



*Philological Review*

Volume 40

Spring 2014

Number 1



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## **Dirty Drawers and Dynasties: Faulkner and Condé on What Women Want and Get**

Amy Schmidt and Terrell Tebbetts

Guadeloupean novelist Maryse Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove* joins other novels in her canon—*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* and *Windward Heights*—in incorporating intertextual connections with canonical English-language authors. It even intensifies the connections, for while the earlier works connected with single novels—Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*—*Crossing the Mangrove* connects with William Faulkner as author not just of one novel but of three. Ruthmarie Mitsch mentions (but does not explore) connections between Condé's novel and two of Faulkner's—*As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* (58), and many of Faulkner's readers would add a third—*Absalom, Absalom!*. The many connections between Condé's and Faulkner's texts constitute an invitation, specifically an invitation to consider how *Crossing the Mangrove* enters a conversation with Faulkner's works, engaging them in what Richard Gray has called an “open dialogue” between writers in the “vast sprawl” of the “literary tradition” (ix).

Condé invites the intertextual conversation through several varied connections. First, she employs a prose style noticeably reminiscent of Faulkner's; in a close study of the novel's syntax, Celia Britton focuses on its “long sentences with numerous embedded subordinate clauses,” all “carefully constructed” (38). Second, Condé uses a narrative structure that adapts the structures of *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, with multiple, variously unreliable narrators whose names head their chapters, some of the chapters in first person and others in limited third person. Third, Condé creates a setting as closed, isolated, and insular as Jefferson, Mississippi: the narratives unfold in Rivière au Sel, a Guadeloupean

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village “buried in the back of beyond” (CM 20), where everyone knows everyone else’s family histories and where gossip keeps alive old resentments and opens up new ones. Fourth, Condé creates several characters seemingly modeled on Faulkner’s: Sonny Pélagie, for instance, has a severe intellectual disability like Benjy Compson’s, leaving him “mute, dribbling, fidgeting and grotesque” (CM 90), yet like Benjy, Sonny narrates a section of the novel. Léocadie Timothée is a retired school teacher who hated her students as much as Addie Bundren hated hers, sneering at the choirboys as “little devils in surplices” (CM 113), taking “revenge on the children” (CM 114), and developing a “longer list of punishments” as she grows more bitter (CM 117). Most noticeably, perhaps, Condé’s Mira Lameaulnes has a fatherless child named Quentin.

Finally, Condé adapts plot elements from *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. The narratives all take place during a wake for a man named Francis Sancher, who, like Addie Bundren, lies in his coffin before all the narrators. Though the wake involves much of the town, the dominant attenders are the families of two young women who became Sancher’s lovers, families as fully marked with incest and dysfunction as the Compsons and the Bundrens. The dead man, however, resembles not Addie Bundren but Thomas Sutpen: Francis Sancher arrived in the community from unknown origins and with connections to revolutions in foreign lands, and he remains a largely resented and mysterious stranger even after his death. Thus the novel becomes a mystery as complex as *Absalom, Absalom!*. First as it raises similar questions regarding Sancher, one of his young lovers explicitly pondering “the enigma of who he was” (CM 161), it revisits questions regarding Sutpen’s past and purposes. Second, it

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revisits questions regarding Charles Bon's murder as it raises similar questions regarding the death of Sancher himself. Third, and most important for this essay, it revisits tacit questions regarding Faulkner's largely silent young women, for in giving narratives to Sancher's two young lovers, Mira and Vilma, narratives in which they reveal what led to their giving themselves to Sancher, it suggests that those voices may well be not only Mira's and Vilma's but possibly Caddy Compson's, Dewey Dell Bundren's and Ellen Coldfield's as well. The chief substance, the meat of Condé's dialogue with Faulkner, arises in its exploration of the mysteries surrounding Sancher's lovers and his lovers' relations with their prominent but dysfunctional families.

Sancher's first young lover, Mira, is a member of the Lameaulnes family, which very much resembles the Compsons. The family is headed by a patriarch, Loulou, with a long ancestry. It lacks a functional mother even more than the Compsons, for Loulou's first wife has died and his second has been abused into silence. The Lameaulnes son Aristide and his half-sister Mira have had an incestuous relationship even more intense than Quentin and Caddy Compson's, for their relationship has moved from desire to sexual expression. And finally, Mira has named her fatherless child Quentin. The Lameaulnes family's connections to the Compsons could hardly be stronger.

Sancher's second young lover, Vilma, is a member of the Ramsaran family, which resembles the Bundrens. They too are headed by a patriarch, Silvestre; they have a mother, Rosa, who is very much absent from the lives of her children. The Ramsaran children, like the

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Bundrens, number four sons and one daughter. Like Dewey Dell, Vilma is pregnant out of wedlock throughout the novel.

The sexual affair between Lameaulnes siblings, in its connection to the siblings' relations with their parents and in its effect on the siblings, provides a provocative part of the novel's dialogue with *The Sound and the Fury*. In addition, the attraction Sancher holds for Mira and Vilma is at the center of its dialogue with both *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and even *Absalom, Absalom!*, unsurprisingly so given Condé's noted frankness regarding "female sexuality" (Leservot 49). In both Mira's and Vilma's cases, Condé seems to be asking Faulkner, his readers, and her readers to consider not only what her women but also what Faulkner's women want, what Caddy Compson, Dewey Dell Bundren, and Ellen Coldfield seek in going to the men they take as lovers and husbands.

### **The Dysfunctional Family**

Condé's Mira Lameaulnes and Vilma Ramsaran are as alienated from their parents as Faulkner's Caddy Compson and Dewey Dell Bundren are. Though specifics vary, all four young women are fully alienated from mother and father alike. Caddy's alienation sets the standard. Caroline Compson's words make crystal clear how distant she is from her daughter: repeatedly Caroline groups Caddy among the three children she classifies as "others" (*SF* 94, 102, 104), those who are "not my flesh and blood" (*SF* 104); she even wonders if Caddy "can be my child" (*SF* 103). Caroline's swings between spying on Caddy and retreating into hypochondria seal the distance between mother and daughter. As for her father, although Caddy shows concern

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for him as she prepares to leave home, urging Quentin to “*look after Benjy and Father*” (SF 115), she knows his distance as surely as she knows her mother’s, for he reveals it in his words often enough. He is a misogynist who makes his daughter as much an Other as Caroline does, classifying her as an alien species given to evil: twice Quentin recalls his father saying that “women have an affinity for evil” (SF 94, 105), adding that they are “never to be trusted” (SF 105), that they “are never virgins” (SF 116). His refusal to give Caddy any guidance as she becomes sexually active distances him from her as fully Caroline’s spying does, and his alcoholism seals his distance as surely as Caroline’s hypochondria seals hers.

Mira is alienated from her parents even more than Caddy is. Mira’s mother died when she was born, and she holds her father, Loulou Lameaulnes, “guilty” of killing her (CM 33). As a result, she asserts bluntly, “I didn’t want his love. I didn’t want to give him mine” (CM 33). Her brother/lover Aristide is equally alienated from his father. Condé assures readers that “hatred for his son boiled in [Loulou’s] heart” (CM 99), a hatred Aristide could not miss. In a move that links this novel with her earlier work *Heremakhonon* in which Veronica’s “sexual self-expression” arises from a “sense of being an unloved daughter” of a “disapproving father” and a “need to settle a score” (Dash 313), Condé has Mira assert that her distance from her father led to her incestuous affair with her brother: in beginning her incestuous affair, Mira says she was “suffocating with hatred and wondering what [she] could think up to hurt” her father (CM 35). Dinah Lameaulnes, Mira and Aristide’s stepmother, recognizes the dynamic, observing that the “misfortunes of the children are always caused by the secret sins of the parents” (CM 79). Her

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incestuous affair having arisen in alienation and hatred, Mira seeks more than the satisfaction of hurting her father. She says she entered her affair with Aristide hoping to find “my happiness in this taste for evil and forbidden fruit” (*CM* 36). Yet she was not to find happiness there, for she admits she loved Aristide “only like a brother” (*CM* 36). Aristide was not what she wanted. She wanted Francis Sancher.

In her conversation with Faulkner, Condé thus suggests that the origin of Caddy and Quentin’s incestuous attraction likewise arose from their parents’ distance from their lives. Condé challenges Faulkner’s readers to consider the anger that could have arisen in Caddy as she recognized and coped with that distance, anger unrecognized and unreported in her brothers’ memories of her but recognized by Condé and expressed by her character Mira. Condé then challenges Faulkner’s readers to consider whether Caddy’s affair with Dalton Ames arose from that same anger metamorphosing into a vain seeking after happiness missing in her family life.

Vilma is as alienated from her parents as Caddy and Mira are. While her father Silvestre has bonded fully with his four sons, taking “them everywhere he went” (*CM* 132), he has largely absented himself from Vilma’s life, paying no attention to his only daughter, considering her “as belonging to Rosa” and thus maintaining a “discreet distance” (*CM* 108). Vilma’s alienation from her mother Rosa is even greater. It strongly resembles Dewey Dell’s alienation from her mother Addie. Just as Addie Bundren bore Dewey Dell only “to negative Jewel” and declares her daughter to be her husband’s “and not mine” (*AILD* 176), Rosa acknowledges that she “didn’t want” Vilma, seeing her as a “voracious parasite” and treating her with coldness (*CM* 135).

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Vilma has known that Rosa “never had any room for me in her heart” and reports bitterly that Rosa never even “held my hand” (*CM* 153). Though Silvestre wonders if Vilma went to Sancher in order to “punish him by tarnishing his name” (*CM* 108), Vilma says it was Rosa she was punishing, confessing that “I had to make her ashamed, I had to hurt her, take my revenge” (*CM* 157). In an echo of Dinah Lameaulnes, Rosa Ramsaran acknowledges her role in her daughter’s flight: “It’s my fault. I’m to blame for what’s happening” (*CM* 137). Vilma wants Sancher as an antidote to the pain of her alienation, as a means of finally opening an emotional relationship with her mother, if only a negative one fed by hatred and vengeance. When Vilma subsequently becomes pregnant out of wedlock, Condé cements her tie to Dewey Dell and, as she does with Mira and Caddy, suggests that Dewey Dell’s willingness to give herself to Lefe MacCallum arises from her alienation from her parents, from her mother in particular, and thus from a desire for a connection to Addie that may be stronger than a desire for one to Lefe.

In giving voice to these two alienated young women, Condé challenges Faulkner and his readers to make Caddy more than a heart’s darling, more than an absent presence, and to make Dewey Dell more than a largely silent breeder. She challenges them to enter their hearts and to experience their very bodies’ responses to the pain they must feel in the Compson and Bundren households, in the very air they breathe, Caddy in the honeysuckle arbor and Dewey Dell in the milking stall.

If Mira and Vilma resemble Caddy and Dewey Dell in their alienation from their parents, Condé does not end by simply suggesting that Faulkner’s two young women begin their affairs in

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response to dysfunctional family dynamics. Having drawn Mira and Vilma not only to resemble Caddy and Dewey Dell but also to express their alienation, their outrage at the abuse they suffer from the parents, Condé goes on to further her dialogue with Faulkner by inviting comparison with a third young woman from Faulkner's canon: Ellen Coldfield. It is Ellen, of course, who leaves her father's house to marry Frances Sancher's *semblable* and *frere*, Thomas Sutpen. It is Ellen too who is most fully silenced, for though Caddy speaks frequently in Benjy's and Quentin's memories and Dewey Dell has four narratives (compared to her brothers' thirty-five), Ellen's very few words echo only in the haunted monologues of a sister born after she left home. Condé challenges Faulkner, as it were, to indicate why Ellen agreed to marry Sutpen. She challenges readers to wonder how alienated Ellen was from Goodhue Coldfield, the same father her sister Rosa was fully alienated from, for the same reason that alienated Mira from her father, the death of her mother in childbirth. Condé invites readers to wonder how Goodhue Coldfield, "a Methodist steward" and "a man with a name for absolute and undeviating and even puritan uprightness" (AA 32), related to Ellen, whether affection flowed between father and daughter, whether Coldfield sealed himself in his uprightness as tightly as he later sealed himself in his attic, whether Ellen lived in pain as great as Mira's and Vilma's, whether the pain of her alienation from her puritanical father made Ellen ready to leave his home. Faulkner provides no narrator who knew Ellen at the time she traded her father's house for her husband's. Condé gives Ellen voice at last through Mira and Vilma.

