumeration of parallels between Mathilda and Shelley and intent on proving that "[c]ertainly Mary is Mathilda" (454), that initiated the paradigm of biographical readings. More recent examples that approach the biographical in different ways include Terence Harpold's "Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," Anne Mellor's *Mary Shelley*, and Tilottama Rajan's "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*."

4 Clemit is right to stress that the considerable differences between the original conception of the novella, *Fields of Fancy*, and *Mathilda* testify to the fact that the novella is a carefully crafted work of art and far more than "an uncontrolled expression of private anxieties" ("From *The Fields*" 152). Other readings that emphasize the limitations and problematic aspects of biographical and psychoanalytical approaches include Charlene Bunnell's "Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy," Kerry McKeever's "Naming the Daughter's Suffering," and Audra Dibert Himes's "Knew Shame, and Knew Desire." All these articles appeared between 1996 and 1997, which indicates a paradigm shift in Shelley criticism.

edy. Mathilda's persistent attempts to redefine and reconstruct her identity in the aftermath of trauma are enacted textually through a complex web of intertextual relations that take the shape of performative acts of (self-)identification. Through its interrogation of what a sense of unity and stability of identity signify for a traumatized individual, the novella alerts us to a set of key concerns regarding trauma – concerns that are also highly relevant to postmodern trauma writing and that relate to twentieth-century identity discourses in both literary theory and psychology.

Shelley's *Mathilda*, which is embedded in a complex web of textual and biographical connections to Wollstonecraft and Godwin, takes up a number of crucial issues addressed by *The Wrongs of Woman* and *Mandeville*.[5] Offering yet another exploration of the therapeutic potential of oral and written self-expression, Shelley's novella, as this chapter argues, rejects even more clearly the period's therapeutic optimism than Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's texts. Mathilda refuses to be cured, to be "morally managed" by the poet Woodville, indulging instead in her fatalistic belief that she is doomed to a life of tragedy. *Mathilda*, then, can be characterized as an especially bleak trauma narrative, a narrative pervasively focused on depicting the traumatic and posttraumatic. Its overall textual frame, which has neither a clear political trajectory like *The Wrongs of Woman* nor an explicit psychological or analytical agenda like *Mandeville*, makes this Gothic novella a particularly "performative" trauma narrative, enacting trauma in multiple ways. Finally, given the extent to which other novels by Shelley also explore trauma and, hence, resonate with *Mathilda*, Shelley's fictional oeuvre as a whole, I argue, can be read as an extensive, multi-textual trauma narrative, with the novella constituting a crucial nexus within that larger narrative.

A TEXTUAL PERFORMANCE OF TRAUMA

Shelley's *Mathilda* foregrounds trauma both diegetically and textually. A key feature that marks the novella as a trauma narrative is its use of repetition at several levels of the text. For example, repetition, which Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* identifies as a fundamental characteristic of trauma writing, is an important feature of the novella's plot: a series of losses and the repeated experience of abandonment determine Mathilda's life from early childhood on. Her mother's

5 As Clemit stresses, the "multiple literary, political, and philosophical influences of Godwin and Wollstonecraft" are evident in most of Shelley's writing ("*Frankenstein*" 26). In the years up to writing *Frankenstein*, Mary and P.B. Shelley, as Clemit further emphasizes, "embarked on a shared, intensive course of reading, which included all of Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's works" (30).

death a few days after Mathilda's birth marks the beginning of the family's tragedy. Her father, overpowered by grief, abandons Mathilda for a vagabond life in distant countries, leaving her to the care of a cold, unloving aunt, who, as Mathilda puts it, "without the slightest tinge of a bad heart […] had the coldest that ever filled a human breast" (11). Mathilda's nurse is the only one who treats her with warmth and affection, but she disappears from her life when Mathilda is seven, leaving her to a life even more defined by isolation, lack of affection, and neglect. Her experience of childhood is depicted as lacking a sense of home and human warmth.[6] Her father's return after sixteen years is the moment Mathilda finally "beg[ins] to live" (15), and the reunion leads to a short period of "paradisiacal bliss" and "unspeakable happiness" (17, 21). The way this period is described, with its emphasis on the complete exclusion of the outside world, recalls the description of her father's time of bliss with Mathilda's mother. This father-daughter paradise is, however, soon disrupted by the father's sudden recognition that the passionate love he feels for his daughter transgresses the boundaries of parental love. Her father's abrupt and incomprehensible change of temper, his suddenly "cold and constrained" manner (23), comes as a shock to Mathilda. His growing incestuous passion, which culminates in the confession scene, leads to the final, most devastating and traumatic loss of a series of losses in Mathilda's life: her father's suicide.

The repetition of abandonment, loss, and trauma, which figures as the driving force in Mathilda's life-story, is, moreover, connected to a fatalistic note that runs throughout the text. In her gloomy reflections at the beginning of the novella, Mathilda states: "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, adamantine chain that has bound me" (6). This fatalistic tone echoes Mandeville's sense of being doomed to a fate he cannot escape. As Pamela Clemit emphasizes, "Mathilda's deterministic outlook" can be interpreted as signalling her "affinity with other Godwinian protagonists who cast themselves as victims of forces beyond their control" ("From *The Fields*" 158). Mathilda's sense of being subject to fate manifests itself in her use of a rhetoric of tragedy, another determining feature of the novella. Mathilda repeatedly declares that she is doomed to be a tragic figure. This fatalistic way of thinking, displayed by Mathilda, Mandeville, and other traumatized protagonist-narrators in Romantic trauma fiction,[7] reappears

6 To some extent, Mathilda seems to find happiness in nature. Yet, as Michael Scrivener rightly points out, this "romantic nature worship" is essentially caused by the bleak circumstances of her childhood: "[H]er love of nature […] is depicted as a traumatic 'internal witness' to provide an affective centre to her motherless and fatherless emotional world" (212).

7 Another example that is relevant here is John Galt's *The Omen*, a fictional first-person narrative on childhood trauma that resembles *Mathilda* in its emphasis on the trauma vic-

in Caruth's description of chains and cycles of trauma as a "possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected" (*Unclaimed* 2). This parallel reveals that Romantic trauma narratives and Caruth's trauma theory similarly conceptualize trauma as uncontainable, as bound up with forces beyond the subject's control. Inescapability and irreducibility are crucial characteristics of this view of trauma.

The elements of repetition and fatalism in Mathilda's narrative are further reinforced by the life-stories of the novella's other central characters. Parental loss in early childhood is an experience that Mathilda shares with both her father and her mother, Diana. Furthermore, the lives of both male protagonists, Mathilda's father and the poet Woodville, are, like Mathilda's, strongly determined by tragic loss and mourning. The characters' deeply painful experiences, all of which originate from disrupted familial and romantic relationships, as well as their reactions to such experiences, seem to resemble or even repeat each other – even though, as I will discuss later, Woodville's strategies for coping with bereavement contrast with Mathilda's. Mathilda's narrative, hence, contains within itself different versions of a drama of trauma.

Although *Mathilda* features several trauma victims, it refrains from enacting the kind of multi-perspectivism that Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* does. In this context, Shelley's choice of narrator is significant. In the draft of the novella, which – echoing Wollstonecraft's fragment *The Cave of Fancy*[8] – is entitled *Fields of Fancy*, the voice of the intradiegetic narrator Mathilda is framed by the narrative of an extradiegetic narrator, who offers readers an outside perspective on the heroine as well as some guidance on how to read Mathilda's story. By dropping the frame narrative in *Mathilda* and making the entire novella an account of the trauma victim, Shelley fundamentally reconceptualizes the novella, abandoning the mode of overt didacticism.[9] This change significantly contributes to the novella's resistance to closure, refraining from offering the reader an explicit interpretation of the heroine's tale. As Audra Dibert Himes emphasizes, *Mathilda* is "uncomfortable for

tim's pervasive sense of doom and fatalistic ways of thinking. The narrator, Henry, is obsessed with the interpretation of omens, secrets, and mysterious events in his early life, when he time and again "experienced the foretaste of misfortune, and heard, as it were afar off, the groaning wheels of an unknown retribution coming heavily towards [him]" (24).

8 Wollstonecraft's *The Cave of Fancy* is also crucially concerned with death. However, in contrast to the marginalization of the mother in *Fields of Fancy* and *Mathilda*, *The Cave of Fancy* foregrounds the theme of a daughter prematurely losing her mother.

9 On this subject, see also Judith Barbour's "The Meaning of the Tree." Barbour asserts that Shelley shifts from the mode of "woman-centred didacticism" to that of "agonistic lyricism" (102).

the reader because it is so devoid of any perspective except Mathilda's," forcing the reader to "share Mathilda's vision of the world because it is the only moral, emotional and intellectual universe offered to her or him" (119). It is hence precisely Shelley's choice to use a single autodiegetic narrator that makes this novella a narrative that is – almost oppressively – dominated by one perspective and one individual's trauma.

In framing the text with a single narrative voice, with an unreliable and psychologically unstable narrator who functions as the fictional autobiographer, Shelley employs an overall narratorial constellation which resembles that of *Mandeville* and evokes a "Godwinian confessional mode" (Clemit, "*Frankenstein*" 38).[10] Her father's legacy also manifests itself in Shelley's profound interest in psychological fiction. However, while Godwin uses an unequivocally fictional construct as the subject of his psychological "dissection," Shelley makes the heroine Mathilda more complex. As mentioned previously, it is problematic to follow Nitchie in reading Mathilda as nothing more than a fictionalized Mary Shelley; however, at the same time, the novella's biographical context, marked by the pain of trauma, should be regarded as an additional level that defines the novella as a trauma text, making it a multi-layered textual performance of trauma – a text both about and of trauma.

There are other generic and textual features of Shelley's novella that support the idea that *Mathilda* can be read as a performative trauma narrative. For one, its poetics convey that trauma can bring us to the limits of language, representation, and knowledge. While Mathilda, like Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman*, writes with a specific addressee in mind, it is symptomatic that the novella's narrative frame enacts a broken relationship between the acts of composition and reception, between narrator and addressee, who are separated by the unbridgeable gap of Mathilda's imminent death. In this way, the text further develops the scepticism towards communication expressed in *The Wrongs of Woman*. The ambiguous view of language and narration in Wollstonecraft's text is here replaced by a more clearly pessimistic vision.

The text's complex relation to language is further reinforced by its generic characteristics. As Tilottama Rajan argues, *Mathilda* is closer to the form of a "novella" rather than a "novel": while "the novel can be seen as the form par excellence of the Symbolic order, the novella is rather a form of melancholy [which] gestures towards Symbolic structures but refuses to participate in them" by using but "para-

10 Clemit, in fact, describes Godwin's legacy in Shelley's writing as particularly powerful with regard to *Mandeville*. She writes that the depiction of "psychological arrest" in *Mathilda* "confirms Mary Shelley's fundamental literary affiliation with Godwin, not so much as the author of the 1790s, but as the creator of *Mandeville*, which she later praised as superior to all his works in 'forcible development of human feeling'" ("*Frankenstein*" 41).

lyz[ing]" novelistic features like plot and character ("Melancholy" 48). Rajan suggests, furthermore, that *Mathilda*'s uncertain status in relation the Symbolic order is increased by its uncertain status "between lyric and narrative" (47). In other words, *Mathilda* cannot even satisfactorily be labelled a "novella" because some of its characteristics, like its "fixation on a single mood, its lack of action" are features of lyric rather than narrative (47).

