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DESIRE, DEATH & THE SUBJECT IN BRITISH ROMANTIC LITERATURE

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Table of Contents

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at the works of Lord Byron, John Keats and Mary Shelley in order to understand how and why narratives of romantic desire get articulated through the vocabulary of death in British Romantic literature. In today's popular culture, we can take for granted the degree to which mortality gets invoked in common axioms related to romantic love and intimacy (both physical and emotional). But what exactly is the logic behind sayings like "till death do us part," "I would die without you," or "I'm dying to be with you?" To answer these questions, I look to select poetry and fiction from the latter part of the British Romantic period (1807-1820) by three of the most significant figures of the time. Each of these writers offers important individual contributions to the period's formulations of gender and subjectivity in relation to love and death. While they make different formal choices and have contrasting affective postures towards desire, these three share a preoccupation with the sheer force of desire. These authors write stories about the unsettling sense not only that desire is continuous with one's sense of self, but also that it continues beyond life into death. What makes these Romantics repeatedly voice this idea that desire feels so powerful that the subject themself must be outlived by the enduring force of their own desires? To explain what I mean by the force of desire, I repeatedly turn to the psychoanalytically-inflected work of Lauren Berlant, along with that of other queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I also contextualize these abstract questions about desire and death through the scholarship of Romanticists engaged with the history of sexuality, gender and subjectivity, including Nancy Yousef, Joel Faflak, Tilottama Rajan and Clara Tuite.

My dissertation asks contemporary critics and readers of Byron, Keats and Shelley to appreciate the way these authors theorized the desiring subject as binding mortality to the beloved and vice versa. Regardless of whether the actual stakes are true danger or entirely

ordinary risks, the Romantics understood that falling in love more often than not *feels* like a matter or life or death. Anxieties about the reciprocity of desire, the cohesion of one's sense of self, and the social legibility of romantic relations all get articulated through desirous language permeated by the vocabulary of death and dying. But this recursion to death is not just about repressed fears and fractured subjectivity. We see in each of my chapters how the question of death compels Byron, Keats and Shelley to inhabit open-ended inquiries about unexpected ways of feeling alive and experiencing loving intimacy.

In my first chapter, "'Death was heavenly in his friend's embrace' : Queer Intimacy & the Veil of Death in Lord Byron," I argue that the poet stages elaborate, tragic death scenes in order to smuggle queer love into plain sight. His manipulation of reader expectations regarding gender roles and classical literature of battlefield warriors emboldens him to write explicitly about men loving other men in "Nisus and Euryalus" and *Lara*. Turning to classical translation and allusion, Byron uses heavy themes of masculine bravery and fraternal love as tools of plausible deniability when he writes narratives of queer love and intimacy. I argue that Byron's playfulness with form complicates the tendency in queer theory to formulate non-normative sexuality as operating in a mode of active, antisocial resistance. I also read Byron's male lover characters as stopping short of engaging in the kind of alternative, utopic world-making practices that more optimistic strains of queer theory have posited. Byron may be conscious of forms as tools of discretion, but he understands discretion around desire as having multiple functions. On the one hand, the legibility of queer desire must always come with risks in a romantic setting. But, on the other hand, any effort to make desire legible and visible, as such, opens up the subject to vulnerable questions of reciprocity, social endorsement, and the compatibility of desires in relation to a full sense of self.

My second chapter, "'Real are the dreams of gods' : Fantastical Intimacy & Violation in John Keats's Romance Poems," focuses on the necessities and the pitfalls of fantasies for young lovers. I read the first three named poems from the last volume of poetry published in Keats's lifetime, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems,* as both cautionary tales and a set of texts which illuminate a generalized Keatsian ethos of desire. In each poem, he presents a set of lovers pursuing close adherence to the scripts of their fantasies of romantic "happily ever after." Because they each draw on heavy Gothic tropes and antiquarian allusions, the poems have consequences of hasty, clouded decision-making that are disastrous and often fatal. Keats's characters rashly but always knowingly embrace mortal risks in the pursuit of their fantasies, even eroticizing their own proximity to death and refusal to accept the finality of death. Much as Byron does with classical tragedy, Keats's antiquarian choices enable a hyperbolic articulation of the mortal stakes of romantic love. Genres like Gothic romance and phases of life like young love are necessarily indulgent and fanciful, but both this literary mode and this stage of falling in love are grounded in an understanding of romance as having necessarily mortal stakes. I argue for a dual reading of Keats's romance poems: young love risks mutual destruction when one or both people selfishly fixate on making fantasies come true. However, true romance can be measured by a degree of indulgence in such fantasies that reckon with the way love binds up the subject's fate with that of the beloved. The wholesale commitment of one's life to another is not fantastical in and of itself.

My final chapter, "'Death is too terrible an object for the living' : The Desire for Death & Ambivalent Life in Mary Shelley's *Matilda*" looks at the surprisingly elastic figurations of "death" in Shelley's incest plot novella. Within Shelley's own oeuvre and within the archive of this dissertation, *Matilda* is by far the least explicitly romantic text, but it deals with the inherent

paradoxes of desire and death that populate all of my primary materials. We witness how "death" operates as a stand-in for various other objects in this novella: as a place, a mode of purification, a descriptor of the past, a sense of destined future, and as a romantic object of desire in the present. In relation to desire, death often becomes a way for Matilda (and Shelley) to rethink relationality in the present such that living feels more bearable, the self feels less fractured and the future feels less impossible. This reading of "death" in *Matilda* importantly differs from a straightforward interpretation of her desire to die as the suicidal wish for nonexistence. Through Matilda's own voice, the reader experiences Matilda's desire for "death" as a narrative magnet which organizes a way of living, a mode of epistolary storytelling and tenuous but necessary self-making for this young woman. Once again, we see how "death" becomes a tool for articulating another Romantic theory of desire: Shelley shows how the force of desire, putting us in relation to the ongoingness of the world even when we do not want it, is an ambivalent condition of being human. Desire can shred the seams of sociality and shatter a subject into a fragile state of unbearability, but, as long as it is present, desire guarantees this minimal yet powerful attachment to the continuity of existence.

Introduction

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
Into a Lover's head—
"O mercy!" to myself I cried,
"If Lucy should be dead!"

William Wordsworth, "Strange fits of Passion I have known" (25-28)[1]

"I cannot exist without some object of love"

–Lord Byron[2]

Love and Death in Romantic Literature

My dissertation interrogates the spectrum of British Romantic writing on love and death that sits between these two different mortal anxieties voiced by Lord Byron and William Wordsworth. In this 1812 love letter to his married mistress Lady Caroline Lamb, Byron suggests that to live "without…love" would to be to "exist" in opposition to fundamental human vitality. In this hyperbolic moment, Byron implies that one would feel dead, be better off dead, and/or might literally pass away from living without love. He explicitly articulates a model of subjectivity as stabilized by the presence of an object of desire. Although it is a personal love letter, the generic ambiguity of "some" suggests that the "object" is replaceable while the hunger for love will always persist. The desire to love "some[one]" animates human "exist[ence]" for Byron more so than the actual "object of love."

[1] See the 1800 edition of Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (316).
[2] See the second volume of *Byron's Letters and Journals* (ed. Leslie A. Marchand) for this excerpt from the November 9, 1812 correspondence with his married lover Lady Caroline Lamb (243).

In the final stanza of "Strange fits of Passion I have known" (1800), Wordsworth captures a different mortal element of romance: deep, loving intimacies are always plagued by the underlying fear of losing the beloved. The speaker's eruption of "O mercy!" disrupts the speaker's otherwise consistent narrative voice with a spoken apostrophe and interrupts the smooth flow of iambic meter with the heaviness of a spondee. The worried interjection that Lucy might "be dead" comes directly after the phrasing of "fond and wayward thoughts." The fear of loss is no less jarring for this juxtaposition with fondness, especially since the whole poem ends with the word "dead." Wordsworth implies in the grammar of this stanza that "wayward" mortality anxieties are not just incidental to but in fact part and parcel of a lover's "fond" line of thinking. In both Byron's personal life and in this poem from Wordsworth's "Lucy" cycle, we encounter the Romantic preoccupation with articulating romantic desire and love in the same breath as invocations of mortality. How does the Romantic subject experience the drive towards the object of desire, and why does this movement of desire towards intimacy gets articulated through literary preoccupations with mortality?

Readers of today, like readers of the Romantic period, may skim over the hyperbole of texts like the Wordsworth poem and Byron letter. Declarations of love as bound up with death might sound to us now–as they might have sounded then–like empty cliche. From "'til death do us part" to "I would die without you," ordinary declarations of passion and romance are punctuated with the presence of death. I argue that Romantic writers make use of these familiar tropes in significant ways, to illuminate how our most emotionally and erotically charged attachments escalate to become simultaneously more intimate and more contingent. The Romantics turn to genres, tropes, aesthetics and vocabulary associated with mortality because nothing feels more vitally precarious than love: attachment to the Other upgrades the Romantic

subject's fear of death to the fear of causing their beloved the pain of loss, and there is always the inverse possibility of losing one's object of desire. Surrendering to the most intimate attachments cannot purify the beloved of the threat of otherness, nor can it protect the subject from the necessary structural entwining of the self with the other.

This dissertation examines a cluster of second generation British Romantic literary works where the reader encounters "death" as the magnetizing center of a narrative about what it means to live. As we see in Byron's letter, love challenges the narrative divide between existence and nonexistence because futurity is located in the force of love more so than through or alongside the corporeal existence of the object of desire. In chapters on Byron, John Keats and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, I argue that the younger Romantics move away from representations of death as absence and an absolute end—as death seems to function in Wordsworth. While "Strange fits of passion" cannot offer the sum of Wordsworth's philosophy of death, nor can it stand in for the vast body of work on love and death by first generation Romantics, I offer this passage as an important contrast to the way my project conceptualizes mortality. My primary texts show how death enables, extends and changes modes of living and modes of writing. Byron, Keats and Shelley share an important posture towards mortality where death can serve as a bridge, a liminal space, or a figure ripe for projection and analogy. These authors insist on the constancy of desire and intimate attachment even when the status of embodiment and manner of being alive change drastically. In loosening the absolutism of death-as-absence, they consider sweeping inquiries about what it means to be and to feel alive.

Because death is rarely figured as the straightforward negation of life, for the Romantics, desire refuses the expected turn to antisociality as linked to the death drive. While the death drive is generally associated with conflict and destructive urges, the preoccupation with death in my

archive offers a far more textured set of affective charges, ranging from directly associating pleasure with mortality to finding ambivalent but enduring structures of living onward right at the brink of death. Death itself, the fact of nonexistence, is not eroticized through risk nor seen as the true endpoint. As death gains these nuanced and motivational roles in the narratives of love, fatality never loses its gravity—the weight of death gets transformed and re-routed through the narrative force of desire. When I speak of death as a loophole or narrative veil for Byron, as a minor roadblock or occasion for Gothic excess in Keats, or as a way of discussing ambivalent desire in Shelley, I never invoke a Romantic understanding of death as totalizing nonexistence. In both dark and tender ways, Romantic mortality narratives examine vital modes of attachment and intense feelings of desire that bump up against the socially impossible, whether due to sexuality and gender or class and kinship.

This dissertation does not argue for the historical exceptionalism of Romantic writing on love and death. But it does bring into sharper focus a range of genre tropes and thematic categories that can be taken for granted because this period is so transfixed by questions about subjectivity, romance and mortality. In my key primary texts, the Romantics consider the trajectory of desire as both entwined with but also standing apart from the trajectory of an individual's life. We see, on the one hand, a consistent Romantic understanding of desire as continuous with and at least partly constitutive of the sense of self. In its propulsive, motivational force, desire draws us out into the world and attaches us to other mortal, finite beings. On the other hand, there is an explicit anxiety over, or a sense of awe-inspiring recognition, of the way desire so often feels like something inflicted upon an individual. When desire feels like it partly comes from the outside, it is hard to imagine not just the end of one's own life, not just the end of life for your beloved, but it is even more difficult to conceptualize the total end of desire itself. In

this way, Byron, Keats and Shelley anticipate contemporary understandings of subjectivity as shaped by desire, and they trouble the bounds of what constitutes a sense of self. In their literary explorations of the desiring R/romantic subject, they are prompted to consider the material limits of the self as contained to a mortal form. Desire is not a force to be reckoned with, it is *the* force to be reckoned with: this is the conclusion I see Byron, Keats and Shelley all landing on, in various ways, as they write about romantic love and mortality in this tight thirteen year timeframe at the very heart of the Romantic period.

I read these Romantic writers as illustrating how the stakes of romance can be reaffirmed when we take seriously the feeling that romance is a matter of life and death. All three authors embrace genres and styles associated with emotional hyperbole in order to highlight the affective truth of intimate romantic love where one's life feels mortally entangled with the beloved. I show how Byron, Keats and Shelley take up themes of precarious embodiment in texts that both borrow and distance themselves from conventional tropes, particularly from Gothic and romance traditions. In prose and in verse, we see this trio of writers responding to and evolving much older romance tropes in order to play with the tension between the superficial and the deep, the playful and the sincere, the unserious and the existential. Unlike Byron in his love letter, these writers' fictional characters actually mean it when they make the cliched claim that they would die without their object of love: Byron's masculine warriors literally expire in each other's arms, Keats's overenthusiastic lovers skip the banality of relationship troubleshooting and pay fatal consequences, and Shelley's *Matilda* protagonist repeatedly and aggressively asserts her love of death until she actually dies. These authors solidify the stakes of the most hyperbolic claims, challenging the assumptions of superficiality that readers and real-life lovers ascribe to declarations of mortal love.

When Byron dips into orientalist Gothic in *Lara*, Keats uses swooning damsel romance stereotypes *The Eve of St. Agnes,* and Shelley's *Matilda* follows scripts of perverse Gothic kinship, these authors clearly have late eighteenth-century Gothic texts like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) in mind. Much as Samuel T. Coleridge does in "Christabel" (1816) or Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1817), each of my key authors mines the oft-dismissed aesthetics, rhetorical structures and tropes of romance and the Gothic for more textured, nuanced ends. Writing in a slightly later moment than Coleridge and Austen, Byron, Keats and Shelley take up these literary forms in similarly unexpected ways as they demand incredible depth out of the genre's most superficial cliches around love and death. They elaborate ambitious theories of how desire—for better or worse—moves the subject through this world and on to the next. These authors show how the Gothic can enable a playful yet inquisitive mode of considering desire as an unwieldly and infinite force. It is not that we are thinking about the conventions and limitations of Gothic in the wrong way, they suggest, but perhaps we are thinking about the conventions and limitations of living and loving in relation to death the wrong way. Each section of my project deals with layered conventionality, incorporating but also extending beyond romance.

Romantic literature about desire, love and death is attuned to the significance of conventions and boundaries because intimate relations can, in turn, shape and devastate the contours of the self. My dissertation shows how, whenever these Romantics are writing about desire, they simultaneously are thinking about the desiring self and the subject as molded by and through desirous attachments. These writers' interest in margins (of the subject, of life itself) manifests in a repeated turn to stylistic choices that would seem to constrain writing. In writing about these incredibly capacious themes of life and death, love and tragedy, these writers make

formal choices that, in some way, tie their hands behind their backs. They each select forms that, to some extent, limit themes, aesthetics and syntax, and they stretch surprising elasticity out of their choices: in my primary texts, Shelley puts blinders on her reader through epistolarity, Keats and Byron both dabble in translation, and choices in rhyme schemes like ottava rima literally limit availability of language. While Keats lacked the education and wide-ranging reading habits of Byron and Shelley, all three approach mortality and death with a similarly self-conscious posture towards literary tradition and social normativity. In true Romantic fashion, every one of my primary texts emerges from, invokes and alludes to long literary historical traditions and particularly influential figures such as Virgil, Dante, Milton, Spenser, and Shakespeare. Most notably within my archive, Shelley hardly goes a page in *Matilda* without multiple direct references to and quotes from literary masterpieces. The epistolary novella feels like a journal of intertextual conversation at the same time as a private narrative project of self-making.

Along with this formal recourse to conventionality, my archive of materials explicitly deals with extreme taboos: pederasty and queer desire in Byron, violation of corpses and rape in Keats, and incest and suicide in Shelley. Throughout the project, I consider the role of recognizable narrative structures and textual allusions in treating socially impermissible and/or ethically fraught topics. Normative forms paired with scandalous literary themes can draw further attention to their own shock factor, but also can provide rhetorical and stylistic counterbalance. This dual effect allows Byron, Keats and Shelley to take up especially loaded topics while giving them critical room to make sense of the darkest human desires, from craving prohibited sexuality to longing for death. Forbidden epistemology thrives in this space between the expected and the unthinkable. My archive was curated by selecting texts that, in my view, represent an especially drastic contrast (both formally and affectively) between bounded

normative literary form and brazenly taboo subject matter. In this contrast, we witness how the Romantics make a compelling case for why it is meaningful to ask why desire sometimes feels so intense we maybe want to stop existing. They show us how generative it is to ask why the longing of grief feels akin to the precarity of dealing with possibly unrequited desire. They demonstrate the productivity of thinking about the strange and surprising anxieties and pleasures behind grand declarations of how life without love feels like, and perhaps in some ways constitutes, a kind of death.

Literature Review

I am particularly indebted to the work of Romanticists vested in traditions of affect theory, psychoanalysis and gender and sexuality studies. Romantic scholars with these critical lenses share an attunement to how the Romantics critiqued the clashes and comforts of subjectivity, sociality and desire. In *Romantic Psychoanalysis,* Joel Faflak writes that "Romanticism's concern with the trauma of self-identity is one of the ways it coheres as an historical entity."[3] Along with Faflak, scholars such as Tilottama Rajan and David Sigler have written about how the Romantics prefigure psychoanalytic concepts related to the tenuous and always fluctuating constitution of the self. When critics talk about the precarity of the Romantic subject, I argue that they often mean something akin to this anxiety over intimacy's enmeshment with mortality. In *Romantic Moods*, Thomas Pfau writes that "[Romantic literature] explores how experience in the aggregate molds the emotional fabric of the subject—namely, as a persistent and unsettling 'feeling' of the irreducible tenuousness and volatility of being."[4] While Pfau turns

[3] Joel Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of Mystery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 5.
[4] Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 17.

to German philosophy and psychoanalysis to explain Romantic psychic trauma, I argue that we can understand Romantic "volatility of being" as the "tenuousness" of creating and sustaining the most intimate and desirous of attachments. In his turn to theories of mood and emotions, Pfau often recognizes how the specter of death remains close (particularly to "melancholy"), but he does not draw the implicit link that I do between love, desire and death.

My dissertation regularly employees the vocabulary and logical gestures of psychoanalysis in order to explain the ways in which desire is predicated on lack. Throughout my chapters, we see what Rajan describes in *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* as a kind of doomed but desire-driven Romantic compulsion to find meaning within our own desires.[5] Yet, in articulating the many functions and figurations of death in my archive, I must go beyond Freudian *Thanatos* in order to explain the incorporation of mortality into often positive and always forward-moving narratives of desire and love. Romantic psychoanalytic scholarship tends to center repetition compulsion and the problem of destructiveness (inward and outward) when using the language of the death drive. For example, in "Judging Justice: Godwin's Critique of Judgment in 'Caleb Williams' and Other Novels," Rajan characterizes the model of the death drive in William Godwin's *Fleetwood* as, "…infinite absolute negativity: the negation of the real from the viewpoint of the ideal and of the ideal from that of the real" (355). This focus on negativity and the "compulsion to destroy…attachments" shows up across Romantic criticism on psychoanalysis, desire and the death drive (355). However, this vocabulary fails to animate the lines of inquiry which bind my dissertation's conception of mortality. Rather than centering the corrosiveness of the death drive,

[5] Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 346-347. A similar model of self-reflexive desire shows up in Faflak's essay "The Difficult Education of Shelley's 'Triumph of Life'" (1-3).

I argue that desire and death collide in my texts in such a way that produces surprising affects, fresh narratives of longing and curious ways of living. Thus, my use of psychoanalysis necessarily side steps the vocabulary of death drive in order to illustrate what is so generative and counterintuitive about the Romantic pairing of desire and death.

The fixation with death in the period has been examined from various angles by scholars such as Susan Wolfson who brings her characteristic formal approach to the linguistic and literal hauntings of the period in *Romantic Shades and Shadows*. She writes, "Romantic haunting is no news…Coexisting with Enlightenment rationalism, modern science, and the material world is its vast converse with spirits near and far, apparitions, ghosts seen, dreamed and dreamed up, old mythologies, specters in historical catastrophes, in high theory and in low culture. However one maps 'Romanticism,' the challenge would be to avert from its phantoms, shades and specters."[6] My dissertation locates the "phantoms, shades and specters" which accompany romance in ways that threaten love but also enhance, enable and complement intimate attachments.

Along with Romanticist criticism on death and the precarity of subjectivity, my project emerges from scholarly traditions of formal interest in the conventions of romance. I investigate the crevice between convention and taboo, examining the "curious compounds of the unknown and the too well-known," as Deidre Shauna Lynch puts it in her essay on "Gothic fiction."[7] Lynch surveys a sweeping range of self-consciously Gothic and/or romantic texts from the British Romantic period in order to demonstrate the way the genre is predicated on a readerly "knowingness" that nonetheless leaves comfortable room for the element of surprise (47-48). My dissertation's preoccupation with genre and conventionality builds on Lynch's establishment of

[6] Susan Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 34-35.
[7] Deidre Shauna Lynch, "Gothic Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Fiction in the Romantic Period*, edited by Maxwell, Richard and Katie Trumpener (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 47.

this knowing public in order to illuminate a specific and often neglected string of surprises related to the entanglement of desire and death. While I am interested in how convention associated with familiarity or "knowingness" organizes a set of questions about affect, desire and death, Lynch argues for how convention organizes a historical account of the romance genre: "Gothic fictions often call themselves romances…to declare themselves anachronisms (throwbacks) in both literary history and the history of belief. But as modern romances, whose stories of superstition and delusion illuminate how fiction is grounded in consensual illusion, they also help complete the rise of the novel" (64).

Ian Duncan also wants to tell a historical story of romance and the rise of the novel in *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel,* in which he reads against the "critical commonplace that 'the rise of the novel' in eighteenth-century England took place upon the overthrow of an obsolete and inauthentic kind of fiction called 'romance,'" and offers an important case for the intellectual flexibility and utility of romance conventions in the British Romantic period.[8] He writes, "For us, romance must always be romance revival, meaning not a synchronicity of archetypes across history but an active cultural work of the discovery and invention of ancestral forms…" (7). Duncan attends solely to the history of the novel here, but, in my exploration of romance archetypes and genre conventions, I find his revision of literary history useful for thinking about even verse reactions to romance. Along with Duncan and Lynch, scholars such as Michael Gamer, George Haggerty and Diane Long Hoeveler have contributed to an understanding of romance and the Gothic as genres of great plasticity and also reflexivity. As Duncan puts it, writing into these modes reveals a self-conscious preoccupation with the "cultural work" of always re/discovering much older forms.

[8] Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

When I speak of convention in this dissertation, I often concentrate on the genre markers of the Gothic and antiquarian romance as digested, satirized and retooled by the Romantics. Beyond the Gothic, though, all of my chapters engage with various literary and social modes of conventionality, and I contend that convention need not act as a negative form of limitation. In this way, I consider limits in a similar methodological vein to Anahid Nersessian's work in *Utopia Limited*. Turning to Marx and the language of materialism, Nersessian makes a counterintuitive yet powerful case for "a Romanticism that defines utopianism as an investment in limitations."[9] Wedding the highly practical to the philosophically capacious, Nersessian shows how the Romantics make an ethical case for doing more with less: "Romantic literature functions as utopian thought insofar as it takes its own formalism to mime a minimally harmful relationship between human beings and a world whose resources are decidedly finite" (16). While I depart from Nersessian in her interest in the material, I also locate urgency in the social critiques (of gender, sexuality, class and literary history) embedded in formal choices associated with blatant limitation. Nersessian models a helpful mode for thinking about what is useful in making boundaries desirable, and what is generative in refusing the absolutism of what seems on the surface to be a hard limit.

My primary texts tap into forms and genres that have long been associated with literary experimentation, particularly with gender, sexuality and networks of sociality. Throughout this dissertation, my approach to these literary experiments is indebted to the work of history of sexuality and desire scholars. I resonate with how Clara Tuite characterizes her own methodology in this area as "the making legible of a practice, tendency, act, or experience."[10] In

[9] Anahid Nersessian. *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) 19.
[10] Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5.

"More Than a Feeling: Shelley's Affect," Faflak writes, "Spurred by, among other things, a return to the body in feminist and queer theory and the transformation of emotion into a scientific object, we are now rethinking feeling in Romanticism as a complex matrix of representational and cognitive possibilities" (np). Per my particular interest in the taboo and the marginal in British Romanticism, I am compelled by Faflak's description of such a stance in Romantic criticism that both is grounded in the "body" but also illuminates a wide range of interpretive "possibilities."

We see such a range of "representational and cognitive possibilities" in how Richard Sha calls attention to desire in *Perverse Romanticism*, "Above all, the Romantic poet's ability to stand inside and outside of desire, enables a vantage point from where to gauge the extent to which mutuality or the dissolution of hierarchy has been achieved."[11] Along with my formal interest in romance tradition and conventionality, I share this interest in the Romantic compulsion to inhabit various "vantage point[s]" of desire because, in my readings, these thinkers remain uneasy of if and how mutuality can last, even when it seems like it "has been achieved." Within my archive, Byron occupies (perhaps surprisingly) the most optimistic position about reciprocal intimacy, but he stages such relations against tragic backgrounds. His poetics of queer death locates reassurance in the idea that desire is both continuous with the self (in a world that cannot recognize queer desiring subjects) and extends beyond the self and past death, preserving the beauty of a reciprocated relation. In Keatsian romance, desire's power is potentially intoxicating and dangerous because, when there is initial mutual attraction, desire risks being misrecognized as full-fledged intimacy. For Shelley, desire is the ultimate occasion for ambivalence but, in recognizing the power of desire in the face of true horrors, we better

[11] Richard Sha, *Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 9.

understand the nature of the human condition. In bringing their readers to this reaffirmation of the mortal stakes of desire, all three conclude with the endurance of desire beyond the obstacle of death.

In thinking about this endurance of desire, my dissertation extends beyond the field of Romantic criticism and engages directly with psychoanalytic and queer theory. Through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz and others, I show how these theorists are uniquely equipped to deal with thorny questions of non-normative sexuality, desire and social attachments (queer or otherwise). In my focus on the desiring Romantic subject, I show how my dissertation's key texts repeatedly challenge notions of what acts and desires should count as part of a self. Methodologically, queer theory supports the core tenets of my project because my texts deal with consistently non-normative consequences of both taboo and ordinary desires. Queer theory allows me to think about finding playful and urgent flexibility within the confines of convention and cliché because queer theorists are always already thinking from the social bounds of what is legible and permissible. My use of "playful" here, and throughout my dissertation, is also indebted to a very queer theoretical way of thinking about play and normativity through the lens of ambivalence. Teasing the flexible bounds of social and literary forms need not emerge from straightforward joyous affects, nor politically antagonistic negative affects.

Throughout this dissertation, Lauren Berlant serves as my touchstone figure for unpacking the Romantic theories of desire as continuous with the self, even as (often fraught) desire overwhelms the subject. Like Berlant, I find the vocabularies of affect theory and psychoanalysis useful for illuminating the tangled, incommensurability of the desires that animate us from within versus the social realities that press down upon us externally. In my readings of *Cruel Optimism*, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* and more, I find Berlant a

valuable interlocutor with the Romantics on the topics of desire and intimacy—in part because they too were concerned with the (sometimes false) binary between internal wants and external demands. I consistently turn to Berlant's scholarship in order to extrapolate my own readings of the Romantic interest in durability of desire. Essential to my project is the understanding that "…intimacy involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way."[12] The Romantics repeatedly illuminate Berlant's sense of intimacy as dictated by an "aspiration[al] narrative" and take it a step further: when faced with hardship, the Romantic narrative of intimacy cannot simply shut down because the narrative of a "story shared" must continue. In all of Berlant's works, the continuity and forcefulness of desire drives the ability of the subject to conceptualize and move towards a future. Throughout my dissertation, I show how the Romantics stretch this logic by recognizing mortality's place within an intimate romantic relation without allowing that recognition to foreclose futurity.

Chapter Descriptions

My chapters unfold largely chronologically, starting with Byron's earliest career publication in 1807 (*Hours of Idleness*) and ending with Shelley's novella *Matilda*, completed in 1820. This offers a tight window from the very heart of the Romantic period in which each author experimented with genre markers and tropes surrounding love and death. In my approach to these texts, I work to balance biographical work with formal analysis, attuned in particular to the dynamism of sexuality and desire in the Romantic period. My first chapter, "'Death was heavenly in his friend's embrace': Queer Intimacy & the Veil of Death in Lord Byron,"

[12] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue" (*Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2, 1998), 281.

highlights the grounded, established and loving intimacies which emerge in Byron's homoerotic poetics of the battlefield. I read Nancy Yousef's work in *Romantic Intimacy* in order to reevaluate the importance of felt closeness and emotional proximity in defining R/romantic intimacy for Byron. From the earliest moments of his career through the peak of his commercial success, Byron demonstrably manipulated literary signifiers of masculinity in order to smuggle queer romance into his writing. I begin with his *Hours of Idleness* (1807) revision of a schoolboy translation exercise, "The Episode of Nisus and Euryalus," which deploys the bodily language of epic violence as tools of queer coding. I argue that the methodologies he uses in this heroic couplet poem to explore queer intimacy extend and evolve through the shades of epic queer poetics in his orientalist poem *Lara: A Tale* (1814). In each text, Byron introduces a pair of men ensconced in intimacies of deep familiarity and love, only to bring the readers to graphic and emotionally devastating death scenes. Unlike contemporary conversations around queer representation and erasure, I argue, a reading of Byron's queer death poetry necessitates an appreciation for his playfulness with form and tradition. Tragedy and gruesome bodily descriptions should not be read as straightforward, sad reflections of a homophobic society. Rather, we should read queer historical agency in Byron's exquisitely violent death scenes as explicit tools of agency, discretion and visibility. In light of the poet's reputation as both formally reflexive and hyper conscious of his public image, criticism should locate more deliberate strategy in his poetics of homoerotic battlefield love and death. Through readings of Berlant, Annamarie Jagose, José Esteban Muñoz and other queer theorists, I argue that Byron offers twenty-first-century queer politics a new lens for thinking about discretion outside the usual polarity of queer optimism versus queer pessimism. Furthermore, the homoerotic nature of these sensual death scenes adds texture to Romantic scholarship's understanding of the desirous

Byronic subject. The murkiness of unknowability and social misrecognition is automatically baked into queerness for Byron. In bringing queerness into the light through death, Byron shows us how the stakes of mutual recognition of desire and the stakes of social endorsement of desire implicate any and all subjects in anxieties about mortality.

Intimacy takes a backseat in my second chapter because Keats's romance poems all feature early-stage romance where intimacy has yet to be earned and stabilized. Titled "'Real are the dreams of gods': Fantastical Intimacy & Violation in John Keats's Romance Poems," this middle section of my dissertation investigates Keats's dual notion of fantasy as both a necessary narrative extension of desire and as a threat to lasting fulfillment of young lovers' romance. In *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), problems emerge from both minor inconveniences (attraction to a total stranger) and explicit threats to the characters' lives (falling in love with a family rival, falling in love with a mythical being). Through his interest in fantasy and the overestimation of intimacy, Keats uses the famously formulaic tropes of the Gothic in order to show readers the problems with over-scripting norms of romance. As Berlant tells us in *Desire/Love*, fantasies are normal and healthy, to a degree, in that they give desire a compelling storyline. However, they can lead to interpersonal harm (with possibly mortal stakes) when one subject selfishly forces into being their vision of when, how and where they want the Other. Keats's lovers repeatedly violate their purported objects of desire when they insist on carrying out their fantastical plans instead of negotiating and compromising their way through mutual challenges and difficulty. Once again turning to Berlant (*Desire/Love* and *Cruel Optimism*), I show how Keats anticipates an understanding of sexuality and desire in which the sense of self gains shape but also risks destruction through the path towards acquiring an object of desire. Examining the three title works from his last published volume, I argue that Keats's

romance poems can be overlooked for their deeper commentary on love and mortality because of how aggressively Keats leans into the superficial aesthetics and rhetorical excess of the Gothic. Yet, I argue that his critiques of foolish youthful love bracket one essential aspect of fantasy: the belief that falling in love involves an intimate bond of mortality. Keats's lovers demonstrate how it is a fallacy to believe this is the *only* necessary ingredient to form and maintain intimate romantic attachment. However, I read the poet as ultimately endorsing a theory of intimacy requiring the vulnerability of loving the other so much you believe that, in some sense, you would truly die without your beloved. In one fell swoop, Keats condemns the reader who would dare to refuse the Gothic critical depth and who would scoff at young lovers' invocations of mortality as foolish versions of romance.

My dissertation concludes with the chapter that takes death the most seriously, but also hinges on the loosest, most flexible figurations of "death" as elements of the narrative of desire. In "'Death is too terrible an object for the living': The Desire for Death & Ambivalent Life in Mary Shelley's *Matilda*," I read Shelley's novella as a limit case for the endurance of desire. In the wake of her father's confession of incestuous love and his ensuing suicide, Matilda convinces herself that, all along, she was fated to die young and alone, and writes this letter of a novella. By situating the titular character through Berlant's theories of the unbearable in *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, I argue that Shelley shows her reader how "death" and the unbearable offer useful vocabulary for shepherding the subject through the ongoingness of living amidst the most agonizing circumstances. I argue that Matilda's feelings of irrevocably damaged selfhood emerge not just from the trauma of her past, but from her inability to recognize her continued attachment to life. Her dearest and only friend Woodville (to whom the letter of her memoir is addressed) sees through Matilda's adamance and recognizes how she remains stuck in

a loop of overwhelming pain in which (natural innocent) death seems like the only answer. Ironically, in articulating her life story to Woodville and to the reader, Matilda reveals an ambivalent yet intact will to live. Unlike the transcendent temporality of queer desire in Byron and the over-zealous futurity of Keats's notion of fantasy, Shelley's Matilda simply cannot see a future for herself outside of death. Through Matilda's morbid but passionately vibrant narrative voice, I read Shelley as upholding the power of desire to keep the subject ambivalently attached to existence itself. This is a raw, minimal and non-linear attachment to life that keeps Matilda motivated enough to narrate her own story while falling short of relieving her mental agony. Less optimistic about the consequences of intimate attachment than Byron and Keats, Shelley formulates desire as powerfully ongoing, enduring against all internal and external obstacles. However, this endurance does nothing to alleviate circumstances of unbearability. Shelley forcibly dismisses the alluring myth of self-knowledge when it comes to our own desires and affirms a theory of desire in which humans have little agency. In her view, we cannot opt out of human relationality and, as soon as we are in contact with the social world, we risk the kind of loving intimate attachments that open us up to vulnerability and hurt. Variations of loss, betrayal and pain are inevitable because humanity is powerless against the fundamental impulse to reach out into the world and attach our desiring impulse to another.