**What They Want in Strangers' Arms**

Then Condé takes another step in her conversation with Faulkner. If Condé's and Faulkner's young women act *from* the pain and anger built by their alienated lives in dysfunctional families, they all move *to* lovers—not only lovers, but men who are virtual strangers to them. Faulkner's Caddy takes the apparent out-of-towner Dalton Ames as a lover and then marries the out-of-towner S. H. Head. Dewey Dell takes Lafe MacCallum, who has no apparent contact with her other than at cotton picking time, for she and other narrators record no courting, no visits by him to the Bundren farm at all, not even at her mother's funeral. Ellen takes Sutpen, with whom she may possibly have shared some stolen moments in the days Sutpen was "in town" between his visit to the Methodist church and his subsequent visit to the Coldfield store (AA 32), but even if those moments came, how much of Sutpen's life could Ellen have known? Condé's Mira and Vilma take the equally mysterious stranger Francis Sancher. While Faulkner does not have his young women explain their attraction to the risky strangers they go to, Condé gives her women voice, giving her novel what Deborah Gaensbauer has called "a challenging feminine perspective" (397). In doing so Condé invites readers to consider the attraction strangers hold not only for her female characters but for Caddy, Dewey Dell, and Ellen as well. What do all of these alienated young women see in their lovers? What do they want from the alien men they go to?

Mira experiences Guadeloupe as a whole and her alienating family in particular as a kind of trap. Her alienation within her home and her alienation from the community created by her

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extraordinary wealth and beauty have sent her repeatedly fleeing to the Gully, a place she says belongs “only to me,” a place she calls “my realm and mine alone,” a place she is sure she will “never meet anyone” (CM 32). The Gully is the physical expression of the solitude she lives with . . . until she finds Sancher there and believes she has found something better than solitude, an escape from her own solitude into the solitude of another. Mira wants Sancher precisely because he is alien, because “he came from Elsewhere. From over there. From the other side of the water. He wasn’t born on our island of malice. . . . From Elsewhere” (CM 43). If Sancher is *from* elsewhere, an alien, he may have brought that elsewhere with him, and his alien home, which others in Rivière au Sel avoid, may *be* an elsewhere. He may *take* her elsewhere. As Jarrod Hayes has argued, as a wanderer Sancher represents “rootlessness” (465). Mira must hope the arms of this rootless man will lift her out of the Gully, out of what Gaensbauer calls a “trap equivalent to the mangrove” (405), a trap formed by her painful, alienated existence in a loveless family. She hopes for an ironic escape from the trap, joining her alien existence to another’s alien existence, as if joining two alienated lives creates a bond that overcomes the alienation that draws them together.

Like Mira, Vilma is escaping a trap—a similar trap of alienation and solitude and also a very specific trap that will extend her alienation and solitude through the remainder of her life. Mitsch puts it well: Vilma fears “being enclosed within the social community” (62), not only broadly, as Mitsch has it, but also very specifically. Vilma fears being enclosed within an unwanted marriage. Her father has arranged a marriage to a man who is virtually buying her. In

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this marriage, as in a mangrove swamp, she senses she will be “sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud” (*CM* 158). When Rosa tells Vilma that her father has “made an arrangement with Marius Vindrex” (*CM* 155), Vilma remembers in horror how Vindrex’s eyes “have not let me alone since I’ve been able to walk” (*CM* 157). But only his eyes. He hasn’t visited her family. He has not courted her. He has not come with gifts. His eyes have looked, but his mouth and his hands have been empty. He has eyed her like a prized object; he has never tried to interact as with a fellow human being. And why should he? “He’s got money” (*CM* 155), as Vilma attests, money enough to buy anything he prizes. Vilma’s father, having kept that “discreet distance” from her all her life, knows her no better than Vindrex does. He believes, as apparently Vindrex does, that “what matters is money, and Vilma would have money to spare” (*CM* 108). Vilma is escaping nothing less than utter commodification in a patriarchal system in which women are little more than objects to be bought, traded, and sold by men. Her intended husband has not cared and will not care to learn who Vilma is, what she hopes for, what she can become. He treats her already like a trophy animal to be trapped, slain, sent to the taxidermist, and put on display. He will make her his very own “last duchess” in her own curtained niche. Vilma flees to Sancher, then, to escape lifelong alienation in a loveless marriage and in a social world where she is a mere commodity. She goes to the alien precisely because she sees him as a man not of this patriarchal, commodifying social world. Like Mira, she is seeking to bond her alienated life to the alienated life of another.

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By implication, Condé suggests Caddy, Dewey Dell, and Ellen (and even Caddy's daughter Quentin, in eloping with the carnie in the red tie) are attracted to risky aliens for that same reason. These alien men offer alienated young women an ironic escape. While Faulkner does not visit the hearts and minds of these female characters who risk almost everything to escape, Condé suggests that, like her characters, Faulkner's women must have felt a "longing to live, at last, in the sun" (*CM* 44), to leave their entrapment in the living deaths of their alienated and circumscribed lives into freeing bonds with alien men. None of Faulkner's young, risk-taking female characters, Condé implies, are content to confess at death, as Addie Bundren seems to, that they lay dying all their lives.

Certainly Caddy senses escape in the stranger Dalton Ames. She tells Quentin that Ames has "crossed all the oceans all around the world" (*SF* 150). Quentin himself remembers Ames "had been in the army had killed men," and he seems to have seen Ames lift Caddy "to his shoulder and run with her" (*SF* 148). She says his name and "her blood surge[s] steadily beating and beating" (*SF* 164), beating with desire and hope, hope to escape the "dungeon" Quentin envisions Caddy and himself trapped in "without even a ray of light" (*SF* 173). Condé's portrayal of Caddy's "sisters" suggests that Caddy goes to Ames hoping he will lift her out of that Compson dungeon and run with her far away from Yoknapatawpha County. Could Dewey Dell be hoping for a similar escape? Certainly she chooses not to let her family know about her condition, despite the druggist Moseley's virtually ordering her to "tell your pa or your brothers . . . or the first man you come to in the road" (*AILD* 202): telling would put her life in

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their hands, with a shotgun wedding in store and then life on another farm like the Bundren's, or perhaps on that very farm, with Lefe brought in to replace Darl, now trapped in a dungeon in Jackson. Perhaps she wants to abort her pregnancy so as to keep free of the patriarchal trap Moseley describes, the trap her mother endured, the trap a forced marriage and motherhood would seal her in. Perhaps she imagines herself and Lefe being "halfway to Texas by now" (*AILD* 202), if only she weren't pregnant, halfway there together, married or not, probably not. Lefe is free to run; she wants to be free to run with him or even without him. And Ellen Coldfield, what does she have to hope for in her father's puritanical household? What chance for a life beyond it in the isolated pioneer community of a handful of businesses, "three churches and perhaps thirty residences" (*AA* 24)? Was she destined for one of the "drovers and peddlers" (*AA* 24), the loafers and idlers around the courthouse? What hopes for escape could she have invested in this "stranger's name" that echoed "in steady strophe and antistrophe" throughout the village (*AA* 24)? The voices of Condé's Mira and Vilma add new depth to the characters Faulkner leaves largely silent. They even tell Faulkner what his alienated young women want: perhaps incognizant of the irony, they want the freedom they sense or believe, or hope the aliens they take as lovers will bring them.

## What Women Get

Sancher leaves the villagers of Rivière au Sel with what Mitsch calls a "desire for renewal" (62), and his death generally initiates what Jason Herbeck also calls "change and

Dirty Drawers and Dynasties: Faulkner and Condé on What Women Want and Get renewal” (148). Indeed, Mira’s stepmother Dinah decides “to leave Loulou and Rivière au Sel” to find a better life (84), and Rosa Ramsaran is ready to ask her neglected daughter Vilma for “forgiveness” (*CM* 140), while her young son Carmélien is ready for a rebirth, dreaming of “taking off his clothes . . . and running naked” in the rain (*CM* 151). Emile Etienne the Historian feels “filled with an immense courage and renewed energy” and intends to “set to work” on his history of the island (*CM* 198). The same renewal, which could lie ahead for Sancher’s young lovers despite the questions their narratives raise, may be what Condé sees in store for their Faulknerian sisters.

Mira may be becoming a “strong young female protagonist who breaks free” (Leservot 87), one of many such women in Condé’s fiction. Mira finds her freedom not in her affair with Sancher but through it. She becomes pregnant by him out of wedlock, arousing as intense a jealousy in Aristide as Quentin feels toward Dalton Ames and S. H. Head, and is subsequently “cast out” by Sancher as Caddy is by Head (*CM* 57). She returns home to give birth—to her son Quentin. Yet like Caddy she will not remain home, remain re-trapped. When she ends her second monologue declaring that from “now on my life will be nothing but a quest” and that her “real life begins” with Sancher’s death (*CM* 193), she seems to shake off the possibility articulated above that she will be taking a corrupted world view with her on her quest. After all, she prophesies that her son Quentin, not herself, will “travel the world on horseback” seeking Sancher (*CM* 191). As Gaensbauer puts it, Mira is “envisioning . . . an independent role” for herself (405). Thus Condé offers readers an understanding of Caddy’s apparent wanderings after

her Quentin's birth. Mira and Caddy alike may have moved from seeking "Elsewhere" in men to seeking it first-hand. Caddy may not be the woman spotted in the appendix, after all. While Pius Adesanmi argues that Mira and other female characters end Condé's novel "mapping out strategies" to enhance their "agency and subjectivity" through "equal and mutually fulfilling partnership with" males (75), Condé more surely suggests that it is sole agency that both Mira and Caddy discover, for in supplying her protagonist with the monologue that Faulkner's lacks, Condé vicariously enters Caddy's mind and converts her from an Other to a full character, "less 'beautiful,' less 'wonderful,' [but] more free" (Weinstein 84).

At first, Vilma may seem to be another matter. While Mira declares her "real life begins" with Sancher's death, as we have seen Vilma wishes to have joined Sancher in death, to have "followed him to the funeral pyre" (*CM* 161). Yet she may be more like Mira than this contrast suggests, for Vilma sees death not as a cessation but as its own kind of renewal. She refers to her ancestors' belief that death is "but a bridge between humans, a footbridge that brings them closer together" (*CM* 161). In the "whistling of the wind" she already hears Sancher's voice speaking "mysterious words I never heard before, lifting the enigma of who he was" (*CM* 161). Most importantly, the death she wishes for would enable her not just to hear Sancher but to speak back to him, to engage in dialogue, in conversation, "talking and talking" endlessly (*CM* 161). In short, she imagines in death she would be able to begin full discourse. All her life Vilma has been only a receiver of others' words—first the written words of books, which she says were "all I had" before Sancher (*CM* 154), and then the spoken words of Sancher himself. But now, though

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it is in death, she imagines herself speaking words, placing herself into the public realm as a full member. If she is ready next to realize that she can accomplish this not in death but in life, she will join Cyrille the Storyteller and Lucien Evariste the Historian in using words not just in the interior monologues the characters of the novel engage in but before others, openly. She will discover that “personal liberation” (Herbeck 147), which she has sought in Sancher’s space, actually lies within her own space, in any space in which she raises her voice. She will even join Maryse Condé, her creator, who engages Hawthorne, Brontë, Faulkner, and all her readers and critics in just such an open dialogue.