This element of "fixation" connects to the narrator's obsession with the past and her refusal to move on, that is, to the theme of psychological imprisonment, which is also evoked by the novella's Gothic features. As Kathleen Miller stresses, "[w]ith its themes of alienation, entrapment, and unutterable personal secrets, Mathilda's story participates in many of the conventions of the female gothic form" (291). At the same time, the Gothic devices that the novella employs contribute to the text's depiction of psychological complexity, of the irrational, pathological, and transgressive aspects of the mind. It displays characteristics of a type of Gothic fiction that Fred Botting associates with the nineteenth century, when Gothic fiction "seemed to go underground: its depths were less romantic chasms or labyrinthine dungeons, than the murky recesses of human subjectivity" (11). According to Botting, the emphasis of Gothicism shifted from the supernatural to the psychological: "Excess emanated from within, from hidden pathological motivations that rationality was powerless to control" (12).[11] Thus, the mode of the Gothic and the mode of trauma merge here even more than in *The Wrongs of Woman*. These textual and generic features of *Mathilda* – its structures of repetition, its rhetoric of fatalism and tragedy, its specific narratorial constellation, and its brand of the Gothic – position the novella as an early example of the kinds of trauma narrative that, in the words of Laurie Vickroy, "incorporate the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of trauma within [their] consciousness and structures" (xiv). *Mathilda*, in other words, enacts trauma in multiple ways.

WORDS OF DESIRE AND THEIR WOUNDING POWER

At the diegetic level, the core of this trauma narrative primarily revolves around incest and its complex destructive impact. Mathilda, who, according to Margaret Garrett, is "one of the first psychological portraits in modern literature of an incest victim" (45), describes her trauma of father-daughter incest as the determining experience of her life, while the misery of her early childhood increasingly fades into

11 Botting also emphasizes the importance of the family to this mode of the Gothic: "[T]he family became a place rendered threatening and uncanny by the haunting return of past transgressions and attendant guilt on an everyday world shrouded in strangeness" (11).

the background. At the beginning of her tale, she does mention the untimely death of her mother, but she then conspicuously avoids reflecting on this loss. Her marginalization of her mother's memory alerts us to the possibility that behind the trauma of incest, which she explores extensively, there might be other traumas fuelling her suffering; the loss of her mother may be as traumatic for Mathilda as the loss of her father, but, as Mary Jacobus suggests, it is "unknowable," "unmournable," and "more unspeakable" (175, 166). Mathilda's mother seems to hover over the narrative, also reflecting, perhaps, the way Wollstonecraft hovered over Shelley's life and writings.[12] Through the shadowy, uncanny presence of the mother (which manifests itself, for example, in the father's mourning and in his difficulty keeping apart his feelings for his wife and his daughter) the text signals that, although Mathilda's self-narration focuses on the traumatic experiences of her adolescence, her experience of trauma reaches back to infancy.

The novella implies, then, that Mathilda's lonely, dreary childhood has rendered her particularly susceptible to excessive emotional attachment. She experiences the reunion with her father as a time of "unspeakable happiness," which, however, soon gives way to "unspeakable grief" (21) because of her father's incestuous passion. Mathilda implies that it was the suddenness of her fall to grief, so soon after experiencing happiness for the first time, that made her pain overwhelming:[13] "I began to learn to hope and what brings a more bitter despair to the heart than hope destroyed?" (17). Mathilda constructs the moment of revelation like the climactic scene in a drama. Structurally, her father's confession acts as the moment of *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia*. Highlighting the intensity of this moment, Mathilda tries to capture her agony in vivid, dramatic language:

> Yes it was despair I felt; for the first time that phantom seized me, the first and only time for it has never since left me – After the first moments of speechless agony I felt her fangs on my

12 It seems that Godwin tried from early on to ensure that Wollstonecraft was present for her daughter. In a striking form of memorial practice, Godwin, as Alan Richardson highlights, "first taught her to read and spell by tracing the letters on the gravestone of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft" (*Literature* 78). Shelley indeed seems to have developed strong feelings about her parents' legacies. In a letter to Frances Wright in 1827, she writes: "[My mother's] greatness of soul & my father [sic] high talents have perpetually reminded me that I ought to degenerate as little as I could from those from whom I derived my being" (*Letters* II 4).

13 Based on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Greg Forter stresses that the element of surprise may constitute a significant factor in rendering an experience traumatic: "The psychic apparatus is overcome, that is, partly because it fails to anticipate the event that overwhelms it, just as the body is traumatized when an external concussion catches it unawares, making flight or defense against the concussive force impossible" (263).

heart: I tore my hair; I raved aloud; at one moment in pity for his sufferings I would have clasped my father in my arms; and then starting back with horror I spurned him with my foot. I felt as if stung by a serpent, as if scourged by a whip of scorpions which drove me – Ah! Whither – Whither? (28)

Torn between attraction and repulsion, love and horror, Mathilda struggles in vain to overcome the shock of this revelation and to conquer her emotional turmoil in the face of "unnatural passion" (28).

What contributes significantly to the dramatic quality of this passage is the fact that Mathilda represents the scene mainly through direct speech. Even more importantly, the text here emphasizes the performative power of words. The scene preceding the moment of confession is dominated by Mathilda's repeated appeal to her father to "speak that word" (27), and it is, indeed, the fateful "word," finally spoken by her father, that hits her like a "flash of lightning" (27). Her father's frantic declaration, "My daughter, I love you!" is represented as carrying a striking emotional force; these words come as a shock to Mathilda because they retroactively eroticize and sexualize her girlhood dreams of reunion with her father, which all ended and culminated in his affectionate words "My daughter, I love thee" (14). Her father's confession, as Kerry McKeever also emphasizes, causes Mathilda to fall abruptly from the realm of the imaginary into the real (198).[14] The loss of her idealized image of her long-absent father repeats with increased intensity the first time she lost her father; his confession marks the end of her dreams. Emphasizing the affective power of the father's words – "My daughter, I love you!" – the novella evokes Judith Butler's discussion of how specific speech acts produce injury, "wounding" their addressee (*Excitable Speech*). Butler explores how speech, through its performative power, can function as an "injurious act" as well as a "bodily act" for the addressee (16, 12). Comparing the effect of her father's words to being injured by a "serpent" or "scorpion," Mathilda also describes his confession as an act of wounding, and her violent physical reaction underscores the profoundly physical nature of this injury.

The text's emphasis on the wounding impact of the father's words is characteristic of the novella's representation of incest: in contrast to most postmodern novels dealing with father-daughter incest and to P.B. Shelley's drama *The Cenci*[15] and

14 McKeever also stresses that Mathilda's fall from the imaginary to the real was preceded by her father's fall, whose "spiritual," "fairy-like" conceptions of Mathilda collapsed when her suitor made him realize that another man could perceive Mathilda as a flesh-and-blood woman rather than a bodiless ideal (197).

15 Shelley's journal reveals that she was familiar with the material that P.B. Shelley used for *The Cenci*, copying for example, a manuscript about the history of Beatrice Cenci (see *Journals* 211).

other literary sources (such as Ovid's "Mirra" and Dante's tragedy *Mirra*), incest in *Mathilda* happens only on verbal as well as mental and emotional levels. Yet the novella still emphasizes the body, albeit in a different way. While the violation of the boundaries between natural and "unnatural" love is not enacted physically, the text highlights how much Mathilda experiences the shock of her father's confession, of his "injurious language" (Butler, *Excitable* 28), in her body.

The body is also emphasized in Mathilda's reaction to her father's suicide. This final loss of the father is literally at the centre of the novella, occurring in chapters six and seven, thereby dividing the novella almost symmetrically into a first half, which describes Mathilda's pre-traumatic past and the genesis of her trauma, and a second half, which is focused on the short- and long-term effects of her traumatic experiences.[16] Trying to retrospectively capture what she thought and felt right after her father's suicide, Mathilda writes: "[S]uch was the depth of my emotion that I had no feeling of what caused my distress, my thoughts even wandered to many indifferent objects" (29). This passage expresses what Caruth sees as a typical feature of trauma: that "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time" or, put differently, that it cannot be fully "witness[ed]" "as it occurs" ("Trauma and Experience" 4, 7). The text, then, evokes what Caruth describes as "unclaimed experience" (*Unclaimed*), emphasizing Mathilda's inability to respond emotionally to the experience:

> I was too weak to feel any violent emotion. I often said to myself, my father is dead. […] Why is it that I feel no horror? Are these circumstances not dreadful? Is it not enough that I shall never more meet the eyes of my beloved father; never more hear his voice; no caress, no look? All cold, and stiff, and dead! Alas! I am quite callous: the night I was out in was fearful and the cold rain that fell about my heart has acted like the waters of the cavern of Antiparos and has changed it to stone. (40)

While Mathilda fails to grasp the meaning of this experience, to respond emotionally and mentally to what happened, her body responds powerfully to the trauma. While she suffers from an acute feeling of emotional deadness, a strong sense of "psychic numbing" or "emotional anesthesia," as contemporary psychiatrists call it (DSM-IV 464), her body reacts with "convulsions" and "fever," as Mathilda states (40).

16 The novella's structure follows a symmetrical logic in other ways: the father's death, marking the middle of the novella, is framed by the death of two women, his wife and his daughter, at the beginning and the end of the novella. Furthermore, as Barbour points out, Mathilda's "two years of manless life" separate the two halves of her story, each focused on her relationship with a man, her father and Woodville (109).

In particular, the symptom of fever deserves closer attention. Fever, mostly an unspecified but violent brain or nervous fever, figures repeatedly as the immediate reaction to overwhelming, shocking, and painful experiences in Romantic fiction. After his creature's birth, Frankenstein succumbs to a dangerous nervous fever that persists for several months and is accompanied by haunting intrusions of the creature (43). Similarly, forced by his "adopted" daughter Elizabeth's attachment to Gerard Neville to confront his trauma of guilt, Falkner is seized by a "high fever" caused by the violent "tumult of his thoughts" (*Falkner* 145-46). Lady Lodore so acutely feels the pain of abandoning her beloved home that she is taken ill in her chariot, likewise suffering from a "high fever" (*Lodore* 272-74). Describing one of the fits of madness that Clifford caused, Mandeville writes: "I was in a raging fever" (105). St Leon, after gambling away all his fortune and causing his family's abrupt fall "from the highest rank to the lowest poverty," is seized by a violent "frenzy" and, shortly afterwards, succumbs to a dangerous fever, a "most dreadful disease" (69-72). The characteristics of fever – a term that seems to get used in Romantic fiction to describe a broad range of symptoms – resemble the set of PTSD symptoms labelled "increased arousal" (DSM-IV 464). One important Romantic-era reference to fever in relation to mental illness is in Erasmus Darwin's *Zoonomia* (1794-96), which describes fever as either a symptom or even a cause of madness (155). William Black's *A Dissertation on Insanity* (1810), moreover, lists "fever" as one category in his "*Table of the Causes of Insanity* of about one third of the Patients admitted into Bedlam" (646). Although Darwin notes that fever can sometimes be a "good symptom" "because when the fever is cured, or ceases spontaneously, the insanity most frequently vanishes at the same time" (*Zoonomia* 155), in trauma narratives like *Mathilda* and *Frankenstein,* fever primarily marks the onset of an individual's mental disturbance. Fever occurs at those moments when the agony of trauma hits the individual with unbearable intensity, thus functioning as a physical manifestation of emotional suffering. Beyond that, these texts depict the trauma victim's oscillation between states of increased arousal and fits of fever on the one hand and states of numbness and weakness on the other, and it is precisely this oscillation that contemporary psychiatry recognizes as a typical feature of post-traumatic disorders. Shelley's depiction of these symptoms, then, conveys her insight that a "wounded heart" (44) tends to disrupt the balance of the organism, leading alternately to a "freezing" and an "overheating" of the system.