Desire, Death & The Subject: A R/romantic Problem

In the pages that follow, I consider how Romantic literature illustrates the evolving and dissolving structures of subjectivity through the vicissitudes of desires which brush up against death. Romantic authors were not attempting to pin down stable subjectivity nor resolve great unknowns about the definition of life. In staging capacious inquiries about mortality anxieties,

they enact remarkable willingness to sit with literary modes which inhabit the unknowable, the unrecognizable and the indeterminate. Byron, Keats and Shelley show readers how desire draws us out into the world, attaching us to objects of desire and fantasies of loving and intimately shared futures. On the one hand, this demonstration creates and sustains the most fundamental and meaningful attachments in a subject's life. The inwardness of desire propels the subject to share and entwine their sense of self with the other, making them more vulnerable as they invest in intimate relationality. Yet the Romantic subject often overestimates their own agency and ends up feeling powerless against the pull of their own desire. How can desire simultaneously feel like both this innermost secret and a propelling external force? Facing the contradiction between feeling in control of desire and feeling swept away by desire, the Romantic subject encounters their cohesive sense of self as the façade it really is. Threats to the cohesion of the self and threats to the material existence of self and Other get muddled through intimate mortality anxieties. I use this vocabulary of intimacy throughout my project precisely because intimate relations dramatize the tension between outwardness and inwardness of desire.

Each chapter takes a different affective stance towards the recognition of the persistent force of desire. I argue that Byron, Keats and Shelley make parallel cases for why reciprocal desire is simply never enough. Mutual desire cannot overcome the taboos of heteronormativity and violence of homophobic society, it cannot smooth over the inevitable obstacles of a life shared through various stages and challenges, and desire can be reciprocated but in the wrong way such that all desire feels permanently tainted. My dissertation makes the case that these Romantics show us how human attachments can only be fulfilling and stable when we come to terms with the honest conditions of real, ongoing romantic intimacy. It is enormously difficult to verify (and re-verify) that one's desires support the cohesion of sense of self, fall in line with

social normativity, and remain grounded in continued mutual desire. In my chosen texts, these three elements always remain in friction with each other and they can have truly fatal consequences if the subject does not put in the work to reflect and make compromises that assimilate their desires to their social environments and individual needs as precarious subjects. Granted, the Romantics certainly anticipate the basic psychoanalytic tenet of desire as never truly satisfiable and at least somewhat at odds with coherence of the self. However, that seems to be all the more reason for them to write texts which toy with tropes of romantic mortality, prompting readers to ask themselves, why does love feel like life and death? How do we prevent being paralyzed by these mortal anxieties while also taking seriously our attachment to, promise to care for, and intention to spend the rest of our lives with another subject? These questions gesture towards the central tensions of love and death that run through this dissertation: regardless of whether your object of desire loves you back or not, regardless of whether they are physically and emotionally close to you or not, and, most extraordinarily, regardless of whether or not your object of desire is even alive, desire persists.

The Romantics turn again and again, with both hope and terror, to the sheer power of desire. It sounds like some gauche twenty-first-century therapeutic axiom to say that we should honor the way that romantic desire and love can feel like life or death. What the Romantics show us, in various genres and styles that embrace the hyperbole of mortal risk, is that we cannot resist human nature in the subject's impulse to bind one's sense of self and literal corporeal form to that of the beloved Other. Each of my authors understands desire as this unstoppable force that defies the laws of life itself; Byron, Keats and Shelley take seriously this affective truth, no matter how grandiose or intellectually untethered it may feel to claim desire as immortal or eternal. Their recursion to familiar formal choices of romance convention underscores this awe at

the quotidian reality of desire's force, with simultaneous tragic and beautiful, frustrating yet reassuring effects for the reader.

Desire can find voice through the mirage of coded language, in the tired cliches of romance conventionality, or in the quietest articulations of commitment to the persistence of living. This elasticity illustrates how the motivational force of desire necessarily exceeds every one of the subject's physical and psychic limitations. Desire feels boundless, abstract and infinite as it pulls the entranced subject down the path to something better ahead, towards the thing they have not yet achieved that is just around the next corner. Byron, Keats and Shelley show us a seductive and bittersweet felt truth about the way desire is experienced partly as an outside force that impinges upon us and outlives us: if our wants and attachments to others endure, then the logic only follows that some essence of the dead endures alongside the living.

Chapter 1

"Death was heavenly in his friend's embrace"

Queer Intimacy & the Veil of Death in Lord Byron

In *Romantic Intimacy*, Nancy Yousef traces enlightenment and Romantic thought on sympathy in order to make the case for intimacy as the term which "… crystallizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities. The term designates, and thus to a degree attests to, a confidence that individuals can and do disclose to one another thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but it also pertains to, and thus intimates the foreboding or wish for, an inward region of irreducible privacy, a fated or perhaps willed withholding" (1). Her account centers rather than resolves the way intimacy troubles the boundaries of subjectivity and the necessary external qualities of intimate attachment. This "tension between sharing and enclosing" plays out in the overlapping vocabularies of subjectivity and normativity. In my own account of intimacy, I want to call attention to the language of norms that dictates our capacity to describe these "opposed imaginations of relational possibilities." If we can only describe intimacy through normative language, how can we truly understand and act on a full human range of "relational possibilities"? For Lord Byron, the answer lies in the flexibility and possibilities of norms themselves. In this chapter, I examine how Byron's poetics offers scenes of queer intimacies that might seem directly oppositional to Regency social conceptions of what counted as real romantic and erotic intimate attachments. Yet, for Byron, this tension never amounts to a political attack against the hegemony of heterosexuality, nor does it fully retreat to quietism and denial of desire.

Byron characterizes queer intimacy by playing with the established normative structures and familiar vocabulary of emotional and/or physical closeness. While queer intimacy must always be understood against and in relation to heteronormativity, Byron helps us see how this dynamic is not necessarily one of legible antagonism, but rather one of "relational possibilities." Byronic queer intimacy refuses a prevalent twenty-first century impulse to use the language of active antagonism in describing queerness' relation to normativity. The poet's longstanding attentiveness to readership, personal experiences with public knowledge of sexuality, and his privilege as a well-read writer with all the protections of his class make him an exceptional candidate for examining this historical question of when and how queerness becomes legible in literary intimacy. Always aware of his social position and literary reputation, Byron both embraces and bucks traditions to shape the very idea of poetry in the Romantic period.

With this career of boldness and creativity in mind, I argue that we must ask why, from early in his adult life, Byron chooses especially confining formal techniques in writing about queerness. I stress the playfulness of Byron's approach to queerness, and to literary methodology in general, in order lower the demands of queerness as politically legible in active resistance to norms. Especially when we look at the history of sexuality through the lens of queer theory, it is easy to overestimate the defiant force with which queerness pushes back against normativity. Byron's fictional queer relations play out in vocabulary and scenes that stay within certain boundaries and do not raise suspicions of transgression. Critics may see this emphasis on non-antagonistic queerness as another version of retreating to the closet or bending to norms out of fear, shame and helplessness. While working within the bounds of normativity will always be a form of compromise, I argue that we gain a more generous understanding of intimacy and a more nuanced reading of Byron's queer literary methodologies when we see how queer desires operate

within familiar literary and social structures of interpersonal closeness.[13] Awareness of normativity does not *just* produce an understanding of confinement, but also opens up room for queer coding. This coding serves both as a survival strategy and also as a platform for reconsidering when and how norms become legible. Hyperaware of how sexuality was perceived in his work, Byron manipulates legible markers of normative masculine desire in order to hide queerness in plain sight.

In line with Yousef's definition of intimacy as opposing/enclosing, Byron's work illustrates how and why we should understand intimacy as both an internal experience of the desiring subject and as an externally regulated experience subject to the rigors of normativity. His poetry illustrates these dual modes of intimacy as always entangled—an entanglement that modern theorists of intimacy can learn from, I argue. It is not that literary theories of intimacy (or fictional portrayals of intimacy, for that matter) ignore the tension between social norms and desires that seem to emanate from a core internal self. As Lauren Berlant wrote in the introduction to the 1998 "Intimacies" special edition of *Critical Inquiry*, "[Intimacy] is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness" (281). As Berlant and Yousef, among other theorists of intimacy and culture have argued, "publicness" imposes scripts of convention onto these zones of familiarity and comfort, adding boundaries and taboos. What Byron helps us understand is how these norms that *would* seem largely hostile to the expression of and acting on particular desires can actually become conduits for those desires manifesting into realized intimacies.

[13] Here I am indebted to Heather Love's insistently ambivalent methodologies in *Feeling Backward*, throughout which she argues for an approach to historical sexuality that neither idealizes queer attachments of the past nor sees the violence and shame of queer history as justification to mourn and set aside the opportunity for critique.

Scripts of convention are ripe for tweaking to let the non-normative shine through. Byron manipulates literary convention to embed masculine queerness in what David Halperin calls "…established discursive venue[s] in which to express, without social reproach, sentiments of passionate mutual love…" (101).[14] Halperin's touchstone understanding of historical sexuality makes clear how and why Byron stages queer desire within more socially accepted scenes of masculine affection. Like Berlant's "zones" of permissible intimacies, Halperin's model of "established… venues" helps explain the queer strategy behind Byron's formal literary choices. Using "established" literary forms alongside typically Byronic (and Romantic) excess and passion, Byron explores the particularities of queer intimacy and the universal anxieties of intimate attachment. I emphasize the importance of form and genre to his theorizing of intimacy because these literary choices are places where the sanitizing forces of convention[15] may be brought into view alongside the internal angst of the desirous Byronic subject.

By attending to Byron's embrace of strict literary tradition and convention in his writing on intimacy, we see how he repeatedly returns to one particular "venue" or "zone" in his queer poetics: his poetry about masculinity and desire for other men repeatedly culminates in intimate scenes of dying and death. Descriptions of injury and violence license lingering on male physicality and desirable masculine traits like bravery. The emotions of fear, horror and grief around the scene of death enable a hyperbolic vocabulary of attachment, frustration and irreparability when characterizing the relationship between two men. The heightened affects around dying and death give voice to a level of love and intimacy that would otherwise raise

[14] Halperin's touchstone *GLQ* article "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality" references these "discursive venues" in a section on men writing about erotic friendships. Importantly, Halperin sees this particular model of historical male sexuality as dependent on a turn to egalitarianism. Byron uses this kind of model but also plays into erotic relationships between men of vastly different power positions.
[15] A phrase I am borrowing from Berlant's *Desire/Love* (71).

suspicion from Regency readers. Byron codes these queer death scenes in obvious places, such as the traditionally homoerotic narratives of Virgilian epic tradition. But, importantly I argue, he simultaneously leans into masculine normativity and literary conventionality (namely the strict heroic couplet) in a way that would seem to tighten the seams of heteronormative poetics. In this push and pull between the obviously queer and deeply normative, Byron makes death itself an instrument for flexibility in normativity and intimacy's "relational possibilities." The prevalence of fatality in Byron's work has not gone without notice—Norbert Lennartz has gone so far as to call the poet "a connoisseur of death."[16] Especially given Byron's wealth of other poetry about fatality, I am not arguing that Byron shows us death as innately or desirably queer. Rather, literary conventions and death both offer sets of legible boundaries for Byron to use in strategically writing about queer intimacy. In this way, Byron refuses the logic of life and death, along with queer and normative, as sets of oppositional poles, and he makes the poetic case for the sheer resilience of desire for intimacy.

I argue that fictional scenes that linger on intimacy beyond death do not cheapen or undermine the intimacy that existed between characters prior to death. There is a certain romance in an understanding of death that affirms desire's endurance beyond the precise moment of departure from life. Even in the tragic and inconvenient aspects of desire, the Byronic subject is grounded by the people, objects and scenes they attach themselves to. In *Desire/Love*, Berlant describes how desire "says *something*[17] about what it takes for you to anchor yourself in time and space" (76-77). Not despite but rather through his careful recourse to layers of conventionality, Byron manages to illustrate the queer anchor of desire for his characters. This does not make the

[16] Lennartz writes about Byron's preoccupation with dying and death in his chapter on "Byron and the Good Death" from *Byron and Marginality*.
[17] Berlant's italics.

desire less queer, per se, but shows us the complexity of discursive strategies required for "anchor[ing]" non-normative desires in Byron's time.

In this chapter, I will read Byron's early Virgilian translation "The Episode of Nisus and Euryalus" as a homoerotic precursor to the quintessential Byronic hero in *Lara* and his "page boy" lover Kaled. From a schoolboy writing exercise to the commercial success of an internationally famous poet, we see continuities in Byron's normative formal choices as conduits for queer poetics. In both texts, Byron forges a discreet path for narrating queer intimacy through his use of epic death and homoeroticism. The field of Romantic scholarship offers decades of work to show how Byron was consistently, often anxiously, aware of both his authorial fame and literature's role in highlighting and questioning social norms.[18] Clara Tuite credits Byron with originating a new kind of celebrity that wedded "the famous and the notorious," in part because of how his private sex life was made so public.[19] In my readings, I expand on Tuite's argument for the publicizing of Byron's private affairs as a lens for understanding when and how the poet makes subtle nods to taboo love and sexuality. Through his normative formal choices, I argue Byron underscores the necessary discretion at the heart of historical queerness without sacrificing the intense affects surrounding same-sex desire. These charged affects are not immune to Regency condemnations of (namely masculine) queerness, but they are also not solely or primarily mediated through a politics of resistance. Living in a state of constant resistance, risky visibility and exile is not a realistic pathway for desire (queer or otherwise) because such a life lacks what Berlant characterizes as "anchors" for grounding desires. Byron's idea of literary discretion with queer writing does not amount to creative self-exile or scandalous

[18] The most recent and robust analysis of Byron's relationship to his public image as a writer comes from Tuite's book *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity.*
[19] See the prologue to *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (xv).

bait for condemnation, though. The actuality of queer life, even at a time when visible queerness could be lethal, allows Byron to see beyond the false binary between aspiring for a not-yet-here queer future or feeling trapped by discontent in the present.

Regardless of whether queerness is described through a politics of optimism or politics of negativity, there is a contemporary critical tendency to frame queerness in the vocabulary of tension and opposition. Queerness offers us variations of *against*-ness: against norms of proper gender performances, objects of desire and social relations. Queer theory and historical scholarship on queerness is full of images of borderlands, liminal spaces and boundaries—spaces that signify the proper (or only) territory of constant queer resistance. Conversely, Byron's visions of queer love do not open up alternative counterpublics nor do they look ahead to impossible utopic futures.[20] Queer theoretical scholarship still tends to assume that queerness equates with an automatic refusal of (or, in more positive terms, progressing away from) the sameness and ubiquity of normativity. For Byron, queer intimacy in both fiction and reality are best served by strategic discretion about normativity—queer visibility is navigated by weaponizing social pressures to seek and to assume heterosexuality and normative masculinity standards. The actuality of Romantic-period queer existence had little to do with explicit visibility, authoritative terminology and political rights—the dominant elements of contemporary queer political conversations. Discretion for Byron, then, is not about erasure and omission, but rather coded disclosure, hints and gestures that are packaged within acceptable literary and

[20] I am thinking of the anti-sociality, anti-futurity strains that began with Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman and then more recent scholarship that embraces optimism (see Michael Snediker, José Esteban Muñoz and Juana María Rodríguez, among others). Although there are varying understandings of just how promising queer positivity should be, the potential for queer utopia is treated seriously as both a thought experiment with theoretical benefits and as a practical method for bringing ideal queer livelihood closer into view. Neither scholarly approach suits how I read Byron's approach to intimacy.

gender norms. Byron's poetry about men desiring men is a masterclass in working within the confines of normativity by toying with expectations about recognition of desires and gendered behavior.

In the vein of queer theorists like Annamarie Jagose, Heather Love and Kadji Amin, I argue for an understanding of queerness that keeps in mind the history of sexuality and therefore does not always rise to the level of identifiable, ideological antinormativity. In the "Queer Theory without Antinormativity" special issue of *differences*, Love argues that critics will access new and more interesting lines of thinking by interrogating deviance as part of the social world rather than a departure from it.[21] In the same issue, Jagose ponders the "political usefulness of a queer theory untethered from its antinormative tendencies; that is, a queer theory that, for all the productive critical leverage the concept of antinormativity has given us, might not be antinormative at its definitional heart" (27). Following this step back from the antagonism of antinormativity, I argue that deviations from normativity do not necessarily suggest versions of queerness that offer novel or fleshed out models for rethinking categories of identity and sociality. My approach follows Jagose's methodological interest in "queer theory's complacencies around what objects or events deserve critical attention, around which types of sexual actors or sexual practices most counter normative values and institutions…" (11).[22] I am interested in queer gestures embedded within the normative that can only be set into motion and gain visibility because of the ways they follow scripts of heteronormativity. I am not arguing for an entirely abstracted, apolitical or ahistorical understanding of queer, though. As Amin has argued, we must attend to the historical specificity of queerness in order to make the most

[21] See Love's 2015 article "Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary" (78).
[22] Jagose elaborates her intervention in queer theory and her focus on sex and the orgasm in the introduction to *Orgasmology*. While this chapter is not interested in the explicit mechanics of sex acts, I appreciate Jagose's interrogation of queer theory's complex relationship to normativity as an ever-present subject of critique.

valuable critiques, and not claim that the term "queer" is "equally capable of being applied to anything nonnormative or boundary crossing" (173).[23] Understanding the stakes of queer visibility through historical specificity keeps scholars from overinvesting in "the conviction that it is the social and sexual practices of queer sexual subjects that are most likely to be politically transformative," as Amin has argued elsewhere (102).[24]

I begin this chapter with Byron's Virgilian translations, which have received little critical attention by nature of their form and content: mundane, repetitious schoolboy exercises. Not at all politically transformative, these texts are nonetheless obvious sites of exploring queer intimacies and desires, but their sheer ordinariness has led to critical neglect. I argue that we are missing an important early step in the genealogy of Byron's queer methodologies if we neglect these forays into homoerotic epic poetry. What is obvious about homoeroticism in Byron should not be overlooked if we want to understand how and why he turns to the most available tools for writing about queerness. I read how the young poet leans into violence, physicality and fated death in order to dilate the already present strains of queerness. I show why Byron studies should take stock of this early example of the poet entwining the privileges of literary normativity and fictional death in order to smuggle in queer intimacy.

In *Lara*, the other key text of my chapter, we encounter Byron's writing once he has gained appreciation for public receptivity to his works, as well as consciousness of his reputation as a man of varied and voracious desires. This leads Byron to advance scenes of more nuanced, charged queer intimacy against the backdrop of Oriental allusion and the anxious question of gender's legibility. With this heightened attention to gender, Byron shows us how heteronormativity is only ever a useless band-aid that cannot stem the tides of universal anxiety

[23] See Amin's article "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories."
[24] See Amin's reading of Jagose's *Orgasmology* in the article "Against Queer Objects."

about the ways our desires exceed our objects. The playfulness with norms in *Lara* feels both bolder and perhaps more cynical about Byron's sense that the public needed only the thinnest of heteronormative veils to cling to. Because my arguments hinge on close, formal readings of Byron's techniques, I have limited my readings to two poems[25] that span a significant arc of the poet's career, from his earliest days of public publishing to the peak of his domestic career before he left England for good. I will show how, between the composition of these poems, Byron becomes a more sophisticated poet and theorist of intimacy through his pairing of death and queerness. In tandem, these elements offer the poet a generative lens for thinking about the wild persistence of desire and the uncomfortable truth of intimacy as a mostly subjective experience. In my conclusion, I will turn my focus to the implications of these queer methodologies and understanding of queer intimacy for queer theory more broadly.

Virgilian Intimate Violence & Death

From Byron's earliest forays into poetry, we can track this impulse to express queer desires as simultaneously sanitized and emboldened by structures of literary convention. The "Episode of Nisus and Euryalus" from *Hours of Idleness* (1807, Byron's first public volume of poetry) is a loose translation from *Aeneid* Book IX in the heroic couplet form, just like Dryden's well-known translation from over a century earlier. Also in *Hours* appears a short prosaic work that tells the same story: "The Death of Calmar and Orla." Here, Byron taps into Scottish literary tradition by invoking the mythic bard Ossian and archetypes of Scottish warriors.[26] Within the same volumes,

[25] There are multiple versions of Byron's Virgil translations but I primarily read the one, long "Nisus and Euryalus" text from *Hours of Idleness*, as I will explain in the following section in greater detail.

[26] In the essay "Byron and Expatriate Nostalgia," Peter Graham writes, "Much of the nostalgia voiced in *Hours of Idleness* comes across as borrowed unsurprising, given how many of the poems are close to being schoolboy exercises in imitation but the nostalgic feelings for the Scotland Byron left behind ring true, not least because the notes continue to resonate throughout his subsequent career." (77).

we see layers of recourse to intellectual traditions as Byron accesses a notably homoerotic tale. Earlier in 1807, the teenage Byron also published a brief fragment version of "Nisus and Euryalus" in his *Poems on Various Occasions*, his second ever juvenile private publication after *Fugitive Verses*. This episode from Book IX clearly preoccupied young Byron in these earliest literary explorations of masculinity, love and death—themes that remained important to his work for the duration of his career. Critics such as Susan Oliver have noted that these experiments into Virgilian translation are emblematic of broader preoccupations of Byron's early writing: "The romance of a lost past, fragments of memory, and the ravages of passing time…" (19).[27] The longer, full "Episode" poem from *Hours* embraces conventions of translation by revising what is assumed to be Byron's schoolboy writing exercise at Harrow.[28] The literary, historical and mythic traditions here add layers of distance between Byron's depictions of close male attachment and the risky reality of Regency homoeroticism.

While there is obvious historical precedent for this formal choice, it is notable how the heroic couplet is especially confining in English, limiting the poet with its demanding, repetitive rhyme scheme. Byron's translation, subtitled "A Paraphrase," has received scarce attention from twenty and twenty-first century scholars, but, in the poet's own mind, the translation was a landmark early work. The 19-year-old poet repeatedly mentions this text in correspondence with friends in 1807, calling it "the best in point of versification I have ever written."[29] The inspiration for his first ever attempt at epic, the duo Nisus and Euryalus also gets mentioned in

[27] Oliver writes about the historical and geographical contexts that play into these themes in the essay "Crossing 'Dark Barriers': Intertextuality and Dialogue between Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott," which emphasizes Byron's nostalgia for and ties to Scottish identity. She suggests that his longing for innocent youth and strong cultural identity influenced his propensity for Scottish and Gaelic allusions, such as with "Calmar and Orla."
[28] See Phillip Cardinale's timeline of Byron's Virgilian education in "Lord Byron, Virgil and Thyrza" (55-57).
[29] Byron references "Nisus and Euryalus" in four letters from 1807, see the first volume of *Byron's Letters and Journals* for correspondences from April 16 (114), May 14 (118) and July 5 (124-125). The quote comes from the May letter to his friend Edward Noel Long.

his private letters in reference to his close relationship with a young man at Cambridge (long speculated by scholars to be a romantic attachment).[30] Byron chooses this blatantly homoerotic scene from Virgil and relishes in the narrative precedent of extolling the virtues of brave men loving one another. The poem starts with the titular Trojan characters already bonded: "[Nisus and Euryalus] burn with one pure flame of generous Love, / In peace, in war, united still they move" (15-16). We begin with this unity and overlap of subjectivity rooted in "love" with no information about how they came to be so close—information that Virgil does not provide and Byron does not attempt to fill in. Byron's use of classical literary convention is as playful as it is discreet. Byron operates within traditions of queer coding desire and intimacy by turning to conveniently masculine literary traditions, archetypes and tropes. Given the more flexible expectations around male desires in classical texts, Byron has extra room to play with queer intimacy. The stakes of individual life, national pride and family honor mask but do not replace the intensity of queer charge for Byron. These stakes enable a hyperbolic version of epic language to describe emotionally charged same-sex relationality, marked by glorious war and death.

The younger warrior, Euryalus, champing at the bit for the battlefield, prompts the experienced Nisus to spin a fantasy of violence, death and romance—a fantasy that does not quite come to fruition. Invoking the vocabulary of masculine beauty and the affects of romantic attachment, Nisus argues that, in the event of mortal danger, he should die first so Euryalus's "beauties" can be preserved (63). Nisus then fantasizes about Euryalus remaining alive after

[30] See Jerome McGann's notes to Byron's elegies suspected to be about John Edleston (354). Louis Crompton, Phillip Cardinale and Michael Nicholson have all written touchstone accounts of how Edleston's death affected Byron's life and poetry, and how Byron used classical references in letters as homoerotic signifiers. For the most detailed history and analysis of Edelston's relationship to Byron, the possible connections to Nisus and Euryalus, and readings of Byron's personal correspondence, see Crompton's *Byron and Greek Love* pages 94-101.

Nisus's death in order to "shed one tear," for him; and, if necessary, Nisus hopes that Euryalus would recapture Nisus's corpse from enemy forces (66). The elder warrior requests that, if this should happen, Euryalus must "raise a simple tomb / To mark thy love" (71-72). Nisus's protectiveness gets expressed in the same breath as this romantic fantasy of tragic mourning and "care" with handling his corpse (71). It is not just that Nisus does not want Euryalus to die, he thinks it would be sexy if he died and Euryalus lived. The physical handling of the corpse is part of this fantasy, not just Nisus's imagined death followed by Euryalus's abstract mourning. The foreshadowing of death becomes a kind of poetic, homoerotic foreplay for Byron, before the actual eroticized violence and death to come.

Young Byron relishes in Virgil's layers of male affection and desire licensed by classical literary tradition. Epic violence offers him the cloak of hypermasculinity to naturalize the intense physical and emotional intimacy between men. The physical intimacy between men emerges through Byron's excessive and stylized scenes of violence:

> The reeking weapon bears alternate stains;
> Through wine and blood, commingling as they flow…
> Brave Nisus here arrests his comrade's arm,
> Too flush'd with carnage, and with conquest warm
> (272-275)

Nisus and Euryalus's love story plays out against the backdrop of this literal saturation of the earth with war violence. Yet there is undeniable pleasure in the "commingling" blood and wine, and the stirring image of the "brave" soldiers "flush'd" and "warm," grasping at one another amidst the chaos. While the poem amplifies violence, Byron's "paraphrase" also includes conversations between the Trojan soldiers about the stakes of war. The battlefield aesthetics go hand in hand with understanding masculine pride as wrapped up in the broader stakes of family and bloodline, bravery for one's nation and the enduring fame of the warrior. We see how Byron

leans into particularly grotesque and bodily language: “Bounding convulsive, flies, the gasping head; / From the swoll’n veins the blackening torrents pour; / Stain’d is the couch and earth with clotting gore” (250-252). The pouring, staining, reeking blood flows throughout the story, both appropriate for any epic translation undertaking and, given the lush intensity of Byron’s vocabulary, I would argue emblematic of the sensual excess we see throughout the poet’s work. A similar atmosphere emerges in “Calmar and Orla” as Byron describes, “their dreams were of blood” and “spears were in their hands” (24; 26). In both prose and poetry versions, Byron uses the Virgilian tale of war to accessorize male attachment with homoerotic masculine gore and death.

In the queer methodologies of his poetry, then, Byron offers a window into Romantic queerness as characterized by the refusal to pick between survival-as-repression or intimacy-as-death-sentence. So how does a poem about men loving men and then dying together escape the causal connection between queerness and fatality? Along with intimacy and queerness, this chapter takes up the larger animating problem of my dissertation: why is the question and/or the scene of mortality folded into intimacy instead of death serving as an absolute barrier to intimacy for the Romantics? Byron is often recognized for his queer-coded writing and for his recurrent themes of mortality, but this chapter considers how these strains directly complement one another. The important distinction is that Byron’s characters are not dying because they are queer; they get to be uniquely, excessively queer because they are going to die. The genres, literary traditions and scenes of heightened emotion around death activate intimate intensity between men for Byron. But neither is death a direct result of the state’s formalized anti-queer antagonism, nor are queer character deaths particularly antagonistic to the early nineteenth-century heteronormativity. The lack of antagonism, the failure to adhere to distinctly optimistic

or pessimistic visions of life and death, offer a queer, literary ambivalence that speaks to the historical embeddedness of sexuality.

We see how men's bodies collide, violently and sensually, as Byron presents an understanding of subjectivity in which desire plays a key role in shaping the self. From the initial metaphor of Nisus and Euryalus as two burning elements of the same single flame, we see how their attachment gets framed as a blurring of the boundaries of selfhood: the "you complete me" model of romantic attachment, to use a very contemporary aphorism. Byron uses the language of fire and heat (dominant motifs throughout the *Aeneid*) to repeatedly suggest physical intensity and being flushed with emotion. This intensity of charged vocabulary describing their love and attachment is enabled by the tradition of choosing recognizable, classical characters who are expected to meet their sacrificial fate. In conversation with Euryalus, Nisus is characterized as "glowing…/ With equal ardour fired, and warlike joy" (37-38). The parallel emphasis on "equality" throughout this poem and "Calmar and Orla" points to an overlapping model of selfhood, an intimacy bond of symbiotic mutuality. Calmar gives a passionate speech that illustrates how Byron conceives of masculine intimacy through entangled subjectivities: "'And shalt thou fall alone?' said fair-haired Calmar. 'Wilt thou leave thy friend afar? Chief of Oithona! not feeble is my arm in fight! Could I see thee die, and not lift the spear? No, Orla!'" (39-42). Calmar's indignance shines through Byron's repeated use of negation in this passage. These men understand and take pleasure in their fates as bound together. "Calmar and Orla" unfolds in much more concise language, but Byron insistently uses the ambiguous plural pronoun for "they" to describe the titular character's feelings, and he uses similar vocabulary of equality: "Equal were their swords in battle" (15-16).

While the language of equality may, at first glance, seem quotidian for descriptions of lovers, is especially interesting given how "equality" departs from the classical modes of pederasty as understood by Byron and his contemporaries. Given the epic classical setting and age difference between the main characters, pederasty would seem the obvious framework for understanding Nisus and Euryalus. Pederasty and sexualized male mentorship traditions from the classics have been noted as important to Byron since Louis Crompton's touchstone work decades ago. But this observation has led to little robust queer literary interpretation to date. In the Byron entry of *Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, Claude Summers writes, "Byron, who boasted he had spent thirteen years studying Greek and Latin, found support for the homosexual element in his own makeup in classical literature. He translated one of Cattalus's love poems to Juventius (retitling it 'To Ellen'), was well aware of Horace's bisexuality and Virgil's Corydon eclogue, and published a translation of 'The Episode of Nisus and Euryalus' from the *Aeneid*" (120). Summers's passing reference to the Virgilian translation in this brief collection introduction is indicative of the kind of glossing mentions that Byron's early queer works receive. Yet, we can and should take this literary historical coding from Byron's private and public writings as important proof of conscious strategy behind his depictions of queerness in fictional narratives. Scholars such as Crompton and D. S. Neff have argued that Byron consistently uses coded references to classical and Greek love in his writing in order to make winking nods to queerness and to locate himself in the role of the older active man. Their work assembles strong archival evidence for Byron's awareness, even from a young age, of Regency codes of masculinity.

More recently, in *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*, Michelle Levy suggests that Byron became mindful about reactions to his poetry's sexual content from his very

first printing of verse: the private dissemination of *Fugitive Verses*,[31] an anonymous work intended for a small audience of mostly known acquaintances. Filled with explicit, mostly heterosexual imagery, the poems sparked reactions among friends and Byron demanded that the copies be returned so he could destroy them. Unsurprisingly, not all of his friends obeyed his wishes. Byron felt the backlash to sexual content specifically and discovered a need for control over his public image through this initial experience, Levy argues (146-148). "What can be known is that from the outset of his literary career, Byron understood the need for discretion in the circulation of some of his poems," Levy writes (146). Since Crompton's 1985 seminal book *Byron and Greek Love*, Romantic criticism has better contextualized Byron's work in the intensifying homophobia directed primarily at men in the Regency period. Crompton remarks, "…fate decreed, by an ironic twist, that the Englishman most in the world's eyes should be a bisexual" (63). However scholars label his sexuality,[32] Byron was undoubtedly making a deliberate choice to write about taboo sexual desire during a period of constrained morality, intense discretion and outright mortal risk.

Byron translates queer intimacy in line with the realities of his world—one which continuously pushed queerness to the margins of secrecy throughout his lifetime. In *Sex and the Gender Revolution,* Randolph Trumbach writes, "The need to prove that a man was exclusively interested in women became the foundation of adult male identity in the early eighteenth-century" (69). Compared to the nineteenth-century, the eighteenth-century has more of a

[31] As Levy points out in her chapter on Byron, there are multiple versions of *Fugitive Pieces* that differ from one another in content. What is clearer than ever with Levy's careful manuscript work is how Byron culled his more explicit works when choosing pieces from *Fugitive* to be printed under his name in *Hours of Idleness*. The key point I take from Levy is how his earliest printing experiences with public readership shaped his awareness and caution in regard to writing about sexuality.

[32] I do not think it is helpful or historically accurate to give Byron a sexual orientation label: bisexual and pansexual depend on twentieth- and twenty-first century ideas separating gender from biological sex. Crompton was writing at a much different time, but I think today's scholarship can take seriously Byron's queerness without resorting to definitive labels of sexuality.

reputation for the bawdiness of molly house culture, but it was also marked by sodomy executions and the perverse association of same-sex desires with the other legal types of sodomy such as bestiality, as scholars like Trumbach and Charles Upchurch have described. Prior to advent of sexology and the heightened sexual policing and reform of the Victorian period, Romantic period men lacked a tradition of public discourse linking choice of sexual object to identity and the sense of self. Scholars such as Upchurch and Halperin have argued that the first half of the nineteenth-century saw some of the most rapid and complex changes in public attitudes about sexuality and subjectivity.[33] Tuite echoes this argument in *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, writing, "The fact that the greatest threat to the reputation of the masculine subject is the accusation of homosexual conduct demonstrates that heterosexual integrity is constitutive of sovereignty, identity, and subjectivity" (125-126). Trumbach also highlights the contrast created by the public prevalence and begrudging acceptance of female prostitution throughout the eighteenth-century, further driving queer behaviors into coded interactions and risky encounters (69-81). In Byron's exaggerated spectacles of violence and death, I suggest that we can view the expiring queer body as both the target of heteronormative pressures on literature as well as the consequence of Byron's need to make the tragedy of stifled queer life semi-legible.

As I read Byron's work in this chapter, I am neither looking to rigorously map biographical facts onto his poetry's characters, nor am I looking to excavate an anachronistic model of male sexual identity. In their introduction to the landmark "Queer Romanticisms" issue of *Romanticism on the Net* in 2004, Michael O'Rourke and David Collings describe "the dissident sexuality which has made Byron something of a poster boy for queer Romanticism"

[33] See Upchurch's *Before Wild: Sex Between Men in Britain's Age of Reform*, especially the Introduction and the beginning of Chapter 3: Law and Reform in the 1820s (8-9; 83-85). Also see Halperin's historical account in "How to Do the History of Homosexuality."