Perhaps Vilma’s pending change prescribes a cure for Dewey Dell, certainly a truer cure than the “hair of the dog” that Skeet MacGowan gives her. Dewey Dell’s inability to communicate is the principal sign of what Carolyn Porter calls her “state of alienation between self and world” (75). Dewey Dell converses with Darl “without words” (*AILD* 27). She is equally reticent with the rest of her family. Cash observes that she “hadn’t said a word” before the asylum attendants come for Darl though she is fierce in attacking him. Vardaman reports that she insisted on equal silence from him, telling him three times “not to tell” (*AILD* 203, 213) and four times to “Hush” and “go to sleep” (*AILD* 216-217). Most importantly, Dewey Dell is unable or unwilling to speak of her condition either to her family or to others. Nor does she say what she wants to do about it. Though repeatedly thinking that Dr. Peabody “could do everything for me” (*AILD* 63), she remains silent before him. She is almost equally reticent in the drugstores. The druggist Moseley observes that he “cant get anything out of her” (*AILD* 199) and has to

question her repeatedly before he determines that she wants to end her pregnancy. Skeet MacGowan goes through a similar process with her, himself rather than Dewey Dell saying that she “got something in [her] belly” she wishes she didn’t have (*AILD* 243). In both occasions, when Dewey Dell does speak, she speaks most often not her own words but Lafe’s, insisting five times that “Lafe said” and “he told me” to get “medicine” at the drugstore (*AILD* 202, 203, 245). And finally, she does not tell Anse why she needs the \$10 when he takes it from her to buy his new teeth. Dewey Dell, whom Mimi Gladstein calls “mostly passive” (107), is a character who cannot say.

While Deborah Clarke explains that Dewey Dell “eschews language” essentially because she “replicates the mother” (41), adopting Addie’s suspicion of language and the “symbolic order” (43), Condé is responding through Vilma’s longing for true conversation with her now dead lover, that, for Dewey Dell and other women, the surest way “to connect with others and the larger world and yet remain a self” (Porter 75), to overcome the alienation she lives in, to fulfill the Persephone role critics have ascribed to her, thus to provide “continuity and renewal” (Gladstein 107), is through words, through the very language Addie has taught her daughter to distrust and disuse. Perhaps Condé herself has modeled the very conversation Vilma longs for and Dewey Dell needs, for in writing *Crossing the Mangrove*, she enters the symbolic order and converses with the long-dead William Faulkner, challenging him to empower his female characters with language as she supplies such language in her characters. In doing so, a black Caribbean francophone writer breaks free of the trap of the colonial worldview and bridges

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the distance not only of sex and race, what Clarke succinctly calls “racial and sexual  
otherness” (17), but also of time, nationality, and language, providing literary continuity and re-  
newal by connecting with Faulkner in words while remaining herself, Maryse Condé.

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**“He’s just so stupid”; “I simply didn’t know”: Oedipus, Hamlet, Pip, Swift,  
and Some Late Night Thoughts and Speculations on the Nature of Irony**

Stephen J. Knapp

Few subjects have been as relentlessly defined, discussed, debated, theorized upon, interpreted, applied, redefined, re-discussed, re-debated, and reapplied as irony. So, I know you’ll be pleased to hear we won’t be doing any of that. Quite the contrary, I really don’t intend to say anything at all “new” about irony, here. My interest in the discussion which follows is to take some ideas about it (mostly those of Douglas Muecke in his *The Compass of Irony*) and use them to answer a specific question about it, especially about how we might compare its victims outside the bounds of their works, and, in doing so, hopefully create criteria for doing the same beyond the scope of this study. As such, then, my thought is that while we may not say anything “new” about irony, we may at least avoid the well-worn paths usually trod in discussing it with a fresh road, rarely, if ever, taken.

This discussion grows out of a comment made in a class some 10 or so years ago at the commencement of an introduction to *Oedipus* for the purpose of its discussion. First, I must tell you, that this was an honors class composed of bright, dedicated students committed to learning, engaged with issues of text and character complexity. So, you can imagine my surprise when one of them—one of the very brightest of the group—simply blurted out: “Oh, Oedipus, he’s so stupid. He’s just so stupid. He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t see anything. He’s so stupid.” Naturally, I addressed this impercipient at once, kindly, but decisively, and we moved on. But the comment lingered with me. And as time has passed it has given way to much musing on the

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issue, the actual contemplation for which the phrase in my title, “late night thoughts,” provides the euphemism.

The nature of these musings was this: this was an engaged student. And she was not alone in this thought. After the class she confided in me that she had been encouraged in this opinion during the study of the play in another class at our university and that she had originally come to the conclusion in a high school AP class where the teacher had, basically, been of the same opinion. Albeit while none of this validates what most of us would probably consider an uninformed or immature misreading of the character, it does provoke the question why such a misreading might even exist, much less be perpetuated.

And there is something else. It happens that in this class we also discuss *Hamlet*, and what occurred to me as I continued to muse was that no one ever called Hamlet stupid. Quite the contrary, even a cursory dip in the Mariana Trench that is *Hamlet’s* critical history steeps one in the endless praise of the Prince’s intellect, his brilliance, his eloquence, his genius. Yet, even a casual comparison of their cognitive abilities and shortcomings yields striking similarities. True, Hamlet dazzles with his wit, but Oedipus did solve the riddle of the Sphinx; Hamlet outplots everyone else in his play, but Oedipus solves the murder of Laius in a single day, something Creon says only Time can do. And, yes, Oedipus is the victim of much irony in the play, but does the Prince not overestimate his ability to keep *only* the Ghost’s commandment “within the book and volume of [his] brain” (1.v.103); does he not decry that he must be the “scourge and

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minister” of heaven in the murder of Polonius (III.iv.179); does he not fail to kill the King by mistaking Claudius’s kneeling for successful repentance, and does he not go to his death despite his own foreboding about it—in short, demonstrating himself to be as colossal a victim of irony as the King of Thebes?

And, still, who among us, *among us*, would ever consider Oedipus to be Hamlet’s equal, certainly, not I; who would ever vote, not only unconditionally but without a moment’s hesitation, that Hamlet is far the brighter and Oedipus, though certainly not stupid, runs a distant second?

Why? That is the question we seek to answer, today—why are we all inclined to be kinder to Hamlet as a victim of his irony than we are to Oedipus as a victim of his?

That they are victims and equally defined as such we shall see in just a moment. However, it is necessary before that, I think, to provide definition as the first useful criterion for discussion. Here is G. G. Sedgewick from his classic study, *Of Irony, Especially in Drama*: “The spectator knows the facts, the people in the play do not. A character’s actual situation is one thing, his idea or interpretation of it is another; the promise things have for him is at variance with their outcome—they are not what they seem” (31). Now, technically, of course, this is a definition of dramatic irony and so stipulated by Sedgewick. But it grows, I think, in two ways. First, it applies any time an irony plays out, narratively; so, is not Pip’s actual situation in the matter of his benefactor one thing and his idea of it quite another until Magwitch shows up? Do

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we not know the facts of the comb and the watch fob in “The Gift of the Magi” when the couple in the story do not? Is not the promise for Gatsby that in becoming who he becomes he will win Daisy at some variance with what happens? I think you catch my drift.

Second, although D. C. Muecke is far wiser than Sedgewick or I and gives no definition, he does give four essential elements necessary for an ironic situation; all of which Sedgewick accounts for. Muecke says all irony must have (1) two levels with (2) an opposition between them, (3) “an observer with a sense of irony,” and (4) a victim “confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being” a second level or point of view opposed to his own (19-20, 100). The way in which these two (Sedgewick and Muecke) fit, hand-in-glove, as it were, gives us confidence that our definition from Sedgewick, if not universal, is at least broader and more useful than might first appear.

More to the point, with Muecke’s help it also gives us our two other most useful criteria: victim and knowledge, or the lack thereof. Here is Muecke’s definition of victim: “the victim of irony is the person whose ‘confident unawareness’ has directly involved him in an ironic situation” (34). The usefulness of this criterion may be seen in two ways. First, it stipulates our focus. For while Hamlet has long been considered a kind of modern Eiron, the original figure of irony, a dissembler and perpetrator of irony throughout the play, this is *not* the subject of our inquiry. Our question is why we incline toward Hamlet rather than Oedipus as a *victim* of his irony. Granted, we may have a higher opinion of Hamlet than Oedipus because the latter is

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hardly ever a dissembler, but that tells us little about their ironic situations. And, second, it enables us to see differences in ironic circumstances where multiple ironies are present.

For example, one of the more ironic passages in *Great Expectations* occurs the first time Estella comes to London and is met by Pip after the latter has received his expectations. Pip arrives ridiculously early and decides to kill some time touring Newgate Prison. Afterwards, about to meet her, Pip says: “I thought of the beautiful young Estella, proud and refined, coming toward me, and I thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her” (264).

There are several ironies here; two concern us: the first, of course, is that the “proud and refined” Estella is the daughter of a murderess and the very criminal who will ironically compromise Pip’s view of his expectations; the second is that, therefore, there is no “contrast between the jail and her”—Estella is as much of the jail as Pip, perhaps even more so, and his abhorrence of the contrast is, thus, ironic. Yet, only the second registers; in fact as I have described them, here, it swallows the first; both turn out to be at Pip’s expense because only Pip has the “confident unawareness” that directly involves him in the ironic situation. Estella is beside the point. Here the differentiation is simple, but let’s consider “A Modest Proposal” wherein Swift creates a persona (unless you’re teaching the essay, in which case the assumption is *it is* Swift [and you will spend much time slowly convincing them it is not]) who is confidently unaware of . . . well, what, exactly? That however economically sound it may be, the eating of

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children is never a good idea (too much protein, bad for your kidneys)? That a literal eating of the poor is, ultimately, no worse than a figurative eating of them? That the situation that prevailed in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Dublin is one that the poor and those who fail to see their humanity have played out and will play out as long as the poor exist? As we move through these “confident unawarenesses” we note a slight movement away from the persona to the man behind the curtain and some small dents both in the unawareness and its confidence. It is an issue to which we will return.

And, finally, implicit in Sedgwick’s definition and Muecke’s help is our principal and most useful criterion of all: knowledge, or the lack thereof. Indeed, as we have already seen it is the essential determiner of the victim in the ironic situation and, I would argue, the reason irony exists in any situation at all. In passing, Muecke mentions two kinds of unawareness, unawareness and impercipient. Although he mentions these, he neither differentiates between them nor explores them as separate phenomena. However, I would like to do just that: examine them as separate, differentiated unawarenesses as the means to analyzing the irony in Oedipus and Hamlet. Let’s begin with unawareness.

For the purpose of distinguishing specific unawareness as a category of general unawareness, I will designate it as ignorance and therein define it: ignorance is the circumstance wherein the victim could have no way of knowing of the existence of a second level or point of view opposed to his own.

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Such is certainly the case with the quotation from *Oedipus* I have used in my title: “I simply didn’t know.” The entire statement is: “Oh, no, no,/I think I’ve just called down a dreadful curse/upon myself—I simply didn’t know (819-21); and the context is Oedipus’s reaction to Jocasta having just described the murder of Laius as a reassurance that he should put no stock in prophets and prophecies (ironic, of course, but not the irony we’re looking for). The irony we’re interested in is both local and general--in saying that he did not know he might be implicated in the death of Laius when he cursed the murderer and those with knowledge of him, he is ignorant of the fact that he did murder Laius and, so, has “known” it all along—but the statement, “I didn’t know,” also stands as a general irony at the character’s expense: The Greek phrase “what do you know,” *oistha pou*, with its resemblance to *Oidipous* is a telling commentary on the man who seems to know everything, but, as here, doesn’t actually know anything, even who he is (Knox 406).