Fever is one of many indicators Shelley uses in her trauma writing to convey the powerful impact trauma has on the body. It is interesting to note that recent traumatic stress studies, as mentioned in Chapter One, have repeatedly found that the body bears the burden of trauma just as much as the psyche. Yet Shelley's texts in particular explore the extent to which a mental wound can affect the whole body: *Mathilda*, *Frankenstein*, "The Mourner," and *Valperga* all represent the physical decline of the trauma victim in dramatic terms. Frankenstein recognizes how se-

verely his posttraumatic crisis affects his health – "This state of mind preyed upon my health, which had perhaps never recovered from the first shock it had sustained" (209) – and repeatedly mentions that his family is shocked to find him looking so weak, unhealthy, and emaciated. The "poor prophetess" Beatrice in *Valperga* is so fundamentally changed in physical appearance after her traumatic imprisonment and abuse that both Euthanasia and Castruccio do not even recognize her at first. Castruccio is shocked to find the Beatrice he remembers as "radiant with beauty and joy" to be utterly transformed, "with grey hairs and a wasted form, a young fruit utterly blighted" (283). The narrator emphasizes how closely Beatrice's mental decline and physical decay are intertwined and how rapidly this process happens: "[H]er attire displayed the thinness of her form and the paleness of her wasted cheeks; her hands were skinny and yellow, her hair perfectly grey; a few weeks ago, although mingled with white, its antient colour was preserved; but since then it had quite changed; her eyes were sunken, ringed with black, and rayless" (281). *Mathilda* sketches a similar process of physical decay, here accelerated by consumption. Showing not only the psyche but also the body so severely affected by trauma, Shelley's fiction highlights the fragility of a trauma victim's mental and physical health.

The text's emphasis on the close interrelations between trauma's impact on the psyche and the body, as we will see, also plays a paramount role in postmodern trauma fiction. While postmodern trauma novels tend to explore extensively the powerful effects trauma can have on the individual's body, Shelley's narratives are, in some ways, more radical in their depictions of trauma and the body: they repeatedly associate trauma with severe illness, inevitable physical decline, and, finally, death. They depict traumatic experiences as causing wounds whose direct or indirect injurious powers tend to be lethal. Similar to Godwin's *Mandeville*, Shelley's texts, ultimately, depict trauma as incurable.

"IN LOVE WITH DEATH" AND "POLLUTED" BY PASSION

While *Mathilda* emphasizes the protagonist's bodily suffering, it explores even more extensively the profound impact trauma has on identity and the self. Mathilda's identity crisis, one of the text's key themes, is perhaps the most complex and severe symptom of her posttraumatic suffering. The novella highlights how much her identity is in crisis by stressing her fixation on the past and refusal to face the future. After her father's death, she feigns suicide and breaks all ties with her earlier life. Symbolically killing her previous self, Mathilda repeats the pattern of mourning displayed by her father, who, after his wife's death, changed his name and virtually erased his previous existence. Feeling as if she died along with her fa-

ther, Mathilda withdraws to a remote spot, shuns company, and indulges in melancholy.[17] Throughout the novella, she remains obsessively fixated on her father and her trauma, as if enslaved by the past: "[T]he life progress of the narrator is arrested, the past is her only reality, and her psychic state and goal is dissociation" (Carlson 174).

The novella suggests that Mathilda's fixation on the past is intensified by the special nature of trauma memories. Immediately after her father's suicide, Mathilda suffers from a mild form of amnesia, having only "vague recollections" of what happened (40). The painful memories surface soon afterwards, however, and haunt her as "memories that never died and seldom slept" (52). Like Maria and Mandeville, Mathilda experiences vivid and intense "intrusive memories" that, to use Anke Ehlers and David Clark's phrase, appear with a strong "here and now" quality, producing a distorted sense of time (327). In passages describing particularly painful moments, such as her search for her father after reading his suicide letter, Mathilda's verb tense switches back and forth between past and present, as if she were reliving the past in the present: "I did not weep, but I wiped the perspiration from my brow, and tried to still my brain and heart beating almost to madness. Oh! I must not be mad when I see him; [...] Yet untill I find him I must force reason to keep her seat, and I pressed my forehead hard with my hands – Oh do not leave me" (37). The sense that Mathilda cannot always properly distinguish between past and present is also reinforced through metafictional comments that express the difficulty of writing chronologically. As Himes puts it, "[i]n her consciousness and memory, everything that has happened to her over the preceding four years and all the locations where she has been are fused, and every event is happening at every place at this moment, the moment of her writing her final confession" (120). In other words, the novella emphasizes the extent to which Mathilda feels both her pre-traumatic past and her present to be dominated by her traumas, suggesting that she, as is typical of trauma victims, tends to "live in durational rather than chronological time, [to] continue to experience the horrors of the past through internal shifts back in time and space" (Vickroy 5).

Mathilda's fixation on the past and her inability to face the future causes her to embrace death and negate life, a process that the novel depicts in several ways. For example, her life-denying tendencies manifest themselves in connection with her

17 Mathilda's reaction to her father's death is, in turn, echoed in Shelley's 1829 short story "The Mourner": like Mathilda, Clarice perceives her father's death as the end of her own life; she changes her name from Clarice to Ellen and hides from her fiancé in a solitary and secluded spot. Ellen/Clarice's farewell letter to her friend at the end of the text expresses her split identity and her sense that her former self, Clarice, is dead. Hence, this short story, written about ten years after *Mathilda*, parallels the novella in its emphasis on pathological forms of mourning and an identity disrupted by trauma.

sexuality. In response to the erotic nature of her father's attachment, with all its fatal consequences, Mathilda abnegates her sexuality. After faking suicide, she symbolically destroys her sexual self, dressing in a "fanciful, nunlike dress" in her self-imposed exile (44). She rejects her potential lover, the poet Woodville, to devote her life to her father's death and, increasingly, to her own death; *eros* plays a role only in connection with *thanatos*. The only moment between Mathilda and Woodville that might be read as a kind of seduction scene is, significantly, Mathilda's emphatic appeal for double suicide. However, the ultimate goal of this attempted seduction is not union through death with Woodville; it is reunion with her father.

Emphasizing Mathilda's devotion to death, the double-suicide passage is also revealing regarding the text's representation of incestuous desire. Mathilda stylizes herself not as the bride of a mortal man but as the bride of death and, possibly, as the bride of her dead father:[18] "[N]o maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapt 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" (65). Mathilda deprives herself of a lived sexuality and increasingly indulges in being "in love with death" (65). However, the way the novella depicts her continuing romantic dreams of her father shows that Shelley does not pathologize incestuous desire as much as Godwin does in *Mandeville*. *Mathilda* could even be said to represent incest with a certain idealizing tendency, with an element of the "frisson" that Alan Richardson identifies as characteristic of Romantic approaches to incestuous love ("Romantic Incest" 554). Yet the consequences of incestuous desire are similarly fatal. As Richardson asserts, in Romantic literature, "incestuous desire, though idealized, nearly always ends tragically" (570).

In *Mathilda*, the tragic results of incestuous desire are underlined by Mathilda's response to her father's death: prolonged pathological mourning. Her mourning can be read in relation to the Romantic-era notion of "ruling passions," which is also important to *Mandeville*. However, in contrast to Mandeville, whose self-analysis repeatedly includes discussion of "the passions," Mathilda uses the term only in relation to her father, to describe his feelings for his wife and, later, for herself; she does not interpret her own emotions and reactions through this lens. While Mandeville dwells on his fits of madness, Mathilda only admits that she was often "on the verge of madness," and asserts: "Do not mistake me; I never was really mad" (43). Thus, it is not surprising that she refuses to identify her own emotions or passions as obsessional or pathological. In spite of Mathilda's self-analysis, the novella as a

18 My reading here is closer to Mellor's, who states that "Mathilda wishes only to reunite with her father, to embrace him passionately in the grave" (*Mary Shelley* 195), than to Ranita Chatterjee's, who claims that Mathilda "dies to liberate herself from the clutches of the father's desire" (144).

whole can be said to evoke a psychology of the passions, notably of the "depressing passions," as described by John Haslam in *Observations on Madness and Melancholy* (1809):

> Those under the influence of the depressive passions, will exhibit a […] train of symptoms. The countenance wears an anxious and gloomy aspect, and they are little disposed to speak. They retire from the company of those with whom they had formerly associated, seclude themselves in obscure places, or lie in bed the greatest part of their time. […] They next become fearful, and, when irregular combinations of ideas have taken place, conceive a thousand fancies: often recur to some immoral act which they have committed, or imagine themselves guilty of crimes which they never perpetrated: believe that God has abandoned them, and, with trembling, await his punishment. Frequently they become desperate, and endeavour by their own hands to terminate an existence, which appears to be an afflicting and hateful incumbrance. (44)

Withdrawal to a secluded place and separation from others, a "gloomy" appearance, and a tendency towards suicide are all important elements of Mathilda's psychology that evoke Haslam's description of the "depressive passions." She describes herself as a "poor girl broken in spirit, who spoke in a low and gentle voice" (43) and actively contributes to the picture of despondency through her choice of clothes. Moreover, her feigned, symbolic suicide is later followed by a serious contemplation of suicide by poison. Her depressive fixation on the past and her melancholic longing for death complete the picture.

Nevertheless, I read the novella, like *Mandeville*, as a multi-layered exploration of mental suffering and mental disturbances, not as a study of one ruling passion. If we extend the perspective to contemporary psychology, Mathilda's "depressive passions" may be seen as one crucial element of a more complex pathology of trauma. In this respect, my reading differs from William Brewer's, who claims that "in Godwin's and Shelley's works the primary cause of madness is generally a ruling passion" (135). While Brewer focuses on the "obsessional" passions between father and daughter (113), I locate the cause of the protagonists' mental disturbances in trauma, while ruling passions either figure as symptoms within their psychopathology (like Mathilda's depression) or as one factor in the individual's predispositions (like Mandeville's misanthropy, which, however, in turn seems to be rooted in trauma). To give a further example, Frankenstein's ruling passion, his fervent ambition, does have fatal consequences, but it only indirectly leads to his mental disturbance and emotional turmoil, which are the results of the trauma his creature inflicts. Furthermore, it is through the traumatic losses caused by the creature's murderous wrath that Frankenstein develops his later ruling passion, his obsessional desire for revenge. As these examples illustrate, the psychology of these protagonist-

narrators cannot be explained through a mere cause and effect model based on the passions.

Mathilda's psychology of trauma and her depression include reactions of self-blame and self-condemnation. The sense of guilt that Mathilda feels about her father's incestuous desires and their fatal consequences seems disproportionate, if not excessive – which, in fact, parallels Haslam's description of patients suffering from "depressing passions," who "often recur to some former immoral act which they have committed" (44). While Mathilda's self-judgment is unstable, oscillating between gestures of self-vindication and moments of acute self-accusation, she generally blames herself far more than her father for the complications in their relationship.[19] Yet the text refuses to identify clearly what precisely Mathilda feels guilty about. Does she feel guilty about forcing her father to confess his secret? Does she blame herself for provoking her father's incestuous desire? Or does she feel guilty about any incestuous desires that she may have felt? It seems to me that Mathilda's sense of guilt gets disconnected from specific actions and becomes a pervasive aspect of her sense of self. Her response, then, may be more accurately described in terms of "shame" than "guilt." In modern psychology, distinctions between guilt and shame tend to rely on the definition that the clinical psychologist Helen Block Lewis proposed in 1971: "The experience of shame is directly about the *self*, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the *thing* done or undone is the focus" (30). Hence, while guilt involves a specific "articulated condemnation of a specific behaviour," shame involves "fairly global negative evaluations of the self" (Tangney and Dearing 24). In Mathilda's case, her negative evaluations are less concerned with a specific action or behaviour and more concerned with her overall sense of self. Calling herself "another Cain," an "outcast from human feeling" and a "monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love" (60-61), her expressions of self-hatred echo the laments of Frankenstein's creature. The text suggests that it is Mathilda's sense of who she *is* rather than what she *did* that makes her feel "unfit for any intercourse" (55). Shame alienates her from other human beings.

