

PATHOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE: THE FEMALE BODY IN THE ROMANTIC ERA

by

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## ABSTRACT

In my dissertation, "Pathology and Performance: The Female Body in the Romantic Era," I examine the cultural practice of medical authorities pathologizing the female body in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I specifically focus on depictions of madness, depression, and hyper-femininity in representative texts that demonstrate the influence of medical discourse on authors of the Romantic Era. Borrowing Mary Poovey's concept of the "proper lady," I argue that women during this time were categorized as pathological if they deviated in any way from a proscriptive definition of "natural" womanhood, which itself was normalized through social conditioning rather than biological fact. Despite this larger practice of pathologizing female bodies as inherently sick, I have found moments of resistance and critique. The personal correspondence and biographical depictions of Mary Lamb demonstrate Lamb's ability to manipulate characterizations of madness in her own favor, effecting her mastery of language despite her pathology. The tragic consequences of rigid gender roles in Joanna Baillie's *Count Basil* illuminate the absurdity of hyperfeminine "romantic" behavior and the contagious threat of the "weak" female body. Matthew Lewis's description of "sane" physical gesture in *The Captive's* dramaturgy reveals the failure of feminine performance in a pathologized setting and the apathetic complicity of his audience. The gothic hauntings and thematic fragmentation in John Keats's *Isabella* signal the violence of patriarchal authority on the female body and mind. Together, these works indicate the literary, theatrical, and cultural tensions established by the pattern of Romantic female pathology.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular and pervasive medical texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was William Buchan's *Domestic medicine* (1769). *Domestic medicine* was published in multiple European languages and underwent new editions and reprints every few years until 1846 in Britain (and until 1913 in America). Buchan (1729-1805), a Scottish doctor trained in Edinburgh, wrote a thorough, descriptive casebook of medical practice that emphasized the empirical, scientific study of the body for which Edinburgh medicine was known.<sup>1</sup> He wrote *Domestic medicine* as a household guide for the average person, using non-medical terminology and explaining not only diseases and their treatments, but also preventative measures. C.J. Lawrence asserts that *Domestic medicine* made "distinctive contribution" to "three educational themes": "the rise of popular science education; the rebirth of the health movement; and the tradition of domestic handbooks of all kinds" (22). Through his stated goal of "laying Medicine more open to mankind," Buchan influenced the public's perception of medicine, disease, and treatment, creating an atmosphere of bodily consciousness and deepening public concern for healthy bodies and minds (Buchan xxi). However, Buchan's influence also contributed to a larger cultural pattern of objectifying and pathologizing the female body in ways that suggested women were inherently sick, abnormal, and in need of the social and medical authority of men.

As one of the most influential medical textbooks published in the late eighteenth century, Buchan's *Domestic medicine* provides ample evidence of the coded language and often outright misogyny with which male doctors studied and treated the female body. In addition to descriptions of diseases and regimens for treatment, as well as a heavy emphasis on cleanliness, Buchan's book provided observations on the moral, physical, and intellectual aptitude of women. Consequently, the female body was treated as a marker for the overall morality of the female subject. We need only look at the very first pages of *Domestic medicine* to see the social

commentary embedded in Buchan's "objective," science-based medicine: "Women of delicate conditions, subject to hysteric fits, or other nervous affections, make very bad nurses: and these complaints are now so common, that it is rare to find a woman of fashion free from them" (2).

Buchan's complaints are twofold: (1) Women are predisposed to delicate conditions which impair their ability to raise children and perform other womanly duties; (2) women develop "nervous affections" because it is "fashionable." The real implication is that not only are women weak, but that they wish to be ill, a notion fraught with misogynistic dismissal of female illness and psychology.<sup>2</sup>

William Buchan is not alone in his medical pathologizing of the female body and mind as abnormal and as prone to disease, if not already diseased from the start. Numerous other medical texts (which I will discuss in more detail below) demonstrate the pattern of pathology embedded in discussions of female anatomy, disease, and behavior that reached beyond the medical community to a broader public audience in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Roy Porter argues that medical self-help was "universal" in the Romantic Age: people "had access to a widespread lay culture of advice and action regarding health and sickness," thus establishing a pattern of self-help first, making "the recourse to professional medical treatment...secondary" (Porter np). Specifically citing Buchan's *Domestic medicine* as well as John Wesley's *Primitive Physick* (1749) as prominent best-sellers in the medical self-help literary market, Porter attributes the simultaneous increase in demand of medical textbooks and expansion of medical professionals to (1) A distrust of doctors and a "healthy skepticism about the powers of the physician" and (2) "the growing prosperity of what has been called an early consumer society" (Porter np). Porter's research clearly shows that, though there were not the kind of scientific breakthroughs that hallmarked the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Romantic period witnessed an increased medicalization of the body in public discourse.

We can see the significance of medical tensions over the body, particularly the female body, in both the medical and literary writings produced during this time. Romantic literature is often characterized by its emphasis on the powers of the mind, the imagination, the self; but recent studies “have demonstrated beyond doubt that many Romantics were deeply versed in medical and scientific knowledge. In certain respects, sickness was seen by Romantic writers and artists not simply as a physical effect—not merely a breakdown of the body machine—but as an expression of the soul or personality, a view which paralleled some Christian and folk beliefs” (Porter np). Some “folk” beliefs, in fact, were given substantial weight by the medical profession and the doctors, surgeons, and apothecaries that could claim the privileged knowledge of professional medicine,<sup>3</sup> so much so that they sometimes espoused traditional assumptions rooted in superstition rather than scientific research. Since most of these professional medical practitioners were men, absolute male authority over the female body and its various disorders was unchallenged.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, all of the major Romantic poets address mental illness at some point in their canon, exploring the effects of memory, trauma, madness, and creativity. As Alan Richardson puts the matter, “Any number of motifs, ideals, and ‘discoveries’ routinely attributed to literary Romanticism—including split or fragmented psyche; the revaluation of feeling, instinct, and intuition; the active mind; developmental models of subject formation; the unconscious; even a new, more humane construction of ‘idiocy’—feature prominently in the era’s emergent biological psychologies as well” (xiv).

Viewed through the lens of feminist theory, however, the constructions of illness in Romantic medical and literary discourse take on an additional element of gender bias that works to inhibit and marginalize women’s minds and bodies. Sondra Archimedes succinctly articulates the practice of using medicine as a cultural weapon against women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

The turn to biology, a preoccupation with disease, and an assumption that the white, middle-class body and its associated social practices comprised a scientific norm all laid the groundwork for a transition from a moral discourse to a biomedical one. Scientific discourse reproduced bourgeois moral codes, concealing religious and social beliefs behind a façade of objectivity. Nowhere was this shift more apparent than in the field of sexuality, where anxieties about crime, poverty, class and racial otherness could be expressed through discussions about public health and safety. (24-25)

What we can infer from these historical facts, and what I will argue in this project, is that the social body and the biological body of females were constructed by narratives that worked to stigmatize the independent or autonomous woman by deeming her mad, deviant, or otherwise ill when she did not conform to prevailing social codes that favored traditional, i.e. patriarchal, beliefs about female behavior. The female body of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was thus pathologized, made a signifier of a sickness inherent to women due to their biological make up, therefore requiring the utmost social discipline and control in order to override the female body's inherent, natural weaknesses. In consequence, women were forced to cover up their sexuality and gender through specific, socially recognized performances of "natural" femininity that were influenced by the medical and social discourses of the time.

Indeed, an underlying assumption of my argument is that there was an accepted "general" female body that was part of the social and medical discourse of Romantic British culture (and indeed, a general body that is accepted and assumed even today). The texts of this period suggest "the cultural consolidation of a proper body" that "arises as a performative effect of a multiplicity of discourses and practices that makes such a norm possible" and which can be seen in "a variety of bodily behaviors" (Youngquist xv). As both Paul Youngquist and Erin Goss

have noted, the general form of the body suppresses its particular iterations in individual subjects because the “particularity of any given body threatens to overturn the assumption of generality from which epistemological reliance on the body—whether as metaphor or as material evidence—proceeds” (Goss 26). Therefore, particular bodies that do not adhere to the anatomical knowledge of the general body are rejected. Such is the case, I argue, with any women who do not conform to the hegemonic understanding of the female body at this time.

Female bodies that do conform are still pathologized, or regarded as “psychologically unhealthy or abnormal” (OED). Pathology is “the study of disease,” but before the word was used in connection with sickness, the Oxford English Dictionary indicates pathology meant “sorrows, sufferings,” as it was used in Sir Philip Sydney’s *Arcadia* in 1590. From its earliest iteration, then, pathology was connected to the emotions, to the mind as well as the body. By 1598, pathology was associated with the cause and nature of bodily diseases; by 1789 pathology included “the study of abnormal mental conditions”; and by 1828, as the OED records, pathology in its extended use became “the study or investigation of abnormality or malfunction in the moral, social, linguistic, or other sphere.” This extended definition of pathology that emerged during the latter part of the Romantic Era articulates the growing sense of the medicalized and pathologized body during the preceding decades. The expansion of pathology beyond medicine also indicates a larger cultural understanding of pathology and its acceptance within Romantic public discourse. I argue that Romantic literary texts often grapple with the abnormal or unnatural as an extension of the pathological in the moral, social and linguistic spheres of women, whose feminine bodies are most often connected to sorrows, sufferings, and the emotions.

This cultural extension of medical pathology beyond clinical treatment and debate over women’s bodies was due in part to the increasingly public voices of women in British culture in

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth. One clear trigger was the English fascination with the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789, which prompted the obvious next question: what are the rights of women? Though Mary Wollstonecraft and others called for independent legal recognition and rights for women, their opponents insisted on the biological and psychological differences between the sexes,<sup>5</sup> which they argued made such rights inappropriate for women.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, by centering the argument around extending men's rights to women, public debate reinforced men as the standard from which women deviated. To be a man was to be fully human; to be a woman was to argue for one's own humanity, to demand rights and privileges already fully claimed by men. "Within this framework," Barbara Caine summarizes, "women faced an extraordinarily paradoxical situation. They were expected to be the religious and moral guides and leaders of men, to whom they were in every other way subordinate. Similarly, they were to raise the moral and religious tone of their family and household, and through this of the wider social world—a world to which they were denied direct access, at least in terms of political rights" (np). Though women were a prominent and explicit feature of British society, their ability to govern their own lives and voice their opinions as (to use Wollstonecraft's phrase) "political and moral subjects" was undermined by their own social system because from birth women were positioned in political and social terms as not-men and therefore abnormal.

Such problematic discourse was not isolated to political language, or even medical language, but also extended to the poetical. When William Wordsworth speaks of "the great and universal passions of men" (180) or the "real language of men" (171) in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), he may be using "men" to signify the human race but his implication falls short because to default to one gender over another as universal is to elide the female in favor of the male. When the typical, the normal, the expected body is always male, then the female body is

always atypical, abnormal, unexpected. Difference therefore becomes not a matter of distinction, but an aberration from a norm. Wordsworth echoes the cultural understanding and public discourse of this time, discourse that was shaped in part by the biological understandings of the male and female bodies and the differences therein.

Because “bodily and embodied authority was based in rhetorical and discursive mastery” (Allard 37), we can thus examine professional and popular medical texts to see the ways in which medical authority influenced public perception of the body beyond the medical community.<sup>7</sup> One example is Thomas Denman’s *Introduction to Practice of Midwifery* (1787), which Paul Youngquist assures us “became a standard” in the newly risen field of obstetrics (144). The latter half of the eighteenth century saw a turn in the traditionally female profession of midwifery as more and more men, armed with forceps, declared themselves the seat of medical authority and knowledge and therefore the only proper choice to assist women in childbirth. Denman’s text “locates the origins of midwifery in male compassion toward women suffering” and “repeatedly emphasize[s] the non-voluntary nature of the female body in labor” (Youngquist 144). Denman writes that animals in labor act instinctively, but women, “on the contrary, either from erroneous opinions, or from false instructions, exert a considerable degree of voluntary force with the hope and intention of finishing their labours speedily” (71). The emphasis on the “non-voluntary nature” of labor is important because it allows the “man midwife” to dismiss the woman’s knowledge of her own body and instead assert his own medical knowledge, and thus guarantee total male control—or at least, the illusion thereof.

As Youngquist points out in his extended analysis<sup>8</sup> of William Hunter’s *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (1774), which displayed anatomical engravings of the pregnant womb in several stages of gestation, Hunter’s man midwife is a “master of medical illusion, pretending to assist where nature does all the work” (Youngquist 144). This is because Hunter

could trust wholly in the ways of a nature that man midwifery fully comprehended: ‘When Labour is actually present I do little or nothing. In the time of a pain I support the Back a little with my hand.... Thus I assist a little but leave it principally to nature. Assisting much is extremely improper, tho I pretend to be doing something, yet I do very little for them, & hardly any more than to take off the reproach of doing nothing at all’ ([Hunter] 34).... One might reasonably wonder why a man midwife should attend so natural a process as parturition at all. But Hunter’s nonchalance signals a victory in the cultural conquest of female anatomy. His respect for nature’s way has less to do with the material operations of mother flesh than its prior indebtedness to obstetric medicine. Nature can be trusted because it empowers men midwives. (Youngquist 144)

Youngquist’s point is particularly salient: Nature empowers *men*. Beyond the mind-boggling notion that a doctor assisting a patient during a medical procedure is “extremely improper” (likely due to Hunter’s prudishness of male-female physical interaction even in medical contexts), Hunter’s attitude that a man midwife should “pretend to be doing something” while taking credit for delivering a healthy child does more than ignore the woman’s role in childbirth: it appropriates her body to serve his own assertion of power. Her body is a vessel to be manipulated (or not) by the man midwife; according to Denman, her mind is “erroneous”; and Nature betrays women in favor of becoming an ally of male medical practice.<sup>9</sup>

The power of men to dictate the behavior of the female body through assertion of medical knowledge does not, of course, end with childbirth. Denman’s remarks on the effects of puberty in females are particularly illuminating:

Many changes in the constitution and appearance of women are produced at the time of their first beginning to menstruate. Their complexion is improved, their

countenance is more expressive and animated, their attitudes graceful, and the conversation more intelligent and agreeable; the tone of their voice becomes more harmonious, their whole frame, but particularly their breasts, are expanded and enlarged, and their minds are no longer engaged in childish pursuits and amusements. (161-162)

What should ostensibly be an objective, medical description of the female body's maturation from child to young woman is instead a social treatise on the ideal feminine body and mind. Denman catalogues the desired qualities of not just the model female body—improved complexion, larger breasts, a pleasing voice—but also of the model female mind: intelligence, maturity, *agreeability*. All of these attributes describe how women might be more attractive to men. The female body is reduced to its sexual appeal, the female mind to its ability to engage the male mind, and so the female subject is denied its independent humanity. By setting up a standard of womanhood from the perspective of medical authority, Denman ensures that any woman who does not adhere to this particular definition of woman, whether it be physical embodiment or social behavior, is abnormal—or, in other words, pathological. Denman's comments on ideal femininity thus expand his medical authority into the sociological sphere. (Denman does not, it should be noted, offer comparable commentary on the changes in the male body and mind during puberty.)

Later, well into the Romantic period, one of most famous surgeons and medical practitioners came to be Sir Astley Cooper (1768-1841). Cooper studied under Henry Cline and John Hunter at St Thomas' Hospital and was later appointed surgeon at Guy's Hospital, where he continued to study anatomy and gave lectures to medical students—including the young John Keats—for over three decades.<sup>10</sup> He gained acclaim for his study of vascular surgery, and by 1820 he was sergeant surgeon to the royal family and named a baronet. In 1824 *The Lectures of*

*Sir Astley Cooper on the Principles and Practice of Surgery* were published.<sup>11</sup> Cooper's surgical lectures do not shy away from the medical complexities of anatomy and surgery, often taking on an objective, distant tone appropriate to the subject matter. But, like William Buchan, Cooper's text also deviates from the strictly medical in order to provide social commentary that goes beyond proper medical treatment. For instance, at the end of his section on ulceration, Cooper asserts, "The prevention of scars is a great object, particularly in exposed parts of the body; this may appear of little consequence, but it certainly is not so; scars from abscesses in the necks of females, excite in the minds of most of our sex a reluctance to associate with them; and thus many a fine young woman may, by such scars, be doomed to perpetual celibacy" (71-72). The mention of "our sex" indicates the intended audience for this lesson: male doctors and surgeons. Cooper's tone is paternal, chastising young inexperienced surgeons who would not take care to preserve "a fine young woman" her beauty and thus her chance for marital bliss (and the more important financial and social security accompanying marriage). Men are characterized by Cooper as shallow creatures who cannot be attracted to a woman scarred by surgery but who are otherwise eligible for marriage, and women are "doomed" without a man showing sexual interest in them. We can thus see a social conscience wrapped up in medical proceedings: a scar on a woman's body, particularly in an "exposed" part of her body, is a signal that her body does not conform to ideal beauty standard *and* that there may be other elements of her body that do not conform to ideal health standards. The scar betrays the abscess, or whatever other ailment that once afflicted the woman, and her bodily imperfection now marks her as unfit for male association.

Though the occasional remark on social activity is not the only mention of women in Cooper's lectures, the majority of the book concerns the diseases of the male body. In the nearly 600-page volume of Cooper's surgical cases and procedures, there is one 12-page section

dedicated to the female body: “On Diseases of the Breast.” The section begins: “The diseases of this organ have been too much considered as being of a malignant nature; and females, who have had the misfortune to have tumours in their bosoms, have been often very unnecessarily submitted to an operation, under the idea of the complaint being cancerous” (230). There are several implications to unpack from this statement. First, tumors located in female breasts are routinely erroneously deemed cancerous by Romantic era doctors, despite little evidence of a higher propensity in breast tissue to develop malignant tumors rather than benign ones. Cooper critiques his fellow male doctors for automatically characterizing female breast tissue as cancerous because of an “idea.” Second, a consequence of this medical assumption is that surgeons trend toward “unnecessary” operations to remove the complaint. Since Cooper does not make any similar comments about operations for male organs, it is not a stretch to infer this inclination to cut first and ask questions later stems from either a greater desire for radical treatment when it comes to female bodies or a disregard for the consequences of such unnecessary alteration to the female body. Either way, what enables both possibilities is a conception of the female body as inherently unhealthy, sick, and in need of male medical interference. Third, the subject which considers “too much” the diseases of breasts “malignant,” the subject which believes the complaint “cancerous,” the subject with the power in the sentence, is not named. The females “unnecessarily submitted to an operation” are obviously not the ones determining the malignant or benign nature of their tumors. The grammatical construction of the sentence positions females as the objects which submit to the authority of doctors, the absent yet always implied male subject. The very language describing disease in a female organ dehumanizes the female subject, reducing her and her body to an object studied and operated on by male surgeons who determine the very state of her being—which, in this case, clearly involves pathologizing the female breast as cancerous.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the idea of female bodies being predisposed to cancer is wrapped up in the medically unsupported belief of the “weak” female mind. In a note to his section on tumors, *“Influence of the Mind in predisposing to Scirrhus,”* Cooper proclaims,

Anxiety of mind, tending to the presence of slow fever, and suppressed secretions, are the predisposing causes of the complaint. A mother watching with anxiety a near and dear relative in sickness; deprived of her natural rest, and inattentive to the deviation from health in her own person, is often afterwards affected with this disease. A person, the prey of disappointment from reduced circumstances, and struggling against poverty, when her prospects begin to brighten, finds a malignant tumour in her breast; costive state of bowels, a dry skin, a paucity of other secretions have attended this anxious state of mind, and laid the foundation of that destruction which awaits her. (235)

A woman is “inattentive to the deviation from health in her own person” due to her attentiveness to her family, so her body produces “suppressed secretions” which lay the “foundation of that destruction which awaits her”: these phrases hyperbolize objective medical observation into sensationalized criticism of the imagination of women and their supposed inability to manage the effects of stress. In almost all other gender references in the text, Cooper denotes a male subject. Yet, when discussing mental anxiety leading to bodily illness, he suddenly uses only female examples in his anecdotes, which offer additional details of anxious mothers and women who are the “prey of disappointment from reduced circumstances,” details which describe women as inattentive, irresponsible, incapable. Such a clear break in the usual default of male subjects, coupled with dramatic non-medical detail, cannot be anything other than a further pathologizing of the female mind and its supposed negative impact on the female body.

