
Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* and the Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity

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From her first appearance on the page in August of 1819, Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* has both intrigued and horrified her readers. William Godwin was appalled by the tale, which provides a first-person account of a young woman and her father's incestuous desire for her, writing that "if [it were] ever published, [it would need] a preface to prevent [readers] from being tormented by ... the fall of the heroine" (Clemit 68). His refusal to publish the manuscript buried it for 140 years, but when it surfaced again in 1959, Elizabeth Nitchie and other early critics took a psychobiographical approach to Shelley's heroine, conflating *Mathilda* with the life of her creator and proposing that the text allowed Shelley to dramatize her "excessive & romantic attachment" to her father (Nitchie 459). However, in the 1990s, Charles Robinson challenged psychoanalytic readings by reading *Mathilda* as not a tragic victim, but as an unreliable narrator—a self-constructed dramatic actress who seizes control of her own script in a novella that explores *theatrum mundi*. He stresses Shelley's distance from her protagonist, arguing that she does not seem to "like" this "substantially flawed" heroine who carelessly blurs the lines between fiction and reality (Robinson 77).

Robinson's reading of *Mathilda* as a dramatic actress who feigns passivity in an attempt to control the other players in her script is especially suggestive in the context of a tradition of female gothic heroines who passively triumph over masculine evil. As Diane Hoeveler explains, "the [female] victims [in gothic fiction] earned their special status and rights through no action of their own but through their sufferings and persecutions at the hands of a patriarchal oppressor and tyrant. One would be rewarded ... for what one passively suffered" (Hoeveler 152). Hoeveler easily locates *Mathilda* within this female gothic tradition, asserting that for Shelley "gothic feminism ... is embodied in the sense of herself and female body as a void, an empty signifier, a lure into the cycle of painful birth and disappointing death" (Hoeveler 183). However, while on the surface, *Mathilda* appears to replicate the conventional gothic tale of an evil patriarch's victimization of his daughter, recent feminist re-readings suggest that Shelley also leaves open the possibility that *Mathilda* knowingly creates an Oedipal incest narrative to gain

empowerment—specifically the ability to tell her own story. As Kathleen A. Miller argues in her analysis of the novella's relationship to both female gothic convention and dramatic tradition, Mathilda might also be read as “exert[ing] a covert form of power through ‘pretend and staged weakness,’” which gives her control over the outcome of her narrative (Miller 298). After all, only in isolation, after the suicide of her father and her withdrawal from the poet suitor whose powerful voice threatens her own artistic vision, can Shelley's heroine wield her pen undisturbed, free to tell the story of her unhappy life according to her own design.

Miller suggests that this reading of Mathilda offers readers “a positive model of female agency,” since she finally emerges as “a heroine whose performative activities code her as a powerful actress or artist rather than as a submissive victim” (292). However, while Shelley's text certainly illuminates nineteenth-century patriarchal society's obstacles to female self-expression, it also draws attention to the problematic nature of securing agency through artifice—Mathilda may have created a document that allows her to finally perform her own subjectivity, but it is precisely that: a performance, full of contrivances and shaped by a problematic ideology that demands (and rewards) female weakness and passivity. By forming Mathilda as, to borrow Robinson's assessment, “a substantially flawed character” who performs victimization in order to obtain certain liberties, Shelley critiques both her heroine and the society that produces her, indicting an oppressive social system that provides women with no other option. Through readings of Mathilda's narrative voice, the relationships that threaten it, and the questionable means by which she regains control of her script, we can see Mathilda not as a reductive, biographical representation of Shelley as a woman writer, but as a carefully constructed character who allows us to glimpse Shelley's anxiety about the sacrifices necessary to secure female narrative autonomy in her society.

From the very opening of the text, Mathilda performs the role of the tragic heroine, drawing the reader in so she can reveal her terrible secret before she takes her dying breath. “Perhaps a history such as mine had better die with me,” she writes, “but I am too weak both in body and mind to resist the slightest impulse” (175). As Julie Carlson suggests, by writing her life story on her deathbed, Mathilda links writing to death from the start of the novella; imminent death and her special status as victim has given her the license to write “what she could not say while living” about the taboo of father/daughter incest (Carlson 108). As Shelley soon reveals, it seems that our heroine has been waiting for the “license” to write freely for nearly all of her short life, just as she has been waiting for an audience. From the beginning of Mathilda's depiction of her lonely childhood, Shelley emphasizes the extent to which her heroine's voice was sternly policed by authority figures.

When Mathilda attempts to form friendships with the girls of the village, her cold aunt “interposes her authority,” because, as Mathilda explains, she ‘was fearful lest I should acquire the Scotch accent and dialect ... great pains [were] taken that my tongue should not disgrace my English origin” (183). Mathilda’s speech is so restricted in her isolation with the unfriendly aunt that for some time her only narrative exchange exists outside of language; Mathilda writes that when she played her harp, she could “pour forth to it my hopes and loves, and I fancied that its sweet accents answered me” (185).