But that, of course, is only one pun on Oedipus’s name; the other is that his name comes from the Greek *oida*, “to know” and *pous*, “foot.” The irony, here, of course, is that Oedipus’s ignorance of who he is exists because he doesn’t know feet, at least his own, and so has no idea how they define him. He is ignorant of the events surrounding his birth, events which made him who he is in every sense of the word. In fact, Oedipus’s ignorance in the play is almost wholly derived from his ignorance of his past and is cleverly concealed in the following statement:

I will speak out now as a stranger to the story,

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a stranger to the crime. If I’d been present then,

there would have been no mystery, no long hunt (248-50).

Once again, the passage is rife with irony—he *was* present and still the mystery and long hunt endure; they endure in part because he *presented* himself at the court of Thebes and the servant who witnessed the attack, seeing him, asked to be put out to pasture, literally. But the irony present in “present” is twofold: present in space and present in *time*. For in stating, “if I’d been present,” Oedipus is also invoking all the ironies that derive from the play’s multiple sequences of events. In other words, to say “if I’d been present” is to imply, had my present, at that moment, been the same as Laius’s, had I not been sent to experience a different set of life experiences, I would have known him and he, me, and “there would have been no mystery, no long hunt.”

It is, then, a short leap from this to imply all such similar ironies that leave Oedipus in the dark—the decision to give him to the shepherd, the shepherd’s decision not to kill him but to give him to Polybus’s shepherd, Polybus and Merope’s decision to raise him as their own, etc. All of these presents are not merely past by the time Oedipus utters these lines, they are a past he is ignorant of, precisely because they form a narrative separate from the one he would have led as Laius’s son, until the two intersect at the triple crossroads, the implication of their intersection entirely unknown to Oedipus.

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As we move to consider Hamlet's ignorance, we mark in passing that there is hardly anything here to justify calling Oedipus stupid. How can one be stupid in what happens to one when there is no way to know its source? Indeed, in the matter of ignorance, as we shall see, Oedipus and Hamlet appear almost identical.

We shall make short work of Hamlet (ironic, of course, because he didn't make short work of anything). I have chosen two quick examples for the Prince: the aforementioned Act II Scene iii when Hamlet finds the King praying and doesn't kill him because he erroneously believes he is begging forgiveness and Act I Scene iv when he assures Horatio that there is no danger in his following the Ghost because "And for my soul, what can it do to that,/Being a thing immortal as itself?" (66-7), a comment containing an irony as damning as anything in *Oedipus* and one that makes me wonder about my vote for him. But, no, we give him a pass here. He does not even know what the Ghost will ask: how can he know the subtlety of the danger that awaits him? And as for the King, would not anyone have thought he's gaining absolution? No, the two look alike in this, with one exception: Hamlet's ignorance lies in the future, Oedipus's in the past. And while this may not even seem worth mentioning, it's about to become telling.

This is because in one sense Hamlet's ironic situation is on-going. He is in the middle of it. And as he makes his way through it the second level that will undo him in each case has yet to happen. One may argue the same for Oedipus but is that actually true? What will undo Oedipus has already happened, what awaits him is his discovery of that. He is not so much in

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the middle of his irony as he is awaiting that discovery, and the moment in which it comes is less a revelation than the springing of a trap he, himself, of course, has unwittingly set.

Among his classifications of victims of irony, Muecke includes the category: People who know they are in an ironic situation, but he includes no examples (39). It is not difficult to see why. If one of your criterions for irony is a victim who is confidently unaware that he is in an ironic situation, how can you have a category for victims of irony designated as “People who know they are in an ironic situation?” I’ll let Muecke explain: “Imagine a man who has been deprived of all that makes life worth living until, at last, ‘sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything,’ he becomes...wealthy enough to indulge his every sense. But the only sense left to him (we shall imagine) is a sense of irony. This will enable him to see himself in an ironic situation.” He continues: “And the stronger his sense of irony the more he will be enabled to *detach* himself from his situation and become, by kind of *double-think*, the ironical observer of himself as victim” (39, my emphases).

As I have said, Muecke provides no examples, but I think we’ve already seen one. If we return to the persona of “A Modest Proposal” and ask, again, of what is he confidently unaware, it is, at one level, that the situation that prevails in it--that the poor and those who fail to see their humanity have always existed and will always exist-- is one that we are all caught in, even that despiser of mankind, but lover of Tom, Dick, and Harry, the great Jonathan Swift, himself. That he as much as admits so is evident near the essay’s end where he gives a lengthy litany of sane

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and humane measures by which the problem of the poor may be alleviated (all of which, at some time, he, himself, had advocated) ending with but “let no man talk to me of these” as alternatives to eating the poor until there is “a glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere Attempt to put *them in Practice*” (495). In that moment, Swift looks back at the situation and recognizes its irony—his sane, humane measures are ultimately doomed to the same impossibility as the insane, cruel suggestion of his persona. But more, in this moment he separates himself from that persona creating exactly the kind of detachment and double-think Meucke speaks of: he sees the self that advocates cannibalism as a pose, of course, but, also, ultimately, as one with just another remedy with less than “a glimpse of hope” of being put into practice.

In much this way does Hamlet see the irony of his situation, never more so than in that moment that he foresees his own death: “Not a whit; we defy augury: there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. . . . Let be” (V.ii.194-8). How ironic that the man who has battled and tried to master fate throughout, now acquiesces to it, the same man who complimented Horatio as a man and “not a pipe for Fortune’s finger/To sound what stop she pleases” (III.ii.61-2), who rails at being heaven’s minister in the murder of Polonius, who seeks fate as *his* choice in pursuing the Ghost. As to Hamlet’s detachment, when is he not detached, when is he not more than one: distinguishing two Hamlets to excuse his behavior with Laertes: “Was ’t Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet./If Hamlet from himself be ta’en away,/. . . Then, Hamlet does it not” (V.ii.207-10), feigning the madness that whether real or not creates another self for him in

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the play, contemplating the selves who will not or cannot act in the “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” and “How all occasions do inform against me” soliloquies. The “O, what a rogue and peasant slave” soliloquy, in particular, provides an excellent example of this, allowing the Prince to see his irony in a context where he has already been irony’s victim—his failure to act despite every prompting to do so—but finds him creating characters—John-a-dreams, coward, villain, whore—his surrogates of inaction, that enable the kind of detachment necessary for him to engage the double-think that enables him to be the character caught in the irony and still be “the ironical observer of himself as victim.”

Oedipus? Obviously, he does not exercise nor seems to have the opportunity to show this kind of detachment. There is the aforementioned moment of discovery, of course, a single line speech, “I’m at the edge of hearing horrors . . . but I must” (1284-5)—the pulling of the trigger, so to speak, but no awareness of the larger ironies he is victim to in the play. So, this is one difference between Hamlet and Oedipus.

But this is only part of the difference between them, I think, the lesser reason, in fact, and just one side of the coin. For despite our discussion of the last several pages, what most defines an ironic character is not what he knows but what she doesn’t, and, most importantly, why he or she doesn’t know it.

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We return now to the other cause of character unawareness, impercipient. You remember Muecke uses this merely as a euphemism for unawareness but I have differentiated it, along with ignorance, as a category of unawareness. So, what do I mean by impercipient? I take my lead from its connotation of sight—an impercipient is one who does not see, and in the context of irony, it is this imperception that causes the irony. Two other stipulations, first, by any reasonable standard the person should have seen; second, as in the play, seeing implies both literal sight and metaphorical sight, as in “to know.”

Earlier we examined the quotation in my title: “I simply didn’t know,” showing the ironies present as local—he murdered Laius, so, he did know—and general—the pun on his name that exposes the scope of his ignorance. Both of these are simple ignorance. But there is a third irony derived from this comment if we read it in conjunction with the next comment he makes, like this:

“Oh, no, no,

I think I’ve just called down a dreadful curse

upon myself--I simply didn’t know! . . .

I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see (819-21; 23).

“He’s just so stupid”; “I simply didn’t know”: Oedipus, Hamlet, Pip, Swift, and Some Late Night  
Thoughts and Speculations on the Nature of Irony

We need not analyze the irony in the atrocious pun on *seer/see* to recognize it contains, implicitly, the three manners of sight in the play—literal, metaphoric, and supernatural--and that all references to sight in the play reflect Oedipus’s blindness in each of those areas. But what is it that Oedipus is not seeing?

Quite a bit, distracted by his intent to find out whether Laius had an escort or not, he misses the key fact in the account that Jocasta has just given him of her first husband’s death, that it was *not* occasioned by their son who had been prophesized to kill his father and marry his mother (tellingly, of course, at this key moment she says to him, “there, you see”) (793). Oedipus *has been* prophesized to kill his father and marry his mother. Unless this kind of thing went on all the time, you’d think that that would be something he’d pick up on, especially since it accompanies circumstances eerily similar to his own killing of a man who, it turns out, looks a lot like he does, now. But Oedipus never sees it. In fact, in the 30 lines between Oedipus’s dawning recognition that there might be some similarity between Laius’s death and what he did, there are five references to *see/see* as *know*, four more if we add the 50 lines of Jocasta’s account that comes before this, nine in all, in less than 90 lines—all calling our attention to his imperception.

But it does not stop there. For example, you might ask yourself, as I have, how many kings with full retinue, who look as this man did, do you think were killed at a triple crossroads

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just before Oedipus arrived at Thebes (must be thousands, right?). Or if you were told that you were going to kill your father and wed your mother by the oracle immediately after it was called to your attention that they might not be your father and mother (the very reason, in fact, Oedipus gives for consulting the Oracle) why would you fly from there and take the chance of running into your biological mom and dad on the road.? Or, my personal favorite, after having been told that you would do this, why would you then kill a man about your father's age and marry a woman about your mother's age while on that road running from *that very possibility*?

Obviously there are mitigating factors here, but this is clear evidence of impercipient. Moreover, none of this ever comes up with Hamlet. There is never a point at which he fails to see something he should see. Quite the contrary—he sees far more than anyone and often brings our attention to it, as in the “we defy augury” speech. It is this difference, I think, that accounts for why we might look upon Hamlet more kindly as an ironic victim than Oedipus. Also, as I have tried to support throughout, I think this has larger implications. Certainly, we shake our heads at Pip who repeatedly fails to see, again both literally and metaphorically, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, that it is impossible that Miss Havisham could ever be his benefactress. Further, to complete the references in my title, I would speculate that this accounts for much of our response, both compassionate and dismissive, depending on the kind of unawareness present, to many an ironic situation, indeed, to the nature of irony, itself.

“He’s just so stupid”; “I simply didn’t know”: Oedipus, Hamlet, Pip, Swift, and Some Late Night  
Thoughts and Speculations on the Nature of Irony

As to whether or not this has changed my view of *Oedipus*, it has not, but the issue of his stupidity does continue to come up. I guess you’ve got to see it before you understand it. I know I did.