And just in case it isn't enough to pathologize women by declaring their minds predisposed to illness-begetting anxiety, a search for the word "unnatural" in connection with diagnosis only yields one result: the unnatural behavior of a woman. Cooper—again, one of Keats's instructors in medicine—describes the "Unnatural Propensities in Women" thus:

Women sometimes render themselves the subjects of lithotomy from perverse and unnatural propensities. I have known a female put a pebble into the meatus urinarius. A lady in using a catheter for herself, broke it in the bladder, and I extracted it in the presence of Mr. Ilott, of Bromley. I have known women introduce extraneous substances into the vagina, to invite the operation for the stone. Case.—A girl, about twenty years of age, came to St. Thomas's Hospital, describing herself to suffer all the symptoms of the stone; she was placed upon the operating table, before all the students, and Mr. Cline passed a sound to ascertain the presence of the stone; he struck some solid body, and a person of less caution might have immediately proceeded with the operation; but he said, 'I feel a solid body, which has not the hardness of stone; he then examined by the vagina, and drew from thence a portion of coal, and afterwards several other pieces: she had no disease. (288)

Cooper is likely describing what we now call Munchausen's syndrome, a disorder in which a person creates or mimics symptoms of illness in order to gain the treatment and sympathy of medical professionals, family, and friends. Nevertheless, it is telling that he offers no comparable anecdote of a male patient feigning illness, nor does he elsewhere discuss the "perverse and unnatural propensities" of patients. Sir Astley Cooper, surgeon to the king and teacher to thousands of medical students over his decades of work, can only conclude "she had no disease."

Such attitudes towards the bodies of women extended even more widely in the medical treatises of this time. First published in 1801, *The Modern Practice of Physic* by Robert Thomas (1752-1835) was reissued in numerous editions in both Europe and America throughout the early 1800s. Its steady publication indicates the demand and popularity of Thomas's volume even though, like Cooper's lectures, the book is clearly intended for a medically educated audience. Thomas makes regular reference to evidence provided by dissection, promoting the edicts of Sir William Lawrence (the Shelleys' doctor when they were England) and William Hunter that anatomical knowledge was the foundation of medical practice. He also frequently references Mr. Haslam, the apothecary at Bethlem Hospital, an asylum which would eventually be condemned by a parliamentary committee as the worst example of treatment of the insane.<sup>13</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of, his reliance on the other medical practitioners of his day, Thomas also succumbs to the medical pattern of pathologizing women, especially when discussing mental illness or illness associated with a strictly feminine bodily function, such as pregnancy.

For instance, while describing "Furor Uterinus, or Nymphomania" (note that the medical term is gendered and therefore the disease only applicable to females), Thomas writes:

This disease comes on with melancholy, lascivious casting about of the eyes, and frequent sighing; and as it increases the face becomes red and flushed, and the woman makes use of libidinous gestures and speeches, and shews an immoderate desire for coition....In most instances it ought to be considered as a high degree of hysteria, or as a species of madness....If it proceeds from acrid matter, the patient must drink plentifully of cooling demulcent liquors. Injections of the same nature may also be thrown up the vagina; the parts be washed with a sedative lotion as just advised, or be anointed with some soothing liniment; and opium be administered in small and frequently repeated doses. (514)

Beyond the violence and carelessness encouraged by the phrase “Injections...may also be *thrown up* the vagina,” Thomas’s explanation of nymphomania combines physical symptoms (“the face becomes red and flushed”) with descriptions of social behavior run amok: “lascivious casting about of the eyes, and frequent sighing.” These physical gestures are heightened signals of social flirtation. When “the woman makes use of libidinous gestures and speeches, and shews an immoderate desire for coition,” she is asserting her own sexual desire and is therefore overstepping her traditional female role of modesty and refinement. Thomas advises that the nymphomaniac must be soothed, sedated, her hysteria treated with “cooling demulcent liquors.” Her uterus has been inflamed and irritated, so the female body must be calmed back to a passive state of sexual moderation, i.e. chastity. After all, Thomas does first list the disorder as “Furor Uterinus,” indicating that “immoderate desire for coition” is only pathological when the body is female.

Thomas does not limit problems of the uterus to heightened sexual desire. Convulsions during pregnancy and labor depend “on the state of the uterus, and has been observed to arise oftener during the first pregnancy than in any after one, particularly where the woman is unmarried” (598). Not only does Thomas suggest that unmarried, and therefore sinful, pregnant women suffer more frequently from puerperal convulsions, he also describes the severity of the convulsions in extreme terms:

A fit of puerperal convulsion is much more severe than one of epilepsy, and a paroxysm of the former is usually so violent, that a woman, who when in health was by no means strong, has been so convulsed, as to shake the whole room, and to resist the coercive powers of many attendants. No force indeed can restrain a woman when in these convulsions. The distortion of her countenance is beyond conception; in regard to deformity of countenance, nothing bears any resemblance

to the progress of this disease; the rapidly with which the eyes open and shut, and the sudden twirlings of the mouth, are inconceivable and frightful. (598)

Thomas hyperbolically describes convulsions that “shake the whole room” and distort a woman’s countenance “beyond conception” into a “deformity” that is “inconceivable and frightful.” These sensationalized descriptions can serve no mere medical purpose. By embellishing the physical effects of a seizure endured by a pregnant woman, Thomas exaggerates the grotesqueness of a female body already swollen and out of its regular form. The pregnant female body, especially the unmarried pregnant female body, therefore becomes further pathologized and made monstrous by a medical discourse that becomes inflected with the theatrical. It is also revealing that Thomas describes the powers of the attendants as “coercive,” for though he refers to attempts of attendants to physically restrain the convulsing female body, the word “coercive” suggests women should be forced or constrained into compliance.

Though he takes the time to grotesquely describe the pangs of female labor, Thomas explains away the greater number of female patients lodged in asylums with one sentence:

It has been observed by those who superintend mad-houses, that the number of females brought in annually considerably exceeds the number of males. The natural processes which women undergo of menstruation, parturition, and of preparing nutriment for the infant, together with diseases to which they are subject at these periods [periods], and which are frequently remote causes of insanity, as likewise the sedentary life they usually lead, and the exquisiteness of their feelings, may perhaps serve to explain their greater disposition to this malady. (352)

Women’s bodies, in Thomas’s understanding, betray their minds not only through the natural processes of menstruation and pregnancy, but also through the choices women make, such as

“sedentary” lifestyles. There is no acknowledgement that the “sedentary life” of a bourgeois woman was encouraged by social conventions that commended men who could support their families and allow their wives to live lives of leisure. The “exquisiteness of their feelings,” a social assumption of female sensibility exaggerated by patriarchal constructions, “explain[s] their greater disposition” to madness. It is not just that women are “considerably” more subject to mental incarceration than men; single women inherently suffer hysteric affections at a greater rate than married women (274). Thomas argues that “women of a delicate habit, and whose nervous system is extremely sensible, are those who are most subject to hysteric affections,” but neglects to articulate the medical context for nervous sensibility and the so-called “delicate” constitutions of women (274).

Sensibility was a highly feminized trait often used in connection with domestic theories of the sympathetic woman as the center of the household or the overly stimulated female reader in danger of losing her reason when reading a sensational novel. G.J. Barker-Benfield calls the term highly flexible, “synonymous with consciousness, with feelings, and eventually identifiable with sexual characteristics” (np). More importantly, the idea of sensibility was gendered:

Newton had not distinguished women's nerves and brains from men's, but his popularizing successors, especially the new medical experts, frequently questioned the operation of the will in women's putatively more delicate nerves, compounding the potential for passivity implicit in the association of ideas. The view that women's nerves were more delicate than men's, making them naturally creatures of greater sensibility, became a prominent convention of the eighteenth century. A high value was placed on this greater sensibility as grounds for imaginative capacity, but the refinement of the nerves (in ‘effeminate’ men, too)

was also often identified with greater suffering, delicacy, and a susceptibility to disorder. (Barker-Benfield np)

By the end of the eighteenth century, terms such as “sensibility,” “sentiment” and the like “were at home in the scientific or epistemological treatise and in the familiar letter” (Todd 6). Despite the gendered nature of “sensibility,” the medical discussions of the nerves and senses did include male subjects and were used to articulate arguments for class structure. Janis Caldwell explains that

as physical science gained authority, mechanical explanations were offered for sympathy, and a crude materialism began to stand in for the previously occult attributes of sympathy. Following John Locke’s empiricism, David Hume in moral philosophy and David Hartley in psychology used the rhetoric of ‘vibrations’ and ‘impressions’ to describe the communication of physical units of feeling. Tiny packets of information ‘impressed’ themselves on the senses, and set up vibrations in the ‘aether,’ a supposedly airy substance flowing through the nerves.....The softest, most responsive and resonant nerves, according to eighteenth-century moral philosophy and medicine, belonged to persons of ‘sensibility,’ or finely tuned physical sympathy....Erecting a physical basis for social difference, theories of sensibility operated to justify the privileges of the nobility. The supposedly exquisite delicacy of the person of sensibility, however, was thought to put him or her at risk for physical and mental derangement—such as melancholia, the vapours, hysteria, or hypochondria—and the rapid communication of illness between his or her mind and body. (31)

To be highly sensible was to be open to feelings and “finely tuned physical sympathy,” which created a physical basis for male social privilege but also a female social burden. Women, with

their supposed greater capacity for sympathy and sensibility, must be the center of the bourgeois household; but their delicate sensibility also made them prey to their emotions, which might take over their rational minds and render them more susceptible to physical and mental disease.

When Robert Thomas uses the phrase “the exquisiteness of their feelings” to describe the likely causes of female madness, we can thus see the direct link between medical, social, and philosophical theories that come together to entrap the Romantic-era female subject in a nearly inescapable situation.

This larger social pathologizing of women is the inevitable effect of so many medical treatises discussing the female body in ways that render women inherently unhealthy or abnormal. The important distinction between real illness and a false pathology is rooted in the social mechanisms that objectify women, particularly the pathologizing mechanisms of patriarchal language. Such language is especially evident in the subjective accounts of women’s minds and bodies throughout William Buchan’s book. Even though it was one of the most widely read and influential household medical guides of the day, Buchan’s medical advice is often interrupted by his moralizing. For instance, he begins his chapter on the “Diseases of Women” with the following:

Women, in all civilized nations, have the management of domestic affairs, and it is very proper they should, as Nature has made them less fit for the more active and laborious employments. This indulgence, however, is generally carried too far; and females, instead of being benefited by it, are greatly injured from the want of exercise and free air. To be satisfied of this, one need only compare the fresh and ruddy looks of a milk-maid, with the pale complexion of those females whose whole time is spent within doors. Though Nature has made an evident distinction between the male and female with regard to bodily strength and

vigour, yet she certainly never meant, either that the one should be always without, or the other always within doors. (352)

The medical relevancy of this passage is minor, and rather simplistic: it is healthier for women to get “exercise and free air” instead of remaining “always within doors.” However, Buchan, rather than introduce feminine diseases<sup>14</sup> by discussing the female body from a medicinal perspective, instead pontificates on the “civilized” woman and the “indulgence” of society in allowing her “management of domestic affairs.” His choice of words is problematic, his tone is both conversational and pedantic, and he asserts his medical authority while addressing the tangential topic of bourgeois feminine behavior. While he is not wrong to criticize an imposed confinement in the home or the discouragement of physical exertion,<sup>15</sup> Buchan glosses over the reason for the division of labor between men and women, turning to the oft-cited “Nature” as cause and explanation in one. A passage with an uncomplicated medical directive is instead infused with moralistic and sexist overtones without any real biological evidence to support such subtext.<sup>16</sup>

This gender bias continues throughout Buchan’s chapters on women. Some of his commentary might today be considered a joke about the trials of adolescence with a few sprinklings of underlying sexism— “Another thing which proves very hurtful to girls about this period of life, is unwholesome food. Fond of all manner of trash, they often indulge in it, till their whole humours are quite vitiated”—while other comments are not so easily dismissed: “A dull disposition is also very hurtful to girls at this period. It is a rare thing to see a sprightly girl who does not enjoy good health, while the grave, moping, melancholy creatures, proves the very prey of vapours and hysterics” (354). There you have it: medical proof that women need to smile more.

Buchan consistently takes a particular tone when describing the duties of mothers and female education. In one long footnote, he comments:

It is the duty of mothers, and those who are entrusted with the education of girls, to instruct them early in the conduct and management of themselves at this critical period of their lives. False modesty, inattention, and ignorance of what is beneficial or hurtful at this time, are the sources of many diseases and misfortunes in life, which a few sensible lessons from an experienced matron might have prevented. Nor is care less necessary in the subsequent returns of this discharge. Taking improper food, violent affections of the mind, or catching cold at this period, is often sufficient to ruin the health, or to render the female ever after incapable of procreation. (353)

There are multiple layers of gender-inflected prejudice within this passage. First, Buchan makes a connection between female behavior and biological health. The lack of “a few sensible lessons” regarding proper “conduct and management” leads to “many diseases.” Health is thus tied up with morality and sensibility. Second, Buchan specifies the faults he finds in young girls’ upbringing: “false modesty, inattention, and ignorance.” These are certainly fair qualities to criticize, but he lays the blame for these young girls’ defects solely at their mothers’ feet, criticizing the lack of education of women at a time when women were, through no fault of their own, actively denied the same education as their male peers.<sup>17</sup> He does not seem to understand the problem of criticizing women, who were themselves deprived of an education, for being unable to provide more rigorous instruction to their daughters. Third, Buchan generalizes and exaggerates the effect of “improper” food or catching a cold on feminine reproductive capabilities.<sup>18</sup> While it is true a severe illness can have long-term consequences, Buchan’s language here, like his abhorrence of “improper food” such as “weak tea,” cannot be based on any scientific knowledge and instead acts as a scare tactic aimed at a middle-class woman’s most valuable commodity during this time: her body and its reproductive capabilities for the marriage

market.<sup>19</sup> The layered effect of these critical assessments of women's bodies, minds, and hearts is a pathological indictment of the female subject without any acknowledgement of the patriarchal social mechanisms that create and perpetuate such behavior in women.

At the same time that he lectures pregnant women on the perils of reaching for an object too high on the shelf,<sup>20</sup> Buchan also laments midwives and the mischievous ignorance of female medical practitioners. Once more in a footnote, he writes:

Though the management of women in child-bed has been practiced as an employment since the earliest accounts of time; yet it is still in most countries on a very bad footing. Few women think of following this employment till they are reduced to the necessity of doing it for bread. Hence not one in a hundred of them have any education, or proper knowledge of their business. It is true, that Nature, if left to herself, will generally expel the foetus; but it is equally true, that most women in child-bed require to be managed with skill and attention, and that they are often hurt by the superstitious prejudices of ignorant and officious midwives. The mischief done in this way is much greater than is generally imagined; most of which might be prevented by allowing no women to practice midwifery but such as are properly qualified. Were due attention paid to this, it would not only be the means of saving many lives, but would prevent the necessity of employing men in this indelicate and disagreeable branch of medicine, which is, on many accounts, more proper for the other sex. (360)

Buchan offers no proof for the claim that female midwives are uneducated in their field and only attend pregnant women out of desperate poverty. He also offers no real solution to this supposed problem. He is satisfied with implying that "skill and attention" are traits incongruous with "superstitious" and "ignorant" midwives, and that it is only through "Nature," a personification

of powers greater than humanity nearly always characterized as female, that women successfully give birth. But it is not enough for him to criticize the female practitioners; Buchan also dismisses midwifery as an “indelicate and disagreeable branch of medicine,” which men must lower themselves to perform in the absence of adequate female professionals. Buchan thus burdens pregnant female bodies with an inability to care for themselves, particularly in an area in which the male has vested interest (the continuance of his family line),<sup>21</sup> while simultaneously denigrating the medical practice of childbirth altogether. This passage, along with many others, pathologizes the female body as inherently ill, abnormal, inadequate, and requiring the utmost skill of male doctors to become healthy.

Through widely read medical textbooks<sup>22</sup> such as *Domestic medicine*, then, we can see how the biomedical community contributed to the social workings of the domestic sphere, that liminal space supposedly occupied and controlled by women. What I argue in the following chapters is that the rigorous expectation of correct social performance—how to be a “good” mother, daughter, sister, wife—was articulated not just in the political or public arena, but also in the private one, and that pathologized performative womanhood was internalized by both real and fictional women who reflected the larger social economy of Romantic subjectivity. These efforts to pathologize women appear not only in texts like *Domestic medicine* or *The Modern Practice of Physic*, but also in the surge of domestic and etiquette handbooks; the rise of obstetrics and the ensuing public defamation of midwives in favor of male-midwives; discussions of the nervous systems which tied sensibility to physical excitability and led to diagnoses of that catch-all of feminine medical pathology, hysteria; the politicizing of the middle-class family and domestic life; the growing market for medical self-help books; the rising popularity of spa towns, such as Bath; and the rapid expansion of medical practitioners, particularly those who specialized in madness.

Since it is impossible to include all possible factors affecting discussions of the pathologized female body and its performance during the Romantic period, I have narrowed the scope of this dissertation to focus on certain specific areas and especially indicative literary texts. Chapter One addresses the feminine performance of “Mad” Mary Lamb, the writer-sister of Charles, and the social and literary consequences of her mental condition as reflected in her published correspondence. Forever marked by her psychotic break that resulted in her murdering her mother, Lamb grappled with the infamy of violent rage and madness for the rest of her life while she moved in and out of private madhouses when not residing with Charles. The correspondence between the Lamb siblings and their friends reveals the extent to which Mary’s madness affected their lives and their writing at a time when madness and the treatment of the mad garnered more and more public attention. One defining consequence of Mary’s infamy is that all of her biographers pathologize Mary’s behavior and, subsequently, her writing. Most importantly, we see that even within her own personal correspondence Mary subversively “performs” her madness, self-reflexively defending herself and internalizing Romantic notions of proper feminine behaviors, but also denying the common representation of the diseased mind as a metaphor for the female body. She is one example of pathologized women forced to perform their gender in order to be considered “normal,” yet, as Adriana Craciun has argued, her unprovoked violence destabilizes woman’s identity as the sympathetic center of bourgeois household and thus calls into question the restrictive gender identity of ‘domestic woman’ and ‘proper’ woman writer. By examining Mary’s letters in tandem with the work of her biographers, I argue that Mary’s (sometimes self-imposed) position as ‘mad female writer’ further pathologizes a woman already irrevocably suffering from the impositions of medical and social pathology.