(np). My readings here ask what Byron's poetic methodologies tell us about how the poet understood sexuality in relation to the sense of self. My methodological imperative is to ask how we can read Byron differently if we assume that his articulations of sexuality, intimacy and death are filtered through the historical realities of the Romantic period. Even with his consciousness of discretion, Byron never fully censors himself. His poetry conjures outlines of forbidden sexuality through strategic ellipses, dashes, line breaks and metaphors in his poetry. In "Byron: Gender and Sexuality" Andrew Elfenbein writes, "In a characteristically Byronic way, he invites an interpretive struggle between knowledge and ignorance: the voyeuristic lure of discovering hidden sexual secrets versus the power that comes from not having to know what one knows about sex" (57). This is what I understand as the push and pull of queer legibility and normative discretion. The invited "interpretive struggle," as Elfenbein puts it, is made possible not just by absence and omission, but how Byron actively uses markers of heteronormativity to feed and then warp reader expectations of masculine behaviors and desires.

My readings of Byron's *Aeneid* most closely align with Phillip Cardinale's interpretation in "Lord Byron, Virgil, and Thyrza," the only scholarly work to give "Nisus and Euryalus" a thorough treatment. Cardinale claims that "Nisus and Euryalus" adjusts but, importantly, does not do away with, the age gap in order to more closely align Byron himself with the character of Nisus, who is the portrait of strong masculine pride and dominance (58-59). Euryalus is illustrated through his youthful beauty and "beardless bloom,"[34] and, in the prose, Orla directly refers to himself as a "boy." [35] Both versions stress the men's shared qualities of physical attractiveness and bravery. I am extending Cardinale's argument by suggesting that Byron further queers Virgil's homoeroticism with the choice to undermine the age gap and emphasize the

[34] Line 10.
[35] Line 47.

characters' equality. This is what I mean by Byron embedding queer gestures firmly within the normative. His language of mutual love and intimacy disrupts without discarding the pederastic model of attachment where the younger man is the attractive object and the older man is the active pursuer. Euryalus and Orla are formidable comrades and strategists who demonstrate agency both on the battlefield and in their demonstrative affections for Nisus and Calmar, respectively. Toning down the age gap has the effect of distancing without divorcing the romance from the model of sexuality in which a boy inevitably outgrows his limited, passive role. Byron's choices do not alter Virgil drastically enough to alarm readers, but the mediation makes room for queerness that is not predicated on a one-way model of temporary desire. Pederasty has an end-date for desire and pleasure, but Byron's characters are depicted in a kind of love that seems to lack this expiration date for intimacy.

Readers should thus be compelled to read Nisus's original fantasy early in the poem about Euryalus outliving him as an exercise in putting a narrative to the continuity of desire: a continuity that elevates their intimacy beyond the bounds of pederastic attachment. It is not just the spirit of altruism, but Nisus cares that his enduring love will protect Euryalus from harm so the younger man can continue living with love for his departed friend. The fantasy of desire persisting is important to how Nisus thinks about the intensity and endurance of his own desire. I take this as evidence of Byron theorizing desire as integral to subjectivity and as a continuous force that evades social norms and even the finality of death. The elaboration of Nisus's fantasy illustrates my argument that Byron's queer characters get to be particularly queer because of their inevitable deaths. Nisus's fatal fantasy enables the expression of his wish that Euryalus will make Nisus "ever loved" even after death (62). By fantasy, here, I do not just mean a mental exercise in the impossible, but, rather, a psychoanalytically-inflected understanding of fantasy as

an essential exercise in the narrativizing of selfhood. Berlant writes about fantasy in *Desire/Love* as the key ingredient or precursor to love: "Fantasy donates a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject; provides a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments" (75). For Nisus, the fantasy of Euryalus living happily ever after, but with Nisus in his heart, brings "affective coherence" to the "flux of intensities and attachments" governing their queer bond. For Byron, the fantastical exercise of homoerotic epic translation "donates a sense of affective coherence" to the impulse to write about queer desires without subjecting himself or his readers to overly intense scrutiny.

Normative pressures can shape and (re)direct desire, but Byron is especially concerned with the sheer force of desire. I do not think it is a paradox to say that desire is both reined in by social context and always capable of exceeding that context. Fantasy, for one, allows the self to imagine a way in which desire can navigate both the longings of the heart and the trappings of social boundaries. As Berlant writes in the "Intimacies" *Critical Inquiry* introduction, "While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way" (284). From his earliest works, Byron keys into this precise contradiction of desire's forcefulness: it is never truly outside "the space of convention" but sometimes desire unleashes itself through sheer "wild[ness]." This reckoning with desire as propulsion through life, as a governing drive to use the language of psychoanalysis, further suggests to me that Byron considered same-sex desire between men as attachment that cannot be explained by or confined to limited intimacies, such as with the classical model of pederasty.

We see an insistent vocabulary of love in the ultimate death scene of the "Episode." Instead of queerness being the cause of death or death cutting short an intimacy doomed to

contingency, death becomes the very scene of queer eroticism and love. Nisus and Euryalus get to be the most explicitly loving and physically intimate in the dramatic scene of their shared death. After successfully sneaking into the Latin camp and wreaking havoc, Euryalus makes the rash choice to take a captain's helmet as a prize. The glint of the treasure alerts their enemies and soon Euryalus is encircled in the woods as the pair tries to flee. Unable to leave him behind for the sake of Aeneas and the greater cause, Nisus charges to protect Euryalus and begs for the Latin warriors to spare the younger boy. Byron narrates:

> Nisus no more the blackening shade conceals,
> Forth, forth he starts, and all his love reveals;
> Aghast, confused, his fears to madness rise,
> And pour these accents, shrieking as he flies:
> "Me, me, --- your vengeance hurl on me alone;
> Here sheathe the steel, my blood is all your own
>
> … All, all was mine, --- his early fate suspend;
> He only loved too well his hapless friend:
> Spare, spare, ye chiefs ! from him your rage remove;
> His fault was friendship, all his crime was love."
> (363-374)

These lines contain the only use of "madness" in the entire poem, which otherwise valorizes Nisus for not only his physical skills in battle but also his tactfulness. By invoking madness here, Byron suggests that, by acting on "all his love," Nisus acts out of step with the sanity of both the Trojan's greater political cause and also, I would argue, beyond the social norms around men loving men. The distinction here of friendship as mere "fault" while love is a "crime" is the closest Byron comes in this poem to explicitly acknowledging the bond between these characters as taboo. Still, I argue that queerness is ultimately emboldened, not causally cut short by, the embodiment of masculine violence and death: bravery and Nisus's ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield. We feel Nisus's breathlessness in the numerous repeated phrases in this passage. His words also suggest that Nisus has to acknowledge his own love for Euryalus in order to be called

to action by the other emotions of desperation: "Aghast, confused …fear[] …madness." Self-conscious queerness unlocks a fuller range of emotions and the ability to act on them for Nisus. Once Nisus has made his admission and plea in the same breath, he fully expects to pay the price in "blood."

While Virgil's Book IX plot carries on past the deaths of the two men, Byron cuts the "Episode" short directly after Nisus dies. Instead of translating the subsequent events (involving the beheading of their corpses and more meditations on family honor), Byron concludes with the drawn-out scene of mutual death. Capitalizing on Virgil's generous descriptions of Euryalus's beauty, Byron suspends the young man's suffering beautiful body in verse that seems to dilate time itself. The death plays out in slow motion from Nisus's perspective, as if he can hardly believe what he sees, but also cannot look away. The lines tortuously draw out a scene that literally depicts the quick thrust of a sword:

> …the dark assassin's sword
> Pierced the fair side, the snowy bosom gored;
> Lowly to earth inclines his plume-clad crest,
> And sanguine torrents mantle o'er his breast:
> As some young rose, whose blossom scents the air,
> Languid in death, expires beneath the share;
> Or crimson poppy, sinking with the shower,
> Declining gently, falls a fading flower;
> Thus, sweetly drooping, bends his lovely head,
> And lingering beauty hovers round the dead.
> (375-384)

Byron stresses the aesthetic qualities of Euryalus's demise, with the young man likened to the petals on flowers,[36] "gentl[e]" "sweet[] drooping," "sinking" and "declining." Byron compares "torrents" of blood with the "scent" of a rose, suggesting that the reader would not be wrong to find perverse pleasure in the sensory spectacle. This language calls up the famously

[36] As Crompton notes in *Byron and Greek Love*, flowers are especially important to Byron's personal letters and use of "Horatian code" and classical symbolism to reference same-sex desires (98-109).

(homo)eroticized, gory end of Saint Sebastian, with Byron illustrating Euryalus as this handsome "snowy" man being penetrated by a sword, leaving behind "lingering beauty." From Nisus's perspective, this "lingering" suggests that death has no bearing on his attraction to and desire for Euryalus, again pointing to desire's continuity.

Desire's endurance here may seem easy to overlook, especially since there is no hint of necrophilia in this postmortem scene of bodily aesthetic appreciation. But Byron's theorizing of desire as ongoing is in fact historically significant. Nisus and Euryalus do not just exceed the pederastic model of desire by understanding desire as continuous, but they also exceed Regency understandings of same-sex sexual attraction. Since same-sex erotic relationships were only considered a series of discrete acts under sodomy law,[37] Byron refuses early nineteenth-century models of desire by showing Nisus's love for Euryalus as continuous past death. Queer desire had no legibility outside of discrete acts, and Byron's time predates Victorian medicalizing and taxonomizing sexuality. The language of intimacy feels all the more urgent in illustrating how Byron understands desire as bound up with identity and one's sense of social embeddedness.

Granted, the subversiveness of describing desire's continuity is certainly limited, especially in light of my arguments about Byron's formal choices as deliberately shielding queerness from full view. But I see this mix of the permissible and the quietly queer as indicative of Byron's strategic literary skills and mindfulness of readership. Queerness even exceeds the bounds of what one might expect from classical sexuality in translation, but Byron gets away with it, leaving these works largely unremarked on until now. The ordinariness of Byron's Virgil translations is both the quality that has led critics to overlook them and the very thing that we ought to be paying attention to if we are to grasp Byron's methodological approaches to queer

[37] See Crompton in *Byron and Greek Love* on Regency homophobia and the law (62-65).

writing. The discretion that worked in Byron's favor at the time seems to be a barrier to contemporary critics appreciating this translation (and its variations) as decidedly queer literary exercises.

We see this very combination of expected plot and conventional poetic structure alongside homoerotic excess come to a head in the final lines of "Nisus and Euryalus." Peppered with exclamation points, Byron's translation paints a particularly romanticized vision of death. Similarly to Euryalus's death, Nisus's body gives out slowly. Propelled by vengeance, Nisus dies in a bloody melee, fighting until the last moment:

> Rage nerves his arm, Fate gleams in every blow;
> In vain beneath unnumbered wounds he bleeds;
> Nor wounds, nor death, distracted Nisus heeds;
> In viewless circles wheeled, his falchion flies,
> Nor quits the hero's grasp till Volscens[38] dies;
> Deep in his throat its end the weapon found,
> The tyrant's soul fled groaning through the wound.
> Thus Nisus all his fond affection proved,
> Dying, revenged the fate of him he loved;
> Then on his bosom sought his wonted place,
> And Death was heavenly in his friend's embrace!
>
> (390-400)

There are layers of parallelism to these subsequent death scenes, both of which seem to drag out a temporally brief scene. Byron uses choppy "f" sound alliterations earlier in "falls a fading flower" as well as above with "falchion flies," to align elegant dying with enraged fighting. The consonant breaks up the breath of the rhythm; dying never flows easily for these characters. In both Nisus and Euryalus's deaths, the agency is granted to the "weapon" and the "sword," though the former dies of many "unnumbered" wounds from an unnamed number of assailants. Focusing on the piercing blades both times, these scenes highlight the physicality of the warriors: Euryalus's "side" and "breast," and Nisus using his last strength to kill Euryalus's murderer with

[38] The man who killed Euryalus.

a fatal “wound” to the “throat.” Despite his “bleed[ing]” “wounds” and the emotional weight of the “death” of Euryalus, Nisus’s maimed body will not yet give out. This bodily emphasis brings the reader’s focus to the images of these men, one lying dead of his wounds and the other in a self-sacrificial frenzy of “revenge[].” The surrounding woods and enemies fade into the background.

We end on this remarkable image of the men literally entwined, with their “bosom[s]” colliding as Nisus slowly falls to his death; he simultaneously is embraced by “Death” and the corpse of his friend. Amidst and after the images of battlefield violence, full of collision and penetration, the close physicality of embrace offers a startling contrast. Importantly, this seems not purely a fated accident, since Byron writes that Nisus “sought his wonted place,” granting the dying man one last act of agency. The kiss of death enables Nisus to claim physical intimacy with the man he loved/s. The word “proved” also suggests a level of defiant publicness in Nisus embracing death as he avenges his “fond affection” for Euryalus. The past tense of “proved” and “revenged” double down on the success of Nisus’s choice. Returning to the continuity of desire for Byron in this poem, we witness an interesting grammar choice with “Death was heavenly *in* his friend’s embrace;” the previous line sets up the “embrace” as an actual “place.” Neither “Death” nor “heaven” is where Nisus goes after he succumbs to his wounds. Rather, Death happens within the physical embrace of the beloved: death gets bound within the arms of the lover. Byron’s grammar preserves desire by making death at the whims of love and not the other way around.

Death can only serve as this scene of heightened affect and romantic emotion because of the timeline choices Byron makes in both of these poems: Nisus and Euryalus, Lara and Kaled are pairs who established their intimate relationship long before the events of the poems.

Describing the internal process of figuring out and naming same-sex desires as such would be far too explicit for Byron's audience. The *in media res* nature of these men's relationships preserves the ambiguity that Byron's characters could just be platonically loving towards one another. It denies the reader complicity in reading and enjoying the descriptions of one man seducing another. This is why the vocabulary of intimacy and not just initial desire or lust is crucial to understanding Byron's methods as a queer poet. Returning to key definitions from the beginning of my chapter: Yousef understands intimacy, in part, through the disclosure of "thoughts, feelings, and experiences" (1). And Berlant claims that desire "says *something*[39] about what it takes for you to anchor yourself in time and space" (76-77). Both definitions make a case for intimacy motivated by ongoing mutual desire as growing through and with the passage of time. The language of desire—particularly erotic desire alone—is insufficient for critiquing the depictions of relationships that have grown with "experiences" in order to be firmly "anchor[ed]."

Byron's temporality choices illustrate his strategies for writing about the most palatable parts of the timeline of queer romance. The beginning of desire and the establishment of intimate mutual knowledge must occur before Byron's queer characters step onto the page, discreetly keeping the reader in the dark about how and for how long these men developed their mutual attachment. As a kind of affective compensation, we get this focus on the end of life for the very same characters, if not the end of desire itself (as I have argued for Nisus and Euryalus). What the reader is deprived of, in terms of the beginning of queer intimacy, Byron makes up for in elongated scenes of queer death and dying; the negative emotions around death chaperone in all the positive affects of love, attachment and desire. As we see in Nisus and Euryalus's mutual

[39] Berlant's italics.

death scene, which unravels over several stanzas, the events are tragic but the speaker can speak passionately to the endurance of desire past death. This slow temporality of queer dying/death radically suspends intimate moments between men and emphasizes the vocabulary of love, desire and intimacy. The speaker elongates these moments of slow death without pivoting to the grammar of remembrance, memorialization and elegy. The intense vocabulary emerges from the fresh horror and shock, but the desire is not wedded to the emptiness and absence that characterize grief.

Decades of queer theory scholarship has showed us how historical and literary studies benefit from understanding queer temporalities as out of joint with normative conceptions of time. By calling attention to Byron's focus on queer dying and death, we see how literary discretion comes to us through the poetic manipulation of both the origins of desire and also time of death. José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* that "Heteronormativity speaks not just to a bias related to sexual object choice but to that dominant and overarching temporal and spatial organization of the world that I have been calling straight time" (154). In Byron's eroticized and agonizingly slow death scenes in these poems, we see how "Queer uses of time and space develop… according to other logics of location, movement, and identification," to quote Jack Halberstam's seminal work *In a Queer Time and Place* (1). Halberstam and Muñoz's emphasis on the "logic" and "organization" of straight time point to the way in which temporality is a structure of normativity. Their work helps me to read Byron's extended death scenes as a temporal structure that makes queerness both distinct and discreet: in a temporality limited to just this intimate pair of men,[40] but also through a vocabulary around death, loss and

[40] Michael Nicholson offers an excellent reading of queer temporality through what he calls "Fugitive Time" in "Fugitive Pieces," an article about Byron and the influences of the noted queer eighteenth-century writer Horace Walpole. Nicholson focuses on Byron's early juvenalia and, while our understandings of queer temporality differ, I

ending that justify the language of loving intimacy. As I have argued in my attention to rhyme scheme and literary tradition, Byron's queer poetics are formally self-conscious. Temporality works as yet another formal structure that is manipulated here in service of queer visibility and discretion.

Scholarship has long acknowledged how Byron's writing often insists on a model of love as, for the most part, uncontrollable. In "Byron: Gender and Sexuality," Elfenbein writes, "In [Byron's] work, love is a dangerous, taboo mode of behavior, one that was irresistible but also inherently dangerous. Far from guaranteeing happiness, it tears apart the social fabric, usually because lovers violate norms held by others" (68). Although Elfenbein speaks of love here without a specific same-sex investment for Byron, it is interesting that he too thinks of Byron's non-normativity as coming most blatantly and uncontrollably from scenes of love. In one of his final poems, "[Love and Death]," Byron bluntly states, "Love dwells not in our will" (22). Byron wrote about love as both uncontrollable yet also utterly vital to existence. This tension between its essential qualities and danger, as Elfenbein puts it, supports my reading of Byron's poetry on queer love as suspended between uncontrollable disclosure and necessary discretion. Byron probes the volatility of taboo love through the tensions and dynamism between public and private love, and public and private selves.

Legibility of Desire, Legibility of Gender

In this chapter, I read the early Nisus and Euryalus translations as precursors to the poem *Lara* because of how the latter text evolves Byron's poetic strategies for writing about queer love. Much like Byron's early Virgilian work, this tragedy relates a complex (and arguably more

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also see Byron's queer death temporality as "movement away from the present" and involving a version of what he calls "the ability to be absent from present sight" (144).

daring) queer romance which plays out against a backdrop of violence, bloodshed and slow death. When paired, we can see how Byron develops his manipulation of literary form, namely the heroic couplet's confinement along with the affordances of Oriental allusion. The relative regularity of the heroic couplet in *Lara* stands out compared to the other poems Byron was writing at the time—*Childe Harolde* famously is composed in Spenserian stanzas, and the other orientalist tales (including the 1813 poems, *The Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos)* offer more variations of iambic pentameter, usually tetrameter, and with only the occasional couplet sprinkled in. In the context of this creative moment for Byron, I see *Lara*'s adherence to heroic couplets as evidence of his impulse to put strong formal boundaries around queer content. Years after his work on Nisus and Euryalus, we see a continuation of both this commitment to a form steeped in epic tradition and another characterization of loving male attachment that formed in a faraway land. These conventional formal elements allow the poet to toy more explicitly with reader expectations about gendered behavior aligning with heterosexual desires.

Lara: A Tale differs from "Nisus and Euryalus" in one very important way that is revealed, of course, at the scene of death. In *Lara*, the titular character's death scene is both the tragic climax and the moment of shocking revelation: the devoted page boy Kaled leans over the dying body of his master and, as his shirt falls open, breasts are revealed and the reader learns that Kaled was a woman all along. Building on the strategies from his teenage translation work, I argue that Byron uses similar themes of violence and masculine bonds, along with Oriental markers of otherness, to question the entwined legibility of gender and desire. *Lara* was originally published in 1814 anonymously alongside *Jacqueline*, a separate poem by Samuel

Rogers who was not identified in this initial version.[41] *Lara* follows the return of a mysterious Count to his European homeland after years of travel and violence. The 1272-line poem involves feuding chieftains and Lara's support of a failed serf uprising, but the text focuses on the secretive angst of the titular character and his attachment to his page Kaled. Byron characterizes Lara as a naive and troublesome boy who has grown into a jaded, enigmatic man:

> With more capacity for love than Earth
> Bestows on most of mortal mould and birth,
> His early dreams of good outstripped the truth,
> And troubled manhood followed baffled youth
> (321-324)

The reader, and the largely undifferentiated inhabitants of Lara's homeland, can only notice the grounding attachment the count has with Kaled: "His only follower from those climes afar / Where the soul glows beneath a brighter star" (512-513). The opacity of the timeline forces the reader to make a judgment as to when and how Lara and Kaled formed this "soul" level bond. Once again, Byron uses the word "glow," as he does in "Nisus and Euryalus," to describe romantic intimacy. The main information shared about this relationship here is the origin of Kaled and Lara's bond as displaced across the continent to "climes afar" under magically "brighter" stars.

As the anti/hero, Lara walks this line, both intriguing and resolute, but his flirtations with Oriental otherness and his avoidance of discussing his background make him somewhat suspect. I see Byron's refusal to give Lara certain British identity or too many defining details as a kind of playfulness in and of itself, forcing the reader to fill in the blanks. Lara gets characterized as so

[41] The title page to the first edition 1814 version published by John Murray reads "LARA, A Tale." and "JACQUELINE, A Tale." with no authors' names (np). The advertisement page hints at Byron's previous works, making it clear to readers who crafted the first "tale" (np).

enigmatic that the other characters, not just the readers, cannot help but to project their own judgments onto him:

> In him inexplicably mixed appeared
> Much to be loved and hated, sought and feared;
> Opinion varying o'er his hidden lot,
> In praise or railing ne'er his name forgot;
> His silence formed a theme for others' prate –
> They guessed – they gazed – they fain would know his fate.
> (289-294)

The tension between "sought and feared" suggests Lara's polarizing nature, but also underscores how this protagonist is not meant to be easy to understand. Both Lara's "silence" and his unreadable countenance (gaz[ing] and guess[ing] are one in the same) make him prime for futile gossip about "his hidden lot." Byron invites allure and some respect by making Lara "lov[able]," but his key character trait is this blank air of mystery. Only after Lara dies, does his corpse reveal "the scattered dints of many a scar," but the other characters and the readers are left entirely in the dark about the violence of his past that scarred his body and his mind (1187).

Considered part of Byron's cluster of "Turkish Tales" (though it is set somewhere in Europe), *Lara* fed an appetite for exotic mystique at a time considered the height of "the vogue for Orientalist poetry in Britain," to use the words of John J. Regan.[42] By the time Byron wrote and published *Lara: A Tale* in 1814, he had completed the Grand Tour, returned to England, established commercial success, and developed a reputation (in his works and in his private life) for a touch of salaciousness. He was in the midst of what Crompton called "Byronomania" which was "ignited by his aristocratic glamour, his personal beauty, and his literary persona, which mixed proud disdain with tantalizing hints of guilty secrets" (119).[43] Critics tend to group this

[42] See the introduction to Regan's article "'Destined to complete a certain cycle': Francis Jeffrey and Byron's Orientalism" (57).
[43] See Crompton's essay on Byron in *Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage.*

poem with *Don Juan* and *Childe Harolde* since they all were published when Byron had solidified his popularity, and each has an orientalized setting, heroic journey and questions of gender conformity. Susan Wolfson,[44] Alan Richardson[45] and Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud,[46] among others, all have argued for Byron's use of Oriental signifiers to illustrate more flexible conceptions of masculinity as tied up with cultural identity and pride.

Despite its purposefully generic European setting, *Lara* is often read in conversation with one particular (and notably more heterosexual tale), *The Corsair,* because of the ambiguous note at the beginning of *Lara* which suggests that the reader may or may not draw a throughline between the two.[47] Between this note and the one refusing to give the main character a specific geographic origin, Byron is ripping away key exposition facts and forcing the reader to latch on to what is offered most explicitly: Lara's relationship to Kaled. Given the plot inconsistencies between *Lara* and *The Corsair*,[48] plus Byron's explicit deferral to the reader for interpretation, I argue that we can read these choices as strategies of discretion. Byron further obfuscates the

[44] See Wolfson's "'Their she Condition': Cross-Dressing and the Politics of Gender in Don Juan," especially 593-595. While I am compelled by much of Wolfson's close readings, especially her attention to Byron's ambivalence, this piece lacks nuanced vocabulary around gender and sexuality, and it also does not use the analysis of gender variance as an occasion to historicize Byron as a queer poet. The word queer does not appear in this article, nor does it appear once in Wolfson's later monograph, *Borderlines,* which takes up the issues of boundaries and social norms around gender while ignoring decades of queer theory and history of sexuality scholarship.

[45] See Richardson's essay "Escape from the Seraglio: Cultural Transvestism in Don Juan" in *Rereading Byron: Essays Selected from Hofstra University's Byron Bicentennial Conference.*

[46] In "Byron & Oriental Love," Cohen-Vrignaud argues that Byron's depictions of same-sex relations as based on an Eastern model would have been recognized by the educated reader as in line with negative stereotypes and as a contrast to British/European values of proper sexuality and masculinity (9-13).

[47] The advertisement of the first edition reads: "The reader of 'Lara' may probably regard it as a sequel to a poem that recently appeared: whether the cast of the hero's character, the turn of his adventures, and the general outline and colouring of the story, may not encourage such a supposition, shall be left to his determination" (n.p.). In "'Quiet cruising o'er the ocean woman': Byron's Don Juan and the Woman Question," Byron scholar Caroline Franklin describes how the reader can re-interpret Gulnare, the primary female character of *The Corsair,* only once the poems are paired: "The transformation of Byron's Gulnare into the faithful Kaled in Lara, whose threatening masculine resourcefulness is recast into the reassuring 'feminine' mould of selfless service to her love" (609). For the sake of my queer reading, I argue that we take Byron's suggestion to make our own "determination" as readers, therefore I am taking *Lara* on its own terms.

[48] See the Franklin article mentioned in the previous footnote.

queer basis of Lara and Kaled's queer relationship and strategically insulates himself from taboo interpretations.

I want to argue in line with scholars such as Crompton[49] and Neff who read, in the words of Neff, "…Kaled's transformation into a woman [as a] protective device… employed to disguise the basically homoerotic character of the interactions between Lara and Kaled" (418). In the essay "Bitches, Mollies, and Tommies: Byron, Masculinity, and the History of Sexualities," Neff goes on to argue, "What is even more important than any protective gynemimesis that might be going on in Byron's Oriental Tale, however, is the careful distancing of the European hero from any serious crimes perpetrated by the Eastern page, thereby ultimately shielding him (and perhaps Byron) from tainted Oriental perspectives, practices, and sexuality" (419). Orientalist tropes are deployed with "generic ambiguity," to borrow the words of Andrew Warren,[50] and the European vagueness underscores what Mai-Lin Cheng calls "the unintelligibility, the illegibility" of Oriental symbolism to a faraway British readership.[51] The poet carefully modulates his Byronic hero's relative alignment with the mystique of Oriental alterity while still maintaining some markers of masculine conduct such as bravery. If we are to take seriously Lara as an example of the Byronic hero, then criticism is obligated to take into consideration the character's queerness. Readers past and present are taking an unnecessarily retroactive approach if we accept Kaled as a woman pretending to be a man. Up until the moment of revelation of Kaled's female body, we must take seriously the pronoun "he" along with Byron's manifest interest in the dynamic between a young page boy and his older master.

[49] See *Byron and Greek Love* (158-195; 206-209).
[50] See Warren's *The Orient and the Young Romantics* (97).
[51] See Cheng's 2015 article "Lara's Stutter" (514).

This grand reveal still serves as a strategy of partial discretion, but it is paramount to take at face value the descriptions of Kaled and Lara's male-male connection.

As with Nisus and Euryalus, Byron returns to markers of pederasty in *Lara*, but once again complicates the age and power dynamic. Both Cohen-Vrignaud and Neff claim that Byron's readers would have been aware of stories of upper class Ottoman men taking on young page boys whose duties included sexual favors.[52] They also agree that Byron personally would have observed such same-sex pairings during the Grand Tour, aside from encountering these cultural differences through mere conversation and reading.[53] Byron tempers the structure of pederasty through class commentary in this more mature poem. The classical structure of pederastic relations between men and boys was predicated on not just age difference but separation across class. In descriptions of Kaled, the speaker does refer to his youth, but notes how the boy does not fit in with others of the servant class, taking an attitude "above his station" (517). The male pronouns get muddled, blurring master and servant grammatically, as Byron's speaker narrates:

> His zeal, though more than that of servile hands,
> In act alone obeys, his air commands;
> As if 'twas Lara's less than his desire
> That thus he served, but surely not for hire
> (560-563)

Although Kaled is obedient, the speaker stresses how his "air" belies his true bond with Lara. If he were merely an enthusiastic servant, the "zeal" would be contained to the actions of his "hands." Instead, Kaled is motivated by his apparent "desire:" a desire that is both for Lara and seems "as if" it exceeds Lara. In light of my reading of "Nisus and Euryalus," I want to suggest that the emphasis on Kaled's "desire" echoes the teenage Byron's insistence on sharing and

[52] See Cohen-Vrignaud (9) and Neff (409).
[53] See Cohen-Vrignaud (10; 15) and Neff (408-409).

equality. The "serv[ice]" Kaled provides is one of desire not servitude. Byron explicitly notes multiple times how plainly visible Kaled's desire for Lara is:

> The cheek where oft the unbidden blush shone through;
> Yet not such blush as mounts when health would show
> All the heart's hue in that delighted glow;
> But 'twas a hectic tint of secret care
> That for a burning moment fevered there
>
> (531-535)

Here, desire, in a specifically romantic vein, is legible on the body. While Lara gets described as dark and unreadable, Kaled's desire and love is plain to see. The extra syllables and alliteration of "unbidden blush" spill over the lines of this stanza as the speaker narrates the way that Kaled's love for Lara cannot be contained. Dismissing "health," desire is legible specifically as "secret care." With the vocabulary of care here, and of love throughout the poem, I again emphasize the need for talking about queer intimacy and not just Byronic lust or homoeroticism. The body is readable in its "fevered" "glow"—heat-related words that recall the language of attachment between Nisus and Euryalus, and a much longer, more generic tradition of poetically associating heat with lust and love.

It is not just through embodiment that Kaled and Lara's bond becomes clear. The characters almost always speak to one another in what is assumed to be Kaled's (unspecified) native language.[54] Kaled, despite understanding multiple languages, does not appear to talk to any other character throughout this text aside from Lara. The consistent use of a foreign language displaces the queerness not only away from the time, culture and place of Lara, but also suggests that the bond between men cannot be understood in an English vocabulary. While some scholars[55] are quick to point out Kaled's submissiveness and feminine qualities, we must

[54] "…in that tongue, which seemed his own" (Byron 242).
[55] Although Cheryl Fallon Giuliano reads Kaled as a threat to Byron's "phallic" mode of depicting gender in "Gulnare/Kaled's 'Untold' Feminization of Byron's Oriental Tales," her argument still depends on prioritizing

acknowledge the agency that Kaled takes in refusing to speak Lara's language and assuming a new name. Byron's speaker shows how the page constructs an identity around devotion to Lara:

> Kaled his name, though rumour said he bore
> Another ere he left his mountain shore;
> For sometimes he would hear, however nigh,
> That name repeated loud without reply,
> As unfamiliar, or, if roused again,
> Start to the sound, as but remember'd then;
> Unless 'twas Lara's wonted voice that spake,
> For then, ear, eyes, and heart would all awake
> (584-591)

The intimate act of choosing a different name seems to be specifically tied to Kaled's bond with Lara, since Kaled literally fails to respond when others use that name.[56] This also underscores the power dynamic of this relationship. Byron characterizes Lara's voice as piquing more than mere attention for Kaled since the page boy's "heart" also perks up at his master's call. Taken together, "ear, eyes, and heart" stress the romantic element of their bond without recourse to gendered language.

Forensic work to find and overemphasize feminine embodiment or behavior in this poem would do a disservice to this relationship, which is described in exclusively male terms for 39 of the 53 stanzas. Furthermore, Byron's references to gender complicate a re-reading in which Kaled's femininity and Lara's heterosexuality become obvious. The speaker flat out describes how the older, jaded Lara who returns to his home lacks interest in women. Framed within a

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certain passive qualities of Kaled as ascribed to femaleness. Cohen-Vrignaud also stresses the "ambiguity" of Kaled and his/her ability to fit into a two-gender system (17-18).

[56] This reference to another name has often been interpreted by scholars as the possibility that Kaled is meant to be the character Gulnare from Byron's Eastern tale "The Corsair." In the first edition advertisement to *Lara*, Byron states that it "might" be read as a sequel text. However, I reject that straightforward acceptance of Byron's gently worded suggestion of a narrative link. I align myself with Cohen-Vrignaud in seeing this explicit but half-hearted connection of these texts as a perfunctory gesture to assure readers needing extra affirmation of the heterosexual nature of the relationship (16-17). If we take this sequel comment as yet another protective move to partially obscure queerness, then we can separate the status of Kaled's name from the story of Gulnare.

description of all the youthful trifles Lara has abandoned, Byron slips in this information that Lara lacks sexual attraction to women:

> …in youth all action and all life,
> Burning for pleasure, not averse from strife;
> Woman — the field — the ocean — all that gave
> Promise of gladness, peril of a grave,
> In turn he tried…
>
> (115-119)

Because female allure is grouped with these other masculine pursuits of pleasure, we can assume that there is a pointed disconnect in Lara's association of women and pleasure.[57] Also, we see how *Lara*'s Oriental setting gets implicitly associated with sexual deviance if Lara leaves home and comes back in love with his page boy. The use of "burning" in this passage recalls Byron's prior uses of the heated language "glow," which shows up in both "Nisus and Euryalus" and *Lara* several times. I argue that Byron's language around heat and emotion make queer desire subtly legible in these poems. Since the "burning" vocabulary of heat is always confined within the subjects of these poems, we witness how queer desire is always contained and prevented from erupting into the present moment. The glow of desire remains bound within the body.

In both poems, we witness this insistence on mutual attentiveness and affective bond. Within this state of established and comfortable attachment, we see the language of love and care as the pair's subjectivities seem to blur. Byron illustrates this in the language of equality and joint movement throughout the different versions of the Virgil translation, and in Lara and Kaled's singular ability to understand one another through mere glances and a language that no one else understands. The speaker also repeatedly stresses Lara and Kaled's chosen isolation from other human connection and their surroundings: "[Kaled] seemed, like him he served, to

[57] Similarly, in the prose "Calmar and Orla" translation, Byron bluntly writes of the elder Calmar, "No maid was the sigh of his soul" (14).

live apart / From all that lures the eye, and fills the heart / To know no brotherhood…" (549-551). Lara and Kaled only gaze upon each other and speak freely to each other, experiencing no outside "lures." To claim that the duo "know[s] no brotherhood" also implies that Kaled and Lara's relationship is definitely not platonic nor fraternal. Byron uses variations on the word "love" in reference to the main characters 18 times in *Lara* and 12 times in "Nisus and Euryalus." The kind of love and attachment we see in these texts comes only from relationships of intimate mutual knowledge and trust built up over time. By the time the reader gets to the death scenes, the level of enduring desire and pain feels appropriate given how Byron lays the foundation of longstanding, intense attachment.