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## **Shelley as Infidel: Child Custody, Poetry, and the Law**

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Before any of Percy Bysshe Shelley's six children was born, he had already invested into his ideas of childhood a complicated schema of power and influence that both objectifies and subjectifies the child, fictive or actual. Shelley's ideas about children and childhood included, as biographer James Bieri notes, Socrates's doctrine that reminiscences from an earlier life were the basis of knowledge and prompted him to stop a young mother carrying her infant across the Magdalen Bridge, inquiring of the dumbfounded woman, "Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, Madam?" (Bieri 1:131). In *A Vindication of the Vegetable Diet* (1813), Shelley's first essay on vegetarianism, the child brings an "unerring wisdom" of dietary choices; in Shelley's poetry, the child either presents an impervious and cheerful confidence or becomes a tragic victim found amidst the debris of the world.

This treatment of the child as subject is noted most dramatically in his work following the circumstances of Shelley's life after he met Mary Godwin in 1814 and particularly after the custody trial three years later for the two children of his first marriage, following the suicide of his wife, Harriet Westbrook. The complications began in 1811, when at nineteen and recently expelled from Oxford University for the publication of his pamphlet, *A Necessity of Atheism*, the poet met Harriet Westbrook and eloped with her in August. She gave birth to their first child, Ianthe, in 1813. In February 1814, Harriet became pregnant with their second child, Charles, born in November. However, on Shelley's second meeting with Mary Godwin that spring, and after several brief separations from Harriet from that winter onward, he and Mary began meeting secretly; in May, Mary was pregnant, and the two eloped with Mary's stepsister, Claire

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Clairmont, in July, traveling in Europe for more than a month before returning to England and Mary's infuriated father, William Godwin, author of the pro-democracy (and anti-marriage) treatise, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Shelley and Harriet were separated for two years, the last year of which he provided £200 quarterly for her and the children (Holmes 285). In November 1816, Harriet, pregnant by someone else, committed suicide by drowning in the Serpentine, a lake near Hyde Park that runs into the Thames. In December 1816, Mary and Percy Shelley married. The *Shelley v. Westbrook* custody case began 24 January 1817 and involved Shelley's suing for his children, Ianthe and Charles, against Harriet's parents, the Westbrooks. It lasted two months, and on 27 March the court ruled against Shelley, denouncing his avowed atheism and subsequent unsuitability as a parent; a year of the battle over guardianship followed. Shelley's *Declaration in Chancery* (1817) reads, "If I have attacked Religion, it is agreed that I am punishable; but not by the loss of my children – if I have imagined a system of social life inconsistent with the constitution of England, I am punishable; but not by the loss of my children" (Shelley, *Prose* 166). However, instead of settling custody with the Westbrooks, the children were released to guardians chosen by the court, Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Hume. Although he was granted strict visiting rights, Shelley left England in March 1818 and did not ever see his children by Harriet Westbrook again (Bieri 2:30-31).

Few critics have studied the connection between Shelley's custody case, the court's decision, and the impact on his work. Notably, Michael Kohler's analysis of Shelley's custody trial emphasizes the significance of the event in *The Cenci* (1819), Shelley's lyric drama about incest and parricide, drawn from a real Italian family, and one that includes a court scene. Kohler

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maintains that “an inattention to the details of Shelley's portrayal of governmental power has allowed critics largely to misrepresent the drama's complex and contradictory political allegory, and that once these elements are recognized the way is opened for a more nuanced understanding of the play's intervention--on the level of literary artifice--as a progressive, forward-looking account of governmental legitimacy” (Kohler 552). Kohler’s focus on Shelley’s custody trial as underscoring the drama’s force toward reconstituting the court as a resolute, paternalistic state works well with *The Cenci* but is less decisively applied to Shelley’s other work absent of such a court scene. Even so, Kohler’s analysis provides a sound perspective and one that distinguishes itself from the psychoanalytic approach toward primary characters in Romantic works, such as that explained by Joel Faflak, who asserts that “Romanticism generates an overdetermined depth model of subjectivity, an interiority inconsistent within itself” (Faflak 13). Although beginning in the complex territory of Shelley’s subjectivity of the kind that Faflak usefully identifies, and assuming that the custody trial would have marked a particular distinction in any mention of the child in his work ever after, Shelley’s poetry and prose clearly manifested a new and symbolic purpose in any mention of the child in his work, and I maintain that this intellectual detachment results in a point of turmoil, an aporia in the text, which is at cross purposes with the authority of his agency as poet. Melynda Nuss observes that *Prometheus Unbound* confronts Shelley’s conflict with the process of the court itself when she notes that, “[T]he problem for Shelley was how to import Plato’s view of punishment as reform without acquiescing to the justice of the punishment or the authority of the punisher” (Nuss 426). This problem of defining the court’s authority was compounded by the poet’s experience in Chancery Court beginning in the winter

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of 1817 and unsettled his own methods of agency in certain of his work ever after. Consequently, this essay analyzes the continuous repercussions of the custody trial on Shelley's ideas of the child as subject and object in his poetry, including the impact of the deaths of his three children with Mary Godwin.

The *Shelley v. Westbrook* custody trial following the suicide of Shelley's wife, Harriet Westbrook Shelley, was a watershed event in the poet's life, an event that deepened and exacerbated his view of himself as a father and sharpened his purposes for images of the child in his poetry and prose. Shelley objectifies children as symbols and subjectifies them as parts of himself, especially in the role of victim. His letters before and during the trial offer a perspective through which to view this effect in his writings. In these letters, Shelley warns their recipients to protest against the destructive moral forces of the world, including their legal agency in the Court of Chancery that ruled against him.

Shelley had married Mary Godwin just weeks before the onset of his custody trial with the Westbrooks, and it was to her that he wrote most often. Shelley had plenty to say about his feelings as a father, the court system, and those involved in this trial, but he writes more than just to inform or comfort Mary at this time; rather, Shelley writes to establish a solidarity not only with Mary but also with the other females involved, implicitly or explicitly: his daughter, Ianthe, born about 3 years earlier; his late wife, Harriet; Harriet's sister, Eliza Westbrook; and Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, who had just given birth two weeks before to Byron's daughter, Allegra. Shelley's strategy to use his trial as a cautionary tale may be intended to absolve himself in part from his culpability in the circumstances of Harriet's death. In these letters, Shelley

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imbues references to the female sex and to children with a sense of victimization in which he himself takes part. While he lost the custody trial and never saw Ianthe or Charles again, the court's decision must have confirmed for the poet his role as champion of those who have no legal mechanism through which to declare their own rights, and in speaking for them, he seeks to ennoble his own efforts.

In a letter to Mary dated 11 January 1817, Shelley writes about the conditions under which the custody of his children by the late Harriet may be determined: "If I admit myself or if Chancery decides that I ought not to have the children because I am an infidel; then the W[estbrook]s will make that decision a basis for a *criminal information* or common libel attack. –But there is hopes [sic] by watchful resistance that the whole of this detestable conspiracy will be overthrown – For, if the Chancellor should decide not to hear their cause; & if our answer on oath is so convincing as to effect this, they are defeated" (Jones *Letters* 1:380). The case was presided over by the arch conservative Lord Eldon, first mentioned by Shelley in his 1812 *An Address to the Irish People*, citing his repression of the free press. Chancellor Lord Eldon also supported capital punishment for minor theft, once condemning a man to hanging for stealing seven shillings (Bieri 2:29). The "watchful resistance" Shelley mentions to Mary is the position of one who believes that he could be overthrown by a "conspiracy" of adversaries within a court whose moral stance was antithetical to his own.

Shelley's moral stance situates the female audience – in particular or in general -- as victims who must resist the very patriarchal authority against which he himself is pitted. In his letters of that January, Shelley first describes Eliza Westbrook as corrupted ("libidinous and

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vindictive”) by her pursuit of her father’s wealth, then appeals to her later in a more conciliatory tone; Ianthe is one of his “unfortunate children, now more than ever dear to me”; Mary is referred to as “my only treasure” and urged to “cheer up”; Claire is championed to Byron; and Harriet is a victim of “awful and appalling horror.” Shelley presents himself as a principled character to the Chancery Court as well as to a female audience; he creates an image of himself as one who must resist the corruptive potential of a trial run by a court that was designed to “purge the conscience of the accused” (Kohler 555). In his stance of “watchful resistance,” Shelley declares the boundary of public and private discourse to be a didactic one, especially for a female readership and particularly when there are children involved.

In Shelley’s letter to Eliza Westbrook of 18 December 1816, eight days after Harriet’s body was recovered from the Serpentine, he writes that his “feelings of duty as well as affection, as a father, incite” him to see the separation of himself from his children as “an evil.” Of Ianthe, he says, “She has only one parent, & that parent, if he could ever be supposed to have forgotten them, -- is awakened to a sense of his duties & his claims which at whatever price must be asserted & performed.” Shelley was also concerned about Ianthe’s feelings toward her absent father, urging Eliza to “refrain from inculcating prepossessions on her infant mind the most adverse to my views,” though he adds that he does “not think the worse of [her] for this” and in supplication, concludes, “the happiness of my child depends on your forbearance” (Jones *Letters* 1:376). In Harriet’s last letter before her suicide, she declares her intention that Eliza have custody of Ianthe and that Shelley have custody of their son, Charles, now two years old; Shelley knew this, having seen the letter sometime after Eliza, so Charles is not mentioned specifically

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here. In this 18 December letter to Eliza, Shelley makes it a point to add, “I had the strongest wish to consult your feelings in this affair.” He hoped to strengthen his position by noting that “the lapse of a few weeks” in delaying Ianthe’s going to her father, “would only render the execution of it more distressing to you.” In point of fact, Shelley probably had not seen Ianthe since April 1815, when she was twenty-two months old and knew that “Mr. Westbrook actively backed Eliza in keeping Shelley from the two children, who, at the time of their mother’s death, were in Warwick under the care of a minister,” Bieri notes (2:25). Whatever his conflicted feelings about Harriet’s sister, Shelley positions his argument to her almost companionably as someone else who loves his children and who loved Harriet. In the letters, Shelley’s emphasis on his feelings as a parent clearly are intended to trump the claims of a maidenly aunt’s affection, that of the unmarried Eliza.

Shelley’s letter to Eliza notwithstanding, the Westbrooks did not surrender Charles and Ianthe but instead settled on them £2,000 in four annuities, and on 10 January 1817 petitioned the Court in the names of the children as plaintiffs, to prohibit Shelley from taking them. The trial began on 24 January, and the decision of Lord Eldon was rendered on 27 March against Shelley; when the guardianship was contested by both sides, Lord Eldon delayed the actual disposition of the children until 25 July 1818, when it was determined that they be put under the care of Dr. Thomas Hume, recommended by Shelley’s lead lawyer, P.W. Longdill (Kohler 553).

Shelley’s letter of 16 December 1816 to Mary, residing in Bath, attempts to involve her in his plans for his and Harriet’s children; he writes, “Do you dearest & best seek happiness – where it ought to reside in your own pure & perfect bosom: in the thoughts of how dear and how

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good you are to me – how wise, how extensively beneficial you are perhaps now destined to become. Remember my poor babes Ianthe & Charles – how dear & tender a mother they will find in you – Darling William too! my eyes overflow with tears” (Jones *Letters* 1:374). In his letter to her on 11 January 1817, he fears the full extent of the decision in Chancery court against him, that he may lose custody even of William or any other children by Mary. Shelley describes to her Chancery Court, whose “process is the most insidiously malignant that can be conceived”; he continues: “They have filed a bill, to say that I published *Queen Mab*, that I avow myself to be an atheist & a republican” (Jones *Letters* 1:380). The bill actually states of Shelley “that he has written and published a certain work called *Queen Mab* with notes and other works and that he has therein blasphemously derided the truth of the Christian Revelation and denied the existence of God as the Creator of the Universe” (Medwin *Appendix* 464). In the 11 January 1817 letter, Shelley writes, “Yet cheer up my own beloved Mary,” whom he also addresses as “my own darling Pecksie,” and admonishes her: “don’t fancy I’m disquieted so as to be unwell,” but rather, “I am, it is true earnest & active, but as far as relates to all highest hopes & you, my only treasure, quite happy” (Jones *Letters* 1:381). Mary, Ianthe, Charles, and Harriet are positioned as vulnerable victims with deep sensitivities – potential or past – and are all considered as those Shelley must needs be protective of, or should have been more protective of, in Harriet’s case. Shelley implies that the act of his feelings’ being trampled – to use one of his favorite tropes – by the legal system is in broader terms an example to others, especially those who cherish the love of their children above adherence to religious doctrine.