Chapter Two addresses feminine performance on the stages of the London theaters through the lens of two incredibly popular playwrights: Joanna Baillie and Matthew Lewis. As the niece of famed anatomist John Hunter and the sister of Dr. Matthew Baillie, Joanna Baillie was uniquely positioned to be influenced by Romantic medical discourse and theories of pathologized female bodies. And as the infamous young author of the Gothic horror novel *The Monk* (1796), Matthew Lewis's reputation created an unavoidable context of feminine pathology and objectification that affected his audience's reception of *The Captive* (1803), an example of a new kind of theatrical spectacle emerging in the early nineteenth century: the monodrama. As Julie Carlson has argued, the Romantic era's critical anti-theatricality can be attributed in part to the presence of women on the stage. These women were deemed monstrous because the problem of representation, combined with the spectacle of their bodies as independent agents, threatened patriarchal culture. Both plays addressed in this chapter, Baillie's *Count Basil* (1796) and Lewis's *The Captive*, demonstrate different performances of feminine behavior that collapse under the weight of social pressures: a duchess playing up her feminine allure regrets the consequences of her infectious vanity, and a wrongfully imprisoned woman succumbs to the madness of her surroundings. By examining the stage directions that dictate the specific physical gestures the actresses would have used to embody their characters, I argue that both playwrights interrogate the nature of gender and gender performance. Baillie and Lewis thereby unearth the acute anxiety over female adherence to proper social norms that we have seen in the medical literature of this period, even as they also resist that literature by inflecting female behavior with subversive meaning.

Chapter Three addresses the feminine performance of lovesickness and melancholy in *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1820) by John Keats. Hermione De Almeida and others have demonstrated how Keats' education as an apothecary influenced his poetry, and *Isabella*, in

particular, confirms his resulting expansion of medical discourse and pathology to the poetical sphere. The affective nature of Isabella's love-sickness encourages the body to perform love and convey grief even as she initially attempts to keep her feelings secret and within the domestic confines of her family home. Her feminine performance takes on new meaning within the space of the home, eventually spinning her sorrow into a pathologized melancholy. As Buchan asserts, "Melancholy is that state of alienation or weakness of mind which renders people incapable of enjoying the pleasures, or performing the duties of life. It is a degree of insanity, and often terminates in absolute madness" (289). Consumed with first love and then melancholy of just this sort, Isabella is unable to perform the duties of her life as a domestic bourgeois woman and does eventually succumb to absolute madness. Through the theme and imagery of fragmentation, Keats breaks down the home, the body, and the mind of a woman who represents the ideal domestic female, demonstrating the hollow, arbitrary nature of her role and the personal, traumatic cost of adhering to feminine ideals of bourgeois sensibility. By actively defying her social obligations, Isabella constructs a feminine performance that is initially strong but eventually fractures due to her inability to support herself in the face of male social dominance and the limited resources consequently available to her.

Close readings of the texts chosen—exemplary letters, two plays, and a long poem—as well as ample historical and medical context demonstrate the pervasive application of pathology to feminine social performance during the Romantic era, as well as the cracks to be found in those very applications. Whether it is Mary Lamb performing her madness, or her sanity; Baillie's Victoria overperforming her femininity in *Count Basil*; Lewis's Captive unable to perform her normal feminine identity in a madhouse; or Keats's Isabella defying the feminine performance demanded by her social position and losing herself to her performance of melancholy: all of these women suffer the consequences of failing to correctly perform their

womanhood or overcome their pathology as it was defined – and imposed – in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England. The edicts laid down by Romantic medical and social discourse created a foundation of pathology on which were built arbitrary codes of conduct under the guise that such feminine behavior is natural and becoming. The result is a performative kind of womanhood that, under such circumstances, must adhere to the reductive modes of “natural” subjectivity available to women despite the inescapable knowledge that Romantic women—by the dominant assumptions of that time—were already, and always, pathological.

CHAPTER ONE: MADNESS, WRITING, AND THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE  
PERCEPTIONS OF MARY LAMB

**I. Introduction**

Most of the critical writings on Mary Lamb (1764 – 1847) begin with a shocking account from the 26 September *Morning Chronicle* of her fatal attack on her mother on 22 September 1796. The newspaper article reads as follows:

On Friday afternoon the Coroner and a respectable Jury sat on the body of a Lady in the neighbourhood of Holborn, who died in consequence of a wound from her daughter the preceding day. It appeared by the evidence adduced, that while the family were preparing for dinner, the young lady seized a case knife laying on the table, and in a menacing manner pursued a little girl, her apprentice, round the room; on the eager calls of her helpless infirm mother to forbear, she renounced her first object, and with loud shrieks approached her parent.

The child by her cries quickly brought up the landlord of the house, but too late--the dreadful scene presented to him the mother lifeless, pierced to the heart, on a chair, her daughter yet wildly standing over her with the fatal knife, and the venerable old man, her father, weeping by her side, himself bleeding at the forehead from the effects of a severe blow he received from one of the forks she had been madly hurling about the room. (Lamb 1:45)

It is easy to see how such an account immediately grabs the reader's attention and paints a particular portrait of the "Mad Mary Lamb." *The Morning Chronicle* reports Lamb as a "wild," "menacing" murderer who had been "madly hurling" objects about the room during the fit which precipitated her stabbing her "helpless infirm mother," who was only trying to protect the "little girl" crying for mercy. The "dreadful scene" which describes how the mother was "pierced to the

heart” and the father, a “venerable old man,” was weeping by his murdered wife creates an effect of the most melodramatic kind. All of the descriptors identify Mary Lamb as a dangerous, violent madwoman. The clear intent is to insist that her unprovoked rage and violence must spark the outrage of the “respectable Jury” and greatest sympathy for her family, who must now reconcile the loss of not one, but two women.

This public portrayal of madness, which isolates the mad person from the law and order of the social world but (as we have seen) was typical of the medical literature on women at the time, would influence readers and critics of Lamb for the next two centuries. Indeed, it is hard to separate Mary Lamb—sister, caretaker, mantua maker, author—from her mental condition and its effect on her and her family, in particular on her brother and life-long companion, Charles Lamb (1775 – 1834). Even the list as I have provided above, a typical description of Mary, leaves her designation as “author” last and lists her connection to her more famous brother first—a famous brother, one must note, who also spent time in a Hoxton madhouse in 1796,<sup>1</sup> a detail which is often glossed over in biographies and other critical studies.<sup>2</sup> His temporary madness, as it turned out, did not detract from his career. According to his admirers, his slender literary output was due to the stress and responsibility of caring for Mary, rather than any insufficiency of genius on his own part. His sister did not receive the same consideration.

One must allow that Mary’s illness was indeed quite severe, requiring continual observation and, when necessary, clinical intervention, starting with her incarceration in a madhouse following her mother’s death.<sup>3</sup> Yet the sensationalized rhetoric of the *Morning Chronicle* article and its repeated subsequent inclusion in critical studies and biographies, especially in contrast to the milder critical descriptions of Charles’ years of depression and alcoholism, exemplify the standard of pathologizing a woman for not adhering to traditional social contracts of womanhood. One effect of this pathologizing of Mary through sensational

biographical detail is an irrevocable intertwining of her writing and her madness that removes much of Mary's agency. There can be no doubt that the mental state of Mary Lamb affected her work, her life, and her literary reception, but one goal of this chapter shall be to consider Mary as more than an extension of her brother's literary work for children. I examine Mary's attempts to assert her authority as both author and friend at a time when her very subjectivity was doubly complicated by her status both as a woman and as a pathologized *mad*woman.

Biographers and critics who pathologized Mary Lamb during and after her life followed a larger social tradition of excluding mad persons from public spheres. In *Revels in Madness* (1999), Allen Thiher argues that society separates and protects itself from the madman by creating boundaries, and that there has long existed a boundary based on conceptions of sanity which has affected how individuals move within society. He comments that "our models for understanding madness are somewhat mad in themselves" (165), a reference to the arbitrary nature of social conventions that nevertheless stigmatize and pathologize non-conforming individuals. Thiher asserts that sanity is defined by connecting logic with its verbal expression, *logos*. To break with *logos* is to break from sanity, and thus, society as a whole. However, the world of order and logic has traditionally been reserved for men. If we extend Thiher's argument to consider the historical treatment of women, we can see that to separate the mad person from the community via a break in *logos* is merely to extend to the madman the same treatment which women have already universally experienced. Indeed, Thiher writes, "Patriarchal *logos* means reason and its codification in language...[which] has always excluded... women in any case. Psychosis becomes, ambiguously to be sure, a condition of liberation when psychosis is lived as a break with a *logos* that has denied women's existence and hence always made of women psychotics *for being women*" (165, emphasis mine). Definitions of insanity rooted in patriarchal

notions of reason articulated in patriarchal language uphold the exclusionary nature of masculine society, thereby automatically deeming women psychotic or, in other words, pathologized.

Thiher's post-modern theory of psychosis as "a condition of liberation" is certainly debatable, but it opens up a new angle for approaching the writings of Mary Lamb, a pathologized madwoman attempting to articulate her subjectivity in a language created by men. For as Margaret Homans points out, women writers and readers have often been excluded from "a traditional identification of the speaking subject as male" (12). This exclusion has consequently affected their ability to fully imagine and realize their subjectivity, especially since during the Romantic period, "writing, along with imaginative activity generally, was discouraged as a dangerous malpractice, jeopardizing mental balance" in females (Aaron, 1987, 7). Women's minds were not considered stable enough to engage with the imagination and creative expression in the same ways men did. Consequently, the traditional scheme of defining sanity through a patriarchal sense of logos draws a clear, yet arbitrary boundary between masculine reason and feminine psychosis. This gendered binary imposes restrictions on women's writing in both content and practice. Writing, at least the type of writing considered acceptable or legitimate during the Romantic period, requires logic and order. Though there was an increase in female authorship in Britain in the late eighteenth century, the literary market was still dominated by men, and "proper" women's writing often needed to be sentimental or domestic, lest the author be accused of radical immorality.<sup>4</sup> As we shall later see, Mary Lamb did indeed find the practice of writing difficult, voicing those concerns within the context of her attempts at purposeful self-restraint in both her professional and personal life. But how might we reconsider her writing, and her reflections on her writing, if her psychosis is not just a burden but also a "liberation"?

Because of Mary's legal position as madwoman, liberation could not have manifested itself as an obvious rebellion against "proper" womanhood, especially since the popularity of

“moral management” as medical treatment specifically for women had also risen into prominence during the late eighteenth century. Jane Aaron describes moral management as “a particularly effective form of social re-education for women, in that the submissive and self-doubting behavior patterns it inculcated corresponded so closely with socially approved models for all female behavior” (1991, 109). There is even evidence to suggest that husbands of the time believed a good term in an asylum would produce a much more obliging wife.<sup>5</sup> *The Domestic Guide in Cases of Insanity* (1805) argues that “Humility is a quality which men wish for in a wife. This complaint [insanity] cannot so properly be said to teach humility, as to implant it in the very nature” (qtd. in Aaron 109). The clear implication is that declaring a potential wife insane and subjecting her to moral management would produce a more docile, humble, model female. Moral management produced humility and submissiveness and thus set out to instruct a woman in the areas in which, despite the abundance of conduct books available at the time, her family had failed to provide a suitable feminine education.<sup>6</sup>

The “proper” lady of this time, Mary Poovey argues, was the product of centuries of social discourse regarding the roles of women.<sup>7</sup> The proper lady was self-effacing, a mirror to her husband and his desires. She was a chaste embodiment of property whose legal status was subsumed into her husband’s upon marriage. The proper lady was the moral center of the British household, a figure charged with the spiritual well-being of her family long after the Puritans lost their political influence. The proper lady raised the children with affection but discipline, and provided the calm, domestic sympathy a husband needed when he returned home from the bustle and strain of his work. These social pressures eventually became naturalized, a process which culminated in a radically simplified stereotype of femininity that branded as “monstrous” any unconventional attempt to explore, develop, or express the female self, and, while it granted women considerable influence in society, this

image effectively inhibited many women's ability to understand, much less to satisfy, their own desires or needs. Taught to emulate the "natural ideal," young women either repressed or sublimated other inclinations. What autonomy a woman earned was often purchased at the cost of either social ostracism or personal denial of inadmissible aspects of herself. (Poovey 35)

By sublimating their desires into their husbands' and following strict edicts of "feminine" behavior, women were able to claim influence and assume a socially meaningful role in the domestic sphere. But the paradox of the "natural" woman, of course, is that innate qualities should not require cultivation or repression.

As I will later show, Mary Lamb's letters indicate successful internalizations of just this kind of "proper" feminine behavior, for she consistently writes of her weakness, her shame, and her inability to control her impulses or strengthen her will in the face of her illness. Mary's madness and subsequent treatment very clearly contributed to an overpowering desire for self-restraint that could never be shaken. According to her friends and family, her illness was characterized by aggressive, violent behavior that greatly contrasted with contemporary reports of her 'normal' meek, mild manner. Her psychotic breaks were thus defined in opposition to the relentless self-restraint and self-control with which Mary tried to live during her sane periods. In order to prove her sanity, in order to be more than a madwoman, Mary needed to follow the logoi of society and the traditional expectations of a domestic woman, a "proper" lady, which required her to always behave as a paragon of kindness and temperance. Ironically, the anxiety produced by such extreme pressure to adopt a serene code of behavior may very well have contributed to and exacerbated her illness—and it certainly affected her writing.

And yet, I am not interested in presenting Mary Lamb solely as a victim of patriarchal society, nor do I wish to solely define her against her madness, as if Mary truly lived a double

life that swung wildly between insane aggression and sane passivity. Mary is not merely a “madwoman in the attic” that wrote children’s literature in her more lucid moments, and recent criticism has done some good work to improve Mary Lamb’s status in the Romantic canon. In particular the studies by Adriana Craciun and Jane Aaron have demonstrated a complexity in Mary Lamb that goes beyond her mental health. While I do address the biographical details of her life which so strongly shaped her critical reception, my interests lie particularly in her own characterization of her mental condition in her letters, especially as her self-characterization compares to descriptions offered in the correspondence of her brother and others in their literary circle. Though Charles Lamb considered his sister his dearest friend and collaborator, there was a permeating social stigma that portrayed Mary as a burden, a familial obligation from which he could not escape. In part because the public judged her from the refraction of murderous madness and in part because of her status as a woman, Mary’s literary identity was subsumed into Charles’, so that their body of work together would not always clearly show Mary’s contributions.

I therefore examine Charles’ and Mary’s letters and first-hand accounts of her social behavior in their correspondence with friends. I argue that, even within her own personal correspondence Mary subversively “performs” her madness, self-reflexively defending herself, but, at the same time, also destabilizing her audience’s expectations of her madness. The performative tension of Mary’s personal letters disrupts easy categorization. This chapter hopes to continue the work of recovering Mary Lamb as an important author of the Romantic era, ultimately suggesting that when we consider Mary as a distressed person attempting to gain control of her own life, we reveal a far more complex subject whose agency cannot be broken into the traditional, restrictive binaries of angelic sister or demonic madwoman. Mary understood that her madness defined people’s perception of her, and she simultaneously backed away from,

even as she also encouraged, their characterizations. Mary's unique authorial perspective and ability to create empathy with her readers through her writing manifested itself, then, through both a performative rejection and acceptance of her madness. By performing her identity as both proper woman and mad woman, Mary deftly uses her illness to her advantage and thus exhibits an ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own benefit, to find a degree of liberation in her madness.

## **II. Romantic Madness**

In considering how the diagnosis of madness affected Mary Lamb's writing and the writings about her, we must first discuss the treatment she would have received and its long-term effects on her behavior. Up to this point in the history of British asylums, both public and private madhouses had been largely left alone and were rarely closely examined by any governing body. Though the Royal College of Physicians had been charged with annually inspecting madhouses since 1774, by all accounts the inspections were cursory and did not delve into specific treatments or the physical condition of the patients. According to Andrew Scull, "the visits took no more than six days a year to perform. Often, as many as six or eight madhouses were visited in a single day" (137). Referencing Dr. Richard Powell, the secretary to the Royal College and one of the inspectors, Scull asserts that "apart from cursory inquiries as to the condition of the patients, no effort was made to discover what medical treatment the patients received, let alone to find out how effective it was" (138). Madhouses in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, therefore, were largely unregulated, understaffed, and seemingly ineffective at treating insanity.

Mary's and Charles' letters downplay the severity of Mary's treatment in private madhouses, but medical practices of the time suggest that typical treatment involved bondage, solitary confinement in uncomfortable, small spaces, and "therapeutic" treatment through fear,

intimidation, and physical violence. Fear was believed to oppose and therefore reduce excitement and was thus used to counteract the unwieldy passions of maniacs. As Jane Aaron puts it, “To induce fear in the lunatic through violent physical treatment was regarded as potentially curative” (105). Physical discomfort was also dismissed by caretakers, for lunatics were considered “impervious” to their physical conditions (105). Patients were also regularly subjected to exhibition to the public for money, their status relegated to objects of curiosity rather than thinking, feeling subjects. For example, Bethlem Hospital exhibited lunatics to the public every Sunday for the admission price of one penny (105).

It must be stated, though, that most of the patients at Bethlem were poor, with families unable to provide care at home. Though mad persons had often previously been cared for at home, the eighteenth century saw a larger demand for separating the sane and insane, particularly in urban areas, and the home was no longer considered the proper site for rehabilitation for the lower and middle classes. Scull explains: “Besides the fact that it lacked most of the basic necessities for the effective treatment of mental illness, the home suffered from a fatal flaw, one which made it the least suitable place of all to keep a lunatic. Quite simply, it was the environment which had nurtured the disturbance in the first place” (94). Even though the verdict of “Insanity” from Mary’s trial meant Charles had a legal obligation to take responsibility for his sister, he was also compelled to isolate her from society and install her in a madhouse whenever she suffered relapses, which occurred on a nearly annual basis.

In 1807, a House of Commons Select Committee collected and published information on the 45 privately licensed mad houses in England.<sup>8</sup> The 1807 report, as well as several others published over the next several decades, revealed widespread physical abuse, neglect, and overall mistreatment of patients. Scull comments, however, that “it may be misleading to speak of early nineteenth-century madhouses as a system; for there was an extraordinarily wide

variability in the character of the houses and those who ran them” (50). On one end of the spectrum were the metropolitan houses in London, which could have as few as ten patients each. On the other end were larger establishments such as Hoxton House or Bethlem Hospital, which could provide for four or five hundred patients. There can be little doubt that, due to their size, the larger institutions would have produced greater indignities and mistreatment of patients, and by 1815 Parliament saw increasing pressure to revolutionize medical treatment for the insane and to curtail the harsher conditions one would find at Bethlam and other large asylums that had previously enjoyed ample donations and public praise without inspection.

One response to this inhumane treatment arose when a group of Quakers opened the York Retreat, which sought to treat madness not as a disease of the body (and therefore not something to be treated by doctors through bloodletting, surgeries, and other physical remedies) but as a disorder of the mind and the imagination. The York administrators argued patients must be treated with the greatest kindness and gentleness and must be re-taught basic human behaviors and reason (note the theory that social conduct and reason, or logos, are the markers of sanity).<sup>9</sup> This approach was highly praised by the 1815 committee organized by the House of Commons to further investigate madhouses and patient treatment and would affect medical treatment for insanity throughout the nineteenth century. However, these positive changes were slow, and “Mary could not have entirely escaped [the more common] humiliations” (Aaron 105).