In the context of guilt and shame, it is also important to note that the text combines the rhetoric of monstrosity with imagery of pollution, contamination, and illness. Mathilda perceives herself as a "living pestilence," believes her soul to be

19 According to trauma psychologists, such patterns of self-blame are typical reactions of victims of childhood and family trauma. As Judith Herman highlights, children suffering from disrupted relationships with their parents tend to cling to the explanation of their own "badness" because blaming themselves allows them to uphold the belief that their parents are "good" (*Recovery* 102-03). In this light, Mathilda's self-blame could be read as a means of preventing her long-treasured, idealized image of her father from being entirely shattered.

"corrupted to its core by a deadly cancer" (61), and feels her ears to be full of the "poison" of "unlawful and detestable passion" (53). These passages show that, although the act of incest was committed only in thought, Mathilda feels polluted in both mind and body. Shelley's depiction of Mathilda's sense of contamination comes strikingly close to what has recently been discussed in studies of sexual abuse as "mental pollution." Nichole Fairbrother and S. Rachman define mental pollution as "feelings of dirtiness" that are "internal, emotional and moral in nature" and evoked by "memories, information or images" rather than by an actual, physical contaminant (175). According to Fairbrother and Rachman, after a sexual assault, many women experience a "sense of internal dirtiness," which is often connected to feelings of responsibility, guilt, or shame (174). This also applies to Mathilda, whose feelings of mental pollution are a vital aspect of her negative self-perception. It is telling, however, that the imagery of pollution is pervaded by ambiguity about whether Mathilda perceives the source of pollution as external or internal. Her phrases, such as her claim that she felt "polluted by the unnatural love [she] had inspired" (60), destabilize any clear sense of who she sees as primarily responsible for the pollution. Once again, what is at stake is less the *act* of polluting than the *state* of being polluted; guilt repeatedly becomes shame.

Issues of guilt and shame lead me to a textual crux of the novella, namely, the question of whether the incestuous passion represented here is one-sided or reciprocal. Critics are deeply divided on this question. Some read Mathilda as the innocent daughter, who feels nothing but a natural, daughterly affection for her father and is, thus, the victim of his incestuous passion. Garrett, for example, claims that Mathilda displays "natural feelings of the child for her father" (52), and Ranita Chatterjee asserts that "[f]ar from desiring her father sexually, she desires to be loved as a child" (143). In contrast, Charles Robinson characterizes her as having a "histrionic" and "hysterical" personality and even shifts the responsibility for the incestuous desires from father to daughter, claiming that Mathilda acts as the main "sexual aggressor," inspiring forbidden desires in her father through her powerful "seduction fantasy" (83). These divergent readings of Mathilda's "guilt" point to the text's inherent ambiguity and to the challenge it presents to moral judgment. In spite of this ambiguity, however, I want to suggest that, overall, it is not so much the text that blames and condemns Mathilda – it is Mathilda herself.

The connection between trauma and guilt is a theme that *Mathilda* shares with a number of Romantic trauma novels: Frankenstein is traumatized by the series of deaths within his family; at the same time, he feels guilty about these deaths because they are the result of his creature's murderous wrath and, thus, indirectly the result of his hubristic act of creation. Falkner exhibits a pathological condition of mourning on behalf of his beloved Alithea but at the same time considers himself her murderer (he abducted her in a moment of rash passion) and hates himself for having destroyed the happiness of Alithea's son. Godwin's St Leon, who is trau-

matically alienated from family and society through his immortality, suffers a profound sense of guilt from having caused the financial ruin and downfall of his family. Further Romantic-period examples of characters burdened by a heavy sense of guilt towards a close family member include Manfred in Lord Byron's *Manfred* and Oswald in Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, both of whom show symptoms of a trauma of guilt. This recurrent emphasis on the relationship between guilt and mental illness may reflect the moralistic trajectory of some Romantic-period psychiatric discourses. As discussed in Chapter One, some early psychiatrists claimed that there is a close connection between an individual's passions and sins and his or her mental illness, thereby assigning the responsibility for the mental disturbance to the individual. Should we, then, read Mathilda's melancholic depression as the consequence of – or even punishment for – her involvement in the tragedy of father-daughter incest? Does the novella encourage a moralistic reading of the narrator's pathology of the mind?

I read the novella's relation to the moralistic elements of Romantic-period psychiatric discourses as far more complex. Evoking "Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's shared emphasis on the formative power of education and circumstances" (Clemit, "*Frankenstein*" 35), Mathilda is depicted as the victim of her environment, more specifically, as the victim of deeply disruptive experiences within the family during childhood and adolescence. The novella, as Clemit emphasizes, "establish[es] knowable causes for irrational-seeming behaviour," representing Mathilda as "the victim of unfavourable circumstances" ("From *The Fields*" 159). In other words, although Mathilda, like most other trauma victims in Shelley's oeuvre and in Godwin's texts, is not a figure of purity and innocence, the novella implies that her mental disturbance should not be seen as her own responsibility. The text invites this reading by recording in detail the environmental factors determining her reactions and precipitating her crisis. This reading could, perhaps, be extended to Mathilda's father: on the one hand, he may be read, as Michael Scrivener suggests, as "an irresponsible father who victimizes her with his self-indulgent abandonments and revelations" (212); on the other hand, he – like Mathilda – figures as an embodiment of pathological mourning, as a victim of traumatic loss and, we might add, a victim of his powerful, unconquerable passions. Unlike Beatrice's father in P.B. Shelley's incest drama *The Cenci*, who is a merciless, cold-blooded, and cruel arch-villain, Mathilda's father does not fit the stereotype of perpetrator. Hence, the novella challenges clear-cut boundaries between perpetrators and victims and problematizes issues of guilt with regard to both father and daughter. The text shifts the emphasis from a *moral* assessment of guilt to a *psychological* exploration of guilt and shame related to trauma.[20]

20 According to Ruth Leys, the notion of guilt tends to involve moral judgment far more than the notion of shame. While a discussion of guilt entails "concerns about accountabil-

Finally, the discussion of guilt and shame also needs to address gender issues. Shelley has Mathilda, like Ellen/Clarice in "The Mourner," suffer from different forms of self-hatred, including self-destructive and suicidal tendencies. The psychology of these female trauma victims stands in sharp contrast to the psychology of male trauma victims like Frankenstein and Mandeville: the female trauma victims mainly direct their destructive drives inwards towards themselves, while Frankenstein and Mandeville turn them outwards, directing them against their "enemies." Indeed, Mathilda not only considers suicide but also takes pleasure in her health's decline and her body's decay through consumption. While Mathilda longs for her own destruction and death, Frankenstein and Mandeville are obsessed with the idea of killing their antagonists. This contrast even manifests itself in the language of pollution and monstrosity. In a few rare moments, Mandeville and Frankenstein perceive an element of the monstrous in themselves, but on the whole, Mandeville is fixated on Clifford as the source of pollution contaminating his beloved sister, while Frankenstein reduces the creature to an embodiment of monstrosity, refusing to see his human features. Again, this attitude differs markedly from Mathilda's, who perceives herself rather than her father as monstrous and polluted. These male and female patterns of reaction constitute different manifestations of how trauma victims possessed by the past are unable to think and act in healthy, life-affirming ways.[21]

The origin of these gender differences may lie, in part, in education. In *Zoonomia*, Darwin claims that the type of education an individual receives influences the type of mental illness to which he or she is susceptible: "The violence of action accompanying insanity depends much on the education of the person; those who have been proudly educated with unrestrained passions, are liable to greater fury; and those, whose education has been humble, to greater despondency" (156). Brewer reads the "fury" of Mandeville, "this arrogant Oxford-educated aristocrat," in connection with Darwin's linking of education and type of insanity (142). Even though Darwin, in this context, does not explicitly refer to gender, the difference between

ity" and "moralisms," the focus on shame shifts the emphasis to "the question of our personal identity and attributes" (Leys and Goldman 672). As Leys asserts, the relation between "what I feel (shame) and what I feel shame 'about'" is "now held to be entirely contingent and indeterminant" (671). In this light, the fact that *Mathilda* explores the affects of both guilt and shame can be said to support the interpretation of the novella as challenging moralistic perspectives.

21 It is interesting to note that recent research on PTSD also reveals these two contrasting types of posttraumatic reactions. As Matthew Friedman et al. maintain, some researchers consider PTSD an "internalizing disorder within the distress/anxious-misery domain," while other studies show that "many people exhibit an angry and aggressive form of PTSD" ("Classification" 741).

male and female education in the Romantic era seems relevant here. In this light, Mathilda's "despondency" can be related to her "humble" education. Her aunt did teach her to play the harp, but she mostly educated herself using her aunt's little library; in many ways, she grew up as a child of nature. It is only when her father returns that Mathilda has a human being to talk to, finding that "the subjects of [their] conversations were inexhaustible" (15). However, similar to several of Shelley's later texts, the novella specifically calls attention to the traumatizing potential inherent in overly close father-daughter relationships, where the daughter's education relies almost exclusively on the father. As Kate Ellis emphasizes, Shelley depicts the damaging effects of domestic isolation, revealing the dangers of "emotional victimization" and "excessive dependency" for daughters growing up in a family defined by the absence of the mother and the exclusion of the outside world (228).[22] This family constellation applies to Mathilda and Ellen/Clarice but also to Ethel and Elizabeth Raby in Shelley's later texts *Lodore* and *Falkner*. These daughters receive, in the words of the narrator of *Lodore*, a "sexual education" from their fathers (218), and they are moulded into self-sacrificing women wholly focused and dependent on men.[23] As Anne Mellor puts it, these works by Shelley portray women "whose selves are less than whole" (*Mary Shelley* 178), lacking autonomy, integrity, and independence, and whose identities are fundamentally "relational," determined by their roles as daughter or wife (205).[24] In the light of Darwin's theory, these educational patterns may be connected to the female protagonists' psychologies. Shelley's texts suggest that these familial power structures, which cast women as powerless and dependent, put women in a position where they are particularly vulnerable to trauma and suffering. Being largely deprived of agency, these female subjects struggle to cope with adversity because they lack the experience of using their psychological resources independently. In turn, the lack of

22 For a Freudian reading of how the mother's early death influences the relationship between Mathilda and her father, see Chatterjee's "*Mathilda*."

23 An important figure of contrast, that is, a daughter who receives a significantly different education, is Fanny Derham in *Lodore*, whose father strives to foster her autonomy and independence: "Mr Derham contemplated his duties and objects befitting an immortal soul, and had educated his child for the performance of them. […] [He] sought to guard his [daughter] from all weakness, to make her complete in herself, and to render her independent and self-sufficing" (218). Fanny indeed acts independently when she plays a very active part in the reconciliation of Ethel with her estranged mother.

24 Mellor goes as far as to argue that in the typical structure of the bourgeois family, "the father-daughter relationship becomes a paradigm for all male-female relationships," which is exemplified by the phenomenon of "child brides": "[W]omen are urged to remain daughters (or children) and to marry 'father figures,' men who are older, wiser, stronger, and more economically powerful than they" (*Mary Shelley* 198).

agency resulting from their education seems to influence the specific types of symptoms that characterize their response to traumatic experiences – in Mathilda's case, numbing and withdrawal, depressive passions, guilt, shame, and self-destructive tendencies.

THE PARADOXES OF PERFORMATIVE SELF-FASHIONING

Mathilda's symptomatology is, in multiple ways, connected to her crisis of identity. The novella grapples with the complex relationship between identity and trauma, and it is precisely this complexity that I investigate in this subsection. First of all, the novella's large number of intertextual references are of vital importance to a discussion of its identity politics. Mary Jacobus explores the interrelations between intertextuality and identity in *Mathilda* primarily at the metatextual level of Shelley's position as a woman writer. Comparing the novella's textual fabric to Frankenstein's creature's skin, with its rough surface that is randomly pieced together, Jacobus interprets the numerous disjointed and de-contextualized quotations in the text as constituting a "poetic failure," which points to Shelley's problematic relation to masculine Romanticism, to her "trauma of being cut off from a productive relation to the poetry of the past" (197). Jacobus reads the novella as an expression of trauma at the level of literary creation, expressing Shelley's "anxiety of authorship," in the words of Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert (49).[25] Yet the complex workings of intertextuality in the novella have further layers of meaning.