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Yet Shelley may be excused in having expected the case to be decided in his favor. In English courts of the time, the norm in custody cases was to declare the father sole guardian, even under the most objectionable circumstances. According to Caroline Sheridan Norton's *The Separation of Mother and Child By the Law of Custody of Infants Considered* (1838), "the custody of legitimate children is held to be the right of the Father from the hour of their birth to the utter exclusion of the Mother, whose separate claim has no legal existence, and is not recognised by the Courts," and that "no circumstance can modify or alter this admitted right of the father, though he should be living in open adultery, and his wife be legally separated from him on that account" (Norton 1). The father "is responsible to no one for his motives, should he desire entirely to exclude his wife from all access to her children," whether or not his children ever live with him (2). In one case Norton cites, "a Frenchman married to an Englishwoman, and wishing to compel a disposition of her property, entered by force the house where she had fled for refuge, dragged the child (which she was in the act of nursing) from the very breast; and took it away, almost naked, in open carriage, in inclement weather"; she adds, "[T]he mother appealed to the Courts: the Courts decided they had no power to interfere" (4). However, Norton continues that, in spite of this, the Court of Chancery can assume "the power of meeting and deciding on individual cases," that they "will interfere...for the security of property, and on account of religious, or even political opinions"; she concludes that there "was a direct interference in the case of Shelley and others of less note" (6). As explained in the "Law Report" of *The Times* of 25 February 1826, "when the minds of the children were likely to be tainted by the immorality of the father, the Court, upon being applied to for that purpose, had deprived him

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of their guardianship” and includes as an example, that the “children of Percy Byshe [sic] Shelley had also been taken from their father, because he had intended to bring them up in the belief, or rather he should say the profession, of atheistical doctrines” (“Law Report”).

As late as 1891, the year of the Custody of Children Act, a child’s religious education was considered a determining factor in the court’s decision of such cases. The legislation therein states that “if the Court is of opinion that the parent ought not to have the custody of the child, and that the child is being brought up in a different religion to that in which the parent has a legal right to require that the child should be brought up, the Court shall have power to make such order as it may think fit to secure that the child be brought up in the religion in which the parent has a legal right to require that the child should be brought up” (Custody of Children Act c.3, sec. 4; see *Note* also). The *Shelley v. Westbrook* case has been cited as one of the rare legal judgments against the father in that century.

Claire’s predicament as a new and unwed mother, whose child was fathered by Byron, prompted Shelley’s sympathy; in a letter to her dated 30 December 1816, he acknowledges “the loneliness and the low spirits which arise from being entirely left” alone (Jones *Letters* 1:378). Her situation must have resonated with some guilt for the poet, surely reminding him of Harriet’s desolation. Claire had a newborn daughter to care for and found Byron entirely unresponsive to her letters. Shelley, intending in some way to fulfill Byron’s role for her, writes to her: “Your letter today relieved me from a weight of painful anxiety...the greatest good you can do me is to keep well and quiet” (Jones *Letters* 1:378). As with Mary, Shelley includes Claire in his

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protective circle of intimates so that, unlike Harriet, she is bereft only of Byron's attention and not in complete despair or entirely on her own.

Claire's situation with Byron is markedly parallel to Harriet's, considering the unnamed lover by whom Harriet was pregnant. James Bieri finds Claire's account of Harriet's lover "probably the most accurate available," that he "was a Captain in the Indian or Wellington Army" who was 'ordered abroad'" (Bieri 2:21). Harriet lived near Chapel Street with a "decent couple" who believed that she was a lady's maid and married and that her husband was abroad; Bieri informs us that "Eliza, wanting Harriet's affair concealed from Shelley, apparently told her parents Harriet was visiting 'friends in the country'" and that Harriet told her sister that Maxwell "did not really love her and meant to abandon her." The Maxwell mentioned here is Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Maxwell, with whom Harriet was supposedly involved. Her landlady stated that Harriet "appeared in the family way" and was "very desponding and gloomy" when she saw her last, in November (Bieri 2:21-22). However Shelley felt about Harriet that fall, he must have been thankful that the official verdict at her inquest on 11 December 1816 omitted any mention of prostitution or suicide, opting instead for the factually precise and morally neutral finding of: "Found dead in the Serpentine River" (Rivers "'Tenderly'" 328). Fanny Imlay's suicide by opium just two months earlier received the same verdict, "found dead"; she was buried where she died, in Swansea, Wales, before Shelley arrived in a frantic response to her despondent letter (Bieri 2:14). That neither Shelley's nor Mary's correspondence mentions Fanny's death at this time demonstrates, according to biographer Richard Holmes, "how secretive they could be about personal matters if they so chose" (Holmes 347). However, the disturbing fate of Fanny and

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Harriet was certainly one Shelley would want to spare Mary's stepsister, and the vulnerability of Claire's circumstance was clear to him.

The Westbrooks did not come forward to claim the body, possibly so that the fiction of her pseudonym, "Harriet Smith," could be preserved; "no reference to her advanced state of pregnancy was made in the coroner's official report, and no account of the inquest was contained in the newspapers," contrary to customary practices, as Bryan Rivers notes in his study of Harriet's suicide ("Tenderly" 328). One wonders if Shelley was thinking of Harriet and her narrow escape from the ignominy of the gruesome burial practices of suicides. Suicide victims were traditionally buried at cross-roads for centuries because "these were signs of the cross; because steady traffic over the suicide's grave could help keep the person's ghost down; and because ancient sacrificial victims had been slain at such sites"; in addition, the untreated body was unceremoniously wrapped in a sheet, a stake driven through the torso, and lime thrown over it (Gates 6). Public opposition to this tradition "had been steadily growing throughout the early nineteenth century" and eventually provoked an act of parliament on 4 July 1823, "forbidding coroners from issuing warrants for the burial of suicides in public highways, and specifically banning the old practice of staking the body of the deceased," Rivers notes ("Revolting" 479). The sad details of Harriet's death certainly prompted grief and remorse in Shelley, who transferred some of those feelings into a vitriolic outburst against the Court in a letter to Byron of 17 January 1817; he describes being "dragged before the tribunals of tyranny and superstition, to answer with my children, my property, my liberty, and my fame, for having exposed their frauds, and scorned the insolence of their power" (Jones *Letters* 1:381). In these letters, Shelley stands

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as a defender not only of liberty but also of all whom he considered vulnerable in the legal system and specifically Chancery Court, most particularly women and children.

However justified Shelley believed his feelings and position to be regarding custody of his biological children, he must have been aware that his feelings would not enter into an argument with the Court of Chancery, conventionally described as “keeper of the king’s conscience” (Kohler 553). As Michael Kohler explains, the Court of Chancery’s “inquisitorial modes – the injunction, discovery, and subpoena, the testimony under oath, the discretionary prerogative of the chancellor – operated according to principles of equity rather than of law”; this code prompted “Shelley into associating Chancery’s legal processes with a ‘superstitious’ effort to police moral and religious obligations through legal means.” In Chancery, “it was the judge who...discerned the truth of an accusation, and it was the judge or court agent who determined what actions each party would take to ensure justice” (Kohler 554-555). Interestingly, Lord Eldon’s tenure in the Chancery Court included the extraordinary judgment certifying George III’s sanity, in effect a “‘cancelling’ of the king’s own actions – his letters patent, decrees, pardons, etc. – when in conflict with the spirit of legislative or ancient-legal prescription” (Kohler 555). Just six years after the George III insanity ruling, authorities of the Chancery Court could have been more prone than ever to reestablishing stability and control in matters of family and religion, such as in the *Shelley v. Westbrook* trial, unfortunately for Shelley.

Poetry has the power to transform the wreckage of one’s life, Shelley may have hoped in his poem, “To William,” written in 1817, about his son by Mary. “Come with me, thou delightful child,” he writes, “though the wave is wild, / And the winds are loose, we must not

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stay, / Or the slaves of the law may rend thee away” (ll. 5-8), alluding to the bitter custody dispute and the “slaves of law” in Chancery Court. The second stanza reads: “They have taken thy brother and sister... / They have made them unfit for thee; / They have withered the smile and dried the tear / Which should have been sacred to me” (ll. 10-13). William’s task in the poem is to recover the speaker’s optimism for life, “With fairest smiles of wonder thrown / On that which is indeed our own” (ll. 21-22), and the *sacra via* by which to accomplish this is through deliberate instruction in the Greek classics. The speaker explains, “I will teach thine infant tongue / To call upon those heroes old / In their own language, and will mould / Thy growing spirit in the flame / Of Grecian lore, that by such name / A patriot’s birthright thou mayst claim!” (ll. 45-51). The poetry of Socrates and Aeschylus, among others, has the potential for salvaging the flagging ideals of patriots everywhere, it would seem to Shelley. In this poem, the child must establish a foundation for patriotism and liberty against the machine of state, a battle his father has lost.

William’s instruction of the Greek poets is the antithesis to the catechism of “the priests of the evil faith” referred to in line twenty-six, the evil faith that divested Shelley of his children’s custody. For children, religious and social respect were inextricably entwined and considered seriously as endangering not only their eternal souls but also their social standing. Alan Richardson remarks that the purpose of manuals for children in the Romantic period, such as Sarah Trimmer’s *The Teacher’s Assistant: Consisting of Lectures in the Catechetical Form* (1800), was to indoctrinate children about religion as well as class: their function in society, where they came from, what social class in which they were to remain, what they should be

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thankful for, and how much work they should be expected to shoulder (Richardson 854). In “To William,” Shelley’s speaker treats the boy as a tabula rasa on which to write a different set of ideals; both forms of instruction, it could be argued, are intended to benefit the child. Both imply that one’s functioning in society is the extent to which one can operate without question within the dominant established directives of the educational system. Although the ideology of the writers Shelley recommends for William differs greatly from that of the Anglican Church, the same points about social function and class could apply equally to a classical education. The message in both is clear: The pupil’s success in memorizing the answers or espousing the ideology determines how optimistic the adults around him will be. The burden Shelley places on the child subject in this poem runs counter to his declaration of the child as embodying freedom, especially freedom from society’s moralistic restrictions.

Shelley’s poem, “To Ianthe,” written three years earlier in 1813, differs most from “To William” in its buoyancy of tone and idealization of Shelley’s infant daughter by Harriet. It begins, “I love thee, Baby! For thine own sweet sake: / Those azure eyes, that faintly dimpled cheek, / Thy tender frame so eloquently weak” (ll. 1-3), assigning to her the qualities of beauty and weakness. With these gendered descriptors, Ianthe as passive infant (“All that thy passive eyes can feel, impart” l. 8) suggests all female members of society, infantilized in a legal system that rarely granted custodial rights to mothers. The last four lines of this sonnet emphasize that the child is “Dearest” to the speaker, “when most thy tender traits express / The image of thy mother’s loveliness.” Because we know that Shelley’s and Harriet’s marriage was fundamentally less stable than the absolute conviction the poem conveys, the speaker’s strategy is to adopt a

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visual idealization by reducing the mother and child symbiosis merely to one of “loveliness” (l. 14). In this way, a union of the two creates the image of an unconflicted motherhood, fatherhood, and marriage. While each poem is addressed to an actual child of Shelley’s, the subjects become objectified into symbols of innocence and vulnerability made more potent by the speaker’s intensity. The difference in the poems before and after the trial is that Ianthe does not have to resurrect the remnants of a speaker’s crisis of faith (or fatherhood); the child in “Ianthe” functions as an ideal of all females, dependent on society to be her patriarchal protector, at least in the Shelleys’ social strata.