Even before studies conducted by the House of Commons, there were non-literary publications that intimated the conditions of madhouses. In *The Modern Practice of Physic* (1801), Robert Thomas discusses the causes and recommended treatment for madness and mania. He frequently references the work of Mr. Haslam, the apothecary at Bethlem Hospital, as an expert who provided Thomas with years’ worth of extensive experience and research into the proper causes of and treatments for madness. He writes:

Madness is occasioned by affections of the mind, such as anxiety, grief, the love of an absent object, sudden frights, violent fits of anger, the disappointment of ambition, prosperity humbled by misfortune, religious terror or enthusiasm, the frequent and uncurbed indulgence of any passion or emotion, and by abstruse study. In short, it may be produced by any thing that affects the mind so forcibly as to take off its attention from all other affairs. A very frequent cause of insanity arises from the pain of some imaginary or mistaken idea, which may be termed *hallucinatio maniacalis*. Violent exercise, frequent intoxication, a sedentary life, the suppression of periodical and occasional discharges and secretions, repelled eruptions, injuries and malconformation of the head, excessive evacuations, mercury largely and injudiciously administered, and paralytic seizures, are likewise enumerated as remote causes... (349)

The sheer volume of possible causes indicates that Thomas had no idea what caused madness, but there is a clear pattern that emerges in his list: references to ambition, misfortune, study and passion demonstrate anxiety over the mind's focus on one activity or emotion. Thomas's mention of the imagination also draws a connection to the dangers of sensibility and the folly of allowing women too much time to read or indulge themselves (a notion I have addressed in my introduction). Mental discipline and controlled behavior, therefore, were essential to maintaining a sane mind.

At the same time, though, Thomas seems to think that the insane mind has no self-control and must be cowed into submission. He instructs:

It should always be the object of the superintendant [sic] and keeper, to gain the confidence of the patient, and to awake in him proper respect and obedience, which is to be effected by discipline of temper and dignity of manners. Tyrannical

severity may excite fear in the lunatic, but it will be mingled, probably, with contempt. In the management of insane persons, the superintendent must endeavour [sic] to obtain a complete ascendancy over them. When this is once effected, he will be enabled, on all future occasions, to direct and regulate their conduct according as his judgment may suggest. He should possess firmness, and, when occasion may require, should exercise his authority in a peremptory manner. He should never threaten but execute, and when the patient has misbehaved, should confine him immediately; and as example operates more forcibly than precept, it will be best to order the delinquent to be confined in the presence of the other patients, be the institution a public or private one. Such a conduct will display authority; and the person who has misbehaved, becomes awed by the spectators, and more readily submits. (353)

Thomas speaks from a position of authority addressing another in a position of authority, the “he” who will be supervising lunatics and “regulat[ing] their conduct according as his judgment may suggest.” As such, his concern is not treatment, but management. Mad persons are stripped of their liberty in all possible ways, their person controlled by another who must “obtain complete ascendancy over them.” Though “dignity of manners” may be preserved, there can be no doubt that a mad person’s autonomy, his or her very humanity, was repeatedly denied, and that such continuous treatment would have devastating effects on a person’s sense of self and their ability to assert or express his/herself.

Though Mary never explicitly confirms such treatment as outlined by Thomas, or even the more humane treatment exemplified by the York Retreat, her letters reveal the anxiety bound up with her confinement and numerous allusions to “unkindness,” a characterization that likely softened her actual experience for her reader. Thus, not only did Mary experience social pressure

to adhere to the ideal “proper lady”; as a chronic inmate of madhouses, she would also have experienced medical treatment that was rooted in social management rather than scientific evidence, which intensified the behavioral edicts that encouraged self-effacement and discouraged self-assertion.

### **III. Mary and Charles**

Just as Mary could not escape the indignities of the madhouse, she could not help but succumb to feminine modesty and submissiveness, a fact stressed by all of her biographers and by Mary herself. Mary’s first biographer was in fact her brother, Charles. Mary, a decade older than Charles, had adopted a maternal role from the beginning and helped raise him. This sibling relationship developed into one of mutual care. Charles pledged to take responsibility for Mary after her conviction for insanity, ensuring Mary would eventually stay with him rather than suffer permanent incarceration in a madhouse. Directly following their mother’s murder, Mary remained in the care of a private madhouse while Charles attended to their aging father. During this separation, Charles wrote to Coleridge: “I very much fear, she must not think of coming home in my father’s lifetime. It is very hard upon her. But our circumstances are peculiar, & we must submit to them. God be praised, she is so well as she is. She bears her situation as one who has no right to complain” (Lamb 1:96). Charles recognized that Mary and his father would not contribute to each other’s happiness and therefore placed filial duty ahead of his desire to live with his sister. One should also note how Charles describes his sister’s acceptance of remaining away from their family for longer than medically necessary in deference to her father and their “peculiar” circumstance. Charles seems to find it a miracle that Mary has not only recovered, but is enough like herself to bear the situation without complaint even though it is “very hard upon her.” Charles praises Mary for adhering to the stereotypical “feminine” virtue of suffering in silence.

Once their father died in April 1799, Mary returned home and they were reunited once more. Excepting Mary's nearly annual stays at madhouses over the years, Mary and Charles Lamb would live together for the rest of their lives, and their relationship eventually grew into acute co-dependency. Though he was never re-admitted to an asylum after his early 1792 episode, Charles continued to suffer from depression and was a heavy drinker throughout his life, depending on Mary to lift his spirits during such times. Whenever Mary was ill and obliged to recover in a madhouse, Charles would fall into despondency over her absence. He writes to Coleridge on May 12, 1800:

I don't know why I write except from the propensity misery has to tell her griefs.—Hetty [Lamb's servant] died on Friday night, about 11 o Clock, after 8 days illness. Mary in consequence of fatigue and anxiety is fallen ill again, and I was obliged to remove her yesterday.—I am left alone in a house with nothing but Hetty's dead body to keep me company.... Tomorrow I bury her, and then I shall be quite alone, with nothing but a cat, to remind me that the house has been full of living beings like myself.—My heart is quite sunk, and I don't know where to look for relief—. Mary will get better again, but her constantly being liable to such relapses is dreadful,—nor is it the least of our Evils, that her case & all our story is so well known around us. We are in a manner *marked*.—Excuse my troubling you, but I have nobody by me to speak to me.

I slept out last night, not being able to endure the change and the stillness.—But I did not sleep well, and I must come back to my own bed—I am going to try to get a friend to come & be with me tomorrow—

I am completely shipwreck'd.—My head is quite bad... I almost wish that Mary were dead. (Lamb 1:202-203)

Although they are indeed full of melancholic hyperbole, these statements reflect the powerful effect Mary's presence had on her brother. From this passage as well as many others,<sup>10</sup> it is quite obvious that Mary's companionship was essential to Charles's well-being, just as he was essential to hers. He makes clear the toll that Mary's necessary displacement makes on him: his "heart is quite sunk"; he is full of misery and grief; he is "shipwreck'd" and almost "wish[es] that Mary were dead." The burden of such stress is furthered by the fact that Charles ends a long complaint over being alone by uttering a wish for his sole true companion to leave him forever, a reversal in his expression of his needs and desire. He would rather she "were dead" than "constantly being liable to such relapses," the effects of which are "dreadful" to both Mary and himself. Throughout the passage, Charles repeatedly states that being alone is very disagreeable to him, that he regards his companions as "relief." But Mary's absence causes him to feel "completely shipwreck'd"—crashed and useless, broken into thousands of pieces on the sharp rocks of a shore. His "almost wish" for the death of his sister is the whispered confession of a man not himself, one with a "bad" head and a "sunk" heart. There is a hint of suicidal fantasy to these remarks that belies their sincerity; nevertheless, they demonstrate the intense, co-dependent relationship between brother and sister. Despite Mary's relapses and the "Evil" that it engenders, Charles is clearly unable to be alone.

In addition to Charles's misery over his sense of abandonment in this letter, one must also note his mention of the infamy that has so "marked" the Lamb siblings. In the same breath that complains of Mary's relapses, Charles also remarks upon their notoriety, effectively equating the stress caused by both circumstances and elevating the importance of their privacy, or lack thereof, to be on par with Mary's mental state. This concern over their public image stems from the public stigma of madness which no doubt followed them over the past several years and

almost certainly affected Mary's ability to publish solely under her own name, factors that affected their personal and professional relationships.

While the relationship between Mary and Charles was full of affection, Charles himself confirms that Mary and their mother had frequent difficult times. In a letter dated October 17, 1796 to Coleridge, Charles writes barely one month after his mother's death:

Poor Mary, my mother indeed never understood her right. She loved her, as she loved us all with a Mother's love, but in opinion, in feeling, & sentiment, & disposition, bore so distant a resemblance to her daughter, that she never understood her right. Never could believe how much she loved her—but met her caresses, her protestations of filial affection, too frequently with coldness & repulse,—Still she was a good mother, God forbid I should think of her but most respectfully, most affectionately. Yet she would always love my brother above Mary, who was not worthy of one tenth of that affection, which Mary had a right to claim. But it is my Sister's gratifying recollection, that every act of duty & of love she could pay, every kindness (& I speak true, when I say to the hurting of her health, & most probably in great part to the derangement of her senses) thro' a long course of infirmities & sickness, she could shew her, she ever did. (Lamb 1:52)

Charles lays a strong foundation for Mary's critics by sympathetically evaluating the strained relationship between Mary and her mother. Writing to a dear friend nearly a month after his mother's murder, he is careful to not overly criticize his mother, but the repetition of "never understood her right" makes clear that he finds fault with his mother for not appreciating and reciprocating the love Mary offered her. But rather than use ill treatment as justification for Mary's actions, Charles turns Mary's lack of affection, and even "repulse," from her mother into

another way to praise his sister: she persisted in her filial responsibility in caring for her mother with love and kindness throughout the years, even to her own detriment. Charles, at least, considers the anxious burden of such great responsibility with little acknowledgement as cause for the “hurting of her health” and “derangement of her sense”—not the cause for targeting her mother. He then speaks for Mary, insisting that Mary recollected her tender care towards their mother as “gratifying,” thus finding absolution and solace in her allegedly totalizing acts of duty, love, and kindness. In his opinion, his sister endured ill treatment at great personal cost, and her long-term sacrifice thus outweighs her momentary sin.

The problem with this characterization is that Charles wants to have it both ways: he wishes to absolve Mary of her sins by giving her sympathy, which comes across as justification for the murder; but he also wishes to declare her entirely unaware of her homicidal actions, driven by an impersonal madness that renders Mary unable to exercise her own free will. In an earlier letter to Coleridge dated October 3, 1796, he proclaims Mary wholly innocent: “My poor dear dearest sister [is] the unhappy & unconscious instrument of the Almighty’s judgments to our house” (Lamb 1:47). If she were an “unconscious instrument” of divine judgment, there would be no need to defend Mary further by emphasizing her incredible kindness towards their mother despite the lack of any reciprocity. He claims she is “restored to her senses; to a dreadful sense & recollection of what has past. . . . & the reasonings of a sound judgment, which in this early stage knows how to distinguish between a deed committed in a transcient [sic] fit of frenzy, & the terrible guilt of a Mother’s murder [sic]” (Lamb 1:47). His description entirely strips Mary of her agency, positioning her as an object rather than a subject, an agent of mad fury rather than her own person with motivation and reason. Just as he spoke in place of Mary when describing her maternal relationship in the above passage, so here too does he negate Mary’s voice with his own. It matters not that Mary at this moment is within a madhouse or that she is

“restored to her senses.” In either case, her experience is still funneled through her brother’s perspective. He follows this excision of blame with the hope that her “strength of mind” will overcome her frenzy and allow her to reclaim her feminine “tranquility.”<sup>11</sup>

Charles’s account seems to be the source of a startling trend to remove Mary’s agency from her violence and to displace her extreme actions entirely onto her madness.<sup>12</sup> For example, Anne Gilchrist’s 1883 biography, *Mary Lamb*, provides the following description of the incident:

Mary, worn out with years of nightly as well as daily attendance upon her mother...and harassed by a close application to needlework...was at last strained to the utmost pitch of physical endurance, ‘worn down to a state of extreme nervous misery’....On the afternoon of that day, seized with a sudden attack of frenzy, she snatched a knife from the table and pursued the young apprentice round the room, when her mother, interposing, received a fatal stab and died instantly. Mary was totally unconscious of what she had done; Aunt Hetty fainted with terror; the father was too feeble in mind for any but a confused and transient impression. It was Charles alone who confronted all the anguish and horror of the scene. (30)

Mary’s responsibility for her actions is obscured by sympathetic descriptions which credit Mary’s “sudden attack of frenzy” to her being “strained to the utmost pitch of physical endurance.” The complex syntax here separates the main subject from the verb and then uses a passive phrasing of the action (“received a fatal stab”), finally declaring Mary “totally unconscious” of her actions—the same word Charles uses to describe Mary in his October 3rd letter. Adriana Craciun therefore asserts: “It is Mary who is ‘seized’ by madness, and her mother who interposes and receives a fatal stab—Mary the murderer is nowhere to be found, so that we as readers, perhaps because we desire to, remain as unconscious as Mary is said to have been” (34). Craciun goes on to argue that such elisions which dismiss Mary’s violence reinforce

women's violence as "impossible and unrepresentable" (34). To entirely dismiss Mary's rage as the actions of a lunatic, without consideration of her possible agency within her madness, is to define a rigid binary that further inscribes women into artificially created identities that overly simplify, and therefore deny, their full subjectivity.

Ultimately, Charles characterizes Mary's illness as that of a split personality: when she is kind, thoughtful, attentive, quiet, she is his sister; when she is violent and manic, words spilling from her mouth in an endless tirade, the madness has possessed her and "Mary" is gone. This is a highly problematic dichotomy that does not allow for any complexity, for any opportunity for Mary to have a "sane" moment between her "frenzies." This description of Mary vs. madness effaces Mary's agency, reducing her options to kind, passive, thoughtful woman or wild, violent madwoman. All violence, all anger, all melancholy, all that which does not fit within the concept of an ideal, conventionally happy woman must be repressed, lest it be taken as yet another sign of her madness. Mary is thus pathologized by Charles into leading a double life. In his letters, Charles establishes his own perceptions of her condition: he believes "fatigue and anxiety" exacerbate, or even cause, her mental lapses, echoing Robert Thomas and other medical practitioners of his time. This supposed medical truth implies certain effects: Mary must not suffer unnecessary fatigue or anxiety; if she does, she could bring her madness onto herself. If she worked too hard, wrote too much, became too passionate or expressed too much emotion, she would recall her madness. Thus, even her most trusted, beloved companion found seemingly justified ways to restrict and restrain her, and his characterization of her pathology would influence two centuries of critics.

#### **IV. Biographers' Descriptions of Mary's Madness**

Indeed, Mary Lamb has been a polarizing figure for critics. Donelle R. Ruwe emphasizes that Mary was only able to write "under her own brother's protection," because "Mary was a

female murderer convicted of criminal insanity and was under the court-approved supervision of her generous and forgiving brother, [so] it is not surprising that Mary's as well as Charles's [literary] representations of sisters promote women's self-control and subordination to others" (100). Ruwe's technically accurate but harsh characterization of the situation all too clearly reveals its bias. In stark contrast, we have Adriana Craciun's version: "Mary Lamb's career as a writer might not have been possible had she not murdered her mother," a statement which follows a paragraph contextualizing Mary's actions within the alleged years of neglect and abuse that contributed to her breakdown (22). Both assertions, however opposed, root Mary's writing within the context of her madness, arguing the undeniable fact that Mary's unstable mental condition and its consequences permeated all aspects of her life. This view of Mary's madness permeating into all critical responses is the result of years of biographies that pathologized Mary from the earliest stages of her life.

Biographer Anne Gilchrist describes Mary as "a shy, sensitive, nervous, affectionate child, who early showed signs of a liability to brain disorder, [and] above all things needed tender and judicious care" (5).<sup>13</sup> By all accounts, it seems Mary did not receive such care. Letters written by both Mary and Charles indicate an unhappy relationship between mother and daughter, and Gilchrist seizes upon these letters to dramatize the family's misfortunes. Throughout her 1883 biography, Gilchrist makes repeated allusions to Mary's mental illness: to the "seeds of madness which she inherited" (11); to how the "cruelty of ignorance Mary's mother...suffered her young spirit to do battle still, in silence and inward solitariness, with the phantoms imagination conjured up in her too-sensitive brain" (21); and to "a child smitten like Mary with a hereditary tendency to madness" (22). Gilchrist discusses Mary's sensitivities as if she were a delicate flower that might collapse under the pressure of the slightest gust of wind. By

framing insanity as an inheritance and Mary as an overly sensitive child, Gilchrist makes a complete mental breakdown seem inevitable, maybe even expected.

Compare the gendered language used to describe and pathologize Mary against Gilchrist's discussion of Charles's struggles. Though, in early 1792, Charles had spent 6 weeks in a madhouse in Hoxton for a self-described "temporary frenzy," Gilchrist downplays such language regarding the family legacy of madness in reference to him (Lamb 1:4). In a section entitled "Effect Upon Her Brother," Gilchrist frames Mary's condition in such a way that she becomes responsible for Charles' unhappiness and struggles with his own mental illness:

The constant anxiety, the forebodings, the unremitting, watchful scrutiny of his sister's state, produced a nervous tension and irritability that pervaded his whole life and manifested themselves in many different ways. For he, too, had to wrestle in his own person with the same foe, the same hereditary tendency; though, after one overthrow of reason in his youth, he wrestled successfully. But the frequent allusions in his letters, especially in later years, to attacks of nervous fever, sleeplessness, and depression 'black as a smith's beard, Vulcanic, Stygian,' show how near to the brink he was sometimes dragged. 'You do not know how sore and weak a brain I have, or you would allow for many things which you set down to whim,' he wrote to Godwin. (102)

Gilchrist acknowledges Charles' earlier madness but immediately dismisses this fact in favor of portraying Charles as a martyr sacrificing himself on the altar of fraternal love. Rather than suggest that Charles continued to struggle, especially as he grew older, with symptoms of insanity due to a medical condition of his own, she instead asserts that his never-ending concern and caretaking of Mary caused him unnecessary stress and was the source of all subsequent illness. The "constant anxiety" is to blame for his irritability, his "watchful scrutiny" leading to

“sleeplessness” and “depression.” His “sore and weak brain” is not the result of hereditary madness exacerbated by circumstance, but rather a manifestation of the stress of caring for Mary. This uncharitable view not only blames Mary for Charles’s depression, but also excuses his “nervous tension and irritability.” While Mary must remain submissive and serene, always feminine and affectionate, Charles is given leave to be irritable and depressed; his mood swings are a result of the stressful circumstances, hers are not. His bad behavior can be excused, hers cannot. Charles, then, is allowed the full range of human emotion and behavior, while any eccentricity of Mary’s is considered pathological.

One must also note the difference in tone with which Gilchrist acknowledges Charles’s alcoholism:

Only on one point did the stress of his difficult lot find him vulnerable, one flaw bring to light—a tendency to counteract his depression and take the edge off his poignant anxieties by a too free use of stimulants. The manners of his day, the custom of producing wine and strong drinks on every possible occasion, bore hard on such a craving and fostered a man’s weakness. But Lamb maintained to the end a good standing fight with the enemy, and, if not wholly victorious, still less was he wholly defeated. (105)

In Gilchrist’s description, Charles is a valiant, nearly perfect human whose “one flaw” was a “too free use of stimulants” used to “counteract” his depression and anxiety—essentially, he sometimes took too much medicine, a medicine that was even pressed on him due to the “manners of his day.” But the good knight “maintained to the end a good standing fight with the enemy.” Gilchrist does more than excuse his alcoholism; she builds Charles up into a mythic figure of goodness, flawed but still better than the average man.