Compared to the distanced epic voice of Byron's Virgil translations, the speaker of *Lara* dips in and out of omniscience. The speaker in "Nisus and Euryalus" is all-knowing and emphasizes the theme of fate, but the characters are not deeply psychologized aside from their mutual attachment. Lara's speaker often stays firmly in the perspective of the outsider, describing how the inhabitants of the count's homeland find him inscrutable: "Around him some mysterious circle thrown / Repelled approach, and showed him still alone" (107-108). At other moments, though, Byron's speaker offers a window into Lara's tormented mind, even if very little details about the facts of his past are shared:

> Yet there was softness too in his regard,
> At times, a heart as not by nature hard,
> But once perceived, his spirit seemed to chide
> Such weakness, as unworthy of its pride,
> And steeled itself, as scorning to redeem
> One doubt from others' half-withheld esteem
> (303-308)

The heavy start of a trochee in "Yet there" disrupts the regularity of the rhythm, interrupting the flow of the stanza as the speaker enters Lara's mind. Yet also imbues the line with a level of

ambiguity. “Perceived” suggests that Lara’s true “spirit” sometimes gets glimpsed, but his air of darkness is a cultivated shield so he can maintain his mysteriousness. While the word “seemed” suggests that the speaker may not have perfect internal knowledge of Lara, we get this narration of his internal drama as the hero “steel[s]” his spirit (a genderless “it”) so as not to appear “soft.” Older and more sophisticated in his poetics, Byron wants his readers to understand how Lara’s sense of self is mediated by this anxiety about what can be disclosed and what should be kept private—even positive traits such as “heart.”

Byron’s choice of omniscience offers insight in the most intensely intimate moment of the poem aside from the death scene. Lara’s heart and bravery make him a capable, though doomed leader, to a violent serf uprising in the second canto of the poem. When Lara sees Kaled’s fear and “mournful paleness,” he attempts to comfort his companion. Byron writes:

> His lip was silent, scarcely beat his heart,
> His eye alone proclaimed – “We will not part!
> Thy band may perish, or thy friends may flee,
> Farewell to life, but not adieu to thee!”
>
> (1001-1004)

Again, Lara and Kaled communicate through mere gazes that only sometimes the speaker can interpret. Here, we see Byron offering another glimpse of his theory of desire’s continuity. As with the endurance of desire at the end of the Virgil translation, Byron, towards the end of *Lara*, presents his main character promising his lover that they will never say “adieu.” Compared to farewell, “adieu” connotes the finality of a last goodbye, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[58] So the refusal of “adieu” feels all the more dramatic here. The drumming of the iambic meter stays consistent, mirroring the calm of Lara’s slow beating “heart.” Lara sees his love for Kaled as transcending “life” because their intimate attachment will keep them from ever

[58] “Used as an expression of farewell: ‘goodbye’. In earlier use usually emphasizing fondness, kind wishes, or sorrow at parting. In later use sometimes regarded as a more final expression of parting, contrasted with *au revoir*.”

truly being apart. I see parallels between this quiet, intimate moment and the beginning of "Nisus and Euryalus" when the older warrior fantasizes about his death. In both poems, the more mature man reassures both himself and his lover by asserting a fantasy of continued intimacy and desire that will not be cut short by death. Once again, we see what Berlant calls the "wild[ness]" of the drive towards intimacy, even when it looks impossible because of sexual norms and the threat to life. I take this as another example of Byron's understanding of desire as continuous with one's sense of self and a powerful force that somehow endures beyond the boundaries of subjectivity and life itself.

This scene foreshadows the inevitable violence and death that follow. While there are little political details or exposition, this battle subplot provides the occasion for more of the same warrior violence and intimacy that we saw in Nisus and Euryalus. Byron meditates on just how painful and futile a soldier's battlefield death can be: "Day glimmers on the dying and the dead, / The cloven cuirass, and the helmless head" (1039-1040). Unlike the Saint Sebastian-esque beauty of Nisus and Euryalus's downfall, the violence here is depersonalized and horrifying: "Their limbs along the crimsoned turf have crept; / The faint remains of life such struggles waste" (1052-1053). Because Lara is a guilt-ridden antihero without the legacy of epic fame, the violence here is not about unilateral bravery and beauty. Instead, the mutilated bodies and blood-soaked earth present a repulsive backdrop for what could otherwise be a straightforwardly romantic death scene when Lara dies in Kaled's lap. Battlefield death does not carry the schoolboy glamour of epic translation, but rather serves as another tool for mitigating the legibility of queer love, right as we approach the death scene of peak amorous attachment. Byron makes the same recourse to violence, in the same epic heroic couplet form, but he weaponizes violence itself this time to distract from queer intimacy (even as he embraces it).

The larger conflict sets the stage for Lara's long, tortuous death scene. As Lara bleeds out slowly over five stanzas of description, we see how queer physical intimacy with Kaled both is predicated on and cut short by death. Lara gets pierced by an arrow and the speaker declares, "Death hath stricken down yon arm of pride" (1028). By flagging death so explicitly before such a long scene of Lara's fatality, Byron sets up his reader to expect tragic, grieving and loving language—this is what I mean when I argue that Byron's characters get to be especially queer because they are doomed to die. Byron narrates how Lara's wound gushes but, unlike Nisus, Kaled does not rise to avenge his beloved and instead tries in vain to save him:

> Kneels Kaled watchful o'er his welling side,
> And with his scarf would stanch the tides that rush
> With each convulsion in a blacker gush;
> And then, as his faint breathing waxes low,
> In feebler, not less fatal tricklings flow
> (1064-1068)

As with Byron's Virgil translation, time seems to slow down as the speaker marks "each convulsion" and the slowing of Lara's "faint breathing." We get intense physical proximity in this scene as Lara lays in Kaled's lap, presumably bleeding all over the page.

Frozen in this intimate moment of queer temporality, Lara and Kaled are in their own world, half reminiscing but shutting out others by speaking in a language only they can understand. Byron writes:

> His dying tones are in that other tongue,
> To which some strange remembrance wildly clung.
> They spake of other scenes, but what — is known
> To Kaled, whom their meaning reach'd alone;
> And he replied, though faintly, to their sound,
> While gazed the rest in dumb amazement round:
> They seem'd even then — that twain — unto the last
> To half forget the present in the past
> (1089-1096)

Byron puts "dying" itself literally "in" Kaled's "tongue," making literal the inaccessibility of an explicit discourse of queer love. Just as Nisus and Euralyus choose to die within each other's embrace, making death at the whims of heavenly desire, Lara "wildly cl[ings]" to life and a vocabulary out of reach to the reader in order to say goodbye. For a character obsessively preoccupied with how and how much he is perceived, Lara controls his death by choosing to be understood only within the bound of secretive queer intimacy in this elongated scene of queer temporality. Byron transposes queerness to another time and place with the phrases "strange remembrance" and "half forget." A few lines later, Lara stops speaking and points eastward,[59] turning to physical gesture as one final effort to cling to displaced queerness and "remembrance[s]."

After removing his scarf to try to stop Lara's bleeding, Kaled's outfit seems to have come undone and the shirt opens up, announcing the secret of the female form. Byron's uses carefully gendered language in these climactic lines:

> In baring to revive that lifeless breast,
> Its grief seem'd ended, but the sex confess'd;
> And life return'd, and Kaled felt no shame —
> What now to her was Womanhood or Fame?
> (1161-1164)

The pronouns in this stanza are strange, with "that" referring to dead Lara and "its" referring to Kaled. Both characters are reduced to non-gendered bodies before the big reveal. The page boy must take a linguistic pause in ungendered territory before getting re-gendered as "her." Byron removes Kaled's agency in this moment with the phrasing of "sex confess'd." It is not even the whole body that reveals this secret, just her breasts, the "sex" that speaks the "confess[ion]." Lacking "shame," Kaled refuses to recognize and feel modest recoil over the reveal of breasts,

[59] Line 1112: "Rose Lara's hand, and pointed to the East."

rejecting the opportunity for feminine bodily comportment. I find it telling that the first female pronoun granted to Kaled comes in the form of a rhetorical question undermining the status of "Womanhood." Byron's playfulness with gender gets more daring as he offers and rescinds heteronormative relief in the same line. The reference to "Fame" is also noteworthy given how "Nisus and Euryalus" defines fame[60] as a consolation prize for dying in battle (the more honorable flipside being living to see one's own glory). Given this negative valence to fame for Byron, we see "Womanhood" being grouped with an undesirable quality for a character rapidly losing the will to live. Fame and femininity lack relevance to how the grieving Kaled processes identity and legacy. Byron offers this normative reveal but then rips away the substance of femininity by denying the significance of womanhood. We must abide by the logic of Byron's own grammar and recognize how Kaled simply does not to exist within the text of *Lara* as unquestionably female.

Queerness gets crossed out so that heterosexuality can be installed retroactively in *Lara*, but gender normativity is not left standing. In simplest terms, Kaled, unlike Nisus, gets (temporarily) to live once he becomes a she; there is no more risk of reading queerness. However, when we consider the language of shared sense of self in this poem and the Virgil poems, we see how Lara's death, along with the negating of Kaled's masculinity, drain her of the will to live. Kaled lives on only to grieve over the very spot of Lara's death, miserable and talking to hallucinations.[61] Shearing her hair, which previously did not signify femininity, Kaled mimes staunching a bloody wound by taking the locks and pressing them "gently to the ground" (1263). It is as if Kaled is caught in the loop of temporality of Lara's tortuous death scene, acting

[60] See the final stanza of "Nisus and Euryalus," especially these lines: "…if aught my verse can claim, / Wafted on Time's broad pinion, yours is fame" (401-402). Also, earlier in the poem, "…life, ignoble life, for glory spurns. / Fame, fame is cheaply earn'd by fleeting breath: / The price of honour is the sleep of death" (51-52).
[61] "She talked all idly unto shapes of air, / Such as the busy brain of Sorrow paints" (1254-1255).

out the last moments before Lara left Kaled alone in the world. Breast revealed, feminine locks shorn, and caught in this trance of performing the past, Kaled has no solid gender or subjectivity.

The character stays anchored to the spot of her beloved's death until she eventually expires as well out of sheer grief. Byron writes, "This could not last – she lies by him she loved" (1271). What exactly "could not last"? Instead of Byron's characters dying because of their queerness, here we see how Kaled dies from the fatal blow of heteronormativity. The choice to make the character feminine destroys her whole sense of self and leaves her doomed to die. In my reading of his queer strategies here, Byron's playfulness with gender and desire feels darker as he makes heteronormativity itself the narrative poison. Professionally emboldened, the mature poet makes the norms of gender particularly flexible and especially self-destructive in the context of this tragic romance. Kaled's characterization implodes in a physically and emotionally disturbing way from the moment she gets gendered female.

I do not read the grand reveal of breasts as a significant statement about gender fluidity in Byron's period. Especially in comparison to Lara himself, Kaled is a thinly drawn character and the references to gender are not deep or numerous enough to build a strong case for some version of proto-gender nonconformity or transness. The crude use of anatomy in these final moments acts as the historically necessary heteronormative afterthought to a queer masculine poetics. Byron's references to Kaled's nurturing, adoring behavior offer only a superficial layer of femininity. Kaled's skin is "femininely white" but there is "something in his gaze, / More wild and high than woman's eye betrays" (578-579). Lara and Kaled's gazes are described as unreadable frequently throughout the poem, so it is notable that the speaker describes Kaled's look as distinctly un-feminine here. To the speaker, other characters around Kaled, and to the

reader, Kaled is effectively male for the vast majority of the poem so I argue that we are obligated to read the dynamic between the page and Lara as a masculine relationship.

Byron's concluding words in this poem make clear that Kaled's narrative will never be resolved within the tale, nor will the readers ever fully understand the relationship between Kaled and Lara: "Her tale untold — her truth too dearly proved" (1272). Kaled is as much "untold" as undone by the end of the poem, emptied out of subjectivity by a flimsy "truth…proved" for the sake of the audience. The language of "dearly" shows how she, in her femininity, is both the perpetrator and the victim of her own heteronormativity. This is not queer erasure, but deliberate heterosexual "erasure" that only works if the reader takes the flimsy bait of female breasts. The tale endures as untold because queerness rests in unspeakable discourse for Kaled and Lara—in the final moments of madness above Lara's place of death, Kaled traces letters from his native language.[62] The page remains suspended in the inaccessible temporality of queer dying and in the off-limits vocabulary of queerness that cannot be "translated," per se, in this text. Byron will not allow the final moment to truly paper over the queerness of the text; a narrative striptease with this flash of breasts can and should only go so far for the reader. With Kaled's foreigner status in particular, Byron ends with this suggestion that our language and our standards for "proved" gender norms cannot accommodate the queerness that ultimately defined Kaled's relationship with Lara. The combination of negation and excess in this closing passage prevents the reader from basking in the comfortable, tragic beauty of heterosexual love and grief.

Byronic Intimacy & Queer Theory

[62] Line 1270: "…trace strange characters along the sand."

In my analysis of Byron's epic poetry of queer death, I read these works as embracing the inevitable clash of queer passion and normative convention; queer discretion and playfulness with boundaries shows us how desire still scrambles to be embodied and fulfilled. There could be no contemporary Byron studies without reading his desires in his life and in his work through a queer lens. But we do not need to frame the queer past in our own image in order to appreciate how Byron smuggles in the pleasures of men desiring men *through,* and not at the expense of, the protecting structures of normativity. Even as he folds death itself into his methodologies for obfuscating explicit queerness, we see eroticism in his descriptions of dying bodies and great Byronic, Romantic passion in his elaborations of attachment between characters. Byron's use of normativity, I argue, does not read as begrudging, tragic or frustrated. We witness how this poet of literary finesse and social mindfulness embraces so-called limitations as tools in and of themselves for queer creativity.

I argue that Byron's poetics of queer intimacy and death offer a political and literary departure from how most twenty first century queer theorists think about death. Byron's simultaneous ambivalence about normativity and fatality complicates urgent conversations about death and queer erasure that are happening in scholarship right now. In what I previously described as the affective splicing of queer theory camps (the antisocial versus the utopic), death gets ideologically co-opted as an event of queer erasure and negation; mortality is typically viewed as a symbol of anti-futurity politics or productive queer negativity. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz reclaims and rereads the suicide of a young dancer named Fred Herko, arguing that, "Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially antiutopian because it absolutely defines the end of potentiality. But to make 'death art,' especially in the flamboyant manner that Herko did, is to move beyond death as finitude" (149). Byron's character deaths do not feel

especially "flamboyant" in a queer way or even artistic, given his commitment to strict formal choices. The kernel of "potentiality" and desire's refusal of "finitude" do not add up to an impossible queer utopia in his poetry. Even in Heather Love's thoughtful, deeply ambivalent considerations of queer tragedy, death is at best a narrative starting point towards queer political freedoms, part of a larger story of traumatic, painful queer origins.[63] For Byron, none of these narratives quite fit, and this point matters to both Byron studies and potentially queer studies writ large. Death itself is not always narrated as a singular event by the poet, and the kind of slow death and suffering that enhance Virgilian battlefield erotics have no bearing, for example, on the excellent queer theory emerging from the politics of AIDS.

Extended scenes of injured and dying men could be seen as exploitive or torture pornography in other contexts, but Byron taps into a narrative that persists for queer people figuring out their own relationship to desire, intimacy and futurity. Discretion is not about the violence of being forced into a closet but rather the relief and the agency to choose when and how one's gender and sexuality should be legible. On the one hand, Byron's queer poetics feel steeped in the "negativizing burden of sexuality"[64] and "unincorporability"[65] of queerness, to use Lee Edelman's terms. Byron repeatedly connects quasi-closeted queerness to fragile subjectivity and the delicacy of life itself. Yet the "negativity" that does attach to Byron's queer characters is not entirely "negat[ing]" of their desires or their queerness. The endurance of desire past death is a reassurance and a trace of queerness for the poet. His interest lies in positivist (if angsty)

[63] In *Feeling Backward*, Love investigates the long history of associating queerness with tragedy and loss, entanglements, she argues, that play out through tropes of "backwardness." In the introduction, she distinguishes herself from anti-futurity strains of queer thinking by focusing on "the experience of failure rather than negativity itself" (3-4). But she is not interested in recuperating death from negativity, as I see Byron doing in his queer poetics.
[64] See Edelman's concluding analysis of Hitchcock's *The Birds* in *No Future* (149).
[65] Edelman names queerness's "unincorporability" in "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint," which elaborates his core theses from *No Future* through a reading of *Hamlet* (149).

subjects that continually reflect on their own desires and sense of self. Rather than death bringing erasure, there is in Byron's poetics a rich friction between "unincorporable" (and often unspeakable) sexual desire and insinuations of the non-normative.

In this way, Byron wants us to grapple with the fact that the end of a life does not immediately negate the desires charging intimate attachment. He uses fictional death as an opportunity to magnify the unsettling intensity and emptiness that characterize all unfulfilled desires—whether or not the lack of satisfaction is due to the death of one's object of desire. This is where we see Byron's understanding of same-sex masculine desire folding into a universalized theory of desire and longing for intimacy. With this mix of winking visibility and discretion, queer pleasure and doomed longing, violence and sexuality—Byron forces the reader to contemplate the inherent and inevitable contradictions of intimacy. He understands that objects of desire and the timelines for when, how and where we want them are rarely convenient for the subject. As Berlant writes in *Desire/Love,* "In bringing people into public or collective life, desire makes scenes where social conventions of power and value play themselves out in plots about obstacles to and opportunities for erotic fulfillment" (14). With his poetry, Byron shows us how queerness and death present extreme "obstacles" and, ironically, "opportunities" that amplify universal anxieties of desire; the collective uneasiness of desire as inescapably bound to convention, yet tortuously persistent even when desires are not recognized as conventionally valid or valuable.

Byron's queer-particular conception of intimacy underscores this uncomfortable truth about all intimacy: he understands that intimacy is ultimately a subjective, individual felt experience. His writing calls attention to how intimacy can be exaggerated, imagined or otherwise misrecognized. I argue that this preoccupation with the un-verifiability of intimate

recognition shows us how Byron understands subjectivity formation directly through the continuity of desire. His poetry shows us how we cannot have perfect knowledge of the charge of the other's desires (normative or otherwise), and how intimate they feel within the bounds of a subject. Intimacy is indeed ephemeral and immaterial even in its optimized, most reciprocal mode. Mutual knowledge and intense proximity cannot lead to symmetrical and measurable desires. Thus, narrating scenes of same-sex intimacy where one party is dying or dead calls attention to the discomfort of intimacy as one-sided without threatening to over-expose queer sexuality itself.

Byron's double move is to show readers the uncomfortable truth of intimacy's difficulty to verify as reciprocal in the same breath as he illustrates intimacy through the ambiguity and discretion of queer coding. This uncomfortable truth of intimacy which threatens our sense of self also makes the subject malleable to queer aims in writing. Queerness, living with desires that are un-nameable[66] and acted on out of view, underscores the unknowability and the socially-embeddedness of intimacy. In Byron's poetry, we see the driving force of desire attach itself to available objects in relation to conventional forms that can be co-opted strategically to queer aims. Intimacy is where the wildness of desire and the drives meets the necessarily disciplinary force of convention. This collision of forces happens against the backdrop of a quite literal clash of bodies in Byron's battlefield poems, dramatizing the Romantic intensity of affects surrounding the desiring subject.

[66] I mean un-nameable as desires in historically normative terms—they are nameable in Romantic period terms as the drive behind, the internal cause of acts of sodomy.

Chapter 2

"Real are the dreams of gods"

Fantastical Intimacy & Violation in John Keats's Romance Poems

The last volume of the poet's work published in his lifetime, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems,* was released in July 1820 just as Keats's health was taking a serious downturn. I consider these three poems as a set because of their formal similarities, close composition timelines, and the fact that they all appeared within the same volume. Featuring Keats's famous Odes, the volume received generally positive reviews and the "Author of Endymion," the phrase printed beneath Keats's name in this work, finally experienced modest success and name recognition. Composed between 1818 and 1819, the three titular poems see Keats turning to various poetic and narrative archaisms as he explores the genre of romance. Even with their metrical differences, each of these poems pulls from much earlier historical and literary traditions to stage a love story against the backdrop of antiquarian imagery and possible supernatural intervention in love. In each poem, he presents a set of lovers pursuing close adherence to the script of their fantasies; childish optimism meets an adult overestimation of the subject's agency to bring the fantasy into being. For Keats's fantastical romance settings, this leads to disastrous and reliably fatal deviations from the lovers' imagined narratives. These characters openly embrace mortal threats in the pursuit of their romantic and erotic dreams. As Keats blurs the lines between life and death, he does the same with the line between dreams of sleep and the fantasies that govern our waking moments. Much as he does throughout his Odes, he turns to the supernatural elements of Gothic and mythic allusion to embellish the consequences of over-investing in the exactitude of fantasy. In this critical final volume, see how

Keats uses Romantic Gothic conventions to inject real stakes into the customary hyperbole in the passionate declarations of young lovers. In these genre settings, associated with both the passions and the specter of death, Keats sketches lovestruck youths who consistently fail to recognize, respect and negotiate with their beloved's individual fantasies and desires. These characters' faults are twofold: they are both unwilling to evolve their personal fantasies for themselves, and they are unwilling to compromise their own fantasy's narrative for the sake of their beloved.

Inspired by a brief episode from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Keats appends the short relevant passage to this poem in the original 1820 volume. In the introduction to "'A Buzzing in his Head': Keats, Romance, and Lamia's Noisy World," Hugh Roberts offers a thorough recap of the way that *Lamia* has long perplexed readers and critics (including Walter Jackson Bate, George Gross and Susan Wolfson): "Lamia, like many great works of literature, presents us with a mystery, but one critics have often seemed unsure merits—or will ever reward—our attention" (49). Although *Lamia* has long been seen as one of Keats's most enigmatic works, I argue that this poem's initial scene about dreams is key to understanding the project of Keats's romances as a whole. This set of texts interrogates the high stakes of romance through the focus on fantasies that get out of control. It is easy to take for granted how a normal aspect of falling in love involves daydreaming about the days, months and years that lie ahead with one's beloved. But Keats's romantic characters have fantasies that are especially unrealistic, and they also are particularly obsessed with manifesting their fantasies in the exact way they imagine them. In *Lamia,* Keats evolves the thinking he does throughout *Eve* and *Isabella* about young lovers' tendency to fixate on fantasy at the cost of their human reality and vitality. With a two-part structure similar to Samuel T. Coleridge's "Christabel" (1816), Keat's final complete romance *Lamia* is the most metrically loose. Invoking both commonplace and more obscure

mythic allusions, the poet alternates between iambic pentameter and hexameter with occasional couplets mixed in.

Lamia is notable and worthy of attention for many reasons, which include the fact that this poem is Keats's only romance where one of the lovers is not human. The speaker describes the titular character as a dazzling, speaking serpent who claims that she was once a woman and now is trapped in the form of a beast. Throughout the narrative poem, the powerful Lamia demonstrates a superhuman ability to will fantasy into reality through various violations of her object of desire. She negotiates with the god Hermes to gain a human body in exchange for using her extraordinary powers to help him locate a nymph who has been hiding from him. Now a woman, Lamia magically travels to Corinth to seduce the young Lycius who she had previously admired from afar in her invisible, teleporting snake body. Lycius quickly falls for her and arranges a wedding, despite the Corinthian youth's confusion over his bride's lack of family and friends. At the wedding festival, Lycius's mentor, the philosopher Apollonius, arrives and immediately treats Lamia with suspicion. When Apollonius accuses her of being a serpent, Lamia disappears, and the poem ends with Lycius collapsing dead right after his bride vanishes.

I read this poem's initial scene about dreams as the key to understanding the project of Keats's romances as a whole: this genre is his chosen vehicle for interrogating the high stakes of desire through a focus on out-of-control fantasies. Early in *Lamia*, Keats famously comments: "Real are the dreams of gods" (I.127). This line comes right after Lamia magically delivers to Hermes the elusive and invisible nymph he has been lusting after. Although the nymph eventually acquiesces, she first sobs and recoils from Hermes in a disturbing scene of terror:

> …she, like a moon in wane,
> Faded before him, cower'd, nor could restrain
> Her fearful sobs, self-folding like a flower
> That faints into itself at evening hour

(I.136-139)

By the next line, when Hermes takes her hand, she acts happy to be whisked away by the god, but Keats lingers at this moment of initial fear and non-consent. The alliterative "s" and "f" sounds in line 138 feel aurally cumbersome compared to the smoother flow of the rhythm in the rest of this nymph episode. Keats's speaker describes the nymph's body as a recoiling object, calling her a flower "fainting" into unconsciousness, folding upon itself under the violating gaze of the god. The speaker treats her as an aesthetic object diminishing in beauty and vitality now that Hermes can lay his eyes on her. The nymph's "sobs" are uncontrollable, her life force seems drained with the imagery of "faded" and "moon in wane." Even though Lamia has stripped away the nymph's invisibility, the nymph is legible only for her terror, difficult to hold in view as she cowers and fades in front of Hermes. Nowhere in the poem does Lamia voice doubts or regrets about her decision to help Hermes in his lustful quest. With this in mind, I see Keats's speaker inhabiting an omniscient perspective in order to make the reader consider Lamia's capacity for and complicity in violence. The nymph's autonomy is sacrificed for the sake of Lamia pursuing a human body and romance with a human man. The unpleasant imagery of this hysterical, helpless feminine being (not exactly human but far more fragile compared to both Lamia and the deity Hermes) comes right after the poem's speaker muses on the power of "the dreams of gods" (I.127). While the nymph's spirits soon brighten, I take this illustration of pure terror as crucial commentary on why Keats thinks fantasizing like gods is dangerous.

In Keats's romances, I understand this concept of dreaming like gods to mean the push for selfish desires at the violent cost of the other's sovereignty. In *Lamia*, the titular character does in fact find initial success in dreaming like a god by identifying her object of desire and almost immediately getting him to fall in love with her. Only in the moments before their

marriage ceremony does her dream implode. In this poem, Keats sets up a paradigm of dreaming like a god that very nearly works for Lamia in making her fantasy a reality. But there are limits to the durability of a fantasy that has been forced into reality through a series of violations. Subjectivity, agency and consent have no stability when a courtship morphs into pursuit of one individual's "happily ever after" dream at any and all cost. Time and again, Keats's romance characters force impossible, fantastical scenes upon their unaware and/or unwilling beloved. Lamia never even tells Lycius her name before they both die. Keats's lovers disregard the proper timing and deep communication of intimacy when they feel that mutual attraction is enough to justify hasty action. Keats highlights the fantasy of mutual romantic intimacy as a fantasy of a doubly impossible transparency: the transparency between subject and object of desire, and the transparency of the subject's desires to themself.

In this same key passage from *Lamia*, Keats writes, "It was no dream; or say a dream it was, / Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass / Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (I.126-128). Through the force of their immortal power, gods can dream their fantasies into reality and sustain this constant, abundant flow of "pleasures." There is no fear of death, no anxiety about lack, and no need to accommodate or negotiate when supernatural powers guarantee that your every wish will be met for eternity. The fearful screams of nymphs have no bearing on such pleasures. Gods, in Keats's understanding, experience dreams as the precursor to certain wish fulfillment. Humans necessarily lack this straightforward equation between the desires dreamed up and the pleasures experienced when those desires are met. The negation in the syntax of "it was no dream" calls attention to the way that godlike dreams are actually more akin to fantasies than to the unconscious imaginative swirl of the sleeping mind. The equivocation of "was no dream…dream it was" underscores how Keats wants his readers to

ponder this question of reality and fantasy, agency in one's life and the longing for control that is beyond human reach. The outcome of each romance poem for Keats's mortals, elaborated (in effect) in a long history of psychoanalytic thought, shows us how humans do not really know what will bring them pleasure, will rarely experience the pleasure they expect (even when their wishes are fulfilled), and are left with further desires and feelings of lack no matter what happens. To insist that you can and will turn your dreams into reality is, for Keats, to misunderstand the nature of the human condition. Without accommodating and negotiating the fantasies of others, the lovesick subject will fail to appreciate their own and their beloved's mortality and leave behind a path of destruction.

Repeatedly invoking plotlines and vocabulary related to sleep and dreams, Keats calls attention to how overzealous lovers fixate on fantasies until they actively harm their own reality. In "The Hoodwinking of Madeline," Jack Stillinger famously writes, "The dreamer in Keats is ultimately one who turns his back, not merely on the pains of life, but on life altogether; and in the poems of 1819, beginning with 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' his dreaming is condemned" (555). But how do we parse the condemnable dreams from the harmless fantasies that every subject dreams up to simply keep them going in life? In order to appreciate exactly what Keats condemns here, we must consider the varying ways "fantasy" operates throughout the romance poems and how his commentary extends beyond mere cautionary tales. In this chapter, I highlight the important slippage between fantastical desire and (un)conscious reality in Keats's work. Consciousness of reality becomes less relevant to characters who are constantly possessed by the need to pursue their dreams and fantasies, regardless of waking state.

In *On Dreams* (1901), Sigmund Freud describes how adults necessarily move away from the wish fulfillment narratives of infantile dreams as they develop not only more complex

dreams, but also more reasonable models for expectations around desires. He writes, "Adults have…grasped the uselessness of wishing, and after long practice, know how to postpone their desires until they can find satisfaction by the long and roundabout path of altering the external world" (99). For Keats, in both literal dreams and the fantasies that govern waking moments, young lovers may not in fact demonstrate the mature grasp of this "uselessness." Overconfidence in fantasy manifests as the stubborn refusal to "postpone" what one believes they can will into being. The subject who has "grasped" the proper ways of wishing and relating to dreams does not need to be denounced in the way Stillinger thinks of dreams as condemnable for Keats. Problems emerge for Keats's romance characters when they approach their fantasies with a downright denial of "the uselessness of wishing."

Keats clearly understood the long association between antiquarian romance conventions and plots featuring superficial wish fulfillment. Like many of his contemporaries, such as Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron, Keats drew inspiration from the eighteenth-century resurgence of interest in medieval romance texts.[67] In "*Lamia, Isabella, and The Eve of St. Agnes*: Eros and 'romance,'" Jeffrey N. Cox explains how, "…romance, a mode of enchantment linked to wish-fulfillment, was prone to being seen as a weak indulgence, incapable of sterner stuff" (54). I read Keats as leaning into both the aesthetics and the enchantment of the genre, sketching these childish characters who enthusiastically chase after their objects of desire and fantasies of a picture-perfect life where romantic love is ongoing and unproblematic. While Cox, in his reading of Keats as a Cockney poet, interprets him as "ironizing" romance, I see Keats digging into the superficial markers of the genre not as mere "indulgence" or ironic anti-romance. This genre presents Keats an opportunity to grapple with the force and consequences of desire—through the

[67] See the introduction of Jeffrey N. Cox's essay "*Lamia, Isabella, and The Eve of St. Agnes*: Eros and 'romance'" (53-54).

most frivolous literary conventions of desire. His poems meditate on indulgent early honeymoon phases of relationships, dramatizing extreme versions of the beginning of love when the lover looks at the world through rose colored glasses without realizing it. The intoxicating affects of first falling for the beloved dilate one's sense of time, and the beginning of a romantic relationship can feel longer, deeper and more intimate than it really is. Throughout this chapter, I consider how the superficiality of Gothic romance lends itself to a meta critique of the earliest and weakest stage of romantic intimacy.

In her essay on dreams in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Nancy Rosenfeld takes an approach more removed from psychoanalysis than mine, but she also reads Keats as interrogating the slippage between fantasy and dreaming. Rosenfeld writes: "The reality prophesied by imagination may turn out to be threatening, the dreamer may awake to find that the new reality is deceptive, and the very fulfillment of the vision may lead to sorrow and despair" (58). In my reading of Keats's romances, the characters never actually wake up to see clear distinctions between dreams, fantasies and realities. Keats elaborates on these same themes that occupy his Odes, but offers them here through more distinct narrative arcs associated with romance and the Gothic. Moments of awakening and clarity are only ever partial, and the original fantasy of romance remains intact even—after devastating consequences. There are "sorrow and despair," to be sure, but the repercussions experienced by Keats's dreaming and dreamy lovers never lead to awakening to a new reality as Rosenfeld describes. These characters remain stuck in the realm of fantasizing, or prophesizing, as they continue to look ahead to how their desires can still be fulfilled, in spite of it all. I absorb "dreams" into the broader vocabulary of fantasies of desire in order to emphasize how integral fantasy is to Keats's model of selfhood: the coherent self is the result of a desiring subject creating and maintaining a narrative of who

and what they want. The hyperbolic passions and tropes associated with romance plots allow Keats to illuminate a paradox around the pursuit of fantasy: the closer these lovers adhere to the script of fantasy, the more their sense of self and their actual life (plus the life of their beloved) come under threat.

In my readings of Keats, I take my understandings of desire and fantasy primarily from Lauren Berlant *Desire/Love* in which they consider the "enabling structure of fantasy" as a key ingredient to "ordinary love" (105). Using pop culture examples to navigate various psychoanalytic understandings of desire and love, Berlant turns to "the space of desire, in a field of scenes, tableaux, episodes and events. Fantasy is the place where the subject encounters herself already negotiating the social" (75). I am compelled by this innately literary understanding of fantasy that emphasizes desire's narrativity ("scenes, tableaux, episodes") alongside desire's embeddedness in networks of sociality and normativity. Desire is a dis/organizing force, but only through the filtering mediation of a social world that ascribes different values, identity markers and norms to desirous behaviors.[68] Rooted in psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, Berlant's theory of fantasy[69] stresses the importance of repetition and memorability. Berlant characterizes the fantasizing subject as playing desirous scenes on loop in their head, leading to both more pleasure and, inevitably, more lack. Both the dreams of sleep and the fantasies surrounding desire are abstractions that take shape and become memorable only through repetition (70-71).

[68] See Berlant's careful delineation of "sexuality as a structure of self encounter and encounter with the world" as compared to psychoanalytic accounts that overvalue certain modes of liberal identification in the introduction (16-17).