At the textual and diegetic level, intertextuality figures as one of the novella's foremost means of problematizing identity, agency, and narrative. The novella's many intertextual references show how Mathilda identifies with a large number of characters, both male and female, from literature, myth, and the Bible, including Oedipus, Dante's Matelda, Wordsworth's Lucy, Boccaccio's Ghismonda, Psyche, and Proserpine, as well as Cain, Job, and David. Some of these intertextual identifications are conveyed through direct comparisons, as in the similes, "*Like Proserpine*, I lived for awhile in an enchanted palace" and "*Like another Cain*, I had a mark set on my forehead" (18, 60, emphasis added), while others operate with more fluid transitions from Mathilda's voice to another poetic voice, like Wordsworth's,

25 On Shelley and female authorship, see also Mary Poovey's "My Hideous Progeny," Barbara Johnson's "My Monster/My Self," and Stephen Behrendt's "Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Woman Writer's Fate." In her preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley also explicitly addresses her struggle to develop her own voice as a writer alongside the dominant and powerful male voices surrounding her – especially the voices of Shelley and Byron (*Frankenstein* 7-8).

for example: "I am about to leave thee; [...] this emaciated body will rest insensate on thy bosom / 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks, and stones, and trees'" (64). Through her changing, temporary, yet in her mind powerful identifications with these different characters, Mathilda performs a considerable range of identities and subjectivities. The complex intertextual web Mathilda weaves around herself indicates that she perceives her identity as malleable and multiple rather than as unified, given, and permanent. In other words, the novella stages the collapse of a unified self and identity and foregrounds the performativity of identity. Yet in contrast to a number of texts of the time that celebrate performative identities (e.g., Lord Byron's *Beppo* and *Don Juan*),[26] *Mathilda* expresses a critical view of performativity, exploring selfhood and identity from the perspective of a severely traumatized individual. In order to elucidate the particulars of the novella's approach to performative identities, I bring the text into dialogue with Butler's conceptualization of identity and trauma specialist Klaus Grawe's psychological perspectives on identity.

According to Butler, the performativity of identity functions as an important source of power, resistance, and subversion. In her seminal study *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that identity is "produced" rather than essential and unified and that it is malleable rather than stable. Identity, then, emerges as a site for subversion and resistance, as a potential locus of agency and change. In *Mathilda*, the autodiegetic narrator constantly performs different roles and constructs her identity through numerous identifications with literary, mythological, and religious characters. These references and quotations function as performative acts. In Butler's terminology, they may be read as repetitions and variations of cultural identity constructions that create and continuously recreate Mathilda's identity. I argue, however, that the novella's negotiation of the performativity of identity differs crucially from Butler's, especially insofar as Mathilda's performative identity practice, expressed mainly through intertextuality, essentially points to a *crisis* of the self. Producing tensions and contradictions, these performative acts of identification seem to open up gaps, and they escape the subject's control. On the one hand, Mathilda identifies with victims who embody innocence, purity, and suffering, such as Proserpine, "who was

26 My main points of reference regarding Romanticism and performativity are the studies by Angela Esterhammer. In *The Romantic Performative*, Esterhammer emphasizes how important performance and performativity were to the Romantic period and explores characteristics of the "Romantic performative." In *Romanticism and Improvisation,* her readings of Della Cruscan poetry, Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, and Lord Byron's *Beppo*, among others, demonstrate that these texts, in different ways, celebrate improvisation and performative identities. Written in an "improvisational style," Byron's *Beppo*, for example, strongly highlights the performative dimension of identities through its playing with Carnival masks, "shape-shifting," and national identities (150).

gaily and heedlessly gathering flowers on the sweet plain of Enna, when the King of Hell snatched her away to the abodes of death and misery" (19-20), Psyche, with her sudden fall from the happiness of an "enchanted palace" to the misery of a "barren rock" and "wide ocean of despair" (18), and Sigismunda, with her unspeakable grief over her lover, who was murdered by her father (29). On the other hand, Mathilda identifies with guilt-ridden figures like Cain and Oedipus (60, 5) as well seductresses associated with incestuous desire, particularly in her references to Leila in John Fletcher's *The Captain* and Vittorio Alfieri's *Myrrha* (20). These intertextual references to incest might, in some ways, appear subtle or even muted: the lament of Fletcher's Leila, which Mathilda repeats, is taken from a passage where Leila speaks to her lover, not her father (20), and unlike in many other intertextual references, Mathilda does not identify directly with the heroine of Alfieri's tragedy, referring only to the play as a whole. Nonetheless, Mathilda praises *Myrrha* to her father as "the best of Alfieri's tragedies" (20), a statement that evokes a kind of reaction in her father which makes her perceive for the first time an "unknown horror" in him (21). Hence, these references point to a concern with the themes of incestuous love and seduction and contribute to the text's ambiguity regarding whether Mathilda is passive or active in the scenes of incestuous love.

In addition to these tensions, a considerable number of intertextual identifications, many of which are only partial identifications, are de-contextualized and focus only on a single detail. The reference to Constance in *King John* accentuates the depth of Mathilda's grief; the reference to Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" highlights Mathilda's death wish; and the reference to *Prometheus Unbound* heightens the intensity of her sufferings (42-43, 45). Yet the quotations are fragmentary, disconnected, and detached from their original contexts, only loosely interwoven into Mathilda's narrative. As Jacobus puts it, they are "strangely out of context, even wooden" (196). As a result, Mathilda's many performative acts of identification seem not only complex and conflicting but also barely connected and incompletely mapped onto her life-story. The novella thereby conveys that Mathilda experiences her self as unstable and disjointed and struggles to define her identity. The novella even seems to suggest that her performative identity practice, that is, imaginatively becoming Proserpine, Psyche, Oedipus, or Constance, does not help her overcome her posttraumatic identity crisis; on the contrary, it reinforces it. The sense of her identity as lacking unity and continuity and the tensions within her self, such as her profound ambivalence about her guilt, are not resolved, but intensified. Meaning is constantly deferred.

In *Mathilda*, the performative is not celebrated as offering potential for resistance, agency, or power; rather, it emphasizes the protagonist-narrator's identity crisis. Like a number of postmodern trauma novels, including Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place*, *Mathilda* does not celebrate the positive, creative, and subversive potential of subjectivities as generated, malleable, and multiple; instead, it foregrounds

the destabilizing and threatening effects of identities that are unstable, split, and fragmented. What the text emphasizes is, in Dominick LaCapra's words, that "[t]rauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (*Writing History* 41). In other words, in Shelley, the performativity of identity emerges as a problematic concept and practice for the traumatized individual who lacks the control over her self and her actions needed to play with subjectivities. Performativity even seems to function as a source of disempowerment for the self. When the self threatens to fall apart, the novella implies, the potential for agency, change, and resistance that identity theorists like Butler associate with the collapse of notions of the unified and stable self tends to get lost.[27]

Intertextuality is, thus, one important way in which the poetics of *Mathilda* enacts posttraumatic suffering. The shifting intertextual web that the novella weaves around its heroine captures her identity crisis and signals a crisis of meaning, both of which are characteristic of the posttraumatic. Mathilda's recurrent references to literary characters express how difficult it is for her to make sense of her past and her self. Because her traumatic past seems to resist direct expression, Shelley has Mathilda grasp at literary comparisons in an attempt to construct some meaningful connections to her obscure past.[28] In this way, I regard *Mathilda*, with its ingenious use of intertextuality, as an early example of a poetics of trauma that works with gaps and indeterminacies, with deferrals of meaning and aporias – the kind of poetics of trauma that, as Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience*, displays the "complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma" (4). Like more recent trauma narratives, the novella also raises questions of knowing and not knowing for its readers. As Allen asserts, "[t]he intertextual character of Mathilda constantly falls into a wandering relation between figures, an overdetermined and unstable condition of textuality, which denies us the ability to read (figure) her, in the sense of translating figures and narrative structures into stable, originary, and thus explanatory referents" (180-81). Mathilda's complex, ever-changing acts of identification make it difficult to identify and read her; the perfor-

27 I see in Butler's approach to the performativity of identity a certain degree of ambiguity regarding the subject's agency. Butler emphasizes that any performative act of (subversive) repetition and variation is always inevitably grounded and embedded in cultural discourses and identity practices. Hence, while identities may be actively "performed," they are, paradoxically, always also constructed and generated by discourses beyond the individual subject's control (see *Gender Trouble* 175-93). A text like *Mathilda*, then, problematizes this essential paradox regarding the subject's agency and negotiates it in far more pessimistic terms than Butler does.

28 The abundance of intertextual references also emphasizes how important literature was for Mathilda's identity formation: during her isolated childhood, art determined her reality, and fictional characters replaced human companions.

mativity of identity seems to escape not only the narrator's but also the reader's control.

However, I would like to take this argument about identity and performativity one step further: I want to show that, in *Mathilda*, the subject's performative self-fashioning, in the sense of performing a multiplicity of identities and assuming shifting roles, co-exists and contrasts with its opposing impulses – the desire for unity, consistency, and stability. According to Grawe, the so-called consistency principle is, in fact, the most constitutive principle of psychic functioning; it subsumes the basic psychological needs for control, stability, and coherence (386, 421). Grawe maintains that trauma severely undermines or violates consistency – threatening the maintenance of a stable identity and stable relationships and causing memory disturbances (426) – and that the psychic system, destabilized by trauma, instinctively strives to restore consistency. Representing a different perspective on the performative than Butler, Shelley combines the exploration of the performativity of identity with an emphasis on the traumatized individual's urge to restore what Grawe calls "consistency," that is, the urge to recover a sense of a stable rather than multiple identity, to regain control over self and life and to construct one coherent life-story. Throughout, *Mathilda* foregrounds processes of narrativizing and dramatizing the self that are driven by impulses towards unity, agency, and control.

One way that Mathilda narrativizes her life is through constructing it as a tragedy; in fact, theatrical metaphors permeate the novella. On the final pages, for example, she summarizes the "drama of her life" as follows: "Again and again I have passed over in my remembrance the different scenes of my short life: if the world is a stage and I merely an actor on it my part has been strange, and, alas! tragical" (66). Patterning her autobiographical tale after the traditional five-act-structure of a tragedy "provides the audience with a sense of closure" (Bunnell, "*Mathilda*" 85), but it also signals that Mathilda aims for a sense of control, coherence, and closure for herself. The novella connects the trope of the heroine's life as a drama to issues of agency by suggesting that in the narrativization of her life-story, Mathilda figures not only as the "tragic heroine," as the actress on stage, but also as the director, staging and controlling the performance of her life. She seems to set the scene for the dramatic moments in her life-story, for example, when she prepares the "scene" for her suicide with Woodville: "[I] decorated the last scene of my tragedy" (57). In assuming the double function of actress and director, Mathilda expresses her desire to gain some control over the harrowing experiences that she feels have been beyond her control. Shelley figures Mathilda as a fictitious playwright who reconstructs her autobiography in the form of a tragedy and simultaneously "stages" the tragedy, thereby complementing the kind of "author metaphor" found in Godwin's *Mandeville* with a "stage director metaphor." In this way, the novella places particular emphasis on processes of narrative self-construction and self-dramatization.

Mathilda's theatrical self-dramatization may also be said to express a desire for agency and control in the way it functions as a psychological distancing device. Shelley's extensive use of theatrical metaphors seems to signal that the autodiegetic narrator, who clearly longs to narrate her life, endures the confrontation with her past only by creating distance from it, by treating her life-story as a drama on stage. The text's stylized rhetoric, poetic pathos, melodramatic language, and use of Gothic devices can be read as part of her dramatic self-fashioning. While the Gothic underlines the emotional intensity of the especially gloomy moments of her tale – Mathilda hiding from her father in a secluded chamber, dreaming prophetically of his death,[29] chasing her father through the stormy night, seeing the blasted tree and prophesying his death, finding his corpse – the Gothic devices make the episodes seem especially constructed and staged. In other words, by giving these central moments of her life a particularly dramatic quality, Mathilda might, paradoxically, experience the agony of the past as less palpably real, as mediated and contained by the distance of literary imagination.