In contrast, Gilchrist follows Charles Lamb's example in suggesting that Mary's madness was brought on by excessive work or excitement without any flair for dramatic heroism. She writes that the "immediate cause of her attacks would generally seem to have been excitement or over-fatigue, causing, in the first instance, loss of sleep, a feverish restlessness, and ending in the complete overthrow of reason" (96). Gilchrist goes on to comment that the "attacks were commonly followed by a period of extreme depression, a sense of being shattered, and by a painful loss of self-reliance. These were but temporary states, however. Mary's habitual frame of mind was, as Talfourd says, serene and capable of placid enjoyment" (97). When Mary showed signs of uneasiness, Charles would encourage guests to remain quiet or depart. If the attack was not severe, or if she was in a stupor, Charles might attempt to "startle" Mary back into sanity before the condition might worsen and require her to return to an asylum for treatment. "Once," Gilchrist reports, "the sudden announcement of the marriage of a young friend, whose welfare she had at heart, restored her in a moment, after a protracted illness, 'as if by an electric stroke, to the entire possession of her senses'" (97). These anecdotes suggest that Mary's madness, as should be expected, was unpredictable and incurable. Though her family could recognize the symptoms leading to a seizure or breakdown, there were no remedies they could undertake beyond preparing for another visit to a madhouse where she might recover under supervised care. Yet Gilchrist presents the observations of family and friends in a manner that focuses on their experience rather than Mary's. Unlike Charles, whose struggle with alcohol allows him to put up a good fight against weakness, Mary is not credited for her fight against madness. Her personal struggle, her fortitude and strength, is eclipsed by the struggle of those around her to "startle" her back to sanity.

In her biography, Gilchrist quotes from numerous sources attesting to Mary's behavior, but most heavily relies on *The Letters of Charles Lamb, with a Sketch of His Life* (1837) by Sir

Thomas Noon Talfourd (1795-1854). An author, lawyer, judge, and MP, Talfourd enjoyed a friendship with the Lambs for many years and, after Charles' death and with Mary's permission, collected many of Charles' letters for publication.<sup>14</sup> He describes Mary's madness as follows:

I am able from repeated experiences to add, that her ramblings often sparkled with brilliant description and shattered beauty. It was all broken and disjointed, so that the hearer could remember little of her discourse; but the fragments were like the jeweled speeches of Congreve, only shaken from their settings. There was sometimes even a vein of crazy logic running through them, associating things essentially most dissimilar, but connecting them by a verbal association in strange order. As a mere physical instance of deranged intellect, her condition was, I believe, extraordinary; it was as if the finest elements of the mind had been shaken into fantastic combinations, like those of a kaleidoscope. (qtd. in Gilchrist 96)

Perhaps the most important revelation in Talfourd's observations of Mary's madness is the focus on her verbosity.<sup>15</sup> Though her language was "broken," "disjointed" "fragments," Talfourd concedes there was a "crazy logic" and "strange order" to her "deranged intellect." Despite the negative qualifiers, Mary's language was also "jeweled" and "fantastic." A kaleidoscope is valued for its seemingly endless combinations of beautiful colors and shapes; so too was Mary's imagination and language when no longer curbed by her reason. His description almost reads like Coleridge's account of his opium-induced haze that led to "Kubla Khan." Rather than exhibiting the violent physical symptoms which led to her mother's death, in this description Mary's madness manifests verbally, her reason and language fractured but beautiful. Like the kaleidoscope to which Talfourd compares her, this side of Mary's madness offers a different

perspective, demonstrating an assertive yet non-violent quality more in keeping with expected female behavior and her own character when sane.

For Talfourd also writes that her character, “in all its essential sweetness, was like her brother’s; while, by a temper more placid, a spirit of enjoyment more serene, she was enabled to guide, to counsel, to cheer him and to protect him on the verge of the mysterious calamity from the depths of which she rose so often unruffled to his side. To a friend in any difficulty she was the most comfortable of advisers, the wisest of consolers [sic]” (qtd. in Gilchrist 94-95). When not suffering from a mental lapse, Mary seemed to others as Charles had always insisted: a kind, thoughtful woman. Talfourd here also supports Charles’s conviction that Mary was essential to his well-being and that her strength of mind allowed her to rise “so often unruffled to his side” despite the annual weakening of that strength. Without the proper context, a person might read Talfourd’s statements and not realize Mary’s condition, so normalizing is the effect of his rhetoric. Talfourd’s specific word choice regarding Mary’s ability to keep a “placid” temper and a “serene” spirit and to “guide,” “counsel,” “cheer” and “protect” Charles, emphasizes prized feminine qualities of the time, gesturing towards the “proper lady” and the so-called “Angel of the House,” as Gilbert and Gubar have termed it<sup>16</sup> after a series of poems under that title by Coventry Patmore, who provided unfailing and unselfish support and love to her household.

In addition to establishing that Mary was an esteemed woman among her friends, Talfourd goes even further to make clear that neither her violence nor her insanity hindered their perception of her “true” feminine nature: by “nature” Mary had a “gentle habit and humble manner.” It was only the “terrible force of disease” which stripped her of her “womanly” resolve to keep “undue subordination to her notion of a woman’s province.” Talfourd is quick, however, to remark that “her conversation in sanity was never marked by smartness or repartee, seldom rising beyond that of a sensible, quiet gentlewoman, appreciating and enjoying the talents of her

friends” (qtd. in Gilchrist 95). He thereby undercuts his previous statements regarding her “intellect of rare excellence,” positioning her as a passive “gentlewoman” who dedicated her time to those around her and only spoke of herself when in the throes of madness. Self-assertion, then, is made pathological; self-effacement ideal. This division of her behavior, too, is in keeping with expectations of selfless feminine behavior: when she was sane she was focused on others; it was only while mad that she focused on herself. In a sense then, “mad” Mary was liberated from her “woman’s province” and made a break with the logos of “undue subordination.” Madness allowed Mary to talk, to babble out beautiful language, however fragmented, to voice herself beyond the “sensible, quiet gentlewoman, appreciating and enjoying the talents of her friends.”

Throughout a more recent biography, *Mad Mary Lamb: Lunacy and Murder in Literary London* (2005), Susan Tyler Hitchcock repeatedly asserts that Mary had suffered years of neglect and ill treatment from her mother and argues there is little doubt that the strained relationship between mother and daughter exacerbated the exhaustion Mary felt while carrying out so many responsibilities. The influence of Gilchrist on this kind of assertion by Hitchcock is unquestionable. The latter characterizes Mary as having “a self-sacrificing devotion which, carried at last far beyond her strength led to the great calamity of her life” (Hitchcock 21), essentially explaining her insanity as a consequence of Mary’s many domestic burdens: the immense amount of pressure Mary Lamb faced as she cared for her ailing parents, instructed an apprentice, worked as a mantuamaker, and also ran the Lamb household on a slim budget. However, Hitchcock’s claim of Mary’s self-sacrifice leading to her mother’s murder is mostly unsubstantiated, an extrapolation of events that only provides a projected emotional context. Mary had been showing signs of illness for days, and the morning of September 22nd Charles had left the home in search of the doctor; hence his absence during his mother’s murder. Directly linking Mary’s psychotic violence to repressed rage against her mother ignores the

circumstances. Mary's initial target was her apprentice, and she only turned on her mother when the woman tried to interfere. Hitchcock turns her subject's murderous, violent impulse into an act motivated by resentment and lost love rather than an act of madness. There is no evidence of direct provocation that explains Mary's violent outburst against her mother, and Charles's descriptions of Mary's behavior very carefully highlight her compassion and tenderness toward their parents. Regardless, Hitchcock pathologizes Mary's relationship to her mother and assigns motivation to an arguably irrational crime.

As we can see from Hitchcock's interpretation, Gilchrist's early assessment of Mary would influence how future critics contextualized Mary's homicidal actions and pathologized her life. Hitchcock cannot resist reducing Mary's life to the sensational rhetoric of her biography's title. Gilchrist's observations dramatically frame Mary's madness as an inevitability of genetics, the curse of a family inheritance that she could not overthrow, while Charles's own brush with insanity is almost entirely dismissed. Like Charles, Talfourd separates out Mary's "normal" behavior from her madness, insisting on two very different Mary Lambs who never really commingled (even though, of course, they did). One was a sane, feminine gentlewoman; the other was broken, disjointed, but brilliant. However, Mary's own writing proves the inaccuracy of such a binary understanding of her condition and demonstrates that "sane" Mary still had a touch of mad brilliance.

## **V. Mary's Performance in Her Letters**

Mary's letters show a kind woman writing about everyday life, who recalls fond memories and asks earnestly after her friends even as she consistently apologizes for not writing more frequently. As she declares to Sarah Stoddart in her July 21, 1802 letter: "I am ashamed of having your kind letter so long by me unanswered: it lies upon the table and reproaches me all day long—when I begged you would write me, I forgot to inform you—I am much fonder of

receiving letters, than writing them....I am always a miserable letter writer” (Mary Lamb 2:63). Her propensity to apologize and admit shame is a pattern repeated frequently in her letters. Though she became an author, there is clear evidence of anxiety about writing that permeates Mary’s writing in her letters. Part of this irony is likely due to the contemporary belief that the vigorous mental stress that writing demanded was suitable only for men’s stronger constitutions;<sup>17</sup> but there is also a frank acknowledgment that Mary’s desire to please her reader contributes to the stress she feels in writing to friends. It is this desire to please, and to be considered pleasing, that informs Mary’s consistent mix of deference, shame, and apology in her letters. A simple explanation for this continuous self-effacement is, of course, Mary’s strict attempts to be a “proper lady.” However, her apologies take on a special performative quality when one considers alternative motives.

Mary defaults repeatedly to a position of deference in her letters, acting the part of a woman concerned with maintaining friendly correspondence. Her performance, however, veers toward a practically indulgent self-castigation. Mary’s next letter, dated December 1, 1802, begins in the same vein: “I am truly and heartily ashamed of myself, I have been so very long without writing to you...” (Lamb 2:89). She frequently calls herself a “useless creature,” possessing a “confused head” filled with “all manner of such-like vapouring and vapourish schemes” (2:210). Yet she has an “advising spirit,” and when she feels she oversteps a boundary by offering advice, she backtracks with an apology so fervent in tone that it sounds almost ironic in its urgency. Thus we can note Mary’s pattern of passive aggressive performance and see how apologizing in advance for sins not yet committed, and likely never to be committed, affords her a position of power in the midst of many perceived weaknesses. By declaring herself “useless,” “confused,” and full of shame, she prevents others from labeling her so. Mary takes control of the narrative and uses her authority as an author to establish her own sense of identity, one far

more complicated than “Mad Mary Lamb.” Rather than succumb completely to her weak status as madwoman, Mary resists being fully pathologized by repeatedly subverting the very rhetorical cues that signify her pathology.

Mary’s subtle resistance to being pathologized is especially evident in a particular exchange of letters with Sarah Stoddart from early November of 1805. Within these letters, Mary describes her relationship with Charles, her relationship with her mother, and her relationship with herself. She establishes her identity of that of a thoughtful friend by deliberately demonstrating her feminine powers of empathy, her careful consideration of the feelings of her correspondents and those she writes about. Mary the letter-writer, above all else, empathizes with her reader. Most importantly, the letters showcase her constant vigilance over the reach—and possible overreach—of her authorial authority. Such vigilance indicates heightened awareness of her language and mastery of her intention.

After the typical pleasantries that open most letters between friends, Mary transitions into more intimate detail of her home life. She acknowledges the low spirits of Charles and how it affects her own disposition: “You would laugh, or you would cry, perhaps both, to see us sit together looking at each other with long and rueful faces, & saying how do you? & how do you do? & then we fall a crying & say we will be better on the morrow—he says we are like tooth ache & his friend gum bile, which though a kind of ease, is but an uneasy kind of ease, a comfort of rather an uncomfortable sort” (Lamb 2:182). This passage demonstrates the close, co-dependent relationship between brother and sister, a relationship that both confirms and defies the expected expulsion of madness from society.<sup>18</sup> As often happens with individuals who live together, one person’s mood and behavior affects the other. For Charles and Mary, their separate difficulties with mental health (Charles’ alcoholism and depression, Mary’s lapses of sanity) come together to both exacerbate and soothe the other’s illness: “a comfort of rather an

uncomfortable sort.” Her rhetoric sets up a mirroring relationship: “[we] sit together looking at each other with long and rueful faces, & saying how do you? & how do you?” This mirroring blurs the lines of individual subjects, shifting the boundaries of Mary’s singular illness to include that of her brother’s as well. Her rhetoric breaks the tradition of isolation which usually characterizes contemporary depictions of mad, pathologized women. Mary, instead of occupying a lonely cell in a madhouse, remains at home with a companion, sharing the misery, the “uneasy kind of ease,” the hope that she and her brother “will be better on the morrow.” Her description of domestic partnership and support defies the exclusionary image of institutionalized violence and madness. It is not idyllic domesticity, but rather something far more honest: domestic necessity and the sympathy of close interaction.<sup>19</sup>

Mary continues to write about the “sad & heavy times” before realizing that, by voicing own distress, she might have taken away from the seriousness of acknowledging her friend’s troubles. To her this lapse is unacceptable. She declares:

I seem upon looking over my letter again to have written too lightly of your distresses at Malta, but however I may have written believe me I enter very feelingly into all your troubles. I love you, & I love your brother, & between you, both of whom I think have been to blame I know not what to say—only this I say try to think as little as possible of past miscarriages. It was perhaps so ordered by providence that you might return home to be a comfort to your poor Mother. And do not I conjure you let her unhappy malady afflict you too deeply—I speak from experience & from the opportunity I have had of much observation in such cases that insane people in the fancy’s [sic] they take into their heads do not feel as one in a sane state of mind does under the real evil of poverty the perception of having done wrong or any such thing that runs in their heads. (Lamb 2:184)

This passage offers excellent insight into several aspects of Mary's character. First, she chastises herself for not spending more time comforting her friend. Though it is clear that Mary had previously endured a number of personal problems and is at this very moment still wrestling with her and Charles' mental health, she prioritizes her friend/reader here and all the way to the end of the letter. It is not enough for Mary to offer comfort; in order to perform the correct mode of female sympathy, she must do so to the exclusion of her own interests. "I enter very feelingly into all your troubles" is a particularly demonstrative sentence. The speech-act of not only acknowledging, but also taking upon oneself, the emotional burden of *all* the troubles of another is a distinctly feminized trait. The fact that Mary feels the need to correct herself and more thoroughly engage in feeling Sarah's woes, however, sustains her initial impulse within this overly generous act of complete empathy. Her empathy is a conscious and conscientious act that paradoxically subverts the socially constructed idea of "natural" empathy. It does not take away from the kindness of the gesture, but the deliberateness behind the empathy suggests a kind of calculation that does not align with the concept of "natural" feeling. Mary's empathy is, at least partially, a performance designed to counteract her pathologized identity.

Additionally, Mary encourages both Sarah and her brother to move past the question of blame, refusing to favor one or the other by declaring her love for both. She effectively positions herself as neutral, even though she had previously offered an impassioned declaration of empathy specifically towards Sarah. This contradiction is not necessarily a wavering in her empathetic position; rather, it is Mary best positioning herself to be of comfort to her reader and to then provide advice. By stating "I know not what to say" after asserting they were both to blame, Mary qualifies both the preceding and following words. This type of equivocation is a rhetorical tactic Mary repeatedly uses in her letters. She first asserts her ignorance, pre-emptively defending herself. Then the phrase "only this I say" sets up the importance of the following lines.

The “only” implies that this is the one clear thought Mary has to offer and therefore Sarah should take it to heart. By discouraging Sarah from thinking on “past miscarriages,” she encourages forgiveness (of Sarah’s brother or Sarah herself remains ambiguous) and urges Sarah to look to the future rather than the past for solace. This forward-looking philosophy of forgiveness contradicts Charles’ description of Mary’s mindset following the death of their mother: Mary felt terrible guilt for her actions and was dwelling on the past; she was “far very very far from an indecent forgetful serenity” (Oct. 3rd, 1796, Lamb 1:47).

Mary had difficulty forgetting her own “past miscarriages.” Her letter also addresses her own relationship with her own mother, specifically in the context of insanity, and goes so far as to offer advice for how Sarah should relate to her mother. She offers a silver lining to Sarah’s return home; she might now provide comfort for her mother, a duty that she should undertake as a good daughter. But there is a caveat attached: Mary cautions against letting Sarah’s mother’s “unhappy malady” afflict her too deeply. The extension of sympathy cannot go too far. She is clearly referencing how her mother’s debilitation affected her and the tragic ending that ensued. Mary explains, based her own experience and the observations of others, “that insane people in the fancy’s [sic] they take into their heads do not feel as one in a sane state of mind does under the real evil of poverty the perception of having done wrong or any such thing that runs in their heads” (Lamb 2:184). Mary knows firsthand the debilitating effect of guilt or misery, or the perception of both. Both traditional treatment for the insane and the new popular treatment of “moral management” would have taught her to repress any unfeminine impulses—as would have larger social pressures in the Romantic era. She must be mild, meek, self-restraining in order to be a “proper lady.” The expectation of self-restraint complicates Mary’s advice-giving, for she is very careful to avoid expressing criticism of her friends even as she tried her best to offer support. The tension between the impulse to subordinate herself as well as actively impart

authority and wisdom is characteristic of Mary's continual contradiction and complexity. She constantly combats the rigid social expectations of Romantic femininity even as she tries to conform to them. Mary is constantly fighting multiple impulses, and the result is a performance of deft bobbing-and-weaving across verbal patterns that reveal her words as performative rather than spontaneous.

The end of this letter further demonstrates Mary's verbal tic of humility followed by advice and also offers a clear position on the medical treatment of the time:

I know not what to say—only this I say. Think as little as you can, & let your whole care be to be certain that she is treated with *tenderness*. I lay a stress upon this, because it is a thing of which people in her state are uncommonly susceptible, & which hardly any one is at all aware of, a hired nurse never, even though in all other respects they are good kind of people. I do not think your own presence necessary unless she *takes to you very much* except for the purpose of seeing with your own eyes that she is very kindly treated. (Lamb 2:184)

The repetition of “I know not what to say—only this I say” reiterates Mary's attempt to advise without overstepping the mark, while also setting up her following comments with aplomb. Her final remarks demonstrate her kindness and concern, which stem not only from her role as caretaker (previously for her mother, now for Charles), but also from her experience as one who needs care. The idea of “tenderness” as the most important aspect of medical treatment, especially for the insane, comes from the experienced authority of a pathologized person. Mary's emphasis that even hired nurses, who are “good kind of people,” “*never*” are fully aware of the importance of kind treatment in the care of their charges heavily implies Mary's own suffering at the hands of inadequate help. Mary's early position as a woman in a family with firmly middle-class aspirations would have taught her humility and a strong work ethic, which, once she and

Charles grew more comfortable in their finances, no doubt would have contributed to her humiliation over her various “banishments” to private madhouses. Though she escaped the fate of the poorest inmates, she was still subject to the indignities of her condition and treatment. Mary’s vulnerability is very clear from what remains unsaid in this passage—and her quick conclusion of the letter. Her vulnerability is rooted in reality, but also becomes the performative foundation for Mary’s next letter.

Several days later (Nov. 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>), Mary follows this initial letter with another one that exhibits an almost frantically performative apology for her earlier remarks and advice regarding Sarah’s mother. Mary shows such distress regarding a possible breach of social etiquette that she verbally prostrates herself and blames her behavior on her mental illness. The rest of this letter then reveals both her heightened sense of social consciousness as well as her manipulation of her illness for, ironically, a better social standing. By calling on the good-hearted nature of her friends to understand her impulsive behavior and be more willing to forgive her offenses, Mary takes advantage of their knowledge regarding her mental state, playing on their assumptions and tendency to pathologize her in order to more easily acquire their leniency for any breach in social conduct. Ironically, the very act of embracing her pathology allows Mary to overcome it.