[69] Here, I am primarily referencing *Desire/Love*, but I find Berlant's work on fantasy compelling because of how they return to and elaborate on the function of fantasy and fantasy-as-narrative across *Desire/Love, Cruel Optimism* and *On the Inconvenience of Other People.*

Thus fantasy takes form only once desire, in all its libidinal and daydreaming manifestations, gets socialized into a storyline that is memorable and motivational to the subject. Berlant writes that the object of desire is never just a person but also "a cluster of fantasmic investments in a scene that represents itself as offering some traction, not a solution to the irreparable contradictions of desire" (76). These "scenes" collectively form fantasies which must continually adapt to feel attainable even as they propel the subject towards degrees of impossibility and "contradictions." This is the psychoanalytic dance between longing and deferral; the subject cannot obtain the object of desire exactly how, when and where they imagine, but they nevertheless pursue their desires. In *Romantic Psychoanalysis,* Joel Faflak reads Keats's poetry as reflexive, auto-critique of the psyche, where "telling" dreams and crafting verse are part of the same project of "…the psyche's endless search for its own narrative self-possession" (209). While I depart from Faflak when he firmly aligns poetry with femininity for Keats,[70] I incorporate this important psychoanalytic account of Romanticism and Keats in order to underscore the importance of fantasy to how the Romantics anticipated a narrativized, reflexive model of subjectivity. Like Faflak, I see Keats and his contemporaries theorizing desire as the force which leads the subject to fantasies that (re)produce scenes where the object of desire is secured. Romantic poetry offers a medium for Keats to then meditate on "the performativity of how the subject reimagines, reenacts, or reconstitutes himself" through such desirous scenes (Faflak 23). Throughout this chapter, the psychoanalytic perspectives of Faflak,

[70] In his chapter on Keats and interminability, Faflak argues that, "Keats reads within the gendered economy of Wordsworth's reason by opposing poetry to philosophy's 'consequitive reasoning'" (202-203). While he sees moments of gendered ambivalence, Faflak consistently reads Keats as aligning "reason" with masculinity and "unreason" and "fancy" with femininity (203; 206). Especially with *Endymion* and *Hyperion,* Faflak sees Keats as engaged in the project of probing the "psyche's dark internal functioning, staged indeterminately between the masculine and the feminine" (206). Particularly with the romance poems, I am not convinced that this kind of gender tension is central to Keats's project of theorizing the desiring subject. Later in this chapter, I elaborate in my discussion of the Gothic and romance tropes how Keats's gender play with regard to literary genre and characterization resists consistent alignment with femininity.

from within Romanticist critique, and Berlant, from a broader cultural criticism lens, help me illustrate both what is cautionary and what is instructive about Keatsian desire.

The Keatsian romance subject is defined by their extraordinary willingness to take on violence and burden, as both agents and victims, in order to live out the precise narrative of their fantasy of desire. In the poet's three touchstone romance poems, we see case studies of young lovers who go to extraordinary lengths to live out the exactitude of romantic fantasy. They are not immune to the lack that necessarily accompanies desires, but they operate with and around that lack in shocking ways that perverts their understanding of their own and their beloved's sense of self. Like Keats, Berlant understands fantasy as potentially fueling a subject's disregard of the autonomy of their object of desire. The overestimation of intimacy is a recipe for violation and objectification. Berlant writes about the threat to love when one party is "insisting on the sovereignty of fantasy: accept *my* fantasy of love as *our*[71] realism" (105). Keats's claim in *Lamia* that "Real are the dreams of gods" illustrates the sovereign power the gods have over humans no matter what. Implicit in this declaration is the coda that your dream, dear human reader, can and never will be real. The speaker's perspective in *Lamia* underscores the abyss between human fantasy and reality that Keats highlights throughout the romance poems. Attempting to inhabit godlike power leads to violation of the other—intimate violation of the shared "our." I use this vocabulary of intimacy because the imagined transparency of shared desires between subjects is a fantasy of intimacy that enables the very violations and romantic pitfalls that Keats takes as his subjects. He repeatedly shows us how forced mutuality, the violent invocation of *we* or *our*, is no mutuality at all.

[71] The italics are Berlant's.

Nancy Yousef takes a philosophy of literature approach to intimacy in the definitive work of Romantic criticism on the subject, *Romantic Intimacy*. She argues that most typical forms of intimacy are "undetermined by, but not indifferent to, the ideal of mutuality" (3). Yousef offers a compelling argument for how most intimacies, even the most comfortable and functional, are predicated on fluctuating asymmetries in the affects and power dynamics between two subjects. Through her readings of Romantic thinkers like William Wordsworth, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume, she argues that most intimate relationships are marked by a gap between expected and achieved intimacy, differing ideas about private versus shared mutual knowledge, and contrasting notions of "equality" in close relationships. Turning away from the well-trod path of eighteenth-century sympathy discourse, Yousef argues that the Romantics understood the asymmetry and disappointment that underwrites most significant relational encounters. She contends that most Romantic intimacies "disappoint" due to the internal high bar the subject holds for themself: "the perfect symmetry of mutual respect" (8).

Conversely, in Keats's romances, naïve and selfish young lovers fail to hold themselves accountable to this bar, or at least fail to really consider what symmetrical mutuality should look like. The feelings of initial attraction and desire may be mutual, but they assume that, because they want each other, there is no need to discuss the concrete next steps. The "smooth immortal dream" of gods they aspire to is predicated on imposition of individual desires, not mutual negotiation of aspirations. There is no navigating the dynamism of intimacy for Keats's lovers who perceive their object of desire as static. Berlant writes in the introduction to *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), "When it comes to living in proximity, there is no such thing as passivity. Adjustment is a constant action: the grinding of the wheels of awkwardness and the bargaining with life's infrastructures" (9). In contrast to the "smoothness" of fantasies,

Berlant's conception of inconvenient intimate proximity captures the effort and sheer ongoingness that Keats's lovers do not realize is essential for long term romantic love.

Both Berlant and Yousef begin with the assumption of "living in proximity" because proximity typically acts as the necessary first ingredient of intimacy. Yousef cautions, though, that proximity can be misrecognized as the only required component:

> The prevailing mood out of which romantic forms of intimacy become articulated involves no more and no less than palpable proximity—whether this occurs literally… or whether this proximity is subsumed, as it were, into psychic preoccupation or reverie. (24)

I am especially compelled by Yousef's emphasis on how proximity must feel "palpable" because this affective requirement for Keats seems far more important than "literal" proximity. Keats's lovers may not be up for the mature, ongoing kind of "adjustments" that Berlant understands as necessary to true intimacy. Yet, these characters still take their desires, the fantasies they build around those desires, and mere morsels of proximity as grounds for misrecognizing themselves as in a solid intimate relationship. Yousef understands the critical "psychic preoccupation" component to intimacy—which I would argue emerges, for better or worse, from some degree of desirous fantasizing. Keats creates characters who need only some physical closeness and perhaps a taste of dialogue to enter a "reverie" of fantasizing, to use Yousef's word.

Indeed, "reverie" seems apt when we consider how Lamia initially meets and seduces Lycius. Here, we see how Keats presents the slippery slope of misrecognizing the combination of proximity and physical attraction as a sturdy foundation for romance. Even though Lamia has powers beyond humanity, she assumes this fantastical belief that, just because there is initial attraction, she and Lycius can have grounded and lasting intimacy. The minute Lamia transports her human form to Corinth and calls out to Lycius, he is smitten and agrees to take her home: "For so delicious were the words she sung, / It seem'd he had lov'd them a whole summer long"

(I.249-250). The earliest moments of romance bend time into feeling like "a whole summer" when the subject becomes convinced that their attraction is actually a deep, intimate love. Lamia and Lycius instantly bond through this mutual assumption that they have been in love all along. Before she becomes human and comes face to face with Lycius, she describes her feelings to Hermes as "love" for this youth in Corinth (I.119). Once they do meet, Lycius literally cannot stop looking at her because he finds her too beautiful and incredible to be real: "…while he afraid / Lest she should vanish ere his lip had paid / Due adoration, thus began to adore" (I.253-255). The speaker suggests that Lycius believes that his "ador[ing]" attention and fixed, starry-eyed gaze can make up for the lack of time spent getting to know his beloved Lamia. The characters need little time or language in order to assume that they can and will spend the rest of their lives together.

Before we get to practical expectation and ordinary disappointment in intimacy, Keats's lovers try to fast-forward to an established relationship. This fantasy is not affectively "indifferent," to return to Yousef's adjective, but rather this is intimacy in name and in fantasy only because there is no reasonable foundation for such relationality. These love-drunk youths attempt to bypass what Berlant calls the "ambivalence and itineracy of attachment" by skipping the part of intimacy where two subjects achieve regular proximity to one another, attempt to get to know each other deeply, and gain mutual trust. In this same passage from *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant continues, "[Fantasy] provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness. That is, fantasy parses

ambivalence[72] in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it" (122). Keats's characters, in all their pollyannaish enthusiasm, cannot see beyond the "smooth" ease of their "intelligible" fantasy enough to confront the ambivalence of negotiating mutuality. They do not fear being "defeated" by their unrealistic fantasies because they refuse to recognize just how "unruly" their desires really are. Mutual superficial attraction, episodes of voyeurism and the persistence of longing are misrecognized as providing a legitimate foundation for intimate familiarity. Using narratological and poetic forms associated with romance, Keats illustrates the violent and tragic consequences when lovers act on fantasies of an imagined mutual intimacy that is entirely unearned.

Why use the language of intimacy at all if every romantic pairing in Keats is demonstrably underbaked? Fantasies that violate the object of desire go hand in hand with the vocabulary of intimacy because the fantasy is only being forced on the other in the first place on the assumption of intimacy. I start my readings of intimate fantasy in Keats's with the previous examples from *Lamia* because this poem is the most interpersonally violent romance with the most drastic power difference between lovers. Yet, even with their lopsided power dynamic and differing claims to humanity, Lycius and Lamia nonetheless epitomize Keatsian romance subjects. Each truly believes that they know and share the innermost wishes and desires of the other, and they repeatedly announce the fullness of their commitment. When they speak to one another, Lycius "bend[s] to her open eyes" and is "mirror'd small in paradise" in her eyes (II.46-47). The now-entwined subjects see themselves as "mirrors" of each other, reinforcing the

[72] In the *Inconvenience* introduction, Berlant makes a strong case for removing the automatic negative associations with ambivalence, seeing a way forward and (perhaps in moments of respite) even a way out of grating inconvenience in intimate relationality.

"paradise" of their instant romance. Given these characters' confident assumption of mutual intimacy, I think critics are obligated to meet these characters where they are. However superficial, erotic and/or impulsive these lovers may seem, we must take seriously the claim that a subject believes themselves to be intimately involved with another. Keats's characters need minimal time and resources to feel confident in their amorous fantasies, and his speakers often reflect the dual optimism and tragic doom of his characters. The lovers' desires quickly upgrade to intimacy because their fantasies are structured by future-oriented, durable goals such as marriage and merged families.[73] We cannot only use the language of desire and attraction to capture the temporality and persistence baked into fantasies of ongoing romantic love.

Especially with the issue of consent looming in the background, it is both challenging and wrong to take any claim to intimacy at face value. But, in order to understand how and why certain characters get violated, we must see how the Other believes themselves to be involved in an intimate relation such that their actions are not violating. If we are to begin to understand the logic of his characters, Keats asks us as readers to sit with uneasy and unearned claims to intimacy. Unjustified claims to intimacy still have narratives and logics that are useful to track. Assuming mutual attraction and interest is only one layer of mutuality; Keats offers us pairs where there are much deeper assumptions of the long-term intent behind mutual desires. Even when claims to intimacy lack credible substance, there is a critical duty to interrogate why intimacy feels intimate and ongoing. Why and how does a relation feel intimate even when familiarity, proximity, mutual knowledge and the anxious pursuit of perfect(ish) reciprocity are missing? The assertion of intimacy and fantasies of lasting love can tell us much about Keats's conceptions of romance, as a genre and as a relational mode of life.

[73] The case of *The Eve of St. Agnes* is more complex, but nonetheless feel optimistic and future-oriented, as I will argue in later readings.

Dreams Do Come True (At First)

Fantasies go terribly wrong in Keats's romances, especially when they become reality. The potency of romantic fantasy gains power when initial desires are fulfilled, drawing the larger fantasy closer into view. The full arc of a fantasy's narrative becomes more recognizable and the subject becomes more attached to this storyline when it repeats on loop in a subject's head, to return to Berlant's psychoanalytic model of desire and fantasy. The more reasonable and attainable the fantasy seems, the more it will take hold and motivate the subject. Keats's characters then overestimate the attainability of their broader, big picture fantasies through the assumption that they have the power to "dream like gods." When the first elements of the fantasy go well, it is also easier to exaggerate the intimate familiarity that emerges from superficial mutual knowledge and limited proximity.

Keats plays into the usual line of Gothic reading, encouraging the blurring of fantasy with reality by illustrating how fantasies and the dreams of sleep are versions of the same thing: the narrative a subject constructs around their core desires, the story they tell themselves about who they are and what they want. In each poem, we see things getting off on the right foot for the lovers: Lamia gets her wish from Hermes to become human again and Lycius becomes enamored with her instantaneously; Isabella and Lorenzo overcome nerves to fall in love after their first ever conversation; Porphyro succeeds in making his way to his beloved Madeline right after she goes through the motions of a ritual to ensure his love for her. We see Freudian wish fulfillment heavily filtered through social norms but lacking anxiety about violating the other's sovereignty and also lacking concern about reciprocity of feelings. Each of these couples disregards the need

for building mutual knowledge and trust with time; one interaction feels sufficient to solidify their "happily ever after" fantasies.

Before these fantasies go off the rails, Keats's lovers intensify their commitment to their own romantic storyline through the positive experience of a seemingly chance meeting. Beginning the poem as a "gordian shape of dazzling hue," the titular serpent of *Lamia* only gets or restores (depending on your interpretation) her human female form after she helps Hermes acquire the nymph (I.47). It is unclear whether Lamia was always a serpent who tricks Hermes or whether she was in fact doomed to the "wreathed tomb" of her snake form (I.38). Importantly, she stands out among Keats's lovers because of her proximity to the supernatural and her ability to—up until a point—dream like a god and force her fantasies into existence. In "The Monster in the Rainbow: Keats and the Science of Life," Denise Gigante eschews a straightforward Gothic interpretation and argues that that Lamia represents a kind of monster which is incredibly distant from Gothic images of deformity, defect and abjection (434). Like Gigante, I see Lamia's monstrosity as a personification of exceptionality more so than the typical Gothic monster, which serves as a source of horror, disgust and death. Gigante reads this character as Keats's vision of "a new kind of monster in the literature of the Romantic period, one whose life force is too big for the matter containing it" (434). Lamia's excessive "life force" ultimately destroys the "matter" of her own physical form as well as that of her beloved. It is only because of Hermes that Lamia gains access to the human form which she eventually exceeds and destroys. She remains an outsider to humanity even in human form, exceeding and destroying her body and her fantasy.

Without downplaying Lamia's obvious classical provenance, I also read her as a Gothic heroine, villain and monster wrapped into one. In light of Keats's other romance genre choices in

this volume, I am compelled to read *Lamia* for its dual classical and Gothic elements. On the one hand, Lamia has a supernatural power framed in godlike terms since she can "dream" herself by teleporting and observing seemingly anywhere (I.214). Yet, the power "to dream" is limited until she has the feminine body she wants, and even then she is powerless to the ultimate tragic end for herself and for her object of desire. The excessive life force, to use Gigante's phrasing, comes from her attempt to dream like a god from the body of a woman; she gets the worst of both worlds with limited but still superhuman powers and a body that ends up destroyed by her own romantic ambitions. Keats's speaker explains how Lamia "…could muse / And dream, when in the serpent prison-house" and would "send her dream" until one day she saw the young Corinthian Lycius and "fell into a swooning love of him" (I.202-203; I.213-214; I. 219). Keats declines to show his readers these powers work, but his speaker makes clear just how intensely Lamia becomes preoccupied with Lycius due to her special ability. With all the magic of teleportation, Lamia simply finds herself swept away by a crush.

While *Lamia* has the most drastic power difference between the main characters, *Isabella* has the most outright violence between the lovers. Out of all the romances, *Isabella*'s plot arc takes the most drastic swing from starting off on the right foot to taking an extraordinary dark turn. Keats takes an already macabre story and leans into the shock factor of the plotline, making the story his own through the Gothic and his longstanding fixation with the archaic. *Isabella* lacks the heavy Gothic aesthetics of *The Eve of St Agnes* and does not have an inhuman monster like *Lamia*. Still, this text exemplifies Keats's unexpected twists on Gothic tropes of romance, death and violence. In *Isabella*, the first composed of the group, Keats uses the Italian ottava rima rhyme scheme to produce a loose interpretation of a morbid story from *The Decameron*, the fourteenth-century collection of tales by Giovanni Boccaccio (who is in fact credited with

originating ottava rima).[74] It is widely assumed that Keats worked from the fifth edition (1684) of a 1620 English translation, *The Novels and Tales of the Renowned John Boccaccio,*[75] likely the work of translator John Florio. Unlike the more English religious superstition and antiquarian scenery in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (written in the decisively English form of Spenserian stanzas[76]), *Isabella* has the distinctly Gothic feel of being displaced to another time and place far away from Keats's Regency England.

To summarize the shocking events, I borrow from Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołdys's essay "Keats, the Grotesque, and the Victorian Visual Imagination: 'Isabella; or the Pot of Basil':"

> Isabella, a young lady from medieval Florence, is in love with the family's servant, Lorenzo. Because of both class and economic differences between the lovers, their connection is disapproved of by Isabella's family, particularly her brothers, who decide to get rid of Lorenzo; they murder him and bury him in a forest. Isabella does not know why Lorenzo disappeared, but eventually she is visited by his ghost and finds out. In a frenzy, she runs to the forest, exhumes the body, cuts its head off which she tenderly nurses. The basil plant thrives, while the girl gradually withers. When the pot is taken away from her, Isabella dies.
>
> (159)

In his revision of Boccaccio, Keats begins the story by emphasizing how the lovers hopelessly fall for each other without speaking at first. Isabella and Lorenzo do have mutual attraction and are in constant general proximity to one another since Lorenzo works for the family, but they fail to work up the courage to speak and are consumed by "sick longing" and their "sad plight" (23; 26). We feel their literal proximity in the syntax of the ottava rima form, which Keats selects despite the original Italian and popular English translation both being in prose. Keats chooses

[74] See Jack Stillinger's notes on *Isabella* in the *Complete Poems* based on notes from his publisher and advisor Richard Woodhouse (442). Also, see Cox ("*Lamia, Isabella, and The Eve of St. Agnes* : Eros and 'romance'") for details of how Keats was urged to do this project by his contemporaries Hunt, Hazlitt and Reynolds (55-60). While this collaborative encouragement is worth noting, I do not find this context important to my reading of Keats's use of the Gothic in *Isabella*.

[75] See pages 182-185 of the 1684 English edition of Boccaccio for the full text of the Isabella story.

[76] The length and rhyme scene of Spenserian stanzas—a decidedly English poetic invention—have long been noted for their similarities to ottava rima, so we do still see a link in Keats's formal choices here.

this strict rhyme scheme, which demands heavy assonance and puts constraints on sentence and stanza lengths (10 beats, eight lines). The short sentences and rhyme scheme (abababcc) immerse the reader in a textual world of deep proximity and familiarity. This syntactical intimacy contrasts with the theme of separateness and the imagery of illness that dominate, in particular, the beginning section of the romance.

In their state of longing that seems to drain their life force, the only thing sustaining Isabella and Lorenzo is the power of dreams. This poem has long been noted for its lengthiness and tangents, once again showing how Keats uses romance and Gothic conventions (including dreams) to dilate the temporality of early romance—desire is excruciating, winding and unsatisfying for both the reader and the lovers in the early stanzas of *Isabella.* Longing for their fantasy of romance makes Isabella and Lorenzo feel as though they were dying, yet dreaming is the only thing keeping them going. Keats offers this bidirectional understanding of how dreams can blur with the affects of death, and how dreams can serve as the sustaining source of vitality. Unlike a Gothic take on dreaming as the experience of terrifying nightmares, dreams are the thing that keep Isabella and Lorenzo hanging on through their lovesick suffering in the daytime.

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of Gothic dream visions that "…no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up from even some innocuous dream *to find it to be true*" (13). Conversely, for Keats's lovers, these dreams are the motivational narratives that propel them forward towards their object of desire—even when that propulsion leaves them exhausted and sickly, as with Isabella and Lorenzo. Keats writes, "They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep / But to each other dream, and nightly weep" (7-8). The intentionality of dreaming "to each other" sets the tone for how Keats's lovers generally think about the power of their fantasies: if they yearn hard enough, their object of desire can

absorb the contents of their fantasies and their singular mutual dream will come true. The directionality is not just about psychically delivering the story to the other, but also about assuming that, if only their fantasy could be recognized by the other, then surely they would share a fully fleshed out vision of the future.

The reader encounters this transhistorical, pervasive fantasy of psychic merging, the "you complete me" model of subjectivities that always already belong together and are twin parts of a singular integral whole. If desire feels like it is killing you while you wait for reciprocity, you in fact are desiring correctly because this means you are living out the appropriate romantic cliché of "dying" to be with your object of desire. Life is not life at all without the other, so Keats's lovers feel affirmed that their desires are worthy, even if they feel physically and emotionally wrecked by lovesickness. This state of being worsens even as it confirms the very romantic essence of their devastating desires. This mortal dynamic gets intensified by Gothic affects of dread and anxiety, amplified in the speaker's many asides throughout *Isabella*; readers also cannot avoid not the claustrophobic feel of the short, tight ottava rima rhyme scheme.

While Keats's line "to each other dream" might seem abstract, his Boccacio tale softens the border between living and dying, allowing the ghost of Lorenzo to appear to Isabella. We see concrete consequences of a dream's agency after the character's death: Lorenzo does actually dream himself to Isabella by appearing as a spirit while she is sleeping. In this first conceived poem of the romance trio, we see both the force of will and the futility of inertia in this phrase "to each other dream." This theme emerges repeatedly throughout this set of poems: "to each other dream" practically sums up the plot of *Eve* where Madeline thinks she is in a dream and Porphyro believes he is in the right to fulfill her fantasy. Lamia gets described as voyeuristically

"sending her dream"[77] to observe her beloved Lycius; at first he thinks she's a tempting vision who is too good to be true. This phrase "to each other dream" encapsulates the way Keats insists on this mix of directionality, imposition of fantasy, and overconfidence in the transparency of desire to oneself and to the other.

Without the intervention of a deity, magical serpent or ghost, *The Eve of St. Agnes* requires human outside assistance in order for dreams to come true at first. The outside help does not seem fully acknowledged by these young lovers, and they only feel more emboldened that they have the individual agency to see their fantasies come to life. Given this poem is arguably the most aesthetically Gothic of Keats's romances, it is surprising that this text is the only romance lacking external influence beyond the whims of mortals. The poem takes its name from the ritual that prompts the events of the poem instead of from the main female lover, as in *Lamia* and *Isabella*. Keats structures the poem around a pagan tradition which "old dames" hand down to the young Madeline (45). Madeline believes that "Young virgins might have visions of delight, / And soft adorings from their loves receive… If ceremonies due they did aright" (47-48; 50). Porphyro, who has no backstory other than his heart being "on fire" for Madeline, uses this knowledge as an excuse to come to her in person rather than hope she dreams of him (75).

The essential outside assistance comes from Madeline's old nursemaid Angela, a figure remarkably similar to the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. The Shakespearean tragic parallels are dense in this poem because Porphyro's family seems to have a long rivalry with Madeline's, à la Montagues and Capulets. When Porphyro enters his beloved's castle home, the setting is described in ominous Gothic terms. Keats illustrates the threatening environment for his young Romeo: "…Love's fev'rous citadel: For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes, / Hyena

[77] Lines I.213-214.

foemen, and hot-blooded lords" (84-86). Porphyro encounters Angela soon after entering and, over two stanzas of dialogue, convinces the skeptical old dame that he means no harm. *Eve* is by far the most dialogue-dense of Keats's romances. In this most human, least supernatural text, the conversations of misrecognitions and miscommunications lead to the true horror and tragedy.

At first, Angela accuses the passionately "burning" Porphyro of being "cruel and impious" for wanting to enter Madeline's chambers (159; 140). She threatens him to behave because "…thou must needs the lady wed, / Or may I never leave my grave among the dead" (179-180). She eventually relents, though, and gives the young man access to Madeline's chambers without her young charge knowing that she will be watched as she goes through the motions of the pagan ritual. It matters not if Porphyro never actually joined Madeline in bed and prematurely consummated their love; Angela already enables violation of her ward by letting Madeline be voyeuristically watched when the young lady thinks she has protection and privacy in her bedroom. Angela's crucial role exemplifies Keats's willingness to depart from Gothic traditions where men, particularly older patriarchs, are the masterminds of sexual violation and the keepers of labyrinthine castles and catacombs. This poem also offers an example of a character outside the duo of lovers who assumes the position of "dreaming like a god." Angela tries to intervene beyond her bounds of control instead of leaving Madeline to pray to higher powers. With Angela's threat of her own mortality in mind, the overzealous Porphyro obtains the keys to enter the first stage of his fantasy to win over his beloved. Even with outside help, we see how the stakes of love feel life or death in Keats's most human romance.

Gothic Romance without Gothic Death

In each romance, Keats uses formal elements of the Gothic to hyperbolize the ordinary stakes of romantic fantasy and the risk of violating the beloved. My attention to Keats's use of and departure from elements of romantic Gothic traditions underscores the ways in which these late career romance poems fixate on mortality, but in unexpected ways. The poet assembles a collage of images and references that call up recognizable traditions of literary love stories: classical allusion, Greek myth, folk superstition, both Christian and pagan imagery, and courtly love tradition. While these invoke longer traditions and older forms, I focus on the significance of Gothic and romantic tropes of Keats's time partly because of his limited literary education. As Marjorie Levinson writes in her landmark book, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (1988), "[Keats's] absorption of the accessible English writers was greatly restrained by his ignorance of the originals upon which they drew and by his nonsystematic self-education" (7). Especially among the "big six" of the Romantic period, Keats stands out for his class position, and scholars have long noted how his working-class background shaped his reception both in his time and in today's development of the Romantic canon. Levinson sees Keats's literary posture as uniquely antagonistic to (and occasionally parodic of) the authoritative forms and voices of his time. Because the Gothic form and romance genres were dismissed at the time, the only legitimate serious literary approach to them was some version of parody, as with Coleridge's *Christabel* (which is often compared to *Lamia* in particular). Keats's work deserves closer examination for exactly how it toys with expectations around the Gothic.

The path of love is literally dangerous and often haunted for Keats's characters who are embroiled in the mortal threats of Gothic romance settings. The atmosphere of threat combined with Gothic aesthetics has long been noted by critics. "What Keats's anti-romances share with the Gothic parodies…is a warning of the ills that befall young women whose heads have been

turned by too much romance reading and who can no longer distinguish the land of fiction from reality," Beth Lau writes in "Jane Austen and John Keats: Negative Capability, Romance and Reality" (30). While Lau, turns to the problems of genre and literariness, I am more interested in how Keats understands fantasy as a literary tool for constructing and maintaining a sense of self. Like Lau, Diane Long Hoeveler reads *Isabella* as Keats leaning into the horror of the Gothic genre while refusing attraction to the Gothic ballad form and the popular romance styles of the period.[78] Scholars such as Lau, Hoeveler and Cox generally see Keats as welcoming the Gothic imagery while rejecting an earnest intellectual embrace of this feminized and disrespected literary genre. I agree with this perspective in its focus on how Keats uses the Gothic to take aim at unrealistic narratives of romantic and erotic love. But I also argue that scholarship has yet to acknowledge how drastically the poet departs from the Gothic romance's typical treatment of death. In the lovers' pursuit of fantasy, and fantasy's capacity for violation when it becomes reality, Keats elevates the stakes of these romances to life itself. This illustrates a hyperbolic version of what Berlant describes as the refusal of the other's sovereignty in the pursuit of fantasy. I argue that the function of fantasy explains Keats's choices as he invokes and departs from Gothic tropes of fatality and fear of death in counterintuitive ways. These decisions add up to a critique of how assertions of desire and intimacy can constitute justification for continued violation of the beloved and explanation for a subject's inability to recognize the most fundamental aspects of their human reality. His cautionary tales of over-investing in fantasy are about nothing short of mortality.

Fantastical romance enhances the scripts of the heterosexual love plot with supernatural fantasies of divine intervention, fated love and love conquering all, even death. These Gothic

[78] See pages 323-324 of Hoelever's article "Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*."

romance characters are imbued with unusual powers of causation that call into question the binaries of reality versus fantasy, life versus death. Typical accounts of Keats and Gothic romance fail to capture the underlying paradox of death in these poems: his lovers do not fear death, they fear absence of their object of desire. Their misunderstanding of intimacy is part of their faulty logic of reality that perverts the natural fear of death into a fantasy-driven fear of absence instead. They too quickly and intensely wrap up their sense of self in the other such that the absence of the other comes to represent an overwhelming fear of one's own loss. This is not a fear of death as the departure from life, but the fear of death as the end of the story of you and me, as the end of a premature narrative of a "we" that has only just begun to take shape.

"Fantasy donates a sense of affective coherence" to the subject, Berlant explains in *Desire/Love* (75). Keats pushes this concept to the extreme through the aesthetic flexibility and associations with the supernatural in the Gothic. He shows how fantasy can bulldoze coherence into existence for what Berlant describes as the "incoherent and contradictory subject,"[79] but to consistently ghastly results. Typically, the Gothic is associated with a kind of mortal fear that results in paralysis, much like the *Lamia* scene of the nymph: frozen, cowering in terror. From a safe voyeuristic distance, the reader can enjoy this genre of fear and these frozen tableaux of horror. But Keats's lovers do not behave according to typical Gothic logics of fear. Instead, in the face of fatal threats, the romance characters keep moving steadily towards their objects of desire, not to be deterred or forced to renegotiate their fantasies. In this zombified mode of romantic zeal, the individual fantasy breathes life into perverse and ultimately fatal scenarios, from rape to decapitation, hasty marriage to fleeing everything you know and everyone you love. The zombie metaphor feels apt for a set of poems involving literally dead lovers, somnambulists and

[79] See Berlant 75 from the same passage as the previous quote.

chronically exhausted characters. While dreaming and fantasizing take up significant plot space (a typical Gothic move), Keats's characters are notably never well rested across these poems. The romances include fleeting mentions of poor sleep and restlessness (the "almost sl[eep]" in *Lamia* Part II). Key plot events revolve around waking reality's difference from the dream world and being literally and metaphorically awakened. The obsession with dreams-as-fantasy is particularly transparent in the beginning of *Isabella* when dreaming is both a refusal of rest and a symptom of romantic inertia. The blurring of fantasy and reality, death and life, dream and waking existence are all important to Keats's revision of Gothic tropes.

Keats uses Gothic tropes in surprising ways to pervert basic human instincts around death. His characters become so wrapped up in omniscient fantasies of living out their dreams that they fear the totalizing absence that would ruin their fantasy more than they fear death itself—for themselves or for their beloved. Psychoanalytic accounts of fantasy would have us believe that at least part of our fantasies are attainable because this is what motivates us to march on through the challenges of life. But believing that all your dreams will come true exactly how you imagine them to do is arguably an even more perverse misrecognition of the limits of sovereignty. Keats makes the case that this belief can doom not just a romantic relationship but entirely nullify the subject's grasp on the fact of mortality. Counterintuitive as it seems, death itself does not automatically negate the fantasy for Keats's determined characters.

Keats's vocabulary insists on the interconnectedness of death, dreaming and fantasizing. In the context of these romance plots, this has the effect of draining death as a source of horror and terror, as it typically functions in Gothic narratives. If dreams feel a little bit like death, then, by that logic, dying and death can feel a little bit like your dreams (of sleep and of desirous fantasies) and the gift of supernatural powers can open up room for these dreams to persist past

death. This understanding of mortality is counterintuitive for both the big picture logic of death-as-absence and also surprising in terms of how the Gothic usually amplifies fear of death. Romance, as a relational mode, changes how people live, and romance, as a literary genre, shows us how that mode of living also changes how people conceive of dying.

In Keats's romances, as well as in many of his odes, dreams and fantasies are described as death-like trances, and death is described like a dream. In the romances, the reader gets absorbed by how Keats blurs these modes of reality into one another through the enabling supernatural elements of Gothic and mythic influence. We see how his fixation with mortal romance and the Gothic subtly differs from the drowsy numbness in *Ode to a Nightingale* or the drowned and drowsy soul of *Ode on Melancholy.* When the locus of fear is absence for Keats, his romance characters must perform extraordinary mental gymnastics to work around death and/or the threat of death in order to preserve the integrity and continuity of their original fantasy. The poet also never lets his readers forget the fragility and mortality of these characters because the young lovers are ultimately human and fallible. They just work with and around the fear of death in unusual ways.

Particularly atypical for Gothic works of this time, the Keats romances refuse to let readers fall into complacent expectations around gender roles. As I highlighted in my reading of Angela in *Eve*, the question of culpability and violation gets distributed across characters regardless of age or gender. In the introduction to *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions,* Sedgwick famously writes, "You know the important features of its *mise en scene:* an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover" (9). While Keats certainly turns to familiar scenery in these poems, he illustrates significant gender fluctuation with the "impetuosity" of lovers.

Both today and in Keats's time, Gothic romance was a genre heavily associated with characters and readers fitting a certain profile of young, impressionable and not especially bright women. As E.J. Clery describes in "The genesis of 'Gothic' fiction," in this period, female readers of the Gothic were regarded as "fantasists and time wasters" (22). In a similar vein, Lau also writes about young women's heads being easily turned[80] as they shape expectations based on romance tropes. But I want to call attention to how Keats's young male characters are just as susceptible to this mode of romantic thinking. To use Austenian terms, Keats's male and female characters are all shades of Catherine Morland, with no hint of Henry Tilney.

Both Keats's understanding of fantasy and his focus on fantasy are shaped by this decentering of the Gothic trope of the innocent, victimized woman who is a bad reader of reality. In each of Keats's romance poems, we see men and women susceptible to the same kind of myopic thinking about desire that leads to death and destruction of the object of desire. These lovers can only displace their fundamental fear of death and barrel ahead towards their fantasies because of the indiscriminating pull of fantasy, regardless of gender. Keats's poems revel in the power of desire to pull the subject along—regardless of gender—even when the individual never feels as though they have achieved their fantasy or solidified a cohesive sense of self. The temptation to fantasize too hard is not solely a feminized weakness associated with women's bad reading habits and the Gothic genre. We still get scenes of swooning, lovesick damsels, but reading for these tropes without considering how the men fall into the very same traps of fantastical thinking does a disservice to Keats's wider critique here.

For example, much has been said about Porphyro falling into Madeline's dream and the nonconsensual sex in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Importantly, Porphyro pursues physical intimacy

[80] See Lau's "Madeline at *Northanger Abbey*: Keats's Antiromances and Gothic Satire" (30-32).

without a second thought because he seems to believe that she is conscious and eager for him to fulfill this courtship ritual. He spends stanza XXXIII playing the lute for her directly next to her ear until she seems to wake up; he then kneels by her so they can make eye contact and talk before he does anything else. The muddled scene of assault that ensues (Porphyro "melt[s]" "into her dream"[81]) lacks the vividly horrific imagery of the recoiling nymph in the beginning of *Lamia*. We know that Keats is capable of writing scenes of interpersonal sexual violence, but he writes this from the perspective of the male lover swept away by fantasy while his beloved firmly believes she is dreaming. Without dismissing the violation inherent in Porphyro's actions, I want to emphasize the contrast between one Keats romance poem that explicitly depicts a horrifying scene of (anticipated) sexual violence and one romance poem that sidesteps explicit description in order to highlight the problems of desire and interpretation in a moment of intimacy. His choices put emphasis on different modes of intimate violence that occur when individual fantasies do not align.