The dying Mathilda tells us that as she grew older, “books in some degree supplied the place of human intercourse” (184). “I was a solitary being,” she writes, “I brought Rosalind and Miranda and the lady of Comus to life to be my companions ... imagining myself to be in their situations” (185). Robinson identifies this as the origin of Mathilda’s development into a dramatic actress who lives in a world of fiction; our heroine reveals that as a lonely child, she would “lose herself” in female dramatic roles, blurring the lines of fantasy and reality (Robinson 78). However, while Mathilda appears to exercise some degree of narrative control at this point in her childhood, bringing to life her favorite literary characters at will and mentally writing herself into their scripts, Shelley reminds us that her existence is ultimately shaped by the words of the father, who remains powerful in his absence. She writes:

the idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination. I bestowed on him all my affections; there was a miniature of him that I gazed on continually; I copied his last letter and read it again and again ... I repeated with transport those words,—“One day I may claim her at your hands.” (185)

Shelley creates a vivid image of a woman engaged in the act of writing, but her potential to create is thwarted by her idolatry for her father. Mathilda’s early acts of writing remain confined to the strokes of her father’s pen; she copies the words of the father in her own hand, writing herself into being according to his own vision and centering her fantasies around his return. Mathilda might, as Robinson and others suggest, possess powerful (and potentially dangerous) imaginative capabilities, but at this point in the text, her imagination is, as she writes, “hung upon the scene of recognition”—the long anticipated moment of reunion.

At first, Mathilda’s reunion with her father proves pleasurable; she can finally play the role of daughter in the fantasy she has scripted many times in her imagination. The maddening silence and isolation of her youth has ended, and she feels as though she has “just begun to live” (187). “The voice of affection was so new to me,” Mathilda confesses, “that I hung with delight upon his words when he told me

what he had felt concerning me during these long years of apparent forgetfulness” (187). However, a discernable anxiety underlies Mathilda’s memory of the happy reunion. Shelley emphasizes the fact that Mathilda is specifically impressed with her father as a poet, a dynamic creative force, and powerful storyteller. His words have a profound, bodily impact on Mathilda. When he describes “the whirlwind” that “tore his feelings” when Mathilda’s mother died, she writes that “he gave his words the impress of life so vividly that I believed while I trembled” (189). The violence characterizing the father’s speech suggests that a conflict has been initiated. Mathilda seems entrenched in a battle of storytelling, and her father has proven to be a more than worthy opponent; she reveals that he has the power to “disrupt” his daughter’s “thoughts,” make her “shudder” with his words, “to drive away bitter memories by bright hopes” (189). It seems that the actual reunion fails to match the expectations Mathilda’s fantasies; after all, her favorite vision featured her “disguised like a boy” during the crucial moment of recognition, perhaps suggesting that she had envisioned a greater degree of equality or agency in the relationship than what proves available to her in reality. Ultimately, her love for her father seems to be eclipsed by the threat he poses to the peaceful world of fantasy where she wrote all the scripts and played all the parts; she must find a way to regain control.

Mathilda confides that her initially idyllic relationship with her father was shattered by her his incestuous desire for her, dramatically revealed in his whispered: “My Daughter, I love you!” However, both Robinson and Miller argue that Mathilda provokes her father’s confession in order to regain control of her script, staging the scene as she has staged countless others in her imagination. As Miller points out, Mathilda is the one who repeatedly introduces the topic of incest by referencing works that cast the daughter as sexual aggressor; for instance, mentioning that Myrrha is the best of Alfieri’s tragedies while she cast her eyes on her father and “met his gaze” (192; Miller 298). Additionally, just before the father utters that fateful “I love you,” Mathilda seems to baits him: “In the despair of my heart I see what you cannot conceal” she cries, “you no longer love me ... I know it—you hate me!” (201). As Miller suggests, “by asking explicitly if he no longer loves her, Mathilda establishes a situation where her father’s reply to her queries must acknowledge his love for her” (Miller 298). Mathilda’s reaction assigns sinister significance to her father’s words; she acts out her disgust for him and stages his disgrace and subsequent retreat: “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 serpent” (202). This fit seals the father’s fate; he flees, committing suicide in shame, and Mathilda is again alone on her stage.

With her father out of the picture, Mathilda's immediate concern is "escape" (218). In order to "purchase her freedom," Mathilda elects to stage her own death and withdraw from society (217). Shelley notes that her heroine "lays her plan with art," securing money and planning each detail carefully (217). Mathilda expresses obligatory shame and disgust about her willingness to engage in "artifice and contrivances" telling her reader that the "reality of the crime" makes her "shudder and turn from the remembrance" (221). While the "crime" here can refer to her deceit in staging her own demise, as Miller argues, Shelley also leaves open the possibility that the heroine knows her real crime is the deliberate entrapment and disposal of the father. Additionally, Mathilda cannot seem to resist letting her reader know what a skilled craftswoman she is; she writes of her performance of grief in London after her father's death: "Do not mistake me; I never was really mad. I was always conscious of my state when my wild thoughts seemed to drive me to insanity, and never betrayed them to aught but silence and solitude. The people around me saw nothing of all this" (219).