The attempt to regain control expressed through the author and stage director metaphors is also closely linked to the basic narrative principles of order, coherence, and causality. Through metafictional comments such as "[b]ut I forget myself, my tale is yet untold" (6) or "[b]ut I wander from my relation – let woe come at its appointed time" (17), Mathilda signals her constant endeavour to maintain narrative order, to follow the logic of chronology. In terms of coherence and causality, the first chapter of Mathilda's narrative also deserves a closer look. After a short prelude, she begins her story with her father's story, relating his childhood, early passions, and all-consuming love for Diana.[30] Mathilda's detailed description of her father's familial background and her own familial roots can be read as an attempt to understand the foundations of her life-story and her trauma. In other words, the opening of Mathilda's narrative enacts a search for (lost) origins and is in line with psychiatrists' claim that the "reconstructing of the trauma story" should "begin[] with a review of the patient's life before the trauma and the circumstances that led up to the event" (Herman, *Recovery* 176). Mathilda then gives an account of her

29 It should be noted that Mathilda's dream is a different kind than Maria's dreams in *The Wrongs of Woman*. While Maria's mainly constitute forms of re-experiencing the traumatic past, Mathilda's is uncanny and Gothic through its prophetic quality. Dramatically foreshadowing her father's death, the dream anticipates the imminent and irrevocable termination of the figurative dream of a blissful union with her father.

30 The fact that Mathilda views her father's story as a crucial part of her own is signalled by the opening sentence "I was born in England," followed by an immediate shift back to her father's past:"My father was a man of rank: he had lost his father early, and was educated by a weak mother […] " (6). It is revealing that Mathilda dedicates far more words to her father than her mother even in the opening pages.

early childhood, which she justifies as follows: "I must be allowed to dwell a little on the years of my childhood that it may be apparent how when one hope failed all life was to me a blank; and how when the only affection I was permitted to cherish was blasted my existence was extinguished within it" (11). Mathilda establishes a direct causal link between her childhood and her posttraumatic crisis after her father's suicide; she expresses the belief that her isolated childhood created a certain disposition in her character, a heightened vulnerability to a particularly violent response to adversity. This passage not only expresses the Godwinian view of the formative power of childhood experiences but also demonstrates a fundamental feature of how Mathilda narrativizes her life: she strives to make clear the overall plot of her tragedy and the causal connections between its individual acts. In other words, the overall structure of her narrative is not an episodic staging of different selves, not a dramatization of various subjectivities and identities, but the construction of one individual's (tragic) life-story, based on the principle of narrative coherence and on drawing clear causal connections between the determining events of her life. In this sense, the novella emphasizes the narrator's desire for a unified identity and a consistent life-story, alerting us to the basic psychological needs emphasized by Grawe.

Mathilda's self-fashioning and identity practices are, then, characterized by fundamental tensions. Her attitude towards identity oscillates between conflicting impulses – variety, multiplicity, and role-playing on the one hand and unity, stability, and control on the other – and these tensions are not resolved but co-exist throughout the novella. However, while Mathilda's dramatic self-narrativization as a literary heroine, with its impulse towards unity and control, could be read as a gesture towards working through, the construction of her life-story as a tragedy, ultimately, proves just as destabilizing and disempowering as her practice of assuming multiple literary identities. While Miller discusses Mathilda as a "heroine whose performative activities code her as a powerful actress or artist rather than as submissive victim" (292), I argue that a "powerful actress" or a "self-determinative" performer (304) is what Mathilda longs, but ultimately fails, to be. In contrast to Miller, I read Mathilda's construction of her autobiography as a tragedy as psychologically and emotionally disempowering. My reading is, thus, closer to Bunnell's, who asserts that Mathilda's self-dramatization illustrates the "dangers of a debilitating confusion of life with art" as well as the effects of an over-intense sensibility ("*Mathilda*" 76, 83). More specifically, while Mathilda's attempt to fit her life-story into a literary template expresses her desire to reduce the horror of her past, her choice of tragedy is disempowering in the way it reinforces a fatalistic sense of doom, forecloses any hope of recovery, and orients her towards death. The structure of unity that the frame of tragedy seems to promise revolves around adversity and suffering, thus feeding into Mathilda's pessimistic determinism and precluding the possibility of hope and happiness. Hence, Mathilda finds no way out of her identity

crisis. Her complex, multi-layered self-fashioning, even if it expresses a desire for agency and control, seems to take control of her.

SELF-NARRATION AND SYMPATHETIC "MANAGEMENT": THE FAILURES OF (SELF-)THERAPY

Mathilda's identity crisis and self-fashioning are closely connected with another crucial topos: the question of how *Mathilda* depicts processes of working through and recovery. I argue that while the novella evokes potential means of therapy and self-therapy, it does in fact depict these in a highly critical light. One way in which the novella explores the possibility of working through is in its representation of writing as a means of self-therapy. In the prelude to her story, Mathilda emphasizes her powerful urge to write her story: "Perhaps such a story as mine had better die with me, but a feeling that I cannot define leads me on and I am too weak both in body and mind to resist the slightest impulse" (5). This "impulse" also drives the protagonists in *The Wrongs of Woman* and *Mandeville* as well as a whole array of traumatized characters in Shelley's oeuvre – Woodville, Frankenstein and his creature, Beatrice in *Valperga*, Ellen/Clarice in "The Mourner," and Lionel Verney in *The Last Man* – who feel compelled to tell or write their stories. Although *Mathilda* evokes the idea of writing as self-therapy, the novella's frame pessimistically forecloses the possibility of recovery through written self-expression by closely linking the act of writing to death. In her opening reflections, Mathilda declares that it is only the certainty of her impending death that allows her to write: "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" (5). In her closing meditations, she returns to the theme of writing and death: "Farewell, Woodville, the turf will soon be green on my grave. […] There is my hope and expectation; your's are in this world; may they be fulfilled" (67). These final sentences suggest that the end of Mathilda's narration virtually coincides with the end of her life; her last words seem written on the verge of death. *Mathilda*, as Rajan puts it, "does not make its reading part of its diegesis, addressing itself only posthumously to Woodville"; as a result, it enacts a "resistance to productive reading" ("Melancholy" 61). Once again, the novella not only signals its refusal to fully participate in the Symbolic order but also undercuts the beneficial potential of written self-expression. Mathilda's imminent death makes clear that for her, writing can, at best, serve as "a palliative rather than a cure" (Brewer 157) and is doomed to fail as a means for her to connect to her fellow human beings.

The novella's approach to therapy is just as pessimistic as its approach to self-therapy. Like Mandeville's sister Henrietta, the poet Woodville can be seen as a

self-appointed "moral manager," attempting to cure Mathilda. As Joel Faflak writes, Woodville figures as the moral manager who breaks Mathilda's self-imposed isolation to "offe[r] the cure of sympathetic exchange" ("Inoperative" 727). Woodville, who finds consolation in confiding his story to Mathilda, repeatedly encourages her to do the same, to trust in "human sympathy," friendship, and "the voice of consolation and kindness" (54). He serves as a figure of contrast to Mathilda, embodying a different reaction to bereavement. His reaction to the tragic death of his beloved Eleonor is *not* to wish for a gradual death; instead, driven by his deep determination to "dedicate [his] life for the good of others" (59) and by his sense of a mission of human sympathy and virtue, he is able to see mourning as a way back to living. The contrast between Mathilda's death-oriented, pathological mourning and Woodville's life-affirming mourning highlights the depth of Mathilda's posttraumatic crisis, the intensity of her grief, and her resistance to recovery.

The reasons why Mathilda refuses to be cured by Woodville deserve closer attention. At first, Mathilda feels that Woodville's "words had magic in them" (55), and she experiences the moment she first verbalizes her suffering to him – though without revealing anything about the source of her suffering – as soothing and comforting: "I know not why but I found it sweet to utter these words to human ears" (54). Despite these moments of temporary relief, which point to the therapeutic value of self-expression, Mathilda firmly refuses to talk to Woodville about her traumatic past. The novella suggests that Mathilda's refusal to talk is rooted in her belief that her "wounds" are "far too deep […] for any cure" (54) and entirely unspeakable. She repeatedly emphasizes that the subject of incestuous desire is taboo, perceiving her life as determined by "sacred horrors" that she cannot tamper with (5) – at least not in direct, oral communication.

Shame is another reason for her inability or refusal to talk. As June Tangney and Ronda Dearing assert, guilt causes a "press towards confession, reparation and apology," while "feelings of shame are more likely to motivate a desire to hide or escape the shame-inducing situation" (19). While her final written confession could be seen as motivated by a sense of guilt that becomes stronger when she is alone and about to die, it is, perhaps, shame that forces Mathilda to hide herself from society and protect her secret from Woodville. By representing incest as unspeakable, the novella explores issues, as the discussion of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* will show, that still play a central role in postmodern literary texts. As Deborah Horvitz suggests, it seems that "[t]here is something uniquely 'unspeakable' about incest, as if discussing its existence exacerbates it" (14).[31] In different ways, both *Mathilda*

31 The unspeakability of incest is also foregrounded in P.B. Shelley's *The Cenci*, where Beatrice's incestuous rape by her father remains the unspeakable gap around which her speech circles compulsively.

and *A Thousand Acres* signal that the kind of transgression, emotional and/or sexual violation, and injury that incestuous desire tends to entail shatters so many assumptions and ideals about the family that any form of expression or exposure is exceedingly difficult. Incest figures as a secret that resists being revealed.[32]

In addition to implying that Mathilda feels talking about incest is taboo, the novella hints at further reasons why she refuses to confide in Woodville. She also seems suspicious of the therapeutic rationale that Woodville proposes: "[D]o not tell me why you grieve but only say the words, 'I am unhappy,' and you will feel relieved as if for some time excluded from all human intercourse by some magic spell you should suddenly enter again the pale of human sympathy" (54). Woodville here constructs a simplistic version of a talking cure, and it is precisely this "all-too-willing transference" that "makes Matilda uneasy" (Faflak, "Inoperative" 727). Furthermore, the novella calls attention to the problematics of authority, power, and dependence, which are key issues in the context of moral management. Woodville not only seems to force himself on Mathilda by trying "day after day to win [her] confidence" (61) rather than accepting her refusal to speak, but he also seems overly obsessed with the idea, and the satisfaction, of doing good: "[Y]ou smile; Oh, Congratulate me, hope is triumphant, and I have done some good" (60). Ironically, his self-imposed mission of "bestow[ing] happiness on another" (60) comes across as a form of self-gratification. Moreover, he fails to see the danger in the power he tries to win over her; he fails to see that for Mathilda, "sympathy" turns out to be "an additional torture" (56). As Clemit puts it, "for all his visionary insight into human ordering schemes, he is unable to respond sufficiently to Mathilda's human needs" ("*Frankenstein*" 40).[33]

The novella calls attention to the destructive effects of Woodville's version of moral management by conveying how quickly Mathilda becomes emotionally dependent on him: "[H]e left me and despair returned; the work of consolation was

32 The foregrounding of incest and unspeakability is one more way in which the text draws on Gothic conventions. Miller emphasizes that incest functions as a "common female gothic trope representing women's victimized position in patriarchal society" and stresses that the Gothic has often been identified as "literature based on unspeakable fears and personal secrets" (295). According to Nathaniel Leach, the interrelations between unspeakability and the Gothic are, in fact, at the very heart of *Mathilda*. Leach claims that the novella's "true source of Gothic horror" should be seen as lying "in the instabilities of language itself" (74).