Mary begins her letter by recalling her night as “very feverish,” for she had been “distressed” about her previous letter to the point of physical discomfort. Mary thus deliberately pathologizes herself, positioning herself as weak and sick, vulnerable and subject to her friend’s good nature. She continues to emphasize her empathy, stating “I truly enter into & feel for” Sarah’s differences with her brother—a phrase she has used before to indicate the depth of her emotional transference. What gives her the most concern is

the way in which I talked about your Mothers illness & which I have since feared  
you might construe in my having doubt of your showing her proper attention

without my impertinent interference. God knows nothing of this kind was ever in my thoughts, but I have entered very deeply into your affliction with regard to your Mother, & while I was writing, the many poor souls in the kind of desponding way she is in whom I have seen, came afresh into my mind, & all the mismanagement with which I have seen them treated was strong in my mind, & I wrote under a forcible impulse which I could not at that time resist, but I have fretted so much about it since, that I think it is the last time I will ever let my pen run away with me. (Lamb 2:185)

While the bulk of her explanation details personal and shared experiences of medical “mismanagement” (management instead of treatment, one must note), Mary’s defense for having possibly offended Sarah through her “impertinent interference” is complicated by her own characterization of her agency in writing it. While Mary’s syntax is characteristically verbose, as demonstrated by her long sentences, there are many clauses in that final sentence which pile on one another in a manner that echoes her metaphor of her pen running away with her. The build-up effect of the syntax communicates a kind of breathless urgency, a rising desire to spit out her concerns as quickly as possible before she loses control again. The effect of these “afresh...strong” memories of many poor souls despondent under mismanagement is a “forcible impulse which [she] could not at that time resist.” The suggestion is that Mary’s mind has been caught up with horrible memories which have clouded her judgment and *forcibly* compelled her to write out of turn—essentially pathologizing her words, or at least the very act of her writing. But Mary insists that the subsequent fretting has been enough to censor her in the future, that the worry caused by her “forcible impulse” is enough to prevent future impulses from occurring—she has regained the discipline and self-control of the proper lady. Such logic, however, is

paradoxical because it assigns agency to the mind in mastering an impulse even as it defines that impulse as something unable to be mastered.

Mary then follows this act of pathologizing her writing with further excuses rooted in her mental illness:

Your kind heart will I know even if you have been a little displeas'd forgive me when I assure you my spirits have been so much hurt by my last illness that at times I hardly know what I do—I do not mean to alarm you about myself, or to plead in excuse that I am very much otherwise than you have always known me—I do not think any one perceives me altered, but I have lost all self confidence in my own actions, & one cause of my low spirits is that I never feel satisfied with any thing I do—a perception of not being in a sane state perpetually haunts me. I am ashamed to confess this weakness to you, which as I am so sensible of I ought to strive to conquer. (Lamb 2:186)

There are several key phrases that not only pathologize Mary, but also position her as vulnerable, apologetic, and deserving of her friend's forgiveness. Mary adopts an extreme perspective by declaring "I hardly know what I do," suggesting her agency is entirely out of her hands, then immediately following the phrase with, "I do not mean to alarm you about myself," a speech-act that almost certainly bids the listener to be alarmed. These statements fulfill the most basic understanding of a reverse psychology. She describes herself as having lost all self-confidence, as unsatisfied, haunted by her mental episodes, and ashamed of such weakness. Consciously or not, Mary wields her illness as a rhetorical weapon, one meant to deflect aggression and instill sympathy. As Adriana Craciun argues, quite rightly, "Mary Lamb understood language's radical separation from nature, and valued it precisely for this reason, since it allowed her to rewrite her own history, and her memory of her mother" (31).

Perhaps the most complex statement in the passage is Mary's final one: "I am ashamed to confess this weakness to you, which as I am so sensible of I ought to strive to conquer." That Mary should feel shame for her mental illness is not unexpected, for it is a common reaction to being subjected to a lowered social status that, by its very nature, defined her as deviant and pathological. But because of her brother's intervention, Mary enjoyed many freedoms denied to her fellow madwomen. She was still in a position of relative privilege, and it is this privilege that allows her to present herself as passive and weak when it is to her advantage. Her confession acts as a concession: Mary seemingly gives up a piece of her dignity in acknowledging weakness, but, in truth, she cannot confide a secret when her past, and present, is not secret to her reader. All of her acquaintances, and many strangers, are aware of her background. While the reader may be moved by her declaration that she is "haunted" by her insanity, it is not a weakness that one could reasonably expect her to conquer. The self-castigation becomes not a gesture of self-awareness and humility but rather one of purposeful martyrdom. Mary then ends the letter bidding Sarah to write her at once, a signal that Mary is forgiven. The move suggests that Sarah holds the power, but such a characterization is dubious in the face of the previous passage: it would be unbecoming for Sarah not to forgive her friend this small, unintentional slight in light of Mary's larger circumstances. Mary's power thus manifests not through her sensibility, but through her "weakness"—her pathology.

Mary presents a complex understanding of the pathologized female in her representation of her actions and mindset because she uses her mental illness as an excuse for her behavior while also demonstrating her trust in her friend, even as she exposes her own vulnerability regarding her health. She decries her self-perceived ill behavior as a product of her weak mind while at the same time reassuring her correspondent that she has the power and sensibility to conquer her weaknesses. The very contradiction in Mary's statements and behaviors are

evidence of her mental prowess rather than mental illness. She absolves herself of judgment by suggesting any unfeminine behavior is an impulse she cannot control, and she pre-emptively excuses those impulses by assigning them to her “mad” self rather than to “Mary,” all while still asserting her ability to console her friends and offer sound advice. Mary’s complex performance of simultaneous authority and weakness in her letters denies the binary understanding madness and sanity that nearly everyone, including herself, assigned to her.

As Mary Poovey proclaims, “the very act of a woman writing during a period in which self-assertion was considered ‘unladylike’ exposes the contradictions inherent in propriety: just as the inhibitions visible in her writing constitute a record of her historical oppression, so the work itself proclaims her momentary, possibly unconscious, but effective, defiance” (xv). Mary Lamb’s letters reveal an intelligent woman who understands the complicated nature of her mental health and will not be forced into one definition of pathologized womanhood. Mary instead challenges her reader to accept her flaws, for they are what give her greater powers of perception and empathy, even as her violent, manic behavior both destabilizes and ensures her feminine identity. Self-assertion and self-expression require autonomy and a strong sense of one’s subjectivity beyond its reliance on and position in the world. Mary’s strategies of resistance inevitably reproduce the system of values of her society while simultaneously reconstructing our understanding of those values. By embracing the complexity of her self-performance, we are thus able to recognize the proscribed limitations of her madness for what they are: limits written by others. Mary defied social expectations by continuing to publish and maintaining a life outside of the madhouses, and in doing so she became more than just a murderer or a madwoman. Mary became an author, and in the writing of her letters she wrote her own limits.

CHAPTER TWO: ATTITUDES, GESTURES, AND VOICES:  
PATHOLOGIZED BODIES IN *COUNT BASIL* AND *THE CAPTIVE*

**I. Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed how Mary Lamb performed her roles as woman writer and madwoman in ways that both reinforced and resisted stereotypical, pathologized constructions of feminine madness. This chapter focuses on pathologized performances of Romantic-era drama, examining two works by two prolific authors of the period who found success both on and off the stage: Joanna Baillie and Matthew Lewis. Both authors wrote plays that were staged but also printed for a reading audience, and examination of their dramaturgy and other writings reveal the theatrical nuances captured in performance, stage direction, and critical responses. These theatrical nuances reiterate the public pathologizing of the female body: how a woman should move, how a woman should be seen, how a woman should react to men both on and off the stage.

The physical nature of theatre, and of Romantic-era theatre in particular, emphasizes the physicality of the human body, literally placing the body in front of an audience for judgment. The popularity of the theatre ensured its position as a powerful component of public discourse, and the theatrical works produced during this time reproduced the system of values shared by its audience. Performance is a kind of publication, after all, and these authors used that link to highlight another one: the connection between performance and the gendered construction of the individual—especially the body of women—in British culture during this time. Indeed, via both print and the stage, Joanna Baillie and Matthew Lewis produced plays that engaged in genuine critical analysis about the performative actions of men and women in the public sphere, what they do and can mean within the cultural construction of personhood.

This chapter argues that both playwrights investigate the patriarchal desire to fetishize the female body and to proscribe improper performances of female behavior, all in an effort to maintain control over the increasingly public exploration of feminine identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The content and form of theatre both reflects and shapes women's lives by formulating normative social structures that position women outside the dominant discourse. All the material aspects of theatre create meaning for the spectator, but perhaps the most visible signifier is the actor's body, which was more easily seen than the speeches were heard in the cavernous licensed theaters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The female bodies of characters and the actresses who inhabited those roles were pathologized by not only the male characters of the plays, but also the popular and critical audiences observing them. The eponymous character of Baillie's *Count Basil* (1798) is so entranced by the body of his love interest, Victoria, that he disrupts the homosocial bonds of his military duty and brings so much shame to himself and his soldiers that he commits suicide—a clear pathologizing of what can happen if femininity undercuts stereotypical notions of male honor in war. Meanwhile, Victoria's body is dramatized as an object by the male characters, turned into the catalyst that sparks ruin in an honorable man. Her body is thus pathologized as a source of weakness and temptation for men. In *The Captive* (1803), Lewis's female protagonist is so distraught by the environment of the insane asylum in which she is unethically imprisoned that she goes mad. Her rational speech, the indicator of her sanity in the play, deteriorates until she is left with only her body; yet even the Captive's performative physical gestures of “natural” womanhood, which try to articulate her sanity to her jailer, fail her in that very effort.

Both plays contain gender performances in which their supposed effectiveness breaks down in an unfamiliar, sometimes hostile, environment: Victoria's excessive pleasure in her

femininity disrupts the social order because she plays her part too well— especially for an audience that cannot control his reactions—resulting in a pathologized female body that infects and transfers its pathological weakness to Basil’s male body; the Captive’s physical attempts to appeal to her Gaoler through gestures of feminine pity fail because the space she now inhabits encourages others to pathologize her rational pleas as hysteria and refuse her agency. Hence the Gaoler denies her words and actions in favor of accepting the label of madness placed on her by her husband. Male characters who pathologize heightened performances of femininity, which are ironically intended by the performer to neutralize her pathology, reveal the performative labor of feminine identity and the pressures of internalized social performance, whether in the “private” home or the public theater. By writing characters that overtly perform and perpetuate the very gender essentialisms that inhibit them, Baillie and Lewis expose and critique the ideological structures and constructed gender norms that affect behavior, especially women’s behavior, both on and off the stage.

## **II. Romantic Theatre**

The ability to pathologize the female body on the stage was made possible, to a great extent, by the material conditions of Romantic theaters, including acting styles of that time, the increase in “private” theatricals, and the personal relationships famous actresses developed with their audiences. An evening at the theater in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would never mean just one play performed for a fixed, passive audience. The audience would be a moving, loud mass of people that interacted with both the actors and each other. Though a typical playbill would announce the main event as well as a few after-pieces, the typical five-act drama would be accompanied by a prologue and epilogue. These were short performance pieces, often but not always verse monologues, and, as Gillian Russell has shown, were “vehicles of communication” between the theater company and the audience (107). They could introduce a

new actor, writer, or stage piece, or excuse the absence of an expected performer. Essentially, theatregoers were encouraged to *engage* with the performers, and these interactions often blurred the line between what was happening on and off the stage. Audiences were thus prompted to invest in an actress's life outside the theater, and personal investment inevitably heightens an audience's feelings of pleasure, disappointment, or even ownership over a performance—and the body that created that performance.

The Romantic period also saw extensive technical stage innovations, such as realistic set pieces, extravagant special effects,<sup>1</sup> brighter lighting, and elaborate costuming. There was also an expansion within the physical theaters, as owners attempted to draw larger crowds to offset the costs of such expensive architecture and set pieces that appealed to London's growing population. Both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the two "legitimate" licensed theaters, underwent massive reconstruction in the 1790s, only to be rebuilt after fires destroyed those efforts a few years later.<sup>2</sup> The "new" Drury Lane which opened in 1794 housed over 3,600 spectators with five tiers of galleries and sixteen private boxes. The aim of this substantial renovation was clear: cram as many of the new middle-class patrons as possible into the theater. However, one consequence of the larger theaters was the lack of sound quality for the audience in the back of the house, meaning that acting styles necessarily became more exaggerated and privileged sight over sound. In *Romantic Drama: Acting and Reacting* (2009), Frederick Burwick cuts to the heart of the issue: "Not entirely vanquished, but seriously challenged, was the sense of intimacy between performer and audience. The consequences were inevitable. No longer able to rely on subtle gesture and vocal nuance, acting style had to employ broader histrionics and maintain volume in its vocal projection. Productions tended more toward spectacle and pantomime" (6). Spectacle and pantomime necessarily directs focus to an actor's

body and to the ways in which a body adhered or deviated from an audience's expectation for both the character and the actor inhabiting the role.

Acting conventions and stylistic practices of gesture of the late eighteenth century are preserved in a number of works which discuss how gait, hand movements, the position of the head, etc. indicate gender, class, profession, age, and other aspects of social identity in such a large space as the newly built theaters. One such publication is Henry Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, first released in 1807 with a second edition following in 1822. Adapted from M. Engel's treatise on German drama, Siddons's influential work addresses "natural" vs. "false" gestures of emotion and how actors use body language to communicate emotions felt, or even dissembled, by their characters onstage. Siddons's work, which primarily focuses on the popular acting styles of his mother, Sarah Siddons, and his uncle, John Philip Kemble, contains sixty-nine engravings "expressive of the various passions, and representing the modern costume of the London theatres" (title page). Of the sixty-nine images presented at the beginning of the text, eighteen contain women. Of those eighteen images, most of them fall along the typically gendered spectrum of female behavior: Tranquil Joy, Quietude, Supplication, Voluptuous Indolence, Sickness, Horror, Terror—in other words, images of female passivity and submission.

The first female image shown below is number sixteen, Affection, which offers a distinct physical embodiment of the stereotypical unbreakable connection between female affection and motherhood: a woman sits in a chair with arms around a young child who gazes up at her with arms raised (see Figure 1). Both figures are wrapped up in each other, focused on the other's face and bodies angled towards one another. The mirroring image of linked arms and matching gazes creates a circle of love and warmth and inextricably ties together the concepts of female, mother, and child. It is one of only nine images that contains more than one figure and the only image

that includes a child. By constructing such an image as the ideal definition of Affection, Siddons's engraving effectively disallows any deviation from the notion of affectionate motherhood. Much like the problematic concept of the "proper" lady, any aberration from the accepted norm would be considered pathological.

The other images of female "passion" tend to show signs of submission: arms are often raised in supplication, heads and gaze lowered, mouths closed. The only female figure that might be considered aggressive is False Gesture (see Figure 2), whose firm stance, open mouth, upward gaze, and clenched fists, one raised in challenge, is the exception which proves the rule: she is the only image of aggressive femininity, and her physicality is labeled "False." Aggression performed by the female body is thus constructed as unnatural, dishonest, pathological. A healthy, natural, "proper" woman should focus on being an affectionate mother, not try to challenge others or raise her hand in anger.



Figure 1



Figure 2

This first image of a woman, Affection, sets up the standard of motherhood that feeds into the kind of gender essentialism that pervades the rest of Siddons's study and points to the complex negotiations of theatrical criticism and performance during this period, especially with regards to women. For as Gillian Russell points out, the

anti-theatrical prejudice of the period, a complex phenomenon derived from long-standing antipathy to the theatre as idolatrous, licentious and a site for the promotion of social disorder, was inflected by issues of gender. What troubled commentators about the theatre – its emphasis on the superficiality of display, the dubious attractions of the body, the trading in inauthentic selves, and most

crucially the capacity to generate desire and fantasy – was also what disturbed them about women. (116)

The images Siddons catalogued were meant to be physical demonstrations of authentic human emotion, but if such emotions could be so convincingly feigned by actresses such as Sarah Siddons, could real mothers feign love for their children or wives “perform” obedience to their husbands? If human nature could be studied and mimicked so convincingly, what prevented women from feigning the “female” “passions” of Affection, Quietude, and Supplication? And how might this threat be neutralized?

Julie Carlson compellingly addresses this complex threat of women on the Romantic stage in *In the Theater of Romanticism* (1994). In an effort to contain the power of women in the theater, Carlson argues, male playwrights such as Wordsworth and Coleridge not only championed the superiority of the mind in their critical discourse, but also wrote plays in which the male characters were tormented by the power of their intellect and consistently brooded on the emotional efficacies of their situations. In contrast to these male self-examiners were the female characters, who usually were impetuously rushing into action without the same careful thoughtfulness as their male companions. Despite the emphasis on passive passions in Siddons’s engravings, the female body on the stage during this time could also embody feminine impulsivity and rashness. For Carlson, this gender divide showcases male poets’ commitment to embodying their highly masculine national agenda in response to a more “feminine” France, as well as a misogynistic impulse to curb the power of female intellect in public debate:

Romantic writers deny this rendition of theatre’s power by denigrating spectacle, ‘situation,’ pantomime, on the grounds that it robs drama of poetry. They then associate all these derogatory effects with women players. With few exceptions, their theatre criticism treats actresses as bodies, not minds; even more

consistently, their plays ascribe action to female characters, poetry to males. The former are at best single-minded and unreflecting; the latter are self-divided but lyrical in their remorse. (20-1)

Carlson's work focuses on the male playwrights, in particular Coleridge, who attempted to bring their works to bear in what they viewed as an unsatisfactory stage environment. As an aesthetic arena that combined reality and imagination, the stage was an ideal place in which man could bring to life his vision of England as a nation, a place, and a people. The theater around 1800 allowed playwrights to actualize the potential of their imaginations and to demonstrate the ideal behavior of *men*. Through their verbose, elegant rationality, the male actors thereby overcame their positions as spectacles on stage. The female characters, however, were not offered this same benefit, remaining mostly physical spectacles instead of deeply thinking subjects.