Female characters perpetuate and enable violence throughout Keats's romances. The nymph gets claimed by Hermes with the full expectation of her compliance, but the nymph is only there in the first place because of Lamia. The ghastly corpse mutilation in *Isabella* (notably more graphic than the English translation of Boccaccio's prose) is the most obvious scene of a female character committing an act of physical violation, but there are further layers to the titular character's violence. The ghostly Lorenzo asks her to just visit his grave,[82] but, once she knows where his body is, she cannot deny herself the opportunity for continued material proximity to a part of his body so she defies his clear wishes. An old maid actively helps Isabella's with not just the search for Lorenzo's corpse, but the actual act of decapitation. Of course, another aging

[81] Line 320.
[82] Lines 303-304: "'Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,' / 'And it shall comfort me within the tomb.'"

female figure is essential in *Eve* to Porphyro's initial opportunity to enter Madeline's private bed chambers. The structures of power and violations of bodily autonomy in these texts refuse a consistent gendered logic, implicating anyone swept away by fantasies of romance. The egalitarian capacity for violence and the displacement of fear of death come through Keats's revision of Gothic tropes to center a cautionary narrative about the force of fantasizing too intensely.

Keats's romances always return to this generalized threat of believing too virulently in the power of one's own romantic fantasies at the cost of forgetting one's fragile humanity. In his initial conversation with Angela, Porphyro promises to "not harm" Madeline and not to "displace" even "one of her soft ringlets" or "look with ruffian passion in her face" (148-150). His apparent goal for entering this risky space is that he "might see her beauty unespied / And win perhaps that night a peerless bride" (165-166). His goals seem partly voyeuristic: to see the "unespied" lady when no one else looks upon her so he can consume her "beauty" alone. But "to win" her as a bride would theoretically require verbal interaction (or even contract), so he seems to contradict himself. The speaker inhabits Angela's benevolent perspective, calling him a "puzzled urchin" in need of guidance to get to Madeline (129). The old dame describes how Madeline is supposed to, undisturbed, "pray and sleep and dream / Alone with her good angels" (141-142). It is difficult to say whether Porphyro breaks his exact, as-worded promise to Angela since Keats does not describe his countenance or if he touches Madeline's "ringlets." What does get narrated is how he plays the lute for her, stares at her paralyzed when she seems to start to awaken, and then, once she reacts positively to his presence, he "melts" into her dream, and "her heart is lost in his" (320; 331). The reader easily can infer that Madeline's virginity and honor are no longer intact by the end of this "dream" sequence. By going through the exact motions of her

pagan ritual fantasy, Porphyro not onl violates her body, but, from her perspective, traps her heart within his own heart. She feels herself to be at the whims of his heart's fantasies because he misread her cues by enacting her dream at the wrong moment instead of waiting for a more appropriate chance to win his forbidden love. In class and gender, Madeline has been nullified by her dream's coming true in the wrong way: she is left an unwed, potentially pregnant young woman at the mercy of her impetuous lover who has now trapped his heart within hers. This scene of misunderstanding, violation and mutual entrapment, in spite of reciprocal desire, exemplifies how Keats problematizes the uncomfortable gap between fantasies and the painfully real consequences of rushed romance.

Deathly Desire, Mortal Intimacy

Keats shows how the overinvestment in fantasy and the resulting assumption of undeserved intimacy lead to a perverse understanding of life itself. He draws a direct line of consequence from desires that get carried away into alluring narratives of fantastical intimacy that warp a subject's comprehension of their own humanity as well as that of their beloved. We are introduced to Lorenzo and Isabella when they are nearly dying of longing for one another. Before we get to the line of "to each other dream" in *Isabella,* the titular damsel speaks into her pillow: "O may I never see another night, / Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not love's tune" (315). The "if" clause implies the futility of life without an object of desire now that Isabella has locked into a dreamy vision of an entwined romantic future. We see how Keats relishes in taking a romance cliché and having his characters follow through to the tragic, bloody end. It takes only their brief first conversation to kickstart the obsessive fantasizing that structures the shocking events of the poem. A weak Isabella deems Lorenzo's countenance "very pale and dead," and the latter think

she looks “ill,” but the damsel finally finds the energy to “lisp[] tenderly” his name and break the profound silence (37; 52-54). Even with the foreshadowing imagery of death, this brief conversation offers enough to fill the pair with hope for their future, and “Parting they seem’d to tread upon the air, / Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart” (73-74). They no longer worry about their own lovesick vitalities and feel that their fantasies have been cemented now that they have finally spoken to one another. The image of “twin roses” that have been blown away and are fated to come back together invokes the “you complete me” model of intimacy where two lovers are part of the same destined whole. In the context of the rest of *Isabella*, along with the other two romances, I read “twin roses” as a reflection of the lovers’ misrecognition of their closeness following just one chat. Even with the affects and images of death saturating their initial desire for one another, these lovers take the first instance of chemistry as grounds for overestimating the strength of their own intimacy and the promise of their shared future.

In the *Eve* we also see how the lovers invoke death as they make promises based on fantasies. In begging Angela to let him observe Madeline, Porphyro promises that if he breaks his vow to not harm her, he will “Awake, with horrid shout, my foeman’s ears, / And beard them, though they be more fang’d than wolves and bears” (152-153). Already having invaded the metaphorical beast’s den, the young man’s imploring words confirm his willingness to die a gruesome death rather than give up on his forbidden love. Madeline makes a less dramatic but still mortal declaration when she first lays eyes on Porphyro, thinking him a spirit vision visiting her in a dream: “for if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go” (315). Especially if she thinks he is a mere spirit, why must Madeline immediately invoke mortality? Her statement is surprising not only for this instant invocation of death, but also confusing in light of the pair’s familial situation. Madeline and Porphyro already lack a pathway to a realistic romantic future

given their families' disapproval of one another. They already cannot "go" to one another without great risk, so Madeline's declaration only describes a version of her current predicament: not knowing where to go and turning instead to dreams, prayers and love spell rituals. Regardless of when or how they consummate their love, no matter if they run away or not, the culmination of Madeline and Porphyro's romance can only result in a kind of social death, an absence that nullifies their legibility in terms of class, family and finances. But instead of reckoning with these practical issues, the pair turns to the scripts of mortal love. Throughout his set of romances, Keats simply refuses to introduce a young lover who does not invoke their own mortality as tied up with their romantic fantasies.

This invocation of death constitutes a foundational element for each of Keats's romance poems when the lovers first lay out the stakes of their fantasies. The speaker narrates Lycius's experience of the initial conversation with Lamia, who sings to him, as a kind of falling in love while experiencing the feeling of death. She wields her siren song not to ensure Lycius's mortal end, but instead out of the desire to quell her own mortal anxiety about living without her object of desire. Although the siren image certainly feels more mythical than Gothic, we once again see how Keats flips expectations around femininity and death in his love stories. The speaker narrates how Lycius "from one trance was awakening / into another" and how "Lycius from death awoke into amaze, / To see her still, and singing so sweet" (I.296; I.322-323). This moment presents another example of how Keats blurs life and death with dreams in two different directions: it is easier to misrecognize the human condition when delirious fantasizing feels like dying yet feels energizing at the same time. Desire induces the subject to feel as though they are teetering on the edge of life and, for Keats, this mode of ecstasy loosens one's grip on reality, temporality and vitality. Shallow intimacies, powered by overeager desires, cloud the subject's

perception of their own life—this is the risk of fantastical intimacy spiraling too far. Their pursuit of the exactitude of fantasy has fatal consequences when they jump to the hyperbolic entanglement of "his and hers" mortalities.

The Gothic (as well as classical) milieu offers Keats a helpful framework for illustrating the effects of binding one's life to the beloved other. Life before Lorenzo met Lamia is mere "death" in comparison to the trance of Lamia; but he gets described as entranced, in a similar Gothic, deathly dreaming state (I.296). Keats also invokes the tragic imagery of Orpheus and Eurydice right before Lycius declares that he "shall die" if Lamia is just a vision bound to disappear—a line of heavy foreshadowing before Lamia even speaks to her beloved (I.248, I.260). Keats's lovers need only an instant of first encounter to invest their sense of self and very mortality in and with their object of desire. Compared to the other romances, the language of *Lamia* most explicitly shows how 1. The lovers decide that they would rather die than see their fantasy unfulfilled and 2. How this hasty overinvestment in fantasy dooms them to tragic ends. In this last composed of the trio, Keats is most explicit in his cautionary tale about fantastical thinking and the viability of romantic love.

In each poem, Keats highlights the contrast between the lovers' stated intents, the fantasies they elaborate as plans, and the actual devastating events that unfold. Death is the natural consequences to miscommunications and misrecognitions left in the wake of these lovestruck youths as they charge towards impossible romanticized happy endings. In the first two romances Keats wrote, there is an explicit disjuncture between the explicated plan and one of the lovers deliberately violating it. But in *Lamia*, the final romance composition, the problems arise more out of the unspoken elements between Lamia and Lycius. Perhaps the biggest unspoken fact (aside from her serpentine past) is Lamia's orchestration of their meeting through her

supernatural powers of teleportation. The title character's scheming occurs long before she gets her human form, and Lycius scrambles to organize a hasty marriage to a woman whose name he does not know. *Isabella* is the most explicit about fatal miscommunication and *Lamia* is the most muddled, but these are the two poems where both lover characters end up dead. While the lovers' actions in the *Eve* have fatal consequences, both characters get to live with their mistakes, but not without other mortals paying the price for their sins. The consequences in each poem show us the way in which subjectivity's coherence, the endurance of desire, and life itself are all devastated by the pursuit of fantasy. Keats demonstrates how dreams and fantasies occupy a liminal place between life and death, undermining the clarity of mortality and deteriorating (if not destroying) the human attachments that govern mortal existence.

Keats drags out Isabella's suffering over several stanzas before we reach the crucial scene of interaction between the dead Lorenzo and his love. Appearing corpse-like with decayed features and a "miry channel for his tears" down his face, Lorenzo's spirit offers instructions for how to find his grave and Isabella wonders if she may be in a dream or vision (275-280). Spanning slightly over three stanzas (out of 62 total), the spirit of Lorenzo makes the longest speech in the text. He specifically requests that Isabella: "Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, / And it shall comfort me within the tomb" (303-304). Calling himself a "shadow," the spirit seeks only "comfort," and does not express interest in leaving his "tomb" (306). His exact wish for "one tear" on the plant above his resting place does not resonate with Isabella, who cries infinite tears over his re-buried head later in the poem.[83] He also tells her that her "paleness

[83] This is foreshadowed by the imagery of tears and heads in the fifth stanza in which Lorenzo makes hyperbolic claims about wanting to soothe Isabella and make her happy. He says aloud that, "If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears, / And at the least 'twill startle off her cares" (40-41). But Keats does not illustrate Isabella as overhearing these words, therefore she does not have the excuse that she mixed up this statement with the spirit's directions.

warms [his] grave," suggesting that his spirit takes pleasure in how his death has made her grieve to the point of looking like she is dying (316). I read this as Lorenzo's spirit taking comfort in the fact that Isabella's commitment to him remains strong enough to have implications for her own mortality. Just as earlier in the poem, when the pair took their own physical symptoms of lovesickness as confirmation of true love, Isabella's drained state signifies the realness of love for both the alive Isabella and the dead Lorenzo. In this most extreme example in Keats's romances, he shows how the fact of fatality fails to alter the fantasy of the lovers' subjectivities as being bound up with one another.

Within Keats's oeuvre, *Isabella* hardly ranks among the highest regarded texts and usually is considered for limited, particular qualities: the poem's economic critique, the unusual use of ottava rima, and its notable winding digressions from Boccaccio's plot. Keats's emphasis on the economic power of Isabella's Florentine family has led to decades of Marxist criticism unpacking the poet's capitalism critiques.[84] The romance plot often gets swept up in this dialogue given Lorenzo spends most of the poem as a decapitated head and his mutilated corpse can be viewed as just another object in circulation.[85] Another common reading of Lorenzo's head and the basil plant follows a feminist logic of reclamation and parthenogenic procreation. Hoeveler

[84] In Kurt Heinzelman's touchstone article, "Self-Interest & the Politics of Composition in Keats's 'Isabella,'" he argues that the poem is, "…a story about a woman whose chances for love and for an authentic selfhood are undermined by the dominant mode of production and by the way in which commodities are exchanged" (160). More recently, Anahid Nersessian brings up *Isabella* and Keats's anticipation of Marxist conceptions of labor in her introduction to *Keats's odes : a lover's discourse* (6). She elaborates on the poem as the poet's most significant elaboration of labor politics and bodily autonomy in Chapter 3 as she compares this romance to Keats's "Ode on indolence."

[85] For further significant critiques of Keats's labor politics in *Isabella*, see the aforementioned Hoeveler article along with David Bromwich's "Keats's Radicalism," Lisa Heiserman Perkins's "Keats's Mere Speculations," and Vincent Newey's "'Alternate Uproar and Sad Peace': Keats, Politics, and the Idea of Revolution." More recently, Keats's preoccupation with the economy in this poem have been taken up by Porscha Fermanis in "*Isabella, Lamia,* and 'Merry Old England.'" Generally, this poem seems to have fallen out of favor with Keats critics and my research of recent scholarship on *Isabella* only turns up a sprinkling of mentions in the last few years. I think *Isabella* is perhaps the strangest of Keats's romances and certainly deserves more critical attention than it has been getting in since 1990's Romanticist criticism.

and Michael Lagory, among others, interpret the decapitation and planting of Lorenzo's head as symbolically reproductive, blurring the lines between wombs and tombs. Yet I find such interpretations of this imagery unsustainable in light of Isabella's ongoing desire for Lorenzo. Given Keats's logic of desire, Isabella could not possibly understand her feelings as "aborted" or her attachment to the head as "rebirth"[86] because she never demonstratively mourns or admits to accepting the finality of Lorenzo's existence. Although the poem certainly has moments of explicit reproductive imagery, the poetic devices and perspective should caution readers against taking this reproductive reading too far with regard to Lorenzo as a character. Furthermore, reducing the violence of Isabella's actions to the consequences of objectifying a lover (into a literal head inside a plant) does not explain why she considers her relationship to this material piece of Lorenzo as ongoing.

For example, we witness some of the most obvious reproductive vocabulary in the following passage as the brothers observe Isabella doting on her pot: "As bird on wing to breast its eggs again, / And patient as a hen-bird, sat her there" (470-471). Keats deliberately relates this scene through the brothers' gaze, underscoring how female desire and possessiveness feel most legible in sentimental, maternal terms. The brothers cannot recognize her perverse mode of feverish romance. The brother's characterization of Isabella as expectant, waiting for some metaphorical hatching or arrival, does not align with the speaker's previous and subsequent descriptions of Isabella. Her own (quite limited) dialogue never invokes language of maternity or expectation either. Isabella's fixation with the head cannot be the production of procreative endings and beginnings if her actions are motivated by a refusal to stray from the continuation of an intimate relationship adhering to a certain romantic fantasy.

[86] In "Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's 'Isabella,'" Michael Lagory writes, "The basil plant that Isabella later nurtures is in one sense the rebirth of Lorenzo, in another the child of the lovers" (329).

In one of the most striking passages in all of Keats's romances, we witness how Isabella's direct contact with Lorenzo's corpse head gets described in language that showcases her desperation for intimacy while the speaker simultaneously undermines her pursuit of fantasy:

> And then the prize was all for Isabel:
> She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,
> And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
> Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam
> With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,
> She drench'd away:—and still she comb'd, and kept
> Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and wept.
> (402-408)

Possessing the head that she personally detached,[87] Isabella further dismembers Lorenzo. She traces "around" the eyelids because the corpse's unseeing eyes themselves cannot signify love. The morbid act of retrieving the head seems all the more violent when contrasted with this incredibly dainty act of shaping "each fringed lash." After many stanzas of exposition and literary asides, Keats slows down the pacing of the poem with this meticulous scene of bodily particularity and materiality.

Through the course of the poem, Lorenzo's dead body gets deconstructed from a whole, to a head, down to individual eyelashes which surround, in effect, empty eye sockets—and then, of course, these synecdochic layers get confined to a pot. While she can enable corporeal proximity and manufacture reciprocity (the flourishing basil), Isabella cannot replicate Lorenzo's alive gaze. With unflinching diction, Keats illustrates Isabella with as much delicacy as ruthlessness in her need for intimacy. Extreme pursuit of the Other in the face of obstacles does have consequences for what Berlant often describes as the "narrative" people tell themselves about the intimacy they desire. Isabella's brothers eventually steal her basil and flee Florence

[87] With a "dull" blade, nonetheless (393). I argue that Keats turns to this adjective to stress the sustained physical violence necessary to detach a human head from its body. He also notes that her nurse, out of pity, joins her in digging and cutting with this single dull knife (378-383).

after discovering the head. Isabella herself dies, "Imploring for her Basil to the last" (497). Her character made every effort in the pursuit of a singular romantic path in life and, once she can no longer be physically close to Lorenzo, her whole existence expires because she experiences total absence of her object of desire. Combining violence and tenderness, Keats makes the reader see the romance in even the most tragic and gory images.

Conversely, *Lamia* concludes through language of death that focuses on vanishing and absence. This more explicitly illustrates Keats's commentary on the threat of intimate fantasizing as setting up the subject for a perverse view of humanity that replaces the fear of death with the fear of absence. Ultimately, both Lamia and Lycius die because they are called out for enacting an impossible "dream;" we once again see how this language sustains and drains humanity in the same exact narrative. Lamia dreams herself to Lycius in her human form, but dooms both of their lives through her overreach when she tries to dream like a god. Lamia literally disappears at the very end of the poem when the status of her humanity is questioned by Lycius's aged advisor Apollonius—the only one who can perceive her absence of true humanity. He cries "Begone foul dream" and, as soon as he calls her a serpent, Lamia vanishes (II.271). By calling Lamia a "dream," Lycius's speech act literally negates her material, questionably human form. Naming Lamia as a "dream" also refuses her the realness and agency of dreaming like a god. Despite Lamia being the one clear monster of the text, this conclusion lacks Gothic imagery of the grotesque or abject. Keats makes the lovers' disappearances feel eerie in their cleanness and immateriality.

Keats's speaker narrates how "Lamia breath'd death's breath" and then "with a frightful scream she vanished" (II.299; II.306). The moment of pause as she inhales "death's breath" before exhaling with a "scream" illustrates the encroachment of death into life, once again

blurring the boundaries of mortality. Lamia's vulnerability stems from both her determination to will her fantasy into reality and her lack of true humanity to exist in all the trials and missteps of mortal existence. Her lack of human corporeal materiality shows up in this death which, unlike poor Lorenzo in all his corpse-y glory, denies Lamia the dignity of an empty body over which Lycius can mourn. But, of course, even if she had left behind her female body, Lycius would not have had time to mourn her because he too is doomed by this romance. It matters not if she started life as a human or a serpent because she uses her powers coercively and calls in a god to assist with a fantasy. Whatever humanity she may or may not have possessed cannot remain untainted because she chooses to impose her fantasy with impunity and violence.

Like Keats's other lovers, Lamia condemns herself and her beloved to a tragic end, but her fault is not just the overestimation of human power. In an instant after she vanishes, Lycius dies as well: "…Lycius's arms were empty of delight, / As were his limbs of life, from that same night" (II.307-308). Lamia's existence as "delight" to her beloved was dependent on her masquerading as a mere mortal. It does not matter if she was human once before or not because she still sins, by Keats's logic, when she uses her own powers and the favor of a god to orchestrate a human romance. The language of Lycius's "empt[iness]" is suggestive of the way that Keats centers the fear of absence as the ultimate risk of love. Lycius does not end up in the same place as Lamia's soul; his authentic humanity gets emptied out by her greedy pursuit of both humanity and deity. No matter what powers, gods, and structures get invoked, Lamia's tale exposes Keats's concern that the lover jeopardizes their own humanity once they believe they can determine the outcome of romance if they only try hard enough.

Although Madeline and Porphyro survive the events of the poem, their conclusion is the most tragic in a different way because their love comes at the cost of every material and human

support in their life, and they are tangentially responsible for other deaths. They must live out an uncertain future but with a wake of disturbing consequences behind them. Of all Keats's romance lovers, this pair has the most explicit "script" of romance (in the more medievalizing sense of the term) to follow, so the consequences are less mortally devastating and more destructive to the kinds of heteronormative expectations that govern their future livelihood. Madeline follows the pagan script of a love ritual in the hopes of achieving her dream of finding the perfect man, but when Porphyro in fact follows the script too closely, he physically violates his young love. One character thinks she is literally dreaming and the other thinks he is fulfilling a mutual dream, but the problem is that they are asynchronously acting out a partly-shared fantasy. When familial circumstances and youthful impatience are at play, obstacles are ignored in favor of pursuing a fantasy in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Madeline and Porphyro run off into the night but are as good as dead in Keats's repetitive Gothic vocabulary: "They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall; / Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide" (361-362). Moments later, they are gone, "fled away into the storm" and the rest of their fate is left up to the reader's imagination, including a possible wedding that seeks to remedy or circumvent their premature consummation. We are left with images of what the phantoms leave behind: other deaths. The dame Angela gets described through almost monstrous language as she "Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform." An old Beadsman who is described in the very beginning of the poem is also doomed to sleep "among his ashes cold" (376; 378). The elder, pious characters are described in death in material terms, with "ashes" and poor Angela's contorted "face." These deaths are syntactically grounded in embodiment compared to the abstract invocations of mortality by lovers who are struggling to distinguish between reality and fantasy, between the affects of dizzying desire and the feeling that one might

be about to die. These wiser Gothic ancillary characters pay the corporeal price while Madeline and Porphyro are doomed to this haunted existence untethered from the material supports and comforts of their families, the institution of marriage, the finances of their aristocratic backgrounds, and the familiarity of the places they know.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the lovers experience absence as the totalizing lack of all non-romantic aspects of intimacy that make life meaningful: familial attachments, the comforts of class and money, and the supportive structure of marriage as an institution to sanction love. While *Isabella* lingers on the brutality (and also the tragedy) of bodily loss, *Eve* divvies up material human loss (the ancillary character deaths) and absence (Madeline and Porphyro's entire way of life). This makes the reader more aware of the consequences when human lovers, despite all their would-be-supernatural Gothic settings, dream as though they have superhuman powers. *Lamia*'s absence is sudden and totalizing whereas the previous poem deals more with these bodily and contextual particularities, but they all feed into the same critique. In each poem, we witness how Keats elaborates these overlapping understandings of romantic fantasies leading to death and absence as interconnected but ultimately different kinds of loss.

Fantasy as Lifeline & Threat to Humanity

What do Keats's cautionary romantic tales of fantasizing beyond the bounds of human control tell us about the poet's theory of desire? Keats's characters consistently use language that does not just invoke death but also eroticizes the way that romantic fantasies bind the subject to a mortal fate. Keats shows this erotic connection by equating dreamy flirtation with death-like trances and lovesick intensity throughout these texts. The characters not only eroticize the notion of "till death do us part," but explicitly invoke the language of mortality immediately after their

very first meeting and conversations. The more urgent cautionary tale here is about the subject's understanding of their own desires. Keats underscores this potent fantasy of your own desire being so transparent to yourself that, in a mere instant, you can be certain of your life path and purpose for the rest of your existence—all because you have found the right object of desire that offers you the promise of enduring meaning. It is a collapsing of an instant desire with not just the fantasies of next steps of intimacy but also the entirety of desires of a human life. This is the premature solidifying of a certainty that one has found *the* beloved who will shore up the self's coherence and cement a fantastical narrative of the full future.

Of course, for Keats this can only be accompanied by an anxiety of loss and absence, which he elaborates through the threatening and affectively intense aesthetics of the Gothic. Mortal death can be drained of threat and eroticized because the vanishing of the fantasy is the bigger fear. If there is no narrative of a future "we," then there is no capacity to imagine the future of just the solitary "I." The fantasy of entwined mortalities keeps alive the fantasy of shared life, the glossy dreams of satisfying marriage and of solid selves that are always overlapping and protecting one another. The characters need to eroticize the devastation to themselves and to their partners if one of them dies in order to buy into the stakes of instant investment. Aligning eroticism and intimacy with death makes the stakes of romance visible because it is not just about the initial compatibility—the stakes are the success of the full vision of the "happily ever after." This is neither the unconscious dark fear of unrequitedness nor the avoidance of disappointment in intimacy, to return to Yousef's model of Romantic intimacy. Rather, Keats's poetry offers readers a pleasureful reinforcement of the viability of one's fantasy through the libidinal promise of you and me forever.

It is not wrong to read Keats's romances as cautionary tales about the consequences of believing in impossible, superhuman abilities to make fantasies into reality. But Keats's supernatural plotlines with dramatic casualties show us a fundamental truth of the stakes of romantic love: falling for someone truly, madly, deeply involves the belief that you have now entwined the fate of someone's life within your own. These are mortal stakes at both a psychic, subjective level and also a material, bodily level. The Gothic as a genre and the fantasy as a psychic exercise of wishing are both associated with superficiality. Daydreams make for poor substitutes of what could be possible in reality; and the Gothic is the frivolous substitute genre when one could be reading something more obviously thought provoking. Yet, both romantic fantasizing and Gothic fantasizing take seriously the idea of romantic love as inevitably, properly, bound up with mortal stakes. By massaging the unexpected out of romance and Gothic conventions, Keats illuminates the consequences of mortal love through the precarity of his lovers' subjectivities and bodies.

However misguided they may be in their perception of their own humanity, Keats's characters are not entirely wrong to understand that their lives are in the hands of their lover and vice versa. This is why the romance poems cannot be dismissed merely as cautionary tales with flat, cynical portraits of young love gone wrong. Keats's lovers are right to see that true love and romance require a mortal bond. The reader should not take smug comfort in the distance from the rash and irrational choices of star-crossed romantics. Cultivating too much psychic distance from the stakes of intimate attachments risks a different kind of perversion of humanity—the refusal to recognize how the self is always bound up with the Other in order to gain essential stability in life. Within Keats's critique of fantasy lies this sober truth about the stakes of romantic intimacy:

falling in love properly can and should bind one's sense of self and very human existence to that of the beloved.

Chapter 3

"Death is too terrible an object for the living" :

The Desire for Death & Ambivalent Life in Mary Shelley's Matilda

Mary Shelley's epistolary novella *Matilda*[88] is the story of a young woman who repeatedly insists that she is looking forward to her imminent death. Throughout the disturbing incest plot, Shelley's passionate protagonist tries to convince herself and the reader that Matilda not only wants to die but that she loves death. The vibrance of the young woman's first-person voice shines through in these declarations of love of and desire for death. In my reading of this unrelentingly morbid text, I want to contrast Matilda's persuasive and consistent desire *for death* with the lack of a coherent desire *to die* in the novella. Shelley shows us that Matilda's desire for death actually has much more to teach the reader about the force and functions of desire than about the mentality of suicidal ideation. Shelley's protagonist figures "death" through numerous, highly elastic analogies and similes: death stands in as a place, as various temporalities collapsing in on each other, a force of purification, a lover, and as the best way to describe an unbearable life. Matilda's varied and artful figurations of death demonstrate the character's fixation on thoroughly explaining her attachment to "death" while also offering the reader tangible evidence for why she can and will soon die. I examine this mobility of Shelley's vocabulary of death in order to illustrate all that *Matilda* can teach the reader about desire. We once again see what I have characterized throughout this dissertation as the Romantic impulse to

[88] *Matilda* was composed in 1819 but not published until 1959, as editor Pamela Clemit explains in the introductory note to the text in Vol. 2 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley* (1-2).

entangle ideas of desire and death such that mortality unexpectedly but persistently shows up in the motivational narrative of what the subject looks forward to in romance.

Matilda's arguments for why she is only "fit" for death (a phrase she uses repeatedly throughout[89]) gradually escalate as she narrates her life, beginning with her own birth, which kills her angelic mother in an obvious parallel to Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft. In the opening paragraphs, Matilda partly deflects agency for her dark story, claiming that her urge to write comes from an uncontrollable impulse: "Perhaps a history such as mine had better die with me, but a feeling that I cannot define leads me on and I am too weak both in body and mind to resist the slightest impulse" (5). She describes her childhood under the care of a cold aunt, who is charged with looking after Matilda when her father abandons the infant out of grief over his dead wife. She obsesses over her father's possible return, fantasizing about reuniting and calling him the "idol of her imagination" (14). When Matilda turns 16, he indeed comes back and initially fulfills her dreams of mutual love, care and intimacy. But the unnamed father grows distant and Matilda suspects that he has fallen in love with "some unworthy person," so she becomes determined to find out his secret (24). After Matilda intensely pressures him, he confesses to loving her inappropriately and she recoils with disgust, declaring him "dead" to her (30). When he then flees and commits suicide, Matilda feels horrified, guilty and irrevocably damaged by both the confession and his death. Finding socializing excruciating in her grief, she fakes her death and escapes to the remote countryside where, after months of solitude, she encounters the recently widowed Woodville: the melancholy but adoring poet, often described by commentators as a stand-in for Percy Shelley.[90] Their tentative friendship blossoms, despite him turning down

[89] The word "fit" comes up frequently in phrases like "so having passed little more than twenty years upon the earth I am more fit for my narrow grave than many are when they reach the natural term of their lives" (66).
[90] Tilottama Rajan, in her touchstone article "Mary Shelley's 'Mathilda:' Melancholy and the Political Economy of Romanticism," refers to Woodville as a "Shelleyan visionary who has also suffered an overwhelming loss and has

her request for a suicide pact. When he leaves to care for his sick mother, Matilda goes on a despondent walk and falls ill after getting lost in the woods and spending the night in the cold. Once she feels that her sickness has passed the point of no return, she writes this letter of a novella for Woodville to find after she passes.

In the first-person epistolary form, Shelley offers a self-consciously argumentative, and persuasive, narrative of Matilda's desire for death. The death component explicitly gets hammered into the reader more intensely than the element of desire. However, the surprising role of desire becomes more transparent in moments where Matilda explicitly figures death through the language of romance. The climax of such rhetoric comes in the last chapter when Matilda explains how she and death are a perfect romantic match: "In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress?" (65). Shelley's metaphor is tactile and embodied for Matilda, with the material references to "attire," "dress" and "shroud." Yet death itself does not get described at all (or even explicitly gendered as masculine). Although she admits to her own physical "decay," Matilda insists she is "without pain" and full of "pleasure" in her "contemplation" of the end (65-66). She can now profess to the reader her love for death without guilt since she anticipates a natural end and does not feel tempted to resort to suicide. While Matilda repeatedly characterizes this fantasy of dying as "pleasure[ful]," the groom of "death" gets named without actually being described. In this surprisingly romanticized moment, death itself remains a void. The wish for death necessarily plays out in a narrative that

tried unsuccessfully to draw Matilda back into the world of the living" (43). In *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*, Diane Long Hoeveler reads the Gothic qualities of *Matilda* and finds similar biographical parallels, commenting that Matilda cannot "find love or happiness with any living man, particularly one whose philosophical opinions bear such an uncanny resemblance to Percy Shelley's own ideas" (179).

must constantly try and fail to rhetorically and affectively compensate for the vacuum of life's end.

Matilda cannot and does not bring the same figurative language to the wish to die because the desire to die is the drive for absence. The wish for irreversible nonexistence precludes the kind of affectively and aesthetically complex narrative of death which Matilda presents to her reader. When the noun "death" gets figured as an entity, a state of being, a mode of temporality and/or a place, it stands in relation to the continuity of living and the question of sociality. While the word "die" appears dozens of times in this text, this tense is always used in versions of the phrase "about to die" or in expository language gesturing towards the event of dying. Through the grammar of death, Shelley carefully confines "die" and "dying" to moments when Matilda discusses the anticipated event of death,[91] but uses "death" when Matilda articulates her desires. Matilda occasionally references being reunited with both her parents in death, but she repeatedly asserts that she is fit for the singular "death"—this claim importantly differs from the argument that one does not fit in with the living and therefore belongs with "the dead," a signifier of plurality. Matilda never expresses a social desire to affiliate with "the dead" as a population of now-passed-on people; she sees no community or consistent, specific vision of heaven in her afterlife ahead. The phrase "the dead" does not appear in the entire text while the adjective "dead" is used 23 times and the word "death" appears an astounding 60 times. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the metonymic and metaphorical language that Matilda uses to shape the contours, the rich borderlands of death-as-absence.

Since Matilda thinks of her personal relationship to death as exceptional, she must go to great lengths to make "death" serve as her object of desire. Through a psychoanalytic lens, we

[91]For example, Matilda uses variations of "I am about to die an innocent death" (64). She refers to herself as "a heart-broken girl who [is] dying" (Shelley 6).

can understand the object of desire as sustaining a subject's vision of the future such that life in the present seems more bearable, if not more pleasurable. The object of desire always involves a sense of lack, since the object is never fully attainable in the way the subject understands, and this object also comes packaged in a narrative of how, where and when the subject will obtain it. Matilda's desire for death presents a conceptual doubling down on lack that does not lead to the kind of timely, clean self-negation that a suicidal character would seem to crave. Instead, the language of longing for death, even when it is dressed up with first-person eloquent persuasion, shows us how "death" is never really about being dead (nor is it about not being alive). By putting desire, the force that propels life to keep living (a theory voiced by Woodville), into the vocabulary of death, Shelley demonstrates the futility and untenability of a life structured around a false desire for opting out of human relationality. Matilda thinks death is a "seal" to fix her shattered self that she sees as incapable of human intimacy (54). And yet, no matter what extreme logic the Romantic subject employs, the desiring self will circle back to the need for human sociality, attachment and care.

In this chapter, I argue that the mobility and elasticity of "death" for Shelley complicates an interpretation of Matilda as the tale of a traumatized young woman who no longer wants to live. The insistent language of mortality illuminates a paradox about the force of desire: the explicit desire for death actually can serve as a viable mode of propelling ambivalent but nonetheless ongoing living. This is why Shelley's model of desire for death cannot be dismissed as a truly self-destructive death drive. Ambivalent attachment may be tenuous and riddled with tension and negativity, but ambivalence about living nonetheless represents an investment in the ongoingness of existence. Shelley demonstrates how desire remains that drive which keeps powering ahead even when the subject claims that they have no will to live. Matilda may claim

to, and even act on, retreating from life in many ways, but she proclaims an ardent desire *for* death and, in doing so, paradoxically demonstrates the kernels of remaining vital humanity grounded in her continuity of desire. Shelley makes death actively motivational to continued existence, standing in for ongoingness without necessarily involving the affects of hope or positivity. You may feel yourself dead to the world and long for death to call you home, Shelley seems to say, but in the act of articulating those feelings, your language tethers you to the continuation of life because "death" still serves as a horizon for ongoingness. Matilda's repeated claims to want and expect death still illustrate the fundamental meaning making work of articulating the self through the vocabulary of desire.