Despite her attempts to perform guilt and sadness for the reader, Mathilda cannot seem to hide the pleasure she feels in forging a new life and identity for herself, even if the role that she has scripted is that of a fallen heroine. Mathilda revels in the romanticized freedom of her new identity:

methought I was an altered creature. Not the wild, raving and most miserable Mathilda but a youthful Hermitess dedicated to seclusion and whose bosom she must strive to keep free from all tumult and unholy despair—The fanciful nun-like dress that I had adopted; the knowledge that my existence was a secret known only to myself; the solitude to which I was hereafter destined nursed gentle thoughts in my wounded heart. (219)

Mathilda confesses that she "lost all this suffering when she was free" in the wild heath, and she clearly derives great satisfaction in her new role as "youthful Hermitess," dressed in a fanciful "nun-like" costume. In solitude, Mathilda seems at last to possess the agency she has desired; since no one knows of her existence, no one can threaten the narrative authority she wields.

No one, that is, except the poet Woodville. Critics who interpret the novella as a taboo tale of sexual victimization tend to read Woodville as either another sexual threat, or as the lost opportunity, someone who "had it not been for the sexual stigma of her body, should have been [a] suitor" (Champagne 55). However, both Robinson and Miller read the poet as another "creative male presence" who, as another writer, threatens Mathilda's control over her script (Miller 302). It is important to note that Woodville is not depicted in the same light as the nameless father, who can easily stand in for the evils of patriarchy as a whole; he

is an idealized man, a gentle and sensitive poet who answers Mathilda's wish for "one friend to love her" (222). However, despite her admiration for Woodville, Mathilda soon begins to struggle with the dynamics of their romantic friendship, anxious that she is beginning to lose control over her thoughts and, because of his position as a potential suitor, perhaps even the conclusion of her narrative. "When we were together I spoke little," Mathilda reveals, "and my selfish mind was sometimes borne away by the rapid course of his ideas" (228). Eventually our heroine grows resentful, seething,

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

As Shelley's language indicates, Mathilda fears that her relationship with Woodville will compromise her carefully earned creative mastery. The poet, who has also experienced tragedy, constantly attempts to draw her out of her scripted role of miserable hermitess through his persuasive speeches, but Mathilda is loathe to "make a speech more to his purpose" or follow any cues other than her own. Miller aptly observes that Mathilda's response to this loss of control is to try to make Woodville an actor in her female gothic drama by forcing him to commit suicide with her; Mathilda senses that the only way they can continue without him usurping control over her ability to stage their simultaneous deaths. But the poet refuses to yield to her artistic vision by allowing her to write this unhappy ending, and soon departs forever (Miller 302).

Ultimately, after Woodville's departure, *Mathilda* resists gothic female convention in its refusal to end with the resolution of a heterosexual marriage plot. Of course, happy marriage is rarely an option in Shelley's world; Anne K. Mellor and other feminist critics have elsewhere noted the dangers of domesticity, particularly for young women with childbearing potential (Mellor 175; Carlson 106). However, closing the tale with Mathilda's marriage to Woodville would also deny Shelley the opportunity to emphasize the horrifying reality of her heroine's struggle for narrative autonomy: the only way Mathilda can truly maintain control the outcome of her script in patriarchal society is to write her own death. By willingly anticipating the end of her life, she ensures that no other possible demise will lurk in the dark corners of the domestic sphere, stealing her pen from her before she is prepared. She will not die in childbirth or from fever or as a result of the foolish actions of a male romantic egoist, like so many of Shelley's other silent or effaced heroines, from Caroline Beaufort to Elizabeth Lavenza to Mathilda's

own mother Diana. Instead, she chooses to maintain control over her script to the very last moment, even if it means giving up life. As she writes in an eerie farewell to the reader: “This was the drama of my life which I have no depicted upon paper ... I close my work; the last I shall *perform*” (245, emphasis added). It comes at the cost of her father’s life as well as her own, and it is shaped by her need for the license her status as a victim permits, but Mathilda finally tells her own story uninterrupted, right down its tragic conclusion.

Mary Shelley once wrote in her journals, “If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever befriended women when—oppressed—at every risk I have defended & supported victims to the social system—But I do not make a boast” (Shelley, *The Journals* 553). This comment seems to encapsulate Shelley’s work in *Mathilda*; she does not “make a boast” outright, but she does provides her reader with a disturbing glimpse into the mind of a young woman whose desire to “give words to her dark tale” drives her to script her own subject position as victim, a woman who will go to any length to ensure that the tale will be “dark” enough to give her the license to tell it. She reveals her intense empathy for oppressed women by creating a heroine who commits terrifying acts of artifice and manipulation in order to indict the social system that produced her: a system where victimization and death seem to provide Mathilda with the only real opportunity for female narrative autonomy. Perhaps Shelley does not “make a boast,” as Mary Wollstonecraft did with her bold and unapologetic feminist tracts, but by penning the dying words of a young woman who seems to end her life to maintain control, she unleashes a narrative that continues to resonate with modern audiences: a narrative that forever reminds readers of the cost of Mathilda’s freedom.

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