In *Laon and Cythna*, begun near the end of the trial in March 1817, children are victims whose suffering is intended to inspire dramatic action from those who defend them. Laon travels through a gory field where “Women, and babes, and men, slaughtered confusedly” (VI.46) lie, but also through a village where a woman, symbol of prostitution and venereal disease, tries to contaminate Laon when she kisses him. “My name is Pestilence” (VI.49), she says, and “This bosom dry, / Once fed two babes,” connecting the lack of being able to nurse her children with the death and violence around her. Pestilence could be an allusion to the hapless Harriet Shelley, whose troubles, broadened by sexual impropriety, consumed her. If so, this dramatizes Shelley’s contention that the corruptive forces of society, including Christian dogma and the legal system, claim both women and children as victims. Similarly, Cythna suffers most after she becomes a mother and her child is taken from her. When Cythna’s “reason” is restored to her, the “dream” of motherhood becomes “like a beast / Most fierce and beauteous” who has “made its lair” in her memory and “on [her] heart did feast” (VII.25). Although Christine Kenyon-Jones contends that

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this scene can be construed not as Shelley's "envy of a beneficent function, but instead a complex revulsion" of motherhood, through the perspective of the trial it is more clearly a metaphor for grief as a raging animal that feeds on "thoughts which could not fade," thoughts of "Some smile, some look, some gesture which had blessed" Cythna herself (VII.25) (Kenyon-Jones 37). By portraying children and their suffering mothers as sympathetic victims, Shelley intends us to comprehend the unnaturalness of the conditions under which we suffer, everything from war to a diseased mind, and to have a child removed from her mother is paramount to the most horrendous severing of sacred ties, Shelley implies. Consequently, she suffers unduly. Written during and after his custody trial, *Laon and Cythna* highlights the victimization of parents separated from their children, and Shelley elaborately develops the horrific images from a self-righteous stance.

It is Cythna's daughter, "That fairest child" (XII.6) and a curiously unreal character, who pleads for Laon's life. She swoons when he is about to be executed, but later explains that she did so "from the calm of love" (XII.26), after which she enters a realm between life and death, and eventually leads Laon and Cythna to her boat, steady and "Calm as a shade," in which they sail, their "minds full / Of love and wisdom" (XII.39; 37). It is this child to whom Laon earlier brings food when she and her father are hungry. Calmness, love, and the purity of a selfless child can transform the conditions under which people suffer, Shelley implies. None of these, he would contend, was applied in Chancery Court in March 1817. As in the poems to Ianthe and William, the child motif in this poem remains a static character, an objectification of purest

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childhood yet also one whose mysterious territory between waking and dreaming, past and present, continuously invigorates the turmoil of an object not fully able to stabilize the narrative.

In *Rosalind and Helen*, begun in the summer of 1817, Shelley portrays the child as one who sacrifices in order to bring an opportunity for revelation to adults, specifically to mothers. In a preface to the poem, Shelley writes, “if, by interesting the affections and amusing the imagination, it awakens a certain ideal melancholy favourable to the reception of more important impressions, it will produce in the reader all that the writer experienced in the composition.” The “ideal melancholy” could be a certain poignancy brought on by memories of the children he was not to see again; if so, melancholy of that order should produce some kind of enlightenment or self-discovery arising from so great a cost. Largely considered a minor poem in Shelley’s oeuvre, *Rosalind and Helen* can also be seen as “a signal example of how his writing and his developing conception of his life as a writer can intertwine so as to blur the common-sense distinction between actuality and art, subject and representation” and particularly, I would contend, as it relates to Shelley’s custody trial, which resulted in the child as subject becoming an aporia in this and other texts, an ever-increasing complexity of its function as a symbol within and beyond this poem (Donovan 244).

It is a melancholy story: Helen and Rosalind are exiles, and each has suffered deeply, either because of love for her children, in Rosalind’s case, or for her husband, in Helen’s case. At some point, each child is a solace to the mother in times of woe; in addition, each child achieves a peace denied to the parents. To Rosalind, her nursing children bring her “soothing tears, / And a loosening warmth, as each one lay / Sucking the sullen milk away,” and, in that act, not only

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they, but eventually she herself was “weaned... / From that sweet food, -- even from the thirst / Of death, and nothingness, and rest” (ll. 396-97; 401-403). After the death of Rosalind’s brutal husband, his will stipulates that she must leave her children and go into exile, or they would lose their inheritance. Rosalind’s daughter, “a lovely child...of looks serene...grace and gentleness” is eventually returned to her and thereby restores to some degree a sense of “joy” and “new calm” to her mother (l. 1283). Helen’s son was fathered by Lionel, a Shelley-like visionary who dies following a false conviction and jail term; the parallels are obvious, though art achieves what life could not: the peaceful alliance of two families. Helen’s son and Rosalind’s daughter grow together in love, “And in their union soon their parents saw / The shadow of the peace denied to them” (ll. 1290-91). It is not the suffering that is the revelation, Shelley maintains, but the calm and peace that come with a loved child, here an idealized and undeveloped character, objectified to serve that purpose, however improbable and artificial the narrative.

The biographical and symbolic similarly converge in Wordsworth’s “Lucy Poems,” which, as in Shelley’s case, resist simplification in that convergence. Mark Jones points out that “no practice in the ‘Lucy Poems’ criticism is more popular than that of identifying Lucy with biographical originals such as Dorothy Wordsworth” but that “biographical identifications give way to symbolist identifications: Lucy becomes primarily a meaning (‘light,’ ‘inspiration,’ ‘illusion’) rather than a person” (Jones, M. 101). Even if, as Richard Matlack concludes, “Lucy became not so much an exact equivalent of Dorothy as an amorphous, and thus safe, object for the hostilities Dorothy aroused, these studies show that the biographical data compounds the complexity of interpretive positions rather than reduces it,” that “for both poets, their personal

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circumstances begin artistic ventures that continue into their work, certainly beyond the original biographical signification” (Matlack 46). Jones goes as far as to assert that “the dialectical romantic symbol, that which both is and means...[of] which Lucy is such a symbol,” is “properly reducible neither to material human being nor to idea, and hence essentially unknowable” (Jones, M. 102). The Lucy in Wordsworth’s poems may not be as fixed as or even as expansive a referent as has been presumed, but it serves as a focal point for our scrutiny of subjectification and objectification, our definition of the actual and the symbolic. Practically speaking, Shelley’s biographical circumstances are not comparable to Wordsworth’s, but it is likely that both poets assumed their reputations and other biographical data would come into the reading of their work. By those assumptions, they employed these referents as a poetical device in order to deter readers seeking to choose between the relevance of the abstract and the actual in furthering a poem’s impact.

In March 1818, a year after the trial’s decision was handed down, Shelley and his entourage left England for Italy. Shelley would never return to England, and, in a letter to Leigh Hunt dated 22 March, he writes, “before I left London, my spirits were as feeble as my health,” but that both improved in Italy (Jones, *Letters* 2:459). He adds in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock in April about Italy: “the loveliness of the earth & the serenity of the sky made the greatest difference in my sensations – I depend on these things for life for in the smoke of cities & the tumult of humankind & the chilling fogs & rain of our own country I can hardly be said to live” (Jones, *Letters* 2:460). Nevertheless, the recuperative effects of Italy would waver in the face of two tragedies suffered by the Shelleys: the death of their daughter, Clara, on 24

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September, 1818, aged one year and three weeks, and nine months later, the death their son William, aged 3 and a half. Both children died of illness, and Mary would blame Shelley in Clara's death, whose illness was exacerbated by the hardships of their travel that summer, travel taken in spite of Mary's reluctance to be on the road with her child (Bieri 2:80).

Neither of Shelley's children by Harriet would see him again. Ianthe was placed under the guardianship of the Humes and educated at home; their plan was that Ianthe would shun fashionable clothes. To the Humes, such accoutrements violated "all feelings of feminine Delicacy and Decency," and they insisted that Ianthe avoid reading most novels (Bieri 2:31). She was also prohibited from reading "any books that might tend to shake her faith 'in any of the great points of the established religion,'" which would include *Queen Mab* and the heroine after whom she had been named (Orange 43). Shelley's father, Sir Timothy, acquired guardianship of his grandson, Charles Bysshe, sending him to Syon House Academy, as Shelley had been. Sadly, Charles died at age eleven of tuberculosis at Field Place on 11 September 1826. Charles's parents' names were on the burial notice, but on his burial plaque in Warnham Church, Charles was listed only as the grandson of Sir Timothy Shelley and Lady Elizabeth Shelley (Bieri 2:352). Ianthe married in 1837 and had seven children; she died "just before her sixty-third birthday in 1876 and is buried under a copper beech tree in the Cothelstone Churchyard, Somerset" (Bieri 2:354). At her request, her headstone reads "Daughter of the Poet Shelley" (Bieri 2:354). In truth, Shelley's daughter never knew him as a father, for all intents and purposes, and she outlived both her parents by age nine.

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After the *Shelley v. Westbrook* custody trial, following so soon after Harriet's suicide as well as Fanny Imlay's two months earlier, Shelley incorporates into his work more than the tragic bitterness that resulted from these events. In his writing that follows, the child as referent is subjectified with the material circumstances of Shelley's own life while simultaneously objectified in an ambitious symbolism. This new complexity finds the center of his poetry and expands there. Shelley's letters direct us to this effect; his poems continue it. "I hope to have a large family of children," Shelley once wrote to Elizabeth Hitchener, while married to Harriet; of six children born, only two lived to adulthood: Ianthe and Percy Florence Shelley, born 12 November 1819, who also would barely know his father (Jones, *Letters* 1:162, 26 January 1812). The experience and outcome of the battle for custody of his children isolated the poet, by grief, anger, and guilt, and isolated the function of the child distinctively in his work. Shelley's turbulent life is worth continuous critical examination in conjunction with his texts. Throughout his writing life, every particular in the phenomenal world – no less the most deeply personal -- to Shelley carried the potential for objectification and can lead us more deliberately into his ideas of creative agency.

### *Note*

The full excerpt reads: "Upon any application by the parent for the production or custody of a child, if the Court is of opinion that the parent ought not to have the custody of the child, and that the child is being brought up in a different religion to that in which the parent has a legal right to require that the child should be brought up, the Court shall have power to make such order as it may think fit to secure that the child be brought up in the religion in which the parent has a legal right to require that the child should be brought up. Nothing in this Act contained shall interfere with or affect the power of the Court to consult the wishes of the child in considering what order ought to be made, or diminish the right which any child now possess to the exercise of its own free choice." [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk). Custody of Children Act 1891 c. 3, Section 4.

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## Ekphrastic Explorations of Evil in Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy

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Ekphrasis is a literary form that involves mimicry of the visual arts. Among the earliest examples are Homer's epic descriptions of battle implements or fine clothing, items of high quality and craftsmanship such as well-wrought urns or baskets. In the twentieth century, a poet like W. H. Auden in "The Shield of Achilles" deflates the epic description of heroic objects and replaces them with images of rape and ragged urchins, vacant lots, barbed wire and bored officials ("Ekphrasis"). John Hollander, the author of one of several recent studies dealing with the persistence of ekphrasis through literary tradition, explains its attraction for later writers, observing that poetic works which mimic painting or photography serve to "exploit deeper rhetorical design . . . [through] the emergence of some explanatory or interpretive agenda" (90).