Exceptional Death, Ongoing Life

Shelley employs the vocabulary of mortality frequently and insistently in *Matilda* because her protagonist needs death to be several (often contradictory) things at once in order for life to feel marginally bearable and in order for death to operate as an object of desire. To claim to experience death as multifaceted, as bleeding into life in varied ways, is to claim that death cannot be pure void. In her desire for death, Matilda sees herself as a "spirit of good" and as the very personification of "joyous, triumphant Despair." She aims to distance herself from humanity while also making her match with death a positive "good" thing. She shapes her own tragic narrative through the external agency language of "doom" and "fate" in an effort to naturalize her desire for death as the proper answer to an existence as a "pariah" and "fellow to none" (60-61; 52).

If Matilda only personified death as a singular figure who desires and loves her back, she would be unable to differentiate her own mortality from that of every other human who

eventually will die. Because her desire for death is the driving force of her life and her epistolary narrative, she claims that her existence has always been dictated by an exceptional link to death. She believes her fate in death transcends any human desire and transcends the shared human fate of mortality. In her desire for death, she needs to believe that her life has been marked by shades of fatality all along. Death is both the horizon towards which she "glide[s]"[92] and her future groom who leads her there (46; 65). Through this narrative, Matilda attempts to replace the fear of dying with the optimism attached to the romantic narrative of fated love for the object of desire. Desire's forcefulness may seem oppositional to the passivity of fate; but Matilda needs this language of mortal fate to substitute and subsume the role of reciprocal human desire. Through this logic of desiring death, Shelley shows her reader how it is easier for a subject to comprehend unbearable living as the encroachment of necessary, exceptional death on life than it is to understand unbearable living as the result of a cruel world which heaps horrors upon an innocent girl. Matilda's logic, however tragic and twisted it may be, feels undeniably more palatable than considering how inhumanely the world can devastate a life that has hardly begun.

Describing her past and present modes of living (cold childhood, socially and emotionally dead present) as types of "death" illustrate how Matilda attempts to drain away the fear of death by claiming she has already been living in opposition to human vitality. She characterizes her parentless, love-starved childhood as a "blank" existence and she only "began to live" once her father arrived at age 16 (11; 15). Her mother is named Diana, who, along with being the Roman goddess of the hunt, calls up associations with death and the afterlife, in a particularly pure mode of femininity. Once again, we see the line between Romantic and

[92] See the beginning of Chapter IX: "Thus I passed two years. Day after day so many hundreds wore on; they brought no outward changes with them, but some few slowly operated on my mind as I glided on towards death" (Shelley 46).

romantic blur along the lines of classical references. In narrating how her mother died, Matilda also uses the language of death to describe her father's grief, claiming he was "no longer counted among the living" after Diana died (10). We see this domino effect in how Diana's death makes the father feel dead even when he is alive, and then Matilda feels like she is dead among the living after her father commits suicide. Robbed of her mother's love from the very beginning, Matilda experiences the aftermath of her father's suicide as a "universal death" because "the spirit of existence" is "dead" inside of her (18; 47). Matilda also writes that her very capacity to love, as an affective mode of existence, is dead and a "ghost" (40). Feeling acutely dead inside, she then finds a way to effectively socially kill herself by "feign[ing] death" in order to seek isolation in a geographically punishing place where she will only endure the occasional fleeting company of a servant (41-42).

Once Matilda achieves her "hermitess" existence, she labels her life "idle, useless" and describes how her "heart was bleeding from its death's wound" (44-45). The grammar of the heart sentence mixes up temporality, agency and subjectivity as Matilda characterizes living as a mode of death. She is "bleeding" out from this specific wounded organ that has already been doomed for "death," but the "death" of "it" as the "heart" seems separate from the impending death of Matilda as a whole person. The noun "death" also may refer to the event of her father's passing, in which case a specific death (or death itself as the force of taking away life) has violent agency. Matilda's "idle" purposeless life may continue for now, but her heart, this irreparably wounded vital organ, offers a synecdoche for Matilda as a whole: physically and emotionally in excruciating pain but nonetheless living on.

The heart is the locus of her emotional pain, the bane of her existence so long as it keeps beating, and also the part of her that sparks joy when she senses that it is physically failing,

speeding up her time to death. The rather confusing, overlapping nature of these claims points to the insistent yet often contradictory nature of Matilda's use of the vocabulary of death. She collapses temporalities by retroactively justifying her perfect match with death, as her current object of desire and destined future. The past, present and future modes of living merge and emerge through the language of death. In the second paragraph of the whole novella, Matilda tells her reader, "I am about to die and I feel happy–joyous.–I feel my pulse; it beats fast: I place my thin hand on my cheek; it burns: these is a slight quick spirit within me which is now emitting its last sparks" (5). Matilda foregrounds her story with this detailed clinical description of her body on the brink of death. She offers up physical evidence of her impending death before turning to autobiography and the attempt to persuade her reader that she was fated for an early demise all along. Here, she talks about the "last sparks" of her "spirit," yet she previously claimed that "the spirit of existence" within her is dead already. She begins the novella with this passage claiming her heart is beating "fast," but later offers up the image of her heart failing from "death's wound." She fragments herself into different metaphorical already dead or dying parts and these timelines and metaphors never fully cohere.

Matilda further fragments and analogizes "death" when she claims that her "secret" is buried in a "grave" (40). The nature of her secret seems multipronged: the fact of her father's incestuous urges, the uneasy nature of her missing and loving him despite his sinful feelings, and/or her very existence as the reason for his suicide. Regardless of how the reader interprets Matilda's "secret," death imagery offers a tool for talking about ongoing difficult living, from her memories to her conflicted current state and her sense of doomed separation from other humans. Even if she does long for him in an excessive, questionable way, Matilda makes clear that she does not fully reciprocate the incestuous feelings nor does she ever justify why a parent may

come to think of their child in this way. Matilda's vocabulary always walks a fine line when she condemns her father's incestuous desires and the effects on her as "pollut[ion]" and "cancer" (61). She talks ominously of her dead "secret," though her language of terminal infection from the outside refuses to naturalize or excuse incest.

When Matilda characterizes herself as always already fated for death, or better fit for death than for life, she stakes out an exceptional connection to death that transcends the contaminating damage of her father's incest. Matilda may reciprocate her father's love in that she feels an abnormally strong connection to him, even calling him her "whole world," but I read this intensity as a product of his abandonment (38). She voices moments of guilt, possessiveness and confusion around her longing for and missing of her father, but, the murky familial love is nothing compared to her overwhelming desire for and love of death. As a lonely child, Matilda locates hope in fantasies of eventual reunion with her one living parent ("I bestowed on him all my affections") so she cannot help but attach her entire vision of futurity and identity to their reunion ("I was to be his consoler, his companion").[93] In "consolation," she longs to repair them both from the grief of Diana's death, and restore them to the happy family unit she spent her childhood envisioning. Matilda carefully explains that, as she grew older, she "nursed" "fancies" where there was "true hope of realization," which is why she fixated on her father's eventual return instead of impossible fantasies of reuniting with her dead mother (13). This explicit language about "clinging to reality," I argue, emphasizes that Matilda's powerful draw to her father comes out of an abandoned child's desire for normal parental love (13).

Matilda repeatedly references their "mutual" love, but mutuality cannot prevent her jealousy when she thinks about her father paying attention to a hypothetical romantic suitor, nor

[93] Both quotations come from the end of Chapter II (13-14).

can it alert her to the asymmetrical nature of the mutuality. Shelley shows how they are dually loving but in nauseatingly different registers. Throughout her own narrative, Matilda puts depersonalizing distance between herself and her father by refusing to name him when she repeatedly and lovingly shares the name of her mother, Diana. Matilda's reaction to her father's confession does not stir perverse mixed feelings and she instinctively turns to the language of death to articulate immediate disgust at his declaration of "love," narrating: "I…sunk on the ground, covering my face and almost dead with excess of sickness and fear" (28). Again turning to "dead" vocabulary, she "fear[s]" her formerly revered father now that she understands the mismatched nature of his attachment to her—the love might be mutual, but his version of it rightly "sick[ens]" her. Her ensuing desire for death allows her to preserve the fantastical image of her father that she had before his confession and suicide, while also maintaining a narrative through which her sense of self (present and future) is held together by this anticipated fated union with beloved death. Matilda's dark state of mind and willingness to confess disturbing thoughts emerge from her confidence in the desire for death as that which will resolve past and present agony, wipe the slate clean of her father's past incestuous feelings, and guarantee a future guided by a sense of belonging (with and to death).

Images of "death" help Matilda navigate her own sense of alienation from other people throughout this text. Death, as the fact of a life ending, does not have the alluring charge for Matilda as much as death signifies the set of circumstances surrounding dying that bring the protagonist a sense of relief. On a moral level, Matilda comprehends that she should relinquish all attachment to someone who loved her inappropriately, but, emotionally, this is a challenging ask. The love between Matilda and her father is the only mutually strong and intimate attachment she has ever experienced. Prior to Woodville, she lacked a blueprint of loving human

relationality, so her sense of irrevocable damage is not unwarranted. This adolescent girl has her only hope, her only model of love and redemption ripped out from under her, and she cannot help but believe that she has lost any capacity for future human love. Yet Matilda's capacity to write such a forcefully persuasive narrative illustrates how she is not in fact depressed to the point of inaction and refusal of life.

Matilda's narrative of her own bleak reactions demonstrates how her humanity in fact persists. Following this loveless childhood and the devastating betrayal of her only living parent, Matilda seeks to do something about her sense of detachment from her own human nature. She contrives to make the physical surroundings of bleak isolation reflect the barren wasteland of her inner grief while writing this never-to-be-answered letter of her lonely story. It is easier to maintain one's sense of irrevocable separation from humanity when there are no other people around, and only the gloom of geographic stillness there to reinforce a mentality of isolation. Because she naturalizes her physical and social situation as the direct consequence of her polluted state, she is unable to recognize her life choices as in fact the consequences of choice. She cannot see that her faked death and her ability to live in this isolated house with occasional servant assistance are the results of orchestrating financial and logistical resources through incredible determination. Matilda presumes she should live forever doomed, unable to touch another's heart, but it is plain to the reader that she has brought comfort to Woodville who calls himself her "sincere, affectionate friend" (54). While her feelings for Woodville are laden with anxiety, she freely admits to their mutual "intimacy" (51).

Even though she sees the friendship with Woodville as the product of mutual respect and affection, the mutuality is not enough for Matilda to stray from her adamant desire for death. Once they are close, she cannot stop her spiraling anxious jealousy when she is even temporarily

apart from Woodville. Matilda calls herself "peevish" and "jealous," admitting to getting unreasonably "angry" when Woodville does not keep an appointed meeting with her (55). Shelley's prose dwells on this moment and Matilda's sense of guilt shines through as she confesses to lashing out at Woodville, unfairly accusing him of interrupting her "solitude" (55). Although Woodville remains steadfast in their friendship, Matilda takes her own fits of insecurity as evidence for why he is "good and kind but I am not fit for life. Why am I obliged to live?" she asks him[94] in agony. In this language of obligation, we see how Matilda is baffled and frustrated by the pain of "liv[ing]" more so than she feels animated by a desire for nonexistence. Woodville's "magic" words soothe her in this moment, but she cannot be reined in from spiraling once he leaves for the long-term visit to his ailing mother (55-56).

Especially once Woodville leaves, Matilda's stunted and damaged understanding of mutual intimacy becomes apparent. Through the repeated language of mutuality around the father, Shelley demonstrates how Matilda's notion of mutuality already has been perverted by incest even if she fully comprehends the sinfulness of her father's love. Mutuality appears warped and downgraded in the consideration of "death" as the object of desire. Shelley shows how Matilda cannot grasp death-as-absence but, in her absolutist sense of "doom," she feels confident about "death" as ever-present and irreversible. Death is irreversible and therefore cannot leave her in the way that her father betrayed her and killed himself, nor in the way that Woodville cannot physically and emotionally comfort her for every waking moment. Matilda has never experienced any long-term loving intimacy that leaves room for vulnerability, dynamism and mild indeterminacy even when mutuality is guaranteed.

[94] Here, Matilda recounts a conversation she had with Woodville. The language directed to Woodville is a memory, not a moment of direct address narration in the letter.

In manifesting her new isolated life, Matilda demonstrates her own fortitude to create a literal space that externally reinforces her most deeply held internal beliefs about not having a sense of human social belonging. Matilda tries to materialize her sense of unbearable living through these logistical and syntactical efforts to make her external reality and written narrative reflect her internal agony. Transforming various aspects of the unbearable into figures of death itself seems, in moments, to reassure Matilda, but the snowballing death language weighs down the reader and contributes to the overwhelmingly morbid atmosphere of the novella. As the story goes on and "death" accrues these additional figurative meanings, both the reader and the protagonist herself experience the heaviness of repeated, always evolving claims to desiring death. Framed as a stream-of-consciousness letter, the pages of *Matilda* burst with moments of contradiction and passion, despite the speaker's insistence on fatal resolve and permanent detachment from human society. In the obviousness of Matilda's paradoxes, Shelley asks her reader to tug at the strained seams between tragic circumstances and a vibrant narrative voice in this novella. Through this very tension emerges Shelley's ambivalent theory of desire as the force which ensures ongoingness of life even when the subject's only remaining legible attachment is to death.

Narrative Control & Unbearability

It is impossible to discuss the overwhelming theme of fatality in *Matilda* without contextualizing the novella within Shelley's personal experiences with mortality and hardship during this period of her life. In one of the best historicist examinations of *Matilda* to date, Pamela Clemit writes, "It was composed during the melancholy period following the deaths of the Shelleys' two young children, Clara, in September, and William, in June; even so, as Mary Shelley later remarked in

her journal, 'when I wrote *Matilda*, miserable as I was, the inspiration was sufficient to quell my wretchedness temporarily'" (65). In "Coming After: Shelley's *Proserpine*," Julie Carlson argues for this period as a creative lifeline for Shelley amidst devastating circumstances:

> Confronting the recent deaths of both of her children, her husband's withdrawal, the discovery of his 'Neapolitan charge' (Elena Adelaide Shelley), and extortion attempts from their servant, Paolo Foggi, and her father, William Godwin, Shelley can be said to write in this period not for a living but for her life.
>
> (351)

Working from explicitly feminist historicist methodologies, Carlson argues for reading *Matilda* and other writing from this time as especially reflective of Shelley's life circumstances. Also acknowledging the particularity of this biographical moment, Clemit calls for renewed appreciation of the artistic merits of the novella and argues that the story emerged from a moment of newfound intellectual inspiration for both Shelleys.[95] In the realm of biographical scholarship, Carlson and Clemit exemplify mindful attentiveness, and Carlson makes a compelling case for how Shelley can speak back to trauma studies (353-354).

Scholars have spent years grappling with the glaring question of incest when Shelley famously turned to none other than her own father to try (and fail) to get *Matilda* published. In "Mary Shelley's 'Mathilda:' Melancholy and the Political Economy of Romanticism," Tilottama Rajan summarizes the intrigue surrounding the novella in the contexts of Shelley's life story and the longer publication history:

> Part of the fascination of [*Matilda]* seems to be that it was never published. "Censored" by [William] Godwin, who was asked to secure a publisher for it but found its focus on father-daughter incest 'disgusting,' and then left behind by Mary Shelley herself as she

[95] Clemit's essay "From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*" (from the essay collection *Mary Shelley in Her Times*) carefully compares the early draft of Matilda, titled *The Fields of Fancy*, to the long unpublished finished project. She argues for a reading of the story informed by Plato's *Symposium,* which Percy and Mary were reading together at the time (65-66). Clemit and other critics are interested in the Platonic influences as a mode of female prophecy and, while I find much of their work compelling, I am less invested in a prophetic reading of Matilda's deterministic outlook. Especially in the context of my dissertation's larger projects, I aim to examine how Matilda's language of inevitable fated death reveals a new, varied reading of mortality and desire in this text.

> turned from the political to the domestic novel in *Lodore*, it was first brought out by Elizabeth Nitchie in 1959, when it must have seemed no more than a psychobiographical curiosity.
>
> (43)

The compulsion to map the taboo themes onto Shelley's personal life has been fed by the fact that her personal letters reflect an intense devotion to Godwin and she even refers to her own "excessive & romantic attachment"[96] to her father. Shelley's writing about a subject's conflict with herself, even as she attempts to achieve agency and coherency through telling her own story, has also attracted comparisons to Godwin's work in particular due to his fall narratives (e.g. *Caleb Williams*) featuring unreliable narrators.[97]

Since the 1980s, Romanticist critique has been indebted to the work of feminist scholars like Anne K. Mellor (*Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*) and Claudia Johnson (*Equivocal Beings*) for pushing historicist scholarship to take into consideration how Shelley and Wollstonecraft's legacies can and should stand outside the influences of famous family, intellectual husbands and lives marked by extraordinarily tragic circumstance. While the familial dynamics of Shelley, Godwin and Wollstonecraft are undeniably ripe for ongoing analysis, I join the contemporary wave of Romanticist critics who focus on more formal methodologies for reading Mary Shelley and expand beyond the temptations of "psychobiographical curiosity."

With *Matilda,* critics such as Charlene E. Bunnell have called for readers to move beyond the biographical interpretations in favor of embracing the titular character for her "theatrical rhetoric and intense subjectivity" (76).[98] In my own reading, I share this critical interest in the way the epistolary form allows for "theatrical" and subjective expressions of a narrative of

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[96] In volume 2 of *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,* see her discussion of Godwin and her stepmother from her October 30, 1834 letter to her friend Maria Gisbourne (215).
[97] For an analysis of Godwinian parallels, see the aforementioned Clemit essay which offers important manuscript analysis between *Matilda* and Shelley's earlier drafts of *The Fields of Fancy* (69-72).
[98] See Bunnell's 1997 article titled "'Matilda': Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy."

selfhood. I also join Bunnell and others in reading Shelley as arranging her protagonist's inconsistencies such that the reader will find them. However, I depart from the scholarly consensus around Matilda's duplicity as a narrator. Recently, critics such as Melina Moore have argued for examining *Matilda* as a text about the construction of a self in writing, but through a voice that actively and consistently manipulates the reader. In "Mary Shelley's '*Matilda'* and the Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity," Moore argues, "Matilda may have created a document that allows her to finally perform her own subjectivity, but it is precisely that: a performance, full of contrivances and shaped by a problematic ideology that demands (and rewards) female weakness and passivity" (209). Accusing Matilda of maintaining a coherent "ideology" assumes that the narrator comes from a place of stable subjectivity and transparent self-knowledge—for all Matilda's stylized contradictions and persuasive argumentation, she clearly lacks both. When the critical conversation orbits these questions of "problematic" suicidal ideation through a "contriv[ed]" narrative voice, we miss out on Shelley's nuanced conceptions of subjectivity and desire. Labeling Matilda's rhetoric "full of contrivances" overestimates the solidity of intentionality and the coherence of the subject giving voice to her own intentions and desires here.

Orianne Smith demonstrates how scholarship can attend to the performative, self-building qualities of *Matilda* without resorting to accusations of reader manipulation. In *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy*, Smith calls the novella "a performance designed to showcase the considerable strength and resourcefulness of this most unreliable of unreliable narrators" (198-199). I appreciate how Smith brackets the question of reliability in favor of calling attention to the "strength and resourcefulness" of Matilda as a character bursting off the page with vitality in spite of her morbid desires. Matilda's performative style of self-

narration demonstrates her determination to materially ground a life that has been reduced to so much pain and precarity. Even if she is an emotional wasteland, we see how Matilda is not strategically "weak and passive," as Moore claims, but rather a narrator of "considerable strength," as Smith points out. Matilda uses the "resource" of her own voice to explain, with great dedication to her narrative task, the fullness of her backstory and the details of her psychological state, without shying away from the dark, the paradoxical and the self-contradictory. To read Matilda's narrative journey purely as artificial rhetoric is to make the dubious assumption that this character possesses a reasonable and consistent sense of control over her sense of self and her desires. It is precisely the question of what she desires (and how desire shapes her tenuous hold on subjectivity and life itself) that animates my chapter.

Shelley shows us that persuasive unreliability (or, rather, unreliable persuasiveness) does not have to emerge from a place of duplicity. We witness the shakiness of Matilda's "conviction of [her] death" in the moments when she equivocates on the topic of suicide (42). The focus on maintaining her own innocence emerges in Matilda's narration of thoughts of self-harm. From the opening pages, Matilda explicitly names herself a "victim" who has never committed "crimes" (6). When the notion of ending her own life first comes up explicitly, not long after her father's death, the narration loosens into what feels more like stream-of-consciousness than a confident girl narrating and weaving her sense of self: "In life there was no escape for me: why then I must die. I shuddered; I dared not die even though the cold grave held all I loved" (41). Matilda chooses to share the weakness of her "conviction" with this real time narration of "I must…I shuddered…I dared not." A few lines later, she continues in a similar self-editing voice: "No, no, I will not persuade myself to die. I may not, dare not" (41). Conversational, stream-of-consciousness phrasing like "No, no" are quite rare in this novella so this moment of stylized

chatty tone stands out. With the admission of "persuade," Matilda lets the reader in on the doubt and fear lurking behind her conviction to die. The repetition of "dare not" and the visceral "shudder" illustrate not just her fear of suicide, I argue, but a broader inability to truly confront and desire death in its most literal form of absence. Of course, the reader may assume differing interpretations of the reasoning behind such equivocations on this topic– perhaps Shelley meant for Matilda to offer evidence of her sound thinking by tracing her thought process of considering but eventually rebuking suicide. Her narrated desires to end her own life, but then stopping short of suicide also could be read as Matilda trying to convince her audience that she should die innocently and naturally but still prematurely. Regardless of the reasons behind her open sharing of inconsistencies, the reader encounters Matilda navigating the opacity of her own mind.

Matilda's sense of what will alleviate her pain in life fluctuates even as she remains grounded in her vocabulary of desiring death. When she discusses death literally, Matilda plainly contradicts herself in her own professed desire for death as a true end to existence. After her self-exile, she writes that "Never for one moment when most placid did I cease to pray for death. I could be found in no state of mind which I would not have willingly exchanged for nothingness" (45). But only a few lines later, she shares her belief that she "deserved the reward of virtue" for abstaining from suicide (45). Matilda then begins the next chapter declaring how she "wished for one friend to love" her and craves "sympathy" (46). The phrasing of a "friend to love" shows how she is not even elevating her hopes or desires to mutuality here since she thinks of herself as deeply unlovable; she merely admits to her desire to love another person. The notion of "deservingness" and the explicit longing for "love" pointedly illustrate how Matilda in fact yearns for more than "nothingness." These kinds of narrative contradictions may slip under the radar for the reader more easily than the previous passage of "No, no, I will not persuade myself

to die." Shelley shows how Matilda cannot consistently name and accept death as "nothingness," but she can voice—with clarity and precision— the gnawing lack of human intimacy. Her manufactured isolation cannot prevent the natural craving for human relationality because "nothingness" alone cannot function as a desirable object to move towards.

In his psychoanalytic reading of the novella, "The inoperative community of Romantic psychiatry," Joel Faflak describes Shelley's titular character as resistant to reparation ("one is not certain if Matilda resists reparation because for her it is impossible or all too possible") and the creator of a "lonely isolationism refuses enclosure" (722). Faflak points out how Shelley starves the reader of Matilda's raw thoughts by choosing the epistolary form, but simultaneously goes out of her way to craft a narrative where the protagonist seems acutely "ready to say anything" (755-756). Claiming to want "nothingness," as Matilda does in the aforementioned passage, and then yearning for "love" only a few lines later illustrate the way her circumstances absolutely refuse the kind of psychic "enclosure" Faflak means. In this insistence on the lack of enclosure for Matilda the person and for *Matilda* the novella, I see Faflak refusing the scholarly tendency to over-ascribe deceit to the narrator. Unable to process both her father's death and her continuing life, Matilda cannot consider how she might begin to move on, and instead chooses a relentless form of "dying into life," [99] as Faflak puts it (726). The continuity of "dying into life" aligns with much of how I understand death as a mode of ongoingness in the face of excruciating life circumstances for Matilda.

As I have argued, Shelley's figurative language and argumentative protagonist make the wanting of death a mode of ongoing life for Matilda, helping the reader to appreciate the force of desire. The necessarily elastic and multifaceted significations of "death" contribute to the tension

[99] My verb quibble with Faflak, of course, is that Matilda's relation to life is not through "dying" or the desire to die, but rather through the relentless desire for "death" in all its metaphorical variations.

between narrating the unbearable even as the subject bears the pain. In my examination of death, I am interested in how Shelley's genre and style choices are structured around the titular character's attempts to rhetorically ward off unbearability with the shield of death vocabulary. In the coda to *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Lauren Berlant defines "the unbearable" as "any overwhelming affect that feels like it might cause system collapse but must be taken up, even as it may shatter its bearer" (152). Berlant usefully captures the constancy of the pressure to "take up" the affective burden of unbearability, regardless of the threat to the "bearer," because the stakes are the fundamental stability and the actual life of the subject. Berlant continues, "Unlike suicidiation, which figures an end from which, usually, there is a retreat, the unbearable is the pure form of threat at its highest intensity. That is the paradox: to call a thing unbearable is to admit that it must be borne" (152). This is precisely the paradox Matilda articulates and repeats throughout the course of the novella. Matilda does not "retreat" to a clear "end," where death means true absence, but instead "admit[s] to" the need to bear her difficulties in the very articulation of her desire for death. Caught between the primal poles of fearing dying and longing for human intimacy, Matilda gets stuck in a loop of the unbearable. She constructs persuasive, evolving and always faulty arguments for why death is necessary and exceptional for her. In this failure of her logic of death, we see a successful logic to the broader theory of desire in Shelley's text: when a subject has clarity about the object of desire, they cannot help but to allow its magnetic draw to pull them along through the world.

Repeatedly taking up, rewording and doubling down on this wish to die, we see how Matilda's persuasive passion is actually a symptom of the way in which death, the ultimate void or blackhole of meaning, cannot be desired. Death is unbearable because, much like the prefix itself "un," death is pure negation. To compensate for the contradictory claim to desire negation

itself, Matilda spins an overcompensating narrative that nonetheless points right back at the void of death. Rhetorical excess offers no match to pure epistemological and spiritual void. Berlant argues that "The unbearable object/scene is never fully faced…As a limit it is only sensed and backed off from but never entirely averted" (152). Because Matilda both refuses to properly face death and cannot come to grips with a conscious desire for life, she remains stuck in "threat" mode and unable to "back off," to use Berlant's terms. Through self-contradictions, recursiveness and reliance on literary allusion and figurative language, Matilda arranges an elegant but illogical narrative that attempts to hold at bay the inescapability of death-as-absence.

The elaborate and contradictory first-person narrative of how and why Matilda wants death undercuts the very determinism behind her insistence that she is going to die. As a psychoanalytic theorist of desire-as-lack, Berlant's formulation of the unbearable here is particularly helpful in unpacking Matilda's paradoxical way of living onwards through the desire for death. In their reading of a traumatic and tragic poetry collection, *Ban en Banlieue* by Bhanu Kapil, Berlant poses a question: "If you live so close to death, are you alive in the ways that people mean it, head capable of tilting towards an elsewhere?" (165). With this brief and devastating question, Berlant gets right at the problem of how "being alive" and being "alive in the ways that people mean it" are never one in the same. The state of one's body cannot be equated to the psychic reality of desiring ongoing relation to the world and continued commitment to sustaining a sense of self.

The "tilt" of desire is what gives away Matilda as in fact attached to life and not truly longing for pure absence. Young and vibrant in her own voice, but psychologically shattered and pessimistic about herself, Matilda certainly is not fully "alive in the ways that people mean it." This novella makes a surprising case for the way that figurative "death" becomes the only

narrative “elsewhere” towards which a subject can “tilt” when the unbearable presses down upon them. But death need not signify real dying. In Shelley’s fracturing of the varied metonymic functions of death, the “elsewhere” of death takes Matilda and her reader away from actual fatality. It is not just that Matilda’s unbearable life events have made her not feel alive “in the way people mean it;” rather, Matilda creates an environment where it is easier to ignore her own logical inconsistencies and affirm her anxiety that she is not alive “in the way people mean it.” Shelley’s narrative style of persuasiveness offers a glimpse of the psychology of the unbearable when the subject maintains a frayed thread of connection to life.

Being “alive in the ways that people mean it” also gets at the pervasive questions of Matilda’s reliability and mental stability as a narrator. In plumbing of the psychology of desiring death, Shelley repeatedly raises the question of Matilda’s sanity through all the brushes with suicidal ideation. Throughout the course of this compact 67-page novella, Matilda references her own and her father’s “madness” 17 times, sometimes claiming that she was never fully mad, other times saying the exact opposite. Occasionally, we get more ambivalent descriptions of Matilda’s “half insanity” and feeling of being “half crazed” (37-38). The explicit (but later revoked) admissions of questionable sanity license Shelley’s reader to doubt Matilda’s arguments about desiring death. In sharing her own history, Matilda also describes her emotional constitution in light of her father’s personality traits. Matilda describes herself as inheriting a kind of emotional or affective porosity-to-circumstance that makes both quotidian and heavy challenges of life weigh down more intensely upon the subject. She describes her father as “strong and susceptible,” and also afraid of his own capacity to love deeply enough to open himself up to hurt– qualities that very plainly describe his daughter as well (9). Matilda believes

herself to inherit this paternal hyper-susceptibility to the passions, deeply affected by surroundings and relationships.

Matilda's self-contradictions as a style choice reinforces the character trait of inherent susceptibility to the passions, nudging the reader to not take at face value her claims, especially about desiring death. We see the intensity and variability of her emotions in the ways Matilda directly contradicts herself about her feelings for her father. When he first confesses to loving her, the daughter reacts with disgust and, though it makes her "breathless with anguish," she describes him as "dead to" her (30). However, after his death when she is still stuck in London with distant relatives, Matilda feels more pained by the separation from her father than the fact of his incestuous feelings "How, on my knees I have fancied myself close to my father's grave and struck the ground in anger that it should cover him from me" (43). This line offers more of the spirit of resentment that he gets the quiet relief of not dealing with life's consequences while she is stuck mourning him and dealing with the repercussions of his horrific confession. By any measure, Matilda's life events are extremely difficult to emotionally process, and the fluctuating nature of her feelings about death and suicide, love and incest, and madness and sanity also fit the portrait of a mind particularly "susceptible" to intense feeling. Matilda's eloquence and questionable reliability emerge from both her unbearable life circumstances and this natural constitution of her mind. In cruder terms, Shelley makes the case for how both nature and nurture contribute to Matilda's warped logic of desiring death.

Woodville's friendship illuminates Matilda's sensitive nature, especially with a friend who quickly gains a strong understanding of her emotional state. He never accuses her of madness and, in their shared grief, offers Matilda grounding affirmation. Because he understands Matilda's state of mind, their close relationship allows him to effectively push back on Matilda's

morbid logic. Woodville's role throughout is to make Matilda question her own desire for death and, more broadly, to encourage the reader to confront the power of desire when a subject declares herself the very limit case of tolerance for living. Woodville's capacity to compel Matilda into doubting her drive towards death partly comes from his willingness to share his struggles with continuing to live while in the throes of his own mourning and doubts about what comes next in life. When they first meet, he erupts onto the scene of Matilda's life in a jarring moment where she accidentally causes him to be thrown from a horse:

> As soon as I perceived him I suddenly rose to escape from his observation by entering among the trees. My rising startled his horse; he reared and plunged and the Rider was at length thrown. The horse then galopped swiftly across the heath and the stranger remained on the ground stunned by his fall. He was not materially hurt, a little fresh water soon recovered him. I was struck by his exceeding beauty, and as he spoke to thank me the sweet but melancholy cadence of his voice brought tears into my eyes. A short conversation passed between us, but the next day he again stopped at my cottage and by degrees an intimacy grew between us.
>
> (51)

He is physically tossed out of his own grief into her treasured space of isolation just as she begins to acknowledge her yearning for friendship. This passage marks the one and only explicit use of the word "intimacy" by Matilda in the text. From this very moment, she describes herself as caught between resentment and curiosity for this "melancholy" man who serves as a formidable intellectual opponent to her world view. Literally moving her to tears in their first conversation, Woodville disrupts the external reality that Matilda has constructed as an approximation of her internal emotional wasteland. Matilda's carefully contrived living situation reflects her internal beliefs about certain ostracization and impending death, but he rebukes her sense of permanent ostracization by alleviating her loneliness and proving her capacity for mutual platonic love.

Desiring Death, Attached to Life

Near the end of her tale, Matilda proposes to Woodville that the pair commit suicide together since they share a sense of hopelessness and painful grief. Shelley carefully shows how Matilda derives pleasure not from the thought of her true end or the voiding of Woodville's life, but from the narrative before and accompanying this mutual suicide pact, which Matilda later labels pure "madness" (57). In this episode, suicide temporarily lacks its offense to nature because the mutual pact would serve as an act of friendship: "If he dies with me it is well, and there will be an end of two miserable beings" (57). In Matilda's mind, death offers the occasion for testing and solidifying the intimacy she has built up with Woodville through exchanging stories of their mutual woe. Shelley writes:

> I will put him to the proof. He says all hope is dead to him, and I know that it is dead to me, so we are both equally fitted for death. Let me try if he will die with me; and as I fear to die alone, if he will accompany to cheer me, and thus he can shew himself my friend in the only manner my misery will permit.
>
> (57)

Matilda feels true "cheer" at the thought of her one and only friend in life loving her enough to follow her anywhere. This scene of potential suicide, which Matilda previously swore off, does not draw pleasure from the imagined negation of Woodville's existence, but specifically from the joy of devotion and care that only comes from real intimacy—the intimacy that explicitly acknowledges the subject's mortality as bound up with that of the Other. While Matilda's view of these mortal stakes is certainly warped, the way she understands death here is actually more indicative of how her actions are shaped by true emotional intimacy with a mutually loving companion in Woodville.

If one's only imaginable future is death, the most loving gesture of intimate care would be to guarantee a shared future: tandem death. Here, though, we see how death magnetizes social

appeal because simultaneous suicide would confirm Woodville's love in the only way that can feel truly reciprocal for Matilda. Given her narrative of self as doomed to die, the only way she can imagine accepting mutual love is someone agreeing to entwine not just his sense of self but his literal material self with hers. Matilda plans a whole "scene" with meticulously placed flower decorations and matching glasses of laudanum, relishing in the aesthetics of what she hopes will be a perfect moment (57). Shelley's language stresses how much Matilda cares about the adornment surrounding her place of possible death: "I…decorated the last scene of my tragedy with the nicest care" (57). From the intimate mutuality aspect of shared suicide to the aesthetic "care" around décor, Shelley shows how Matilda invests in the scenes, people and objects surrounding her death, but not in a real suicide plan. Shelley locates the pleasure of "death" for Matilda in this *mise en scene* of intimate mutuality and the "proof" of loving companionship in the face of raw "fear." Shelley asks her reader to consider just how unbearable life must be if the only enjoyable test of friendship a subject can think of is a contract to die happily ever after together.