33 Scrivener reads Woodville's visions in terms of a "cosmopolitan identity," being "intersubjective, formed in relation to a past and a future, oriented to a social project of enlightened modernity, informed by attention to the suffering of other people" (212). The novella demonstrates, however, that these cosmopolitan ideals are incompatible with Mathilda's pathological condition (212).

ever to begin anew" (55). On top of that, she feels painfully instrumentalized by him:

> I am, I thought, a tragedy; a character that he comes to see act: now and then he gives me the 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 a play to him, but to me this is all dreary reality. (56)

This passage, which dramatizes Mathilda's imaginary fall from a position of power as stage director to that of a powerless, self-alienated marionette, expresses a powerful critique of Woodville's version of moral management. It alerts us to the dark side of the moral manager's authority, to the ways in which the individual subjected to this kind of therapy can feel not only dependent and helpless but even abused and manipulated by the therapist. *Mathilda*, then, as Faflak emphasizes, can be said to revolve around "two halves" of a Romantic-era "psychiatric consciousness," situated between the two poles of a "democratic and empathic spirit" and a tendency "of foisting well-being upon populations in order better to manage their unwieldy psychological life" ("Inoperative" 721). The novella's critique of this strand of psychiatry is even more remarkable given that moral management tended – and to some extent still tends – to be celebrated as humane and kind, as a sign of progress and reform. In some ways, the novella's critique is more comprehensive than Godwin's in *Mandeville*: while Mandeville praises the beneficial effects of oral self-expression, of talking to a sympathetic listener, and argues that Henrietta's treatment would have worked had he been able to verbalize his wounds, Shelley's novella depicts not only Mathilda's *inability* to speak but also her *unwillingness* to be managed, implying a profound scepticism of psychiatric therapy.

Mathilda's refusal to be morally managed also needs to be seen in connection with her self-stylization as a tragic heroine. The novella suggests that her rejection of this psychiatric approach is closely linked to her perception of herself as a tragic heroine and her life as a tragedy. Although the strategy of representing her life based on a traditional cultural template may be a way of containing trauma, the structures of tragedy impose a deterministic autobiographical map onto her life that offers no space for recovery or room for escape. Whatever control this conceptual map offers, it does not put her on the road to becoming a "happy," "well-developed and self-fulfilled citizen[]," which Faflak identifies as the goal of moral management ("Inoperative" 721). While Mandeville seems to regret his failure to realize the therapy's potential, Mathilda does not; rather, she indulges in her suffering and cultivates her role as the embodiment of "Despair" (59). Hence, even though the novella explores the therapeutic potential of self-therapy and therapy, of life writing and oral self-expression combined with moral management, ultimately, the text conveys a radical scepticism towards the means and possibilities of cure; all potential pathways to recovery are blocked or seem doomed to fail from the beginning.

Even though Mathilda's theatrical and at times melodramatic staging of her despair may make us wonder to what extent she genuinely suffers, it is crucial that the novella never breaks out of the cycles of acting out. Mathilda seems so absorbed with the idea of the tragic heroine that this "role" becomes her identity.

MATHILDA WITHIN THE TRAUMA NARRATIVE OF MARY SHELLEY'S OEUVRE

In the last section, I want to relate the novella to other texts by Shelley in order to further examine and contextualize the text's exploration of the family as a site of trauma as well as its position on the (in)curability of posttraumatic suffering. In other words, I open up the perspective to Shelley's entire fictional oeuvre in order to grasp more fully the more general but also changing meanings of trauma in her oeuvre and to further illuminate the specificities of the approach to trauma represented by *Mathilda*. First of all, it is essential to note that repetition, which is a core element of the novella's poetics of trauma, also plays a vital role on an intertextual level. As Constance Walker observes, the same pattern of trauma repeats itself throughout Shelley's oeuvre:

> On a basic structural level, *Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and *The Last Man* all tell the same story of abandonment and mourning: like Mary Shelley herself, the eponymous characters progressively lose almost everyone dear to them to violent death or fatal illness and end up utterly alone, anticipating only their own deaths as a release from misery. (135)

Indeed, *Frankenstein*, *Mathilda*, *The Last Man*, and "The Mourner" are focused (perhaps obsessively) on abandonment, death, and mourning. In several other novels by Shelley (i.e., *Valperga, Lodore*, and *Falkner*), while trauma is not the only focus, it still occupies a central position. Time and again, Shelley examines severe tensions and disruptions within the nuclear family, repeatedly returning to complex father-daughter relationships, especially in "The Mourner" but also in *Lodore* and *Falkner*. While the incestuous and traumatizing potential of the relationships between Ethel and Lodore and even more between Elizabeth Raby and Falkner are muted in comparison with Mathilda and her father, both relationships reveal problems at the core of seemingly idyllic parental-filial attachments. Moreover, while the topos of the daughter as a trauma victim is particularly prominent in Shelley's oeuvre, her works are also peopled with a range of individuals whose traumas stem from other familial roles, including husbands and fathers (Mathilda's father), mothers (Idris in *The Last Man*), wives (Clorinda in *Lodore*; Perdita in *The Last Man*) and sons (Neville in *Falkner*; Villiers in *Lodore*). For example, Villiers and Neville

suffer from their estrangement from their fathers, and Neville is also traumatized by the inexplicable disappearance and sudden loss of his mother. In addition, Lodore and Falkner are depicted as "Byronic" figures: gloomy, melancholy, seeking a self-imposed exile from society, and burdened by a trauma of guilt that arises from complicated love and familial relationships. Shelley's texts abound with fundamentally conflicted child-parent relationships and other types of tensions, disruptions, and traumas in the family. Based on these striking repetitions, I read Shelley's oeuvre as an extensive trauma narrative that, like *Mathilda*, compulsively returns to certain traumas.

Given the pervasive importance of trauma in Shelley's oeuvre, it is not surprising that Shelley criticism has discussed the possibility of a therapeutic function underlying her works. Shelley does, in fact, state that writing *Mathilda* was "sufficient to quell [her] wretchedness temporarily" (*Journals* 442), which suggests that the novella can be seen as a "literary work of mourning" (Carlson 173). There are, however, considerable displacements between biographical and textual levels. Shelley was mourning the loss of her children at the time of composition, but *Mathilda* emphasizes a different kind of loss, the loss of a father. This displacement could be read as a distancing device, rendering the process of writing about death less painful at an early stage of severe crisis.[34] More generally, as Rajan asserts, *Mathilda* "confuses" the modes of autobiography and fiction in more intricate ways than, for example, the "'autonarrative' fictions" of Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays ("Melancholy" 48). In *Mathilda*, the relations between life and text, between real and fictional characters, must be seen as inherently instable.[35] Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that Shelley's texts consciously and self-reflexively explore processes of writing about trauma and suffering through the different protagonists and narrators.[36] In this sense, the multi-textual trauma narrative of Shelley's oeuvre offers a number of further negotiations of the potentials and limitations of self-therapy and therapy – negotiations that, as I want to demonstrate, constitute important contexts for the discussion of *Mathilda*.

34 Also, while the novella has repeatedly been interpreted as a sign of an incestuous attachment between Shelley and Godwin, it might, instead, reflect an acute crisis between them, one reason being that Godwin responded to Mary's profound sorrow after William's death with demands for money rather than with sympathy and consolation. Godwin's lack of empathy in this situation, as P.B. Shelley stresses in a letter to Leigh Hunt, significantly exacerbated her grief: "[H]e heaps on her misery, still misery" (*Journals* 291)

35 On Shelley's complex "mapping of real onto fictitious characters," see also Rajan's *Romantic Narrative* 94.

36 As McKeever writes, "[m]ore than a self-conscious examination of her own pathology, Shelley writes about the pathology of less fortunate individuals, unable to heal themselves through the purgation of writing" (191).

A crucial parallel between *Mathilda*, "The Mourner," and *Frankenstein* is that the moment of self-narration and confession happens when the possibility of recovery is undercut by the protagonist's imminent death. In "The Mourner," this deferral of verbalizing suffering is, as in *Mathilda*, connected to the unspeakability of trauma as well as a resistance to recovery. Like Mathilda, Ellen/Clarice denies herself the consolation that could come from sharing her harrowing past with her friend, drawing a veil of silence over the source of her "agony of woe" (106). As Brewer observes, "[t]he brusque way in which Mathilda and Ellen-Clarice reject the catharsis of oral self-expression […] suggests a somewhat masochistic desire to preserve their lonely sufferings from outside observation and interference" (175). Like Mathilda, Ellen/Clarice at last seeks to verbalize the sufferings caused by her traumatic past, yet only in writing and only when she is on the verge of death, leaving a "posthumous" letter to her friend Horace Neville. Even her "posthumous" writing, however, expresses how much trauma tends to defy verbalization. In her letter, the word "parricide," which embodies the trauma of her father's death and her guilt, abruptly breaks off ("the parrici___"), conveying that this loaded word, even at this moment, is still unspeakable and unwritable (106). Ellen/Clarice's inability to spell out the word that encapsulates her trauma is telling; it reinforces the story's emphasis on the act of self-expression and confession being deferred to a moment that is, literally, too late, a moment beyond hope or even life.

Similarly, in *Frankenstein*, the eponymous hero perceives his impending death as finally opening up a space for confessional narration, this time taking the form of oral self-expression. The novel also explores the unspeakability of trauma, but with a somewhat different emphasis than *Mathilda* and "The Mourner." While in the case of the two female trauma victims an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame seems to be the main reason they are unable to confide in others, in Frankenstein's case, his sense that trauma is beyond words seems to result mainly from his awareness of how difficult it will be to find a sympathetic listener for his tale. The focus in *Frankenstein* is less on a subjective sense of guilt and more on the knowledge that the traumatic stressor, the creature, is an embodiment of the unthinkable and ungraspable. Thus, it is not a coincidence that Frankenstein finally tells his story in a place where the listener's confidence can more likely be won, namely, the Arctic: "Were we among the tamer scenes of nature I might fear to encounter your unbelief, perhaps your ridicule; but many things will appear possible in these wild and mysterious regions" (187). The sublime landscape, far away from society and civilization, functions as a space of empowerment for the trauma victim, where, long alienated and isolated from social connections, he can finally speak and be heard. However, as in "The Mourner" and *Mathilda,* the narration of trauma does not lead the trauma victim back into life; it ends with and culminates in his death – the novel denies Frankenstein the possibility of recovery. Nevertheless, the fact that Shelley has Frankenstein, unlike Mathilda and Ellen/Clarice, choose oral narration and

choose to face his addressee directly is pertinent. It reinforces by contrast Shelley's depiction of the female trauma victims' persistent resistance to recovery and their refusal to leave their absorption in suffering.

Shelley's exploration of the (im)possibility of therapy and recovery takes a different shape in her depiction of Beatrice, one of the female protagonists in her 1823 historical novel *Valperga*. On the one hand, the orphan Beatrice figures as one of the most severely traumatized characters in Shelley's oeuvre and also represents the unspeakability of trauma with particular intensity. On the other hand, her act of (therapeutic) talking happens at a moment when cure is not rendered impossible by the imminence of death. Beatrice's main traumatic experience, preceded and followed by a period of imprisonment as a result of the Inquisition, is her three-year imprisonment in Tripalda's "infernal house," where she endures unspeakable terrors. The unspeakability of trauma is here foregrounded even more than in Shelley's earlier trauma writing: in Beatrice's story, the core of her traumatic experience is missing, a gap that is never filled. Beatrice's narration revolves around this gap, but only to emphasize repeatedly its unspeakability: "Then something happened, what I cannot now tell, terrific it most certainly was. […] But I have said enough, nor will I tell that which would chill your warm blood with horror" (256-57). The profound tension between the trauma victim's urge to speak and the difficulty of verbalizing trauma comes across particularly powerfully in these passages. The central sentence, "[i]t was the carnival of devils, when we miserable victims were dragged out to —" (257), ends abruptly on a dash, breaking off into the silence of the untellable.