The misogynistic reactions to female characters also extended to female writers, women who dared to enter public, intellectual debate. Take, for instance, *The Monthly Review's* response to Mrs. Frances Plowden's opera *Virginia* (1801): "The preface informs us that it was composed under the pressure of misfortune; we shall therefore be glad if it meets with more favour in the closet; and that we may throw no obstacles in the way of its success, we shall dismiss it with merely our good wishes" (qtd. in Bennett 164).<sup>3</sup> This high-handed condescension dismisses the efforts of the playwright by declaring the closet a more favorable medium for an *opera*, a clear insult to both the writer and closet drama. The reviewer notes that the female writer "composed under the pressure of misfortune," a detail that often haunts those members of the artistic community regardless of gender. By solely using the biographical detail of "misfortune" to characterize the female author, the reviewer pathologizes her artistic endeavor as evidence of feminine creative weakness. The implication is that Mrs. Plowden, a victim of "misfortune," only wrote her play for money and so, out of pity, the reviewer will comment no further on her

implied inadequacies and “dismiss it with merely our good wishes.” The dismissal itself, of course, acts as criticism of Mrs. Plowden’s individual opera and her larger artistic ability, not to mention the greater implication that a good, proper lady would not have to succumb to such “pressure[s] of misfortune.” As this censorious review of a female playwright indicates, the critical male gaze was particularly sharp in the theater, where the stage directly invites assessment of the female mind and body. This peculiarity was due in part to the literal corporeality of bodies on the stage, but also to the way in which the stage provided actresses and female playwrights heightened professional visibility and further opportunity for engagement in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, more so than for their male counterparts (except for the much-publicized Edmund Kean), the treatment of female characters on the stage was often wrapped up in the identity of the performer and her relationship to the audience.<sup>5</sup> Since prologues were traditionally performed by an actor and the epilogue by an actress, Russell adds that they served an additional function of “articulat[ing] issues relating to gender politics. Garrick’s epilogues for actresses such as Frances Abington in the 1770s are complex negotiations of the relationship between feminine character as defined by the main play, the celebrity identity of the actress herself, and the performative behavior of women of fashion in the audience” (107). Sarah Siddons, Mary Darby Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald: these actresses were often as popular for their social lives as they were for their talent, and they cultivated a relationship with their audience that went past the limits of the stage.<sup>6</sup>

These relationships audiences felt with specific actresses were possible in part because the theatres of the Romantic period were true repertory theatres: new plays were rarely performed more than several nights in a row, and most of the performances were the older staples already familiar to audiences, often plays by Shakespeare. Any actress playing a role

would often continue to play that particular role during the entirety of her career, meaning that an audience member would be able to watch Sarah Siddons in the role of Lady Macbeth over the course of several decades. As a result, the “very action of the performer summons genealogies of performance that embody an entire cultural apparatus of memory and forgetting. . . .the actress not only bodies forth the character she is playing but also, in the case of historic or historical roles, becomes an effigy for the memory of that persona” (Freeman 603), a heavy burden to bear. Ironically, in a professional environment where identity is necessarily fluid and its embodiment ever-changing, there were still decades-long expectations regarding the actress’s ability to embody a character to an audience’s liking.

Judith Butler’s far more recent comments on gender performance, as it turns out, are quite apt when it comes to this repertory practice of actresses revisiting their signature roles: “This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization. . . .As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself” (188). By inhabiting again and again a character that the audience has loved, treasured, committed to memory—despite perhaps an aging body and waning ability—the actress’s older body and performance becomes an imitation of the audience’s memory rather than her original performance. The “myth” of her theatrical powers is thus more powerful than her actual performance, the (clouded) memory more compelling than her physically present body. The actress’s body thereby works *against* her, betraying her as human: the female body could be young and beautiful, or old and sick—no other construction existed. Live theatre is by nature unpredictable, and yet the scrutiny of women and the predictably proper embodiment of feminine behavior at this time still pervaded every social arena (and sometimes still does); indeed, because of the public nature of theatrical performance,

one might argue that the stakes for correct gender performance were even higher during the Romantic era.

At the same time, even as public performance demanded and depended on public approval, the amateurs engaging in private theatricals fell under the same scrutiny, even in the “privacy” of their own homes. Staging private theatricals, or entertainments that were not open to the paying public and not subject to censorship and licensing regulations, was an English tradition that went back to at least the Early Modern period. These occurrences only increased with the advantages of the printing press and the emergence of a new kind of journalism which recounted the activities of the elite in something of a precursor to our modern-day “Page Six.” Russell explains that, due to women’s traditional authority in the home, they became the subject of such entertainment reporting, so much so that the booming economy of the later eighteenth century “represented an opportunity for women to assert themselves in public culture.... Intelligence about private balls, masquerades and theatricals...served the interests of the print media by attracting readers intrigued by the affairs of the fashionable world” (193). What was once considered private behavior of private citizens was suddenly subject to public interest, one effect of which was a heightened anxiety about correct adherence to social norms in such settings.

Furthermore, private theatricals in the home functioned as a test of gendered performance, requiring young boys and girls to emulate socially acceptable behavior under the scrutiny of other family members.<sup>7</sup> These familial expectations epitomized the nuanced interactions of power that enacted themselves in private theatricals, which therefore blurred distinctions between public and private. In doing so, such performances revealed anxieties about domestic dynamics and feminine behavior. Just as in the licensed public theaters, standards for private acting were determined by the social categories of the performers and thus highlighted

the arbitrary, performative nature of their behavior—and also provided further opportunities to scrutinize and pathologize the female body.

An offshoot of the private theatrical was the closet play. Closet drama has long suffered from connotations of inferiority to the traditional stage, serving as an easily-coded insult to the amateur playwright unable to find a stage for her work.<sup>8</sup> Catherine Burroughs has deftly shown how such a strict, hierarchical bifurcation of closet drama and staged performances perpetuates a false, often misogynistic, dismissal of a theatrical form that allowed for dramatic experimentation and artistic expression during a time when spectacle and repertoires had taken over the London stage.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in addition to its hierarchical connotations, “closet” also connotes *privacy*, referencing those intimate feelings and behaviors that are restricted to the private spheres. Indeed, by focusing on the passions in her plays, Burroughs argues, “Baillie created what one might readily call ‘closet drama’ in the late-twentieth-century sense of that phrase: a play that focuses on those passions more readily expressed in the privacy of one’s closet as well as the question of how to perform the ‘correct’ socio-sexual identity” (126).<sup>10</sup> Essentially, a playwright may use closet drama to explore how a character might perform those un-performable identities and thereby explore those behaviors that defy social propriety.

Such a characterization implies that the closet could be a space free of social obligation and that in the privacy of the closet a character has the option to cease performing, even for themselves, their prescribed roles. Therefore, any glimpse into the closet could potentially reveal a more private, and thus more truthful, identity. Nestled in the home, then, the domestic sphere of women, the closet was “a small experimental theater in which dramas and gendered identities were conceived and rehearsed” (Burroughs 11). The “flexibility and imagination” enacted in this space can be tied to “women’s experiences of performing femininity on social ‘stages’ and to their understanding of how a cleavage between public and private realms obtruded upon their

lives” (11). The ability to move between spaces while maintaining the appropriate gender performance was a skill required in a culture increasingly aware of gender (dis)location, particularly as women expanded their presence in political and public debates.

Transferring the concerns of the female ‘closet’ to the public stage, though, was problematic because the closet was not simply a metaphor for privacy, but also a space for intense study and academic engagement. To showcase such intellect on the stage would be to prove women’s rationality and intellect, which in turn would weaken the patriarchal claim that women’s biology prevented them from fully entering public discourse and enjoying the same political rights as men. As Julie Carlson has argued, male critics and poets “align women with touch rather than sight, love rather than justice, in order to deny them the distancing capacity that initiates full humanity. Having entrapped women in bodies, they then lament their absence of mind and transfer to men ‘undisputed rights of ownership’ in the private and public spheres” (144). The so-called “laments” of male playwrights, however, reek of defensive rhetoric. It is important to remember that during the eighteenth century, “public and “private” were also “aligned with the difference between openness and secrecy, between transparency and opaqueness” (Klein 104). This understanding of closet therefore implies the inherent existence of concealment. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on the closet, Michael Simpson points out that to “demarcate this space is precisely to short-circuit any associated effort to confer secrecy on it because it is known in and by the act of its construction. Setting up the closet thus defeats its own object” (312). By relegating women’s writing to the “closet,” male playwrights and theatrical critics have actually shown their fear of female contributions to public spaces, and, at the same time, opened a private space to public scrutiny.

The consequence of this opening was and remains an increasingly intense focus on the female body and feminine behavior. The Romantic period saw a great influx of female authors in

all areas. In addition to an increase in female playwrights,<sup>11</sup> there was an increase in the number of female actors, the number and types of stages (both legitimate and illegitimate), and a growing number of books published on female public conduct as well as public discussions of women's roles as mothers, daughters, educators, etc.<sup>12</sup> One result was that the stage became a "feminized space for affirming established codes of gender appearance and behavior while simultaneously controlling strenuous, potentially uncontrollable, threats to those very models of gender propriety" (Kucich 56). The combination of larger, nearly pantomimic theatrical gestures that reinforced gender codification through physicality; the entwining of actresses' personal and professional lives while their bodies are scrutinized under expectations of object-permanence rather than fluid subjectivity; and blurred boundaries of private "closet" and public "theatrical" performance all worked to confuse the nature of performance itself, which in turn threatened its very definition. Humans, as well as the theatrical characters that best represent humans, are immensely complex beings whose multiplicity cannot be captured by codified physical gestures. The theatrical anxiety regarding women's bodies on the stage, whether they are failing to live up to earlier iterations or resisting the confinement of the closet, points to a larger social anxiety about women's bodies *off* the stage. The threatening question then becomes: if a woman's performance never ends, what counts as "performance"?

Such a question, of course, has no real answer. The larger consequence resulting from the threat of the staged female body was that pathologizing the female body set up women to fail social tests of womanhood—and failure meant a woman engaged in unfeminine, sick behavior. The threat of feigned emotion is neutralized by making its theatricality obvious, the exaggerations deliberately false. Like the Siddons engraving of "False Gesture" which constructed female aggression as unnatural, "real" women both on and off the stage are meant to be passive objects that reflect the desires of the men around them. When the female body no

longer serves as a mirror to social constructions of desirable femininity, it is feared, she becomes a subject rather than an object and thereby attains her own power.

### III. Joanna Baillie and *Count Basil*

Because of the work of many scholars of Romantic writing including Jeffrey Cox, Anne Mellor, Thomas Crochunis, Marjean Purinton, and perhaps most importantly, Catherine Burroughs, it is now nearly incontestable that Joanna Baillie was the most celebrated contemporary playwright of the Romantic era. She enjoyed a close friendship with Sir Walter Scott, received typically snarky yet complimentary comments from Lord Byron,<sup>13</sup> and was repeatedly lauded as England's finest dramatist since Shakespeare. *The Literary Journal* describes her as an "immortal" writer who "has achieved some things which even [Shakespeare] left undone" ("Miss Baillie's..." 51-52), while *The Critical Review* declares:

Miss Baillie's dramatic powers are of the highest order. With the miserable stage-writers of the day, it would be insult to compare her... Above these, above Beaumont and Fletcher we will not hesitate to rank her... Why should praise be awarded only to the dead? She has a near approach to Shakespeare; and, if not connected with him by blood, has something superior to a mere family likeness. ("Miss Baillie's *Series*..." 212)

Joanna Baillie's plays were promoted and performed in the theatres by Kemble and Siddons, publicly praised by her contemporaries, and enjoyed a subscription from the royal family. She was, essentially, one of the most well-connected female authors of her day and was thought to have jumpstarted a new flourishing of English dramatic tradition that would solidify national pride amidst turbulent times.<sup>14</sup>

And yet, in the preface to her second volume of *Plays on the Passions* (1802), Baillie remarked that once she was revealed as the author of her initially anonymously published plays

the critical reaction to her first work suddenly became “praise mixed with a considerable portion of censure” (vii). *The Monthly Review* credited her with “considerable powers—injudiciously directed” (“Miss Baillie’s...” 303). *Blackwood’s* lamented her “defective” efforts and encouraged her to “cut away the weaker branches” of her talent (“Celebrated Female...” 178). Regarding Baillie’s less favorable reviews, Greg Kucich sums up both their causes and their effects: “Reactions to women dramatists in the male-controlled reviewing press remain, in fact, much more curiously divided throughout the Romantic era, split between effusive welcome and vigorous resistance, suggesting more complex patterns of accommodation, containment, and threat” (49). Indeed, Baillie’s initial reviews were all positive; the censure only came when her gender was revealed.<sup>15</sup>

Baillie wrote during a time of heated discourse regarding women’s rights and gender relations, and any discussion of the period must acknowledge the politicized atmosphere created by the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Clara Reeve and Hannah More. As Jeffrey Cox has argued, these women writers all critiqued the ways in which “women are constructed and constricted by the male gaze” of patriarchal Romantic society (56). Even though Baillie was writing at a time when there was an influx of female poets and playwrights championing the voice of women, she had repeated difficulty getting her plays staged.<sup>16</sup> Of the twenty-six plays Baillie wrote, only seven of them were staged, with *De Monfort* standing out as the clearest theatrical success. Though *Count Basil* was never staged during her lifetime, it is very clear through both her writings and the text itself that Baillie wrote this play, as well as many others, for theatrical performance.<sup>17</sup> Her stage directions indicate a firm knowledge of the London stage and provide clear visions of how to stage the spectacle and pageantry of both the court and war.

Baillie published *Count Basil* anonymously in her first volume of *A Series of Plays: in which it is attempted to delineate the stronger passions of the mind each passion being the*

*subject of a tragedy and a comedy*, commonly referred to as the *Plays on the Passions*, in 1798.<sup>18</sup> In her “Introductory Discourse” to this volume, she clearly addresses the double standard of criticism she was forced to confront. Writing perhaps the most thorough analysis of the theatrical arts from a Romantic-era female dramatist, Baillie starts by asserting the universal tendency of observation and reflection in humans: “Every person, who is not deficient in intellect, is more or less occupied in tracing, amongst the individuals he converses with, the varieties of understanding and temper which constitute the characters of men; and receives great pleasure from every stroke of nature that points out to him those varieties” (67-68). For Baillie, “tracing” signifies not only observation but also a conscious analysis and progression of perception, wherein character is constituted by external action that somehow represents the interior understanding and temperament of a person. The act of “tracing” is inherently theatrical and performative: it requires an assimilation of information gathered through observation that is then integrated into one’s understanding of the subject. It must also grasp how certain physical gestures, verbal phrases, or “strokes of nature” can signify the varieties of human nature, which can then be extrapolated and joined to others in order to categorize each “character.” Since Baillie believed the dynamic between stage actor and audience member encourages a process of identification and empathy, through which self-assessment and discovery might be achieved by members of the audience, one inevitable conclusion is that the theater can provide a more powerful representation of life, compared to everyday life, because its representations embody truths and examples which can be drawn out of quotidian details and emerge as more universal.

But Baillie goes further. She also attempts to pathologize human character by examining how passion appears in unchecked responses, as when the characters in *Count Basil* (as I will show below) fail to restrain the impulses that challenge their assumed gender roles. However, the very language by which Baillie articulates a supposedly universal human condition indicates the

constraints under which she worked: Baillie writes of the “characters of men,” not the characters of men and women. “Men” is the default word, the assumed standard for what is human. This diction not only erases the humanity of women, but also places an unfair responsibility on men to represent all possible modes of human behavior. Complicating matters further are Baillie’s contradictory statements about the behavior of men and women. Baillie articulates a universality that transcends gender division most clearly in a footnote to her “Introductory Discourse”:

I believe there is no man that ever lived, who has behaved in a certain manner, on a certain occasion, who has not had amongst women some corresponding spirit, who on the like occasion, and every way similarly circumstanced, would have behaved in the like manner. With some degree of softening and refinement, each class of the tragick heroes I have mentioned has its corresponding one amongst the heroines. The tender and pathetick no doubt has the most numerous, but the great and magnanimous is not without it, and the passionate and impetuous boasts of one by no means inconsiderable in numbers, and drawn sometimes to the full as passionate and impetuous as itself. (89)

Despite this seemingly equitable position, it is important to note that Baillie was quite conservative and that she did indeed believe in some specific gender ideologies that she thought must be maintained (note her use of the word “softening,” a word choice which clearly recalls Edmund Burke’s theory of Beauty in 1757 as feminine, which he opposed to the masculine Sublime).<sup>19</sup> In her preface to *Metrical Legends of Exalted Characters* (1821), she writes: “He may indeed be, and often is, as tender and full of gentle offices as a woman; and she may be, and has often been found, on great occasions, as courageous, firm, and enterprising as a man...[but] the character of both will be most admired when these qualities cross them but transiently, like passing gleams in a stormy day, and do not make the prevailing attribute of either” (709). To

“reverse” the masculine and feminine qualities for more than a “passing gleam” would mean to “deform the fair seemliness of both” (709). One wonders how a woman who benefitted so much from an education, who endeavored to penetrate the heart of human character through critical observation, and who insisted that men and women have “some corresponding spirit” that allows for magnanimous passion despite gender differences, could also argue for the “seemliness” of ideological gender roles. I do not think Baillie’s conflicting beliefs can be resolved satisfactorily; instead, her conflicted positions indicate the contested nature of proper social behavior and the fraught debate over women’s identities during this time. Moreover, despite her personal claims in prose, it is important to consider these tensions as we examine her play *Count Basil*, which, I argue, contains subtle critiques of enforced gender roles that encourage disingenuous behavior, often at great cost to the individual caught up in his or her own performance.

In *Count Basil: A Tragedy*, Joanna Baillie presents the conflicting codes of the divided spheres of gender and uses her theatrical medium to the fullest extent she ever attempts by having her characters stage their own performances within specific social identities. The problems in these appear most prominently in Duchess Victoria’s hyper-femininity, in Count Rosinberg’s mockery of a lover during the Mask scene, and the affective performance of the little boy in the play, Mirando. Within all of these characters we can see a meta-theatrical interplay: an actor playing a character who is performing a particular social identity who is also playing a role that is a caricature of courtly love. In *Count Basil*, more so than her other plays, Baillie reframes the audience’s expectations of Romance in order to highlight the nature of the “tracing” that determines (and therefore transcends single) gender boundaries and reduces all human behavior to a performance. Baillie thereby suggests that overly determined gender performances should be seen as false, blatantly theatrical, as well as aristocratic, play-acting that does not reveal true human behavior. She achieves this irony in part through establishing a

metatheatrical connection between gender standards and restrictions on the performances of them that have been determined by both the stage and by society. Through Victoria's overtly insistent, pathologically "feminine" behavior and the subsequent recognition of the tragic consequences of her playacting, Baillie exposes the "normalizing" effects of performative action and the disastrous effects of playing a part too well. Taken together, all these characters (and their bodies) critique gender performance in men, women, and children and show how the cultural pathologizing of "feminine" behaviors can lead to tragedy.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most effective moments of deliberate onstage mimicry in *Count Basil* is embodied by the young orphan, Mirando, whom Victoria has semi-adopted and who is an acknowledged favorite of hers in the court. Baillie introduces his character in the second act, when the women at court are discussing the men and are preparing for a masque. Mirando enters to lift the mood of the scene, but he serves much more than a comic role; through his childish exaggeration he dramatizes the interaction of the men and women at court and demonstrates the "tracing" of behavior and performance that Baillie claims can be found particularly in children. His exaggerations expose the subjectivity of the people he mocks, turning them into objects of amusement and revealing the absurd gender performances that are nevertheless internalized by the men and women around him.

Mirando's language, first of all, mimics the verbal postures of the courtiers he has observed. Mirando declares that he loves Victoria because "she's pretty," highlighting the hyper-femininity of Victoria's character as a woman of ultimate desire, and the superficial nature of the compliment: her beauty is inherited, not earned, and repeatedly found wanting in comparison to her mother. Mirando articulates a desire for Victoria because of her beauty, but of course he is not sexualized himself. He is merely playing at the adult roles he observes. His play-acting at such a young age demonstrates the early stages at which gender identification take hold. He turns

his interactions with Victoria into performances and in them plays the game of courting. Even a complaint about his height turns into another opportunity to affect courtly love. He wants to be “just tall enough to reach Victoria’s lips” (II.iv.132). He knows that by playing on the affections of his benefactor that he can get her to respond as he wishes, establishing Victoria as a tool by which he may receive pleasure. Though mimicry in itself is not subversive, exaggerated mimicry exposes the faults of such behavior within its performance, and within Mirando’s performance Baillie subtly criticizes the affective behavior of the court and the tradition of courtly love in Romance, showing the audience some of the absurdity in “romantic” behavior.