A more expansive approach to ekphrasis would consider its implications in narrative genres as well, and for contemporary American novelists such as Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy, this form often becomes a vehicle for meditating on the nature of evil, as well as how we respond to it. One recurrent interpretive agenda, which may partly explain the persistence of this form for novelists today, has to do with the various media through which we are made to consider evil--the video footage of the Texas Highway Killer in DeLillo's *Underworld*, for instance, involves the reader in an exploration of our own philosophical, psychological, and physiological responses to the medium of video itself, and how it shapes our understanding of senseless violence. At other times, it is made to serve as a device that startles us into a recognition of evil that might otherwise escape us, demanding confrontation and ethical

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response. This is the case in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, which confronts evil in the form of cannibalistic behavior among human survivors. Ekphrasis here involves the conspicuously pictorial framing that occurs in the father's dreams and memories, as well as moments of frozen attention that capture the horror of characters' reactions. As Randall Wilhelm suggests, "McCarthy's use of visual structures and tropes often function as signs to guide the reader toward understanding this narrative violence." In the case of both novelists, ekphrasis often attests to the human need to make sense of evil, how that need is frustrated, and turns instead to the question of how we might accommodate or make room for it in our lives—and the search for some ethical response to it that amounts to more than mere passive acceptance or quietism.

Ekphrasis time and again raises the problem of perspective, how we see or fail to see reality, before any other questions about the nature of evil or our moral response to it can be addressed. These two orientations towards the visual—one linked to postmodern theories of the image, such as Baudrillard's simulacrum, and the other wanting to quicken perspective, to *defamiliarize* (in a modernist sense of the word) our lived experience and restore it in some way-- are poles between which these novelists raise questions about evil, so that tracing the formal parameters of ekphrasis may reveal something about the cultural limits that shape our attempts to engage such questions.

From the "Most Photographed Barn in America" in *White Noise*, to the Zapruder film in *Underworld*, ekphrasis has figured prominently in DeLillo's fiction, frequently as a mode of engaging with the question of evil. In what amounts to a kind of "anti-metaphysics" of evil,

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there is a sense in DeLillo that theories of human motivation lack the explanatory power necessary to account for atrocity, which characters in his fiction encounter time and again with a sense of surprise and terror--even to the point, paradoxically, that our shock and awe become routine. As Martin Amos suggests, "DeLillo is the laureate of terror, of modern or postmodern terror, and the way it hovers and shimmers in our subliminal minds." In the story "The Angel Esmeralda," Sister Edgar rises early to look out on the world in a similar light, registering this every day, routine sense of terror: "That's creation out there, little green apples and infectious disease." This story, one also woven into the sprawling fabric of *Underworld*, follows Sisters Edgar and Gracie on their philanthropic work in the Bronx, and their ekphrastic meditations on the graffiti writers who spray paint angels on a tenement wall to memorialize children who die in the neighborhood.

For Sister Edgar, it is the "drama of the angels that made her feel she belonged here. It was the terrible death these angels represented. It was the danger the writers faced to produce their graffiti. There were no fire escapes or windows on the memorial wall and the writers had to rappel from the roof with belayed ropes or sway on makeshift scaffolds when they did an angel in the lower ranks" (239-40). There is a sense of risk involved in the artistic labor of these graffiti artists, which Sister Edgar admires, something at stake for them beyond commercial success or exploitation. Later in the novel, a twelve-year-old girl Esmeralda is raped and thrown off a roof, and stories begin to circulate, in the neighborhood and the media. At one point, the graffiti artists see their own art work on CNN, and their work is made "new and nationwide. They stand there smeared in other people's seeing." As stories circulate about her death, the

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people in the community begin talking about some “uncanny occurrence,” a kind of collective delusion in which the murdered girl’s image “miraculously” appears on a nearby “billboard floating in the gloom.” This image takes root in the community’s imagination, as “some . . . go and look and tell others, stirring the hope that grows when things surpass their limits” (818).

This sense of hopefulness beyond limits is the only sort of hope that might amount to anything, and the ekphrastic insight here is that art can only become relevant in this liminal space. Sister Edgar goes to join the crowds that gather and stare at what is actually nothing more than an ad for Minute Maid orange juice. But an interpretive argument about this delusion ensues between the more pragmatic and cynical Sister Gracie and idealistic Sister Edgar. The issue at stake is whether or not there is some contemplation of the child’s murder that would amount to anything more than the media’s exploitation of it. For Sister Edgar, there is, it is an aesthetic contemplation that necessarily involves a communal response, in the form of what Sister Gracie can only characterize as mass delusion and misrecognition of a commercial advertisement. This aesthetic experience brings the community together in hope and belief, as the girl’s image transcends commercialism and would seem to have the power to “attract the doped-over glances of commuters on the trains” (818).

If visual media threaten to deaden the senses, then the ekphrastic scrutiny of these media in DeLillo are an attempt to quicken them. The video footage of the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld* raises the stakes, however, suggesting as Lois Wolfe points out that the viewer becomes complicit in the video’s representation of violence, through the “accidental prurience which ease of videography allows a technology-saturated society.” The footage is “recorded by a

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child who thought she was doing something simple and maybe halfway clever, shooting some tape of a man in a car,” but turns out to be a document that the media acquires and circulates endlessly on television. We as readers are drawn into the video, a technique that involves us in the child’s perspective and at the same time makes us reflect on the medium itself. The narration begins where the video does:

It shows a man driving a car. It is the simplest sort of family video. It is the simplest sort of family video. You see a man at the wheel of a medium Dodge.

It is just a kid aiming her camera through the rear window of the family car at the windshield of the car behind her.

You know about families and their video cameras. You know how kids get involved, how the camera shows them that every subject is potentially charged, a million things they never see with the unaided eye. They investigate the meaning of inert objects and dumb pets and they poke at family privacy. They learn to see things twice. (155)

In the repetition that constitutes the form of the televised video, DeLillo portrays a flatness of response to the images of violence that readers are made to experience at the same time. The novel dramatizes a tension between the act of evil as *event*, and its medium of representation which empties the image of value--reducing evil to mere image and empty signifier. DeLillo's use of *ekphrasis* urges a kind of cultural engagement or vigilance, as characters are caught up in a process of interpretation that shows them laboring to recover meaning, “learning to see things twice,” to bring value back to media-saturated images of evil.

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The child's point of view merging with our own suggests the way we as readers, as viewers of the video image on TV, wander into this experience of evil without any clear moral compass: "She wandered into it. The girl got lost and wandered clear-eyed into horror. This is a children's story about straying too far from home. But it isn't the family car that serves as the instrument of the child's curiosity, her inclination to explore. It is the camera that puts her in the tale" (157). As Kathleen Fitzpatrick suggests, the "incident becomes metamorphized as a fairy tale . . . , a cautionary tale for children about the dangers of playing with images." And, as the narrator in the passage editorializes,

there is something about videotape, isn't there, and this particular kind of serial crime?

This is a crime designed for random taping and immediate playing. You sit there and wonder if this kind of crime became more possible when the means of taping an event and playing it immediately, without a neutral interval, a balancing space and time, became widely available. Taping-and-playing intensifies and compresses the event. It dangles a need to do it again. (159)

The question about the medium that frames this reflection, rather than deserving Amos's rebuke of similar passages as examples of DeLillo's "high style editorializing" and "big voice," serves to examine the medium in a way that draws us closer to the event itself.

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* includes a scene that illustrates another kind of ekphrastic contemplation of evil that I want to explore. The passage reads: "The way narrowed through rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies. . . These small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats

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from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky.” The pictorial frame, as the reader’s perspective is drawn into that of the characters who encounter this scene, presents the image casually, as a kind of still life, as mirroring the callous perspective of the marauding hired guns who make their way across the border into Mexico to kill Comanche. Evil in McCarthy’s universe often involves this element of chance encounter such as the one highlighted here, or like the coin toss of Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*. Often, it is ironically linked to characters’ moral choices, characters like John Grady Cole or Llewelyn Moss whose acts of kindness or empathy paradoxically generate horrific outcomes. Ekphrasis in McCarthy’s *The Road* highlights a vision of evil in the presentation of physical landscape—embodying something more than just an amoral universe that we associate with late 19<sup>th</sup> literary naturalism, not quite the indifference of nature that we find in the writing of Stephen Crane, for instance. Rather, in McCarthy, it is as if the universe has been made over in man’s image, and reflects the cruelty and inhumanity of our own dealings with one another, the logical extension of our self-destructive nature. This seems to be the case in the ambiguously post-apocalyptic aftermath in which *The Road* is set. As Randall Wilhelm suggests, the description of setting in the novel presents “a terrifying picture on a grand scale, complete with its blackened valley of ashes, roaring winds and burned out stalks of trees amid endless miles of catastrophic devastation.” But as Wilhelm points out, “this narrative landscape is also significant for its littering of material objects, its broken and abandoned artifacts scattered across this bleak wasteland, remnants shorn of their previous functions in a post-apocalyptic world.” And “many of these objects are represented in such a way that they resemble still lifes.”

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These objects salvaged by father and son are the moral focus of a passage in the novel whose pictorial framing has something in common with the still lifes that Wilhelm identifies. After sojourning on a fruitless quest to the ocean, the man and boy discover that they have been robbed by a stranger and their cart of goods stolen. When the father eventually catches up to the thief, he forces him at gun point to give up all of his belongings, even stripping the thief of his clothes in the bitter cold. The still life image of the thief stripped bare, framed by the child's perspective looking at him as they walk away, brings to a head the clash of moral perspectives in the novel. This still life scene highlights the boy's sense of hope, his willingness to remain open to others—even to see himself as no different from the thief--and the empathy and risk that such an attitude requires, and reveals the limits of the father's survivalist, siege mentality.

In another ekphrastic passage, the father's ties to the past, embodied in the photograph of his wife, represent a similar quality of self-interest, which he puts aside in the symbolic act of laying her picture "down in the road." As Wilhelm suggests, "Mere physical beauty has no place in this new world, the father's gesture implies, and the leaving of the photograph frames a fundamental feature of the father's personality, for he will suffer himself no distractions in his sacred guardianship of the boy."

Ekphrasis in the novel brings into focus a common thread in McCarthy's treatment of evil, as the father in *The Road* is revealed unexpectedly to have something in common with the likes of Anton Chigurh, the untraceable, cold-blooded killer who shows no mercy and who reduces life to chance. But unlike the Darwinian survivalist Chigurh in *No Country*, or even Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, whose Nietzschean outlook demands that all of nature

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acquiesce to his will, the father is made to undergo a moral education in *The Road*, one that turns the tables on his own attempts to educate his son. While the father teaches the son to survive, the son at the same time moves the father towards self-understanding that hinges precariously on communal identity—and these ekphrastic explorations of evil in the novel highlight a vision of evil that is linked to the idea of remaining closed off to the Other.

In both novels, art has the potential to redeem evil, or rather to redeem us from the effects of evil, as in DeLillo's portrayal of the experimental artist whose colorful refurbishing of war planes *re-service* historical objects and narratives. Ekphrastic explorations of evil in these novels amount to a meditation on the frames through which we attempt to understand the horrors of our life in the present as well as the future. In DeLillo the examination of technological frames that mediate reality, and our understanding of the nature of evil, has the effect of prying open the real, of nudging aside the frames for an instant to reveal the “aura” that Walter Benjamin describes. At the other end of the ekphrastic spectrum, McCarthy's dystopian setting puts aside, by virtue of the genre itself, the comfortable frames through which we view the world, to defamiliarize our response to atrocity, taking us to a kind of imagined ground zero at which we might reinvent human nature.

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