Although Beatrice never fully breaks through the wall of silence around the core of her trauma, both Euthanasia and Beatrice state that talking about the past, albeit in vague and general ways, has a positive effect. In fact, *Valperga* demonstrates the therapeutic potential of a talking cure more explicitly than Shelley's other trauma narratives, perhaps because it combines therapy with the positive potential of female friendship. The text implies that the main reason the talking cure fails is not Euthanasia's therapeutic approach but the malice of the witch Mandragola, who reawakens Beatrice's delusion that she is a Catholic prophetess, thereby precipitating Beatrice's fall from a posttraumatic crisis into actual madness. Despite the therapy's failure, it is significant that Euthanasia's attempt is not depicted as problematic in the way Woodville's moral management is; represented as potentially (although not actually) successful, Euthanasia's talking cure does not seem to involve the problems of authority, power, and dependence that Woodville's therapy entails for Mathilda. This contrast between the two texts' negotiations of therapy could be seen as implying that female friendship might function as a healthier ground for therapy than male-female relationships because it does not reproduce problematic power relations, especially structures of female dependence.

Even though the female version of a talking cure in *Valperga* is depicted less critically than the male one in *Mathilda*, Shelley still refrains from idealizing female friendship as a site of therapy. In *Mathilda*, sympathy figures as a trap that proves destructive. In some ways, *Valperga* makes us wonder if Euthanasia's sympathy for her friend is, indeed, beneficial because Euthanasia makes one fundamental misinterpretation of Beatrice's mental illness. According to the mental topography envisioned by Euthanasia, madness and "poetry and imagination" are closely connected and located in the same "inner cave" of the human mind (263). Beatrice, however, violently rejects this mental topography:

> "Talk no more in this strain," she said; "every word you utter tells me only too plainly what a lost wretch I am. No content of mind exists for me, no beauty of thought, or poetry; and, if imagination live, it is as a tyrant, armed with fire, and venomed darts, to drive me to despair." (263)

Beatrice emphatically expresses that she experiences her mental illness not as a source of beauty or poetry but purely as a source of destructive delusions, despair, and suffering. The discrepancy between Euthanasia's theory and Beatrice's suffering is an indication that, even here, Shelley's representation of therapy has a critical edge, signalling how difficult it is for a therapist to respond with the appropriate kind of empathy.

Euthanasia's view of madness also calls to mind Brewer's claim that trauma is often linked to poetry, creativity, and genius in Shelley and, as a result, is represented in less bleak ways than in Godwin (29). With regard to *Valperga*, I find Brewer's reading problematic, especially because of Beatrice's refusal to accept Euthanasia's link between madness and genius but also because of the text's continuous emphasis on the fragility of Beatrice's mental health and the intensity of her suffering. If at all, the claim about Shelley's linking of mental disturbances and creativity seems more plausible with regard to *Mathilda*. From childhood on, Mathilda's lonely existence and suffering significantly contribute to her lively imagination and her creation of fictional worlds; it is through her lasting posttraumatic crisis that Mathilda becomes a writer, and it is her excessive grief and depressive passion that drive her to self-fashion herself as a tragic heroine. However, as the discussion of intertextuality has shown, *Mathilda*, like *Valperga*, refrains from celebrating the mentally unstable individual's indulging in imagination and creativity as a source of empowerment. Retreating into the imaginary worlds of literature and mythology is depicted as a coping strategy that, while aimed at gaining a sense of control, is in many ways destabilizing and disempowering. Even though Mathilda stages her suffering and incurability, her staging often escapes her control; what eventually dominates is still, as is the case with Beatrice, the agony of unbear-

able wounds. In the end, a sense of incurability underlies Shelley's trauma narratives from *Mathilda* to *Valperga*.

However, Shelley's later works display a shift away from incurability. Her apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* (1826) functions as the point of transition in this respect. The novel does echo or even redouble *Mathilda*'s fatalistic tone and emphasis on death and mourning, evoking an exceedingly bleak vision of the world where the plague is a never-ending source of trauma.[37] Nevertheless, Lionel Verney, the autodiegetic narrator and "last man," embodies endurance and survival more than he embodies trauma. In contrast to his wife Idris and his sister Perdita, Verney's mental and physical health are exceptionally stable. Despite the endless series of deaths, Verney's grief does not become pathological, and he is the only character who recovers from the plague and survives. In this way, *The Last Man* creates a tension between the relentlessness of death and trauma on the one hand and the protagonist-narrator's recovery, endurance, and survival on the other.

It is significant, though, that the reasons for Verney's exceptional resilience remain obscure. In fact, it is only in Shelley's later novels *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837) that the scene of trauma changes drastically and a shift towards curability and working through is explicitly enacted. In these later works, which have sometimes been labelled "sentimental," trauma victims are no longer incurable. *Lodore* and *Falkner* break through the earlier mode of fatalism and tragedy, ending with a clear move towards domestic harmony, happiness, and peace; the plot resolutions contain symbolic gestures that point to familial reintegration and the reconstitution of family structures. Shelley's last novel, *Falkner*, explores the development of the orphan Elizabeth Raby and her struggle to reconcile the two men she loves: her husband Neville and her surrogate father Falkner. Her mission of fostering forgiveness and reconciliation is successful and finally allows for a peaceful domestic reunion. Shelley's second-last novel *Lodore* is even more relevant as a reference point for *Mathilda*. In *Lodore*, Ethel's initial reaction to her father's death resembles Mathilda's. She is first seized by a severe illness and then continues to mourn excessively, focusing her whole existence on her father. Like Mathilda, she is obsessed with death and suffers from a profound sense of alienation. Unlike Mathilda, however, Ethel succeeds in forming an attachment to a lover and husband. It is significant that the kind of wound, the kind of traumatizing relationship that was depicted as fatally irresolvable fourteen years earlier in *Mathilda* turns out to be curable in Ethel's case. Moreover, in *Lodore*, the salient absence of mothers in texts like *Mathilda* and *Frankenstein* is replaced by a detailed exploration of a mother-

37 This source of trauma is, as in the case of Frankenstein's creature, beyond human powers. In this "story of human vulnerability and helplessness in the face of what is described as a 'virulent, immedicable disease'" (Walker 139), trauma is thus associated with the uncontrollable and uncontainable even more than in *Mathilda*.

daughter relationship whose driving element is Lady Lodore's conversion from an immature, unloving, and non-maternal figure to a loving, benevolent, self-sacrificing mother.[38] In contrast to the earlier trauma texts, *Falkner* and *Lodore*, then, allow for scenarios of recovery, reconciliation, and reintegration.

Hence, if we read Shelley's oeuvre as a trauma narrative, we can trace a shift from acting out trauma to working through and recovery (embodied in the contrast between Mathilda and Ethel) as well as from a bleak and fatalistic to a more optimistic and hopeful outlook. In spite of this shift, it is important to recognize how many kinds of family-centred traumatic experiences and how many approaches to the (im)possibility of working through trauma and recovery Shelley's oeuvre explores. Even in her later fiction, there is still a remarkable frequency of and emphasis on deeply painful and traumatic experiences happening within the context of the family. The kind of trauma dominating *Mathilda* has not disappeared in *Lodore* and *Falkner*; it is still present, albeit in a muted form, lurking at the interstices of a seemingly romantic plot. Yet the pervasiveness of trauma that characterizes the plot, narration, psychology, and poetics of *Mathilda* makes the novella one of the core texts (if not *the* core text) in the extensive, multi-textual trauma narrative spanning from *Frankenstein* to *Falkner*.

On the whole, the repetition of trauma at the heart of Shelley's oeuvre displays the fundamental ambivalence of repetition that Anne Whitehead describes: "Repetition is inherently ambivalent, suspended between trauma and catharsis" as well as between "remain[ing] caught within trauma's paralysing influence" and "work[ing] towards memory and catharsis" (*Trauma Fiction* 86-87). While Shelley's earlier work embodies the former and her later work the latter, the tension between the compulsive, uncontrolled repetition of acting out and the conscious, controlled repetition of working through is never fully resolved. Shelley's larger trauma narrative, then, returns to fissures and disruptions in the family, which take on more or less pessimistic shapes; however, what remains at its core is the repeated scenario of the nuclear family degenerating from a safe haven to a cradle of trauma, a scenario also found in *The Wrongs of Woman*. Yet while Wollstonecraft's deeply political text focuses on cycles of trauma caused by wilful "wrongs" such as abuse and violence, Shelley's trauma writing puts special emphasis on the emotional impact of death as well as ungovernable passions. Hence, although Shelley's trauma writing also has important political dimensions, notably its exploration of gender issues, its representation of trauma revolves more strongly than the writing of her parents and,

38 This mother-daughter relationship could be read as one important indication of a more general shift: it seems that the shift towards curability in Shelley's oeuvre goes hand in hand with an increasing emphasis on female-female relationships, which can also be illustrated with the theme of female friendship that is introduced in *Valperga* and plays a prominent role in *Lodore* through Ethel and Fanny Derham.

perhaps, even compulsively around trauma's uncontainable, irrational, and fatalistic aspects.

Mathilda is far more than a fictional reflection of Shelley's personal trauma and suffering; it is a nuanced exploration of a complex psychology and poetics of trauma. Framed as the "posthumous" writings of a young woman who struggles with unspeakable secrets about father-daughter incest, the text reveals how trauma can lead to a state of depressive stagnation and solipsistic absorption in suffering – a mental and emotional state of death-in-life. Mathilda's negative impulses are mainly directed against herself, in the form of self-destructive and suicidal tendencies and a disruptive sense of guilt that often turns into shame. Yet the psychology depicted in *Mathilda* is more complex than that: a core tension that runs throughout the novella is the tension between the pathological and the performative, between the disrupted self and self-fashioning. One side of Mathilda's performative identity practice is enacted textually through an extensive use of short, often de-contextualized intertextual fragments; it emerges as destabilizing for the traumatized individual by opening up multiple fragmentary identities instead of reconsolidating her already disrupted self. Nevertheless, there is one interpretation of her life that Mathilda particularly clings to and that stands for her attempts at (re)gaining a sense of unity: the view of herself as a tragic heroine. The essential paradox that the novella implies, however, is that even though Mathilda's attempt at interpreting and staging her life as a tragedy represents a desire for unity, consistency, and control, the structure of tragedy is inherently destabilizing, especially in the way it reinforces Mathilda's fatalism, her resistance to recovery, and her fixation on death. The literary template of tragedy offers no way out for the protagonist-narrator because its "unity" depends on misery and misfortune. Hardened in her belief that she is a tragic heroine, Mathilda refuses to be cured by Woodville. The problematic aspects of Woodville's moral management certainly influence Mathilda's rejection of his kind of therapy, and the novella here also participates critically in early nineteenth-century psychiatric discourses. Nevertheless, Mathilda's rejection of therapy is symptomatic of a more general resistance to recovery.

One question that remains is this: how much of Mathilda's suffering is genuine and to what extent can her self-fashioning be read as reinforcing or even generating her absorption in suffering? It seems to me that, ultimately, *Mathilda* challenges precisely this distinction between a "genuine" self or "genuine" feelings on the one hand and a performed self or performed feelings on the other. The novella explores in what ways Mathilda's identity is not performed but performative; in other words, it represents her self-fashioning not just as a theatrical role that she enacts but as an ongoing process that, in fact, creates her self. The self she fashions from the literary template of tragedy becomes her psychic reality, becomes her "genuine" self. Hence, even while the longing for death may originate through her theatrical, tragical self-fashioning, it cannot be dismissed as mere histrionics because, in the end,

the only prospect in which Mathilda does find consolation and comfort lies in the last "scene" of her tragedy, a scene that lies beyond the frame of her narrative: her own death. With Mathilda's farewell words to Woodville, "[*t*]*here* is my hope and my expectation" (67), this bleak trauma narrative, which is both diegetically and textually pervaded by trauma, comes full circle, ending, as it began, with the focus on Mathilda's imminent death.