Mirando uses such affectation to interact with the women of the court because strictly bifurcated gender roles encourage him to do so. We see the social significance of his mimicry developed further at the conclusion of the scene. When the women mean to leave, they encourage Mirando to exit in front of them, but instead he insists on escorting them from the room in a highly staged manner.

Mirando: Nay, but I’ll shew you how Count Wolvar did,  
When he conducted Isabel from Court.

Victoria: How did he do?

Mirando: Give me your hand: he held his body thus,  
*(putting himself in a ridiculous bowing posture.)*

And then he whisper’d softly; then look’d so;

*(ogling with his eyes affectedly.)*

Then she look’d so, and smil’d to him again.

*(throwing down his eyes affectedly.)*

Isabella: Thou are a little knave, and must be whipp’d.

EXEUNT. Mirando *leading out Victoria affectedly.* (II.iv.145-165)

Mirando's behavior echoes Basil's love for Victoria, but, having lived a life at court, Mirando knows how to perform the role of a lover and elicit a desired response. Where Basil loses eloquence and stutters when he encounters Victoria, Mirando playfully puns and performs the role of the courtier in order to win his lady's affection. The stage directions further indicate the exaggerated courtier's gestures affected by Mirando. He puts himself into a "ridiculous bowing posture" and ogles and throws down his eyes "affectedly" before finally leading Victoria offstage, once again "affectedly." We see from the stage directions the importance placed on Mirando's physical parody of courtly love.<sup>21</sup> He not only verbally recounts the exchange between Count Wolvar and Isabel upon their departure from Court, but he also physically acts out their behavior in a stylized, "ridiculous" fashion. His "ridiculous bowing posture" is a clear criticism of self-prostrating lovers that physically exaggerate the emotions they claim to feel so as to aggrandize and "prove" their love. In this manner, the character of Mirando, the young child repeating the stylized behavior of the adults around him, emphasizes through his "play" the theatrical nature of "real life" and thereby functions as a questioner of the "natural reality" of those behaviors.

The women only allow Mirando's behavior, however, because he is a child who has not yet fully learned the proper social etiquettes so prized by his elders. Even so, Isabella calls him a "knave" and declares him deserving of physical punishment for his mockery. Though likely spoken in jest, Isabella's negative reaction to Mirando's parody, along with his (unintended) critique on courtly behavior, reinforces the status quo and pathologizes the boy as deviant; he must be punished for highlighting the ludicrousness of "proper" social interaction between the sexes. Yet Victoria encourages Mirando and plays along unthinkingly, not looking too hard at the distorted social mirror Mirando functions as in this scene.

Performances that engage the actors in playing roles of course suggest the parallel notion that non-actors play roles as well. When Count Rosinberg dresses up for the masque and assumes the role of a distraught lover, he does so self-consciously, but still as his character. This layering of an actor playing a role that requires yet another acknowledged role points to the problem of performance: the blurred lines that exist between exterior performance, internal representation and emulous social behavior. Rosinberg's costume for the masque is a mockery of the poet-lover pining for his absent mistress. The stage directions describe him as "*fantastically dressed, with a willow upon his head, and scraps of sonnets, and torn letters fluttering round his neck.*" He declares himself a "right true servant of the fair," harkening back to older Romance tropes of knights in armor who serve and debase themselves for their beautiful mistress. Rosinberg emphasizes the mournful nature of his position with a "woeful chaplet on [his] brow" and "tear-blotted sonnets," calling himself a "poor abandon'd lover out of place." However, Rosinberg really is a "lover out of place," for he alters the role of the monogamous pining lover by making himself readily available for "any mistress ready to engage/Who will enlist [him] in her service." (III.iii.30-36)

Like Mirando, Rosinberg puts on the affect of a courtier in order to elicit specific responses from the women in his company. His purpose, however, is quite different from the young boy's. While Mirando mimics courtly gestures out of childish playfulness, Count Rosinberg mockingly feigns lovesickness because he sees love as a weakness. Love is the wrong type of passion for a man to embrace, a womanly passion, inspired by women, and not worthy of a man who prizes the homosocial bonds created between men fighting on the same side of a war. When the women at the masque ask what Rosinberg can do (besides offending), he lists a string of actions that contribute to his hyperbolic performance and concentrates on appearance:

Rosinberg: O! I can sigh so deeply, look so sad;

Pale out a piteous tale on bended knee;  
 Groan like a ghost, so very wretched be,  
 As would delight a tender lady's heart  
 But to behold. (III.iii.30-44)

Rosinberg breaks down his performance of the pining lover into disparate machinations that cumulatively work to “delight a tender lady’s heart.” What is important is not that he will be sad, but that he will “look” sad. Just as the pastoral declaration of love through carving the beloved’s name in a tree (as in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*) insists upon the public nature of love and its reliance on community perception, so too will Rosinberg play the social role of his assumed character. In order to properly perform the role of the lover, one must do so in the public sphere. He will feign wretchedness in order to play upon his lover’s real emotions and in doing so will bring their love into the public sphere: she must “behold” his deep sighs and piteous tale and, through her observation, sanctify his performance.

Furthermore, Rosinberg concentrates on the appearance and physical gestures meant to represent lovesickness: his “abandon’d lover” is pale, piteous, and groans like a ghost, all physical signs of sickness. Rosinberg pathologizes love, yet he goes further than suggesting love makes one ill. To “pale” not only means to lose color but also to diminish in importance. By taking the position of bended knee, the lover gives up his power in the relationship. Rosinberg’s parody, of course, foreshadows the rest of the play: Basil has behaved and will repeatedly behave like a lovesick fool around Victoria, and his sickness, his inability to perform his duties as military leader, leads to his death. In this context, love is a sickness, an infection that delights a lady’s heart but costs a man his dignity. According to Rosinberg, a lost lover is ultimately a dead lover.

Once his character is established by his long list of romantic affectations, the masked women question Rosinberg further on his services to his future mistress, asking “Wilt thou do nothing for thy lady’s fame?” Rosinberg responds that he will “carve her name” “on ev’ry tree”, write madrigals, odes and sonnets praising her rosy cheeks, her eyes. He alludes to the pastoral romanticism of shepherds declaring their love through nature and to the reputed simplicity of an Arcadian romance. Rosinberg exhibits playfulness even when mimicking the stylized flattery of a Petrarchan sonnet, insisting ““faith ev’ry wart and mole” will have its praise. Satire is Rosinberg’s aim here; by exaggerating the unrealistic expectations of the beloved who wants endless praise for her beauty, Rosinberg—and through him Baille—points out the ridiculous nature of courting that requires the affected behavior that men and women use to interact with each other.

Rosinberg also, once again, foreshadows another character’s behavior, this time Victoria’s: she asks Basil to stay behind and court her, to delay marching his troops in order to prove his love. Victoria makes her request in ignorance of the possible consequences, but the effects are nonetheless devastating, and they stem from female desire. More accurately, they stem from Victoria’s internalization of what she was taught female desire should be—coquettish behavior that entices a man (and creates unrealistic expectations). Though such flirtations and interactions between the sexes are predicated on false behavior, where men and women play preconceived roles in order to relate to each other, they still continue to enact them, this play suggests, because the performance has become belief, and they are now following a prescribed “ideological script” that has become so familiar and automatic that they forget it is only ideological (Purinton 151). Behavior becomes pathological when it is an internalization of a learned response; Baillie’s characters are trapped in constructed gender roles that are seen as natural or innate.

These constructions of gendered social spheres, after all, are set up from the play's opening scene. *Count Basil* begins with a theatrically-staged pageant, wherein the male and female public spheres are sharply divided between Basil marching his soldiers through the city of Mantua and Victoria leading a train of ladies to Saint Francis' shrine. The soldiers exhibit male power through physical prowess while the women play out female submissiveness through worship.<sup>22</sup> The two trains meet before a crowd of citizens, and, rather than permit the gender spheres to intermingle, the men gallantly "pay obeisance" and allow the women to pass first.<sup>23</sup> From the first moments of her play, Baillie visually represents the dividing nature of gender<sup>24</sup> and the "show" required by women: the first lines are dedicated to members of the crowd inquiring about the "grand procession" of Victoria and whether or not "the Princess look[s] so wondrous fair as fame reports" (I.i.1-4). Victoria is therefore introduced not through any merit of character, but rather through the assessment of the male gaze, which finds her wanting: Geoffrey, the old soldier who remembers the "gracious smile" of Victoria's mother, "the fairest lady e'er [his] eyes beheld," waits to "see the princess pass" to discover "if in her face/ [he] yet might trace some semblance of her mother" (I.i.41-51). Upon seeing Victoria, he pronounces, "She is fair;/ But not so fair as her good mother was" (I.i.104-5). Geoffrey's blunt assessment indicates a woman's value is not only dependent on her present physical state, but is also judged in comparison to the idealized past, the memory of the women who came before and affected the spectator.<sup>25</sup> Despite his claim that he "came not for the show," Geoffrey is indeed greatly concerned with the visual materiality of the body before him, equating Victoria's beauty with her potential goodness. In addition to demonstrating the power of spectacle, the opening scene provides insight into Victoria's later actions. If she is constantly compared to her mother and found inadequate, she is forever chasing after an ephemeral sense of self. This condition of perpetual unfulfillment mirrors the inevitable failure of all women will experience under such

impossible expectations—and when women experience failure, the blame is placed on the pathologized female body and how it did not live up to its ideal.

The focus on Victoria's body continues in the next scene, wherein we hear Basil's first lines of the play: "Mark'd you her hand? I did not see her hand/ And yet she wav'd it twice" (I.ii. 96-7). Basil is overwhelmed by the materiality of Victoria's body, unable to recall specific parts even though he clearly saw the hand in motion. Instead, he has marked other, more obviously "feminine," aspects of her body: "O! it is admirable...Her form, her face, her motion, ev'rything!...That graceful bearing of her slender form;/Her roundly-spreading breast, her tow'ring neck,/Her face ting'd sweetly" (I.ii. 122-138). Basil praises Victoria's most obviously feminine features, focusing in on her slenderness, the flush of her face, her breast. She is "graceful," which in its usage in 1798 meant "having pleasing and attractive qualities" and "full of or showing divine grace" (OED). The first definition positions Victoria as an object intended for the pleasure of the male gaze; the second denies her human subjectivity by placing her on a pedestal and treating her as a conduit for the spectator's relationship to the divine.<sup>26</sup> Either way, both meanings set up an object-subject relationship between Victoria and Basil (a relationship that is reiterated by Victoria's interactions with Mirando, who also seeks out Victoria for pleasure). She is visually pleasing to Basil, and that quality seems to be enough to merit his full attention.

Attracting men through her body, it turns out, is a social "skill" that Victoria has already learned. The most revealing moment of Victoria's play-acting is perhaps her interlude with Basil in the forest. Baillie offers an idyllic scene of pastoral romance: Victoria and Basil alight from their horses in a "*very beautiful Grove in the forest. Musick and horses, heard afar off, whilst huntsmen and dogs appear passing over the stage at a great distance.*" Victoria offers poetic descriptions of the landscape, heightening the romantic feeling of nature and their seclusion.

Basil, however, has eyes only for Victoria and once again blurts out his adoration. As a kind of punishment for his awkward overtures, Victoria recalls previous visits to the grove with another male companion:

VICT: I do repent me that I led thee here,  
 But 'twas the fav'rite path of a dear friend.  
 Here, many a time we wander'd, arm in arm;  
 We lov'd this grove, and now that he is absent,  
 I love to haunt it still. (BASIL *starts.*)

BAS: His fav'rite path—a friend—here arm in arm—  
*(Clasping his hands, and raising them to his head.)*  
 Then there is such an one!  
*(Drooping his head, and looking distractedly upon the ground.)*

I dream'd not of it.

VICT: *(pretending not to see him.)* That little land, with  
 Woodbine all o'ergrown,  
 He lov'd so well!—it is a fragrant path,  
 Is it not, Count? (IV.v.64-74)

The stage directions specify that Victoria deliberately ignores Basil's physical gestures of despair, seemingly in an effort to make Basil jealous. She engages in both a verbal and physical performance, looking away from him in a pretense of observation and memory, and also deliberately misleading him with the identity of her "dear friend" with whom she has walked "arm in arm" and thus shared a physical closeness she has not granted Basil. She then reveals that her male companion was her brother and acts the innocent, blaming Basil for misinterpretation and chastising him for behaving so "uncourtly" as to curse her brother for the

affection she bestows him. Rather than sharing genuine intimacies in a secluded grove of nature, Victoria cruelly plays the role of “sweet enchantress of the mind” (V.i.32), drawing Basil in with her feminine allure with every intention of leaving him unsatisfied. When she exits the stage, Basil “*look[s] after her for some time*” and describes her absent body to the audience, “see with what graceful steps she moves along,/ Her lovely form in ev’ry action lovely” (IV.v.117-118). He remains fixated on her body, and her arm reaching for a flower, emitting a “wild bewitching charm,” enchants him still (ln. 124).

Victoria’s powers of enchantment, however, are also powers of destruction. The stage directions indicate Basil acts out gestures of lovesickness, an echo of Count Rosinberg’s behavior in the previous act. He “starts,” clasps his hands against his head, looks “distractedly” with a drooped head. His body language communicates to the audience his clear unhappiness. The source of this unhappiness, this lovesickness, is Victoria—her body, her words, her apparent indifference—everything she does and is, especially in this scene, affects Basil and makes him sick with longing, disappointment, rejection. Her body affects his body, infects his body with its pathological feminine weakness and ruins his military discipline and masculine strength. Basil is an “abandon’d lover,” and he in turn has abandoned his military principles and homosocial bonds of war for a “False Gesture” of feminine “strength.”

Catherine Burroughs argues that Victoria’s hyperfeminine behavior is “self-conscious, aggressive, carefully staged, and temporary,” a process of teaching herself how to manage her social position “through an exaggerated performance of femininity” (Burroughs 143). By taking on the role of aggressive pursuer, Victoria upends the tradition of male dominance and female submission in courtship rituals; to “effect more control over a world that would physically fetishize her, she tries to use that very physicality to her advantage” (140). While Burroughs’ observation of Victoria’s hyperfeminine aggression is indisputable, I would argue that Victoria’s

body—as an ideal standard of the feminine body in Basil’s eyes—has power over him whether she engages in hyper-feminine behavior or not. Furthermore, since Victoria’s aggression is, in effect, a lie (she has no real love for Basil for much of the play, and her behavior is “carefully staged, and temporary”), her body is pathologized by her deviance from “true” female behavior—each “carefully staged” pose, “ev’ry action lovely,” misuses the body in a false gesture, and in effect pathologizes and dishonors the body with feminine lies. If the female body is pathologized, it must also be contagious, and so it has the power to infect the male body with its “feminine” weakness.

In their first real exchange in Act II Scene I, Basil’s masculine competency is disrupted by Victoria’s mere presence. She enters the “room of State” with several other ladies of the court and Basil “*changes countenance upon seeing them*” and suddenly begins to stutter: “Yes, I believe—I think—I know not well—” (II.i.42). Basil’s previous confidence is gone; he rapidly shifts from belief to thought to knowledge and still comes up empty. In Victoria’s presence, he seems to know nothing. Baillie even inserts a line of character observation to make clear Basil’s physical reaction to Victoria. The Duke asks, “You are not well? your colour changes, Count,/What is the matter?” and Basil admits, “A dizzy mist that swims before my sight—/A ringing in mine ears” (II.i.48-51). Dizziness and ringing ears are common signs of sickness, symptoms that affect the brain. Basil’s sight and hearing weaken in the face of his passion for Victoria, a passion he is able to control when far away from her but unable to master when her infectious body is near him, when each new exposure strengthens his new pathology.

Basil’s visible physical reaction to Victoria is to either blush or turn pale, yet “changes countenance” and “your colour changes” are unclear. A blush might indicate healthy love, a rush of blood to the head, a flushing of life and vitality—but it also might indicate another pathology. The concept of blood possessing the energy of life has a long tradition in both medicine and

literature,<sup>27</sup> and Baillie's use of the word "life-blood" in another scene confirms the medical knowledge to be expected from a sister and niece of famous doctors (II.ii.13). The major Romantic-era publication on theories of the blood was John Hunter's *Treatise on the Blood* (1794), published posthumously by his brother-in-law after Hunter's death in 1793. Hunter writes: "Blood is known to be of a red colour...and to be altogether a fluid while circulating in the living body...it is likewise known, that, when deprived of a certain proportion of it, an animal dies; it has, therefore, been held in particular veneration, as constituting the life of the animal" (13-14). Blood as conceived by Romantic medicine is a living force, a stimulant and a respondent to stimuli, an "omnipresent nourisher of diverse parts, and living entity distinct from all other secretions and organs" (De Almeida 89). Hermione De Almeida summarizes,

life resided in the blood, which served as the place and medium for vitality; coagulation, an operation of life that proceeded upon the same principle as the union by the first intention, was the contractive response of living blood to the stimulus of injury or death; and polarizing energy, the material vitae of living creatures or the electricity of inanimate nature, normally prevented coagulation within the body and promoted coagulation outside the body. (87)

According to Hunter during Baillie's own time, a blush is "an exertion of the action of the vessels" (Hunter 281), a sign of inflammation, "an increase or distension beyond their natural size" (279). Inflammation is the body's blood increasing in an area that requires its healing properties, its life force. Blood rushes in after the stimulus of injury. As might be expected, a pale countenance would indicate a loss of blood and all that such physicality suggests: "The attending symptom was a total stoppage in the actions of the heart; of course the face was pale and ghastly. Not the least signs of motion in the heart could be felt... if a muscle is hardly allowed to act, its vessels become small, and it becomes pale" (Hunter 150-55). Paleness is a

draining of one's life force, a physical sign of weakness, another symptom of pathology.

Whether Basil blushes at the sight of Victoria (a sign of inflammation) or pales looking at her (a sign of a momentary stoppage of his heart's actions) becomes immaterial because both possibilities point to pathology, an unhealthy physical manifestation of Basil's passionate response to Victoria's body.

In the Romantic era, passion was very much thought to influence health. In the 24th edition of John Wesley's *Primitive physic* (1792), one of the most popular medical books read by the general public during the eighteenth century, its author writes: "1. The passions have a greater influence on health, than most people are aware of. 2. All violent and sudden passions dispose to, or actually throw people into acute diseases. 3. The slow and lasting passions, such as grief and hopeless love, bring on chronical diseases. 4. Till the passion, which caused the disease is calmed, medicine is applied in vain" (xiv). Wesley claims passions such as "grief and hopeless love, bring on chronical diseases." The lovesickness and passion Victoria inspires in Basil has a pathological effect on him, body and mind. When Basil experiences these initial symptoms of lovesickness, Victoria is still on the opposite side of the room, surrounded by her ladies. Though she may currently be "performing" the gestures of a well-born, graceful lady at court, I disagree with Burroughs' suggestion that she is specifically, "aggressively" targeting Basil before she even takes notice of him or is introduced to him by her father. Instead, I argue that Basil is unable to perform his manly duties of State, in the very space designated for such masculine prowess, in the presence of an attractive female because of his pathological response to her. Feminine beauty excites the passions and disturbs masculine rationality in the very room in which the latter should be exercised. Whether at this point in the play she means to be or not, Victoria is a distraction, and Count Rosinberg, ignoring the spectator's enthusiastic consent to this distraction, repeatedly places the blame for Basil's lovesickness and eventual suicide

squarely on Victoria's "lovely" shoulders, on her pathologized female body that inspires irrationality and infects an otherwise honorable man with her feminine weakness.

In only allowing women power