Anticipating Shelley's own critics, Woodville is positioned in this text to openly question the clarity of Matilda's logic while noting and appreciating her artful use of language. Woodville responds to Matilda's suicide pact proposal with a monologue that demonstrates just how keenly he sees Matilda for both her pain and her vibrant persuasiveness: "Listen to me, and then reflect if you ought to win me to your project, even if with the overbearing eloquence of despair you could make black death so inviting that the fair heaven should appear darkness" (58). With "black death" and "dark heaven," Woodville makes the claim that Matilda's "eloquence" has completely reversed the figuration of death as absence or void. Instead of death signifying nothingness, death dressed in the eloquence of Matilda's persuasive language accrues weight and

feels “overbearing” to the recipient of her tale (Woodville along with the readers). Even with her fiercely spirited voice, “despair” is undoubtedly the affect that enchants the entire text. I locate this passage as a key moment where Woodville stands in for the reader in assessing the overwhelming emotional force of Matilda’s death rhetoric.

In challenging the logic of her eloquence, Woodville encourages the reader of *Matilda* to attend to the complexities behind a relentlessly forceful (if not always coherent) text about the desire for death. Matilda’s “project” in the suicide pact moment is to convince the still grieving Woodville to poison himself alongside her, but Matilda’s larger aim is to convince her generic reader that her death is in fact unavoidable. Up until her progressing illness in the final chapter, she demonstrates remarkable intellectual depth, shows active curiosity about the nature of humanity, and seems generally physically fit. Matilda’s eloquence indeed feels overbearing to the reader of Shelley’s novel because it emerges from apparent vitality.

Matilda’s wish for death feels “overbearing” to Woodville in this moment because she speaks of death in positive terms in both the affective sense and the empirical sense of the term positive. Because Matilda expects to die, she knows that this letter of her life story will never be returned. Aside from the disturbing horrors of her life story and desire for death, the reader and Woodville are paralyzed and overwhelmed by a narrative that refuses response, contradiction and questioning. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, as both a verb and adjective, “overbearing” indicates an imposition of weight pushed down upon a subject, an overwhelming and excessive force that exceeds the power of the subject.[100] Overbearing behavior can be associated with failed sociality or an excess of sociality to the point of interpersonal harm. In the case of Matilda, her desire for death pulls her away from sociability in London but, in her one

[100] “overbearing, adj.” *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2023.
“overbear, v.” *OED Online,* Oxford University Press, March 2023.

and only meaningful friendship, she exceeds the bounds of social expectations and becomes overbearing when she tries to project her desire for death onto Woodville as a shared fantasy.

Woodville refuses her dismissal of futurity not by convincing her that she can or will be happy, but by arguing that she has a demonstrable capacity to bring happiness to others– and this is one of the key reasons for anyone to want to live. Her appreciation for his friendship blossoms even as he challenges her every belief about humanity, life and death. She repeatedly credits his persuasiveness as due to his nature as a "poet," able to use attractive language that, in temporary moments, disrupts her worldview before she once again retreats and shores up her previous attitude of wholesale refusal. They both see the other as intelligent and compelling, but incommensurate with their ultimate understanding of human life. The looming cloud of Oedipal references, the temptation of autobiographical pressures on themes of absent motherhood, the flatness of the Percy Shelley comparisons, and the book's comparative focus on Matilda's early years make it easy to flatten Woodville into the personification of hope compared to Matilda's despair. But Shelley packages Woodville's hopefulness with a strong dose of uncertainty and ambivalence about the existential questions of how to keep living when one is weighed down by enormous tragedy.

Woodville believes it is good and moral to search for new sustaining desires in life. He understands the pursuit of new desires as a key part of being a good person, and also as an absolute necessity to human existence. Woodville views desire as the drive to find new drives which will then animate his life in the wake of his beloved's death. In rebuking Matilda's suicide pact suggestion, Woodville admits that he himself struggles to find hope, but he believes that they must persevere:

> We know not what all this wide world means…But we have been placed here and bid live and hope. I know not what we are to hope; but there is some good beyond us that we

> must seek; and that is our earthly task. If misfortune come against us we must fight with her; we must cast her aside, and still go on to find out that which it is our nature to desire. Whether this prospect of future good be the preparation for another existence I know not; or whether that it is merely that we, as workmen in God's vineyard, must lend a hand to smooth the way for our posterity.
>
> (59)

Woodville's gentle agnosticism demonstrates his efforts to persuade Matilda through honesty without resorting to hollow, pollyannaish platitudes. With three uses of "I know not," Shelley underscores Woodville's humility when coming up against the horrors of living and dying. Yet he affirms a belief in the innate persistence of desire even in the face of obstacles through the naturalizing language of "that which it is our nature to desire." The grammar of "bid live and hope" shows how Woodville sees living and hoping as the same mode of being, even if "hope" requires real "fight" in the face of "misfortune." Woodville does not sugarcoat but he does naturalize desiring and hoping as the "nature" of humanity. The concept of "smooth[ing] the way" for "posterity" shows how Woodville conceives of his social embeddedness as having futurity beyond the bounds of his own life. Compared to Matilda's drastic, self-imposed social death, Woodville refuses to give up trying to stay in relation to the world.

Later in the same monologue Woodville implores Matilda:

> Believe me, I will never desert life until this last hope is torn from my bosom, that in some way my labours may form a link in the chain of gold with which we ought all to strive to drag Happiness from where she sits enthroned above the clouds, now far beyond our reach, to inhabit the earth with us.
>
> (59)

Woodville fully acknowledges the dark pain of grief and figures "Happiness" as a heavenly object that is so difficult to obtain it requires gold chains and striving beyond one's reach. He also tells her, "...if I can influence but a hundred, but ten, but one solitary individual, so as in any way to lead him from ill to god, that will be a joy to repay me for all my sufferings, though they were a million times multiplied; and that hope will support me to bear them" (59). In narrating

Woodville's language, Shelley shows how he targets Matilda through passionate elocution by refusing to downplay the pain of "sufferings," which they both have in common. He undermines "death" as a viable object of desire by calling attention to all the unknowns in Matilda's future, both in the ongoingness of life and the mystery of death. Matilda may figure death in all these proliferating, sometimes contradictory rhetorical moves, but she is always confident that she does desire "death."

In my reading of desire in this text, I reject interpreting Woodville as a superficial stand-in for a noble and optimistic view of humanity. Shelley shows how his resilience in the face of his grief stems from unwavering faith in the value of human relationality, but we can locate ambivalence in his understanding of intimacy as worth living for even when relationships fall short of reciprocated care and affection. And, unlike Matilda, Woodville lacks confidence in his conception of what he wants from eventual death. Woodville clearly articulates the belief that there is no divine guidance on how to make a life worth living because no one knows for sure if there is a God or another life to look forward to. This lack of sure knowledge does not reduce his commitment to ongoing living in relation to a social world. Death cannot be desirable for Woodville because he sees goodness in continued living. His beliefs call attention to the faults in Matilda's logic because he understands that it is also impossible to desire something that refuses human knowledge in the totalizing way that death does.

Although Matilda references the Bible several times, comparing herself to Cain[101] and Job,[102] the novella lacks heavy Christian theological overtures. The Biblical references are

[101] "I thought that like another Cain, I had a mark set on my forehead to shew mankind that there was a barrier between me and they" (Shelley 60).

[102] "I might say with Job, 'Where is now my hope? For my hope who shall see it?'" (Shelley 41).

treated similarly to her quoting a Wordsworth[103] poem or comparing herself to tragic classical figures such as Proserpine[104] and Psyche.[105] When she explains why she cannot commit suicide, Matilda contends that it would "violate a divine law of nature" (45). Woodville gets described as a "true child of Nature" who sees the world as a "strange mixture of good and evil" (51; 59). Despite the parallels between the poet character and Percy Shelley, Woodville notably does not offer a staunch atheist understanding of what happens after death (nor does he endorse a particularly Christian notion). He focuses on life itself, urging Matilda to believe in the possibility of "bestow[ing] happiness" upon another even if she is not capable of it herself right now (60). He employs botanical metaphors to compare encouraging potential happiness in others to the act of sowing seeds of "corn" and "fair flower[s]" and patiently watching them grow (60). This focus on the language and laws of nature, combined with Matilda's refusal to consider hell and a punishing afterlife, suggests that, even outside of Matilda's voice, Shelley lacks investment in elaborating a specific vision for heaven in this text.

When Matilda talks more literally of death as the afterlife, "Death" functions across a shifting sense of place and temporality. As a vaguely Christian character, Matilda imagines a "Paradise" that has purified her father of his incestuous feelings, leaving behind only sanctioned parental love. Thus, even as an afterlife place, death is more importantly a force of purification than it is a location. Near the end of the novel as her illness worsens, Matilda turns to Dante, one of her most frequent literary references, to imagine the afterlife:

> …I repeated to myself all that lovely passage that relates the entrance of Dante into the terrestrial Paradise; and thought it would be sweet when I wandered on those lovely

[103] At the beginning of the second chapter, she describes her bleak childhood through a line from "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways:" "–there were none to praise / And very few to love" (Shelley 11).
[104] "I have compared myself to Proserpine who was gaily and heedlessly gathering flowers on the sweet plain of Enna, when the King of Hell snatched her away to the abodes of death and misery. Alas!" (Shelley19-20).
[105] "Like Psyche I lived for awhile in an enchanted palace, amidst odours, and music, and every luxurious delight; when suddenly I was left on a barren rock; a wide ocean of despair rolled around" (Shelley 19).

> banks to see the car of light descend with my long lost parent to be restored to me. As I waited there in expectation of that moment, I thought how, of the lovely flowers that grew there, I would wind myself a chaplet and crown myself for joy: I would sing *sul margine d'un rio*, my father's favourite song, and that my voice gliding through the windless air would announce to him in whatever bower he sat expecting the moment of our union, that his daughter was come. Then the mark of misery would have faded from my brow, and I should raise my eyes fearlessly to meet his, which ever beamed with the soft lustre of innocent love.
>
> (62)

Aligning herself with Beatrice, the ultimate personification of divine love in the *Commedia*, Matilda longs for a "restor[ation]" of a parental love from her father that never existed in life. She no longer has to "fear" death or her father if "Paradise" will be a safe space to enact her fantasy of normal parental love. The literary allusions offer beautiful images, entrancing song, the tactile feel of "windless air," and we sense Matilda's yearning for relief. "Death" only gets named as "Paradise" in this novella when she imagines a place where her father's incestuous affection has been transformed into "innocent love," erasing the Cain-like "mark of misery" that has stained Matilda's "brow" from the moment of his confession. While this scene offers the only explicit imagining of the topography and narrative "reunion" of the afterlife, Matilda brings up the subject a few times throughout the text. She never mentions hell or sin and calls the abstract incestuous desires "evil" but will not label her own father with the same language (20). In fact, in a few moments, she references her father being in the same place as her angelic mother and as Woodville's saintly dead wife Elinor. There is no disappointed or troubled maternal figure in "Paradise" waiting to confront father or daughter in this imagining of Matilda's. This "Paradise" moment focuses on the "innocent" purification and Matilda stops short of conceiving a heaven that is gratifying for its sociality–the only reunion that matters is with the person who haunts her current life.

In these passages about Matilda's and Woodville's differing conceptions of spiritual existence after death, I see Shelley inhabiting a quiet theism accompanied by a belief in a singular afterlife– an interpretation which aligns with scholar Robert Ryan's speculation that Shelley took up her mother's beliefs in God and the abstract possibility of existence after death.[106] Scholarship on *Matilda* has yet to more deeply examine how this text might inform readings of Shelley's spirituality. For the sake of my own argument, I focus on how this non-ideological spiritual understanding of death precludes hell and enables Matilda's narrative of heavenly purification of her father's love. Shelley's choices here align with my reading of Matilda as not quite confronting death, but instead making "death" into various functions and figures as an object of desire. Telling a story about death as the place which restores innocence makes death into the object of desire that could fill a lack, instead of death being a place predicated on totalizing lack.

I take these lingering, ambiguous questions of spirituality and afterlife as further evidence of how this novella can be read as Shelley's case for why humans cannot exempt themselves from the fear of death as pure void—nor can people opt out of the desire for love and human connection. An intriguing and ambivalent theory of humanity lurks beneath Matilda's eloquent despair and Woodville's tentative hope. We know how these instincts, to live and to live in relation to others, lead to inconvenience and emotional pain on a more quotidian level. But Shelley's dark story shows us how even the most unbearable perversions of life, of love and of family do not necessarily destroy baseline humanity. Unbearable life, so long as you can think

[106] In *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824,* Robert Ryan reads *Frankenstein* (1818) as Shelley carefully navigating between various influences on her religious beliefs, namely Godwin and Percy Shelley, but also Milton and Wollstonecraft (189). He argues that she critiques state religion and didactic Christian ideology without capitulating to her husband's atheism or her father's philosophical notions of justice (190-191).

ahead and feel motivated towards a particular narrative of your future (even "death"), is pushed along by the power of desire, much like any other more-or-less bearable life.

Matilda's narration of her own desire for death causes the reader discomfort and a sense of horror because the force of her desire for ongoing living shines through so obviously in the passion of her words. Shelley feeds into the reader's uneasiness and offers balance to Matilda's unreliable tendencies by giving her protagonist particular traits associated with acuity. From the very first paragraphs, Matilda attends to the question of temporality as she writes about dying, voicing the hope she has "strength sufficient to fulfil" her tale (6). But this attention to time does not begin and end with the ticking clock of her own life. While this epistolary text breaks up into chapters with no dates, Matilda narrates her life story with obsessive commitment to the tracking of time, seasons and temporal parallels. Matilda's sense of care regarding temporality illustrates her ongoing attachment to recognizable markers of human life events. She cannot just describe abstract stages of her life, the story of how her parents met or the tale of how Woodville lost his beloved; she must share every narrative and subplot with specific references to exact months, ages, weather patterns and more. Even if the reader has evidence to question Matilda's sanity, this noticeable obsession with time shows the extent to which this character has noted her own life story in relation to an ever-changing world as time passes on. Documenting every little change in time and every anniversary of an event feels anxiety-producing in the context of a story insistently filled with claims about the desire to die. Bombarded with markers of time, the reader gets the sense that time is running out as Matilda writes her way to her own death. Conversely, the reader can interpret Matilda's attentiveness to temporality as her mode of investing in the world around her, the timelines through which narratives develop, and the awareness of the future she cannot and will not live to see.

Through Matilda's posture towards time, Shelley presents her theory of ambivalent attachment to life itself: this mode of attachment cannot properly operate as future-oriented because it is attachment without progression. Matilda's constant measuring of her past compared to her present illustrates a commitment to the marking of time; discrete events happen and Matilda makes explicit note, but she cannot see her own attachment to the passing of time in her existence as any kind of progress. In fact, her wish for death would be more straightforwardly persuasive if her narration showed a sense of linearity towards death. Instead, because death gets fractured and figured throughout her various analogies, death cannot serve as a linear, firm endpoint. The way Shelley collapses and layers the temporalities of "death" in her narrator's voice illustrates how Matilda cannot shake this ambivalent, but nonetheless strong attachment to the ongoing passage of time in her living existence. The desire for ongoing life scrambles the trajectory of her stated desire for "death." Although it is less fixed and specific than marking months passing, Matilda's fixation with "fate" also demonstrates how she cares about making her time while alive mean something to the big picture of her narrative of self. The attachment to time—as the attachment to how one has spent one's own limited existence—indicates the kernels of desire to live.

In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Berlant argues that narrative style offers a tool for the subject facing the unbearable, "Style gives resilience to a structure; if ordinary resilience is an inevitable feature of ordinary inconvenience, in the scene of the unbearable, style is a way of talking about what happens when trauma kills someone but doesn't kill you" (155). Quite literally, the traumatic incest confession leads the father to kill himself and leaves Matilda struggling to find any structure to hold on to such that life feels legible in its continuation. Guilt, anger, resentment, grief, shame, confusion, and desire coagulate into an atmosphere of

excruciating unbearability that permeates the whole text. We see how, in between her emotional and sometimes unreliable language, Matilda stylizes her own memoir through the particularity of time as a method of "resilience." She finds grounding "structure" by keeping track of a world that is so difficult for her to make sense of due to the "trauma" and tragedies she has endured. Matilda reaches for agency in this "style" of attention to time, and, in doing so, reveals her desire to remain in contact with the human world. In both *On the Inconvenience of Other People* and *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant defines "attachment" as "what draws you out into the world"[107] and, through this very epistolary mode, Matilda is in fact "draw[n] out. The fixation with temporality proves Matilda's "resilience" and demonstrates her refusal to let go of time completely and give in to true suicidal ideation. She remains firmly in Berlant's zone of the unbearable where the subject feels at the absolute limit but nonetheless confronts that which painfully bears down upon them.

In the second to last passage, the now 20-year-old Matilda writes to Woodville directly. Shelley turns to this mode of direct address only briefly at the beginning and then at the end of the text in moments where Matilda seems to slow down the speed of narration. Time moves slowly when Matilda contemplates the present through apostrophe. As we have seen throughout my chapters, the Romantics dilate and slow the narration of time when the actual event of death is imminent:

> So day by day I become weaker, and life flickers in my wasting form, as a lamp about to lose its vivifying oil. I now behold the glad sun of May. It was May, four years ago, that I first saw my beloved father; it was in May, three years ago that my folly destroyed the only being I was doomed to love. May is returned, and I die. Three days ago, the anniversary of our meeting.
>
> (67)

[107] See page 6 of Berlant's *On the Inconvenience of Other People* and the very first page of *Cruel Optimism*.

The "lamp" metaphor shows Matilda gaining consciousness of encroaching death as actual death: the black void of eternal night. In this passage, though, death does not seem as desirable as in the previous page where she calls her impending death a "triumph" and insists that she feels "happy" (66). While May is generally associated with the fertility and new life of spring, instead, through this repetitive structure, Matilda contemplates specific anniversaries in the anticipation of her own end. Contributing to the sense of destiny, Matilda keeps track of how all these important events have occurred within the same month. This seemingly predictable cycle of events supports her certainty of death coming at any moment; we see this confidence in the present tense of "I die." After this declaration, of course, she continues writing for several more passages. Once again, we see how the desire for death animates this text far more than the desire for or the event of actually dying. Shelley's grammar and the solemn repetitive structure used to describe a reliable cycle of significant events illustrate how Matilda carefully attends to temporality to support her adamance about death. Matilda's fixation with temporality both contributes to the sense that her sanity and humanity are somewhat intact, even as she uses rational, factual descriptors of time to try to persuade her reader to buy into the narrative of death's desirability.

In the final passage of the novella, Matilda concludes in a similarly somber tone with present tense and sentences that are shorter than the meandering lines in earlier chapters. Along with this heightened attention to temporality, Shelley employs a noticeable grammar shift to "real time" narration that feels all the more urgent when Matilda claims death could happen at any minute. Matilda only speaks of her deteriorating health at the very beginning and very end of the novel. While she narrates that the writing of this letter has taken her three months,[108] she does not

[108] "This was the drama of my life which I have now depicted upon paper. During three months I have been employed in this task" (Shelley 66).

pause in the middle of her storytelling to remind the reader that her body is failing more and more. In light of her attachment to "death," I find the absence of continuously narrated symptoms of dying to be conspicuous for the reader.

In the end, Matilda drops her insistence on death's pleasures, instead marveling at her overflow of emotion, asking Woodville directly, "Why do I weep so bitterly?" (67). She does not attempt to answer her own question, merely asserts her sure sense that "soon" she will "meet" her father in "another" "world." While Shelley quotes the Bible in this same passage ("as the waters cover the sea"), Matilda's vague language about another world again points to the lack of Christian overtones in this text, as well as the possible influence of Woodville's open agnosticism. As with "world," the very last line focuses on death as a place; now that she is deeply ill and the void of death feels tangibly close, Matilda imagines death more as a location than as the romantic figure. Once again directly addressing her singular friend, Matilda bids adieu: "Farewell, Woodville, the turf will soon be green on my grave; and the violets will bloom on it. *There*[109] is my hope and my expectation; yours are in this world; may they be fulfilled" (67).

Jumping ahead to the temporality of the future, Matilda seems to find comfort (and hopes Woodville will too) in knowing that, with time, her grave will not be a signifier of fresh loss but a patch of living nature and beautiful flowers. Perhaps her grave will even be erased, covering all traces of her excruciating existence with the markers of fresh, uncontaminated life. The italicized, emphasized "*There*" shows that Matilda has a degree of material awareness which she previously lacked since this is the only time she references her own resting place and tangentially acknowledges the end of her corporeal form. Her insistence on finding not just physiological

[109] The italics are Shelley's.

expectation but “hope” in death feels suspect given the reader has just read the line in which she wonders why she is crying “bitter[ly].” With this open-ended question, Matilda shows Woodville and the reader that she finds her own emotions rather opaque, despite death long being her only “hope.”

The contradiction between bitter tears and confident hope epitomizes the broader way in which *Matilda* consistently presents the assured desire for death alongside events and disclosures that undermine the titular character’s determinism (and determination). Taking into consideration Woodville, this pattern of confidence mixed with contradictory affects and emotions is a troubling letter to receive. Shelley’s reader, I argue, should be left with a sense of uneasiness for the main recipient of this letter due to the role of Matilda’s father’s last letter. He tells his daughter he is traveling and not to worry, but she sees through his facade and quickly figures out that he has gone to throw himself off a cliff. In light of this context, Woodville and the reader may wonder if Matilda is actually lying and intends to follow in the steps of her father and die by her own hand. Aside from her own word, of course, there is no evidence to verify that Matilda is deathly ill and ready to pass away in an innocent death. While I believe this interpretation bears mentioning, I argue that Shelley does intend for the reader to take Matilda at her own word given how important it is to this character to die “innocently” (55). In narrating her life story, Matilda repeatedly invokes the language of innocence and victimhood as she describes her unique doom, “fit” for death and death alone. If she chooses to die an unnatural death, she would undermine this sense of fitness for death, which remains one of the most consistent arguments of the text. In order for Matilda to maintain the narrative of death as reaching out to her specifically as a special subject, she cannot rush her union with death. Shelley offers enough contradiction and unreliability to bring this interpretive question to the surface for the reader, but, ultimately, I

argue that it is important to understand Matilda as indeed dying alone and somewhat afraid. The luster of desire for "death" wears off when real "dying" comes into view for this protagonist.

The Ambivalent, Desirous Existence

Through this narrative tension between the atmosphere of unbearability and the style of unreliable yet persuasive eloquence, the reader comes to grips with Matilda's self-contradictions. But the result should not be to call this text a stirring though chaotic depiction of trauma and depression. I have resisted diagnostic or therapeutic language throughout this chapter precisely because I think the contradictions tell us less about the psychology of one fictional individual and more about what Shelley thought about humanity and desire. The most optimistic perspective represented in this text is Woodville's insistence on looking for things to desire because he believes it is human to desire to try to bring happiness to others. But this vision of humanity does not guarantee happiness or even reprieve from suffering. Shelley shows how the force of desire, putting us in relation to the ongoingness of the world even when we do not want it, is an ambivalent condition of being human. Remarkably, she manages to make this point not just through Woodville's agnostic hopefulness but also through Matilda's paradoxical desire for death. Woodville seems to think that being in relation is a noble and conscious choice, but Shelley's formulation makes relationality an unbidden guarantee–as is the innate fear of death. Instead of shying away from the fear of death, Matilda shows the reader just how pliable "death" can be, if living can feel like experiences akin to "death" and death can offer so many narrative steps of continuation and continuity for the self. The reader can see through the contrived force of Matilda's narrative to understand that this young woman's life is not infected by the touch of

death in some exceptional and/or fated way. What is clear is that life gets utterly infected by the vocabulary of "death" when living feels unbearable.

The density of allusions and the overwhelmingly grim tone of the text point to the human need to compare, relate and approximate, even if in contradictory ways, in order to make sense of unbearable life. The problem of the unbearable is not confined to the extreme circumstances of loss, incest and loneliness for Matilda. Desire can feel like death and shades of the unbearable when the subject experiences a tragic failure of desire that ruptures their sense of self, vision of future and notion of social belonging. Mathilda labels her life a "tragedy" and cannot think of a sequel story aside from mortality, so she pours her energy and desirous narrative into death (57). Desire, in the movement to fill a lack, can always feel unbearable to the subject looking to fix their sense of self. And continued desire to preserve an existing loving relation always risks the unbearable event of loss. In *Matilda*, excessive, contradictory syntax cannot cure the unbearable, but it can make these circumstances less acute and legible in a way that allows for ongoingness. Through "overbearing eloquence," as Woodville puts it, Matilda writes her way to justifying the antisocial desire for death even as she proves her social capacity for ongoing relationality (58). In between Matilda's claims to emotional sensitivity versus being "dead" to the world, and in between Woodville's claims to knowing nothing of death versus confidence in his spiritual purpose as a social being, we see Shelley's understanding of a basic human anxiety: is there really any autonomous control over the choice to desire the other? And why should we desire to desire when we risk agonizing emotional pain and damage to the self?

If desire is always already propelling us through the world, as is our "nature" according to Woodville, then we must confront our lack of control over the intimate attachments that can cause unbearable pain. Even when those attachments are irrevocably polluted by evil, humanity

cannot help but be left in a state of ongoing desire since the automated mode of human existence is to look ahead to a horizon of some sort, any sort. This is the temporality of ongoing attachment without a sense of progressing in the world among and alongside fellow humans. Narrating the death of her terrible caretaker of an aunt, Matilda reflects on her younger self's capacity to mourn even the attachments which meant little to her. She explains her own grief at this insignificant loss by telling her reader that "death is too terrible an object for the living" (67). Despite all her assertions to desiring and loving death, the full narrative of *Matilda* in fact supports this claim. Death indeed is "too terrible an object for the living" and, even when a person experiences absence of love and perverted versions of desire, a true desire for death remains impossible. Death is not an object to be apprehended, made legible or made desirable when it can never be anything other than pure unknowable void. Matilda's inability to solidify her suicide pact, her inconsistent views on her own sanity and emotional state, and her ferocious desire to be heard and understood in her own narrative illustrate how she very much remains attached to humanity. Ambivalent as Shelley may seem in this novella, she offers a test case of the unbearable in which a subject can profess to desire death while still implicating themselves in the ongoingness of living.

Matilda is a mere 67 pages but it is hard to come away from the text and not feel bombarded and exhausted by the vibrant protagonist's insistence on her impending death. The effect of the ever-proliferating figures and analogies for death, conveyed through wrought emotional language, is incredibly overwhelming for the reader. Shelley's rhetoric aggressively piles on the weight of this glaring contrast between the face-value horror of desiring death and the syntactical aliveness of the narrator. In this unmistakable abyss between the vitality of the voice and the horror of the claim to desire death, we can open up how Matilda's style reveals

Shelley's theory of desire and death. For all the intensity of her affects, Matilda is in fact a character who understands the way in which ambivalence, tension and grief are baked into desire. In contrasting her point of view with Woodville's, we can see more than the resignation for death opposing the wish to live. Matilda understands that any kind of human attachment pulls you into the orbit of another person who can cause you joy and anxiety, relief and pain in the same breath. The capacity for any and all effect on the subject is the risk of intimate attachment—Woodville is too earnestly swept away by the fantasy of a life where he can bring happiness with little to no risk of interpersonal harm. However, he sees what Matilda cannot and ultimately so does the reader—ambivalent attachment to life itself endures so long as the subject desires.

Coda

When I set out to write this dissertation, I explicitly centered theories of intimacy—I began from an interest in how the Romantics conceptualized versions of closeness and proximity, the textures of familiarity, care and love that go into the mutual recognitions and misrecognitions of intimacy. At the same time, I wanted to know why the images and vocabulary of death show up regularly but in surprising ways when the Romantics articulate versions of intimate relations. The language of intimacy remains central to my thesis but, as I have argued, the primary texts at the heart of my project are most preoccupied with the propulsive movement of romantic desire: the way desire moves us through world and pushes us into intimate relation with one other. I have repeatedly called attention to the duality of desire's force: desire can feel like the unsaid secret and longing that excites from within, and desire can also be felt as a yank of longing that originates from entirely outside of the self. Ultimately, I am interested in what Byron, Keats and Shelley can contribute to how twenty-first century theorists of literature, desire and sexuality think about the vibrant forcefulness of desire—particularly as articulated through tropes, cliches and hyperbolic declarations of romance. These writers show us how tropes of romance can be simultaneously labeled hollow and heavy; tropes invoke the extreme and excess while their utterance can feel entirely commonplace and ineffectual. Such romance forms play into conventions that allow for declarations of desire to play it rather safe, even when the stakes of desire are in fact quite serious.

While I do not want to "play it safe" in this dissertation, I also recognize how the form of my argument reflects the content of my claims. Throughout these pages, I have insisted on the importance of taking seriously the kind of cliches or superficiality that can invite the reader to

gloss over them with ease. But, in doing so, I have performed the very argumentative choreography which I have tried to spotlight in my chosen authors' works. In order to demand that readers of Romanticism look for depth in cliché, as these authors seem to want their readers to do, I too have been compelled to offer variations on the same tropes we see in my primary texts. It is difficult to consider the functions and forms of conventionality without using them earnestly and argumentatively. In describing and rewording the tropes of love, death and poetry in the Romantics, I am explicitly indebted to the Romantic logics and vocabulary which I am claiming deserve more attention.

The Romantic recourse to conventionality points to something important about the way that people are prone to both over-dramatizing and also downplaying the sense that love feels like life or death—because cliches and tropes on this subject can feel either overwrought and earnest in their melodrama (e.g. "I would die without you") and they can also feel like a trite sidestepping of the earnest vulnerability of committing to a truly intimate loving relationship. This paradox of opening up to the other while still protecting at least part of the self is what Yousef diagnoses as a specifically Romantic conundrum in *Romantic Intimacy*. She turns to the "epistemic and ethical demands of sympathy" by way of explaining the Romantic "…struggle to reconcile mutual feelings with equally compelling commitments to the idea of an incommunicable core of the self" (4). But how do you achieve true "mutual feelings" of love and intimacy if you manufacture defenses around an imaginary "core" and reject the hyperbole of romantic affect? Byron, Keats and Shelley ask us to look harder at assumptions about the emptiness of cliché in order to fill in the gap between the assumed superficiality of romantic tropes and their actual capacity for depth. The "struggle" that Yousef describes can get buried in the triteness of genre markers that call attention to their own familiarity or levity. In my focus on

convention and form, I depart from Yousef's theories of intimacy and sympathy in order to locate the cacophony of desire vibrating below the disarmingly simple exterior of romantic cliché.

The way Byron, Keats and Shelley magnetize around romantic tropes illustrate what Nersessian describes in *Utopia Limited* as "a mode of making and thinking whose horizon is abbreviated possibility, in particular the possibility that human energies might be directed not toward overcoming barriers to a wholly liberated future, but on making them objects of desire in their own right" (20). The "abbreviated possibility" of a raw desire articulated in trope gets at what is in fact attainable in the scope of "human energies" and in the scope of human capacity for being vulnerable about the "incommunicable self," as Yousef puts it. When I argue, for example, that Keats's romance poems are more than cautionary tales, I mean that he exemplifies what Nersessian describes as this rejection of fantastical "liberated futurity" for the sake of finding desirability in conventions-as-barriers. A "horizon [of] …abbreviated possibility" beautifully captures Byron's cheeky yet genuinely covert maneuvers in his queer poetics of slowly dying men. And what is *Matilda* if not an electrifying case for the possibility of redirecting "human energies" towards desiring the "barriers" to utopia when life feels nothing short of an emotional dystopia? By figuring their barriers as desirable, and by styling their limitations a pleasurable boon for their readers, Byron, Keats and Shelley make the limits appear as more than negative constraints. This Romantic recourse to conventionality shows how limits can be reinscribed without cementing them as true, unyielding barriers to creative ways of writing, thinking and being in the world. The self-conscious use of limitation involves pleasure, as Nersessian describes it, and, in my readings, helps to make legible what would otherwise be invisible about convention and romance.

In *Desire/Love*, Berlant writes that, "…love can be thought of as a way of managing the sheer ambiguity of romantic language and expectation" (97). While this dissertation largely builds directly on Berlant's ideas, in this instance I argue that we must completely flip the argument: for the Romantics, the language of romance manages the overwhelming ambiguity and expectations that come with the feeling of being in love. By language, here, I mean both the commonplace cliches of talking about romance as well as the literary history attached to romance as a genre. The way love and desire trouble the boundaries of a self, the manner in which love makes the subject emotionally responsible for not one but two mortal lives, the fact that loving another involves a fantasy of transparency and perfect mutual recognition between subjects that can never be reached: all of these tensions are animated and alleviated in the discourse of romantic cliché. The language of romance is essential to the felt experience of being in love regardless of whether or not the general circumstances and the beloved's feelings align with the individual subjective mode of desiring the Other. Byron, Keats and Shelley show us why we need even the most trite and familiar conventions of language around love in order to assuage (but never master) the threatening "ambiguity" and "expectation" attached to desire.

All three authors show us how conventionality serves as an attempt to reign in the propulsive force of desire while at the same time calling attention to the very lack of control over desire. This echoes the way Lynch understands the British Romantic reader's relationship to the Gothic in this period as the self-conscious use of the familiar to illuminate the unexpected or the uncontrollable. I share Lynch's confidence in readers and Gothic romance writers of the time as able to acknowledge and enjoy recognizable formal choices while leaving room for elements of true surprise and nuance. In "Gothic fiction," she writes:

> Throughout the Romantic period the Gothic remains a vehicle for engaging questions…about the relationship of knowledge to belief (timely in an era of revolution

> when the political instrumentality of that particular mode of belief called ideology was explicitly theorized for the first time), questions about the relationship of knowing to feeling, or imagination to delusion, and questions about the powers of the mind. (48-49)

Throughout this dissertation, I have worked to illustrate how Byron, Keats and Shelley dip into romance vocabulary and Gothic genre markers in order to ask profound questions at the very existential junctures Lynch describes. Each of my chapters concludes with some meditation on how my primary texts speak to the problem of knowing desires versus feeling desires. The conventions of romance, whether directly Gothic or not, ask where the "powers of the mind" begin and end when it comes to recognizing and attempting to resolve or satisfy desire. Byron, Keats and Shelley are all invested in the psychological inquiries behind the shiny, superficial surface of romantic tropes which depend on familiarity.

Lynch shows how the Gothic lays the groundwork for asking deep questions of the mind, and I have spent my three chapters demonstrating how the Romantics use literary convention to pondering desire: as a threat, a vital force and everything in between. To return to Nersessian, the Romantics are interested in the limiting powers of forms, but they are also invested in that which overflows convention because conventionality can never contain the full picture. In Byron, Keats and Shelley, literary death (often through the Gothic aesthetics of mortality) becomes a mode of convention in and of itself. Throughout this project, I have highlighted how these Romantics play with the vocabularies and logics surrounding mortality and desire in order to show how "death" can be generative and feel motivational while desire can be destructive and feel negative. They illuminate to readers just how deeply (and counterintuitively) death and desire are entwined with each other and with broad notions of conventionality. Conventional romantic forms structure the discourses of desire and death without bringing true and lasting order to the Romantic subject's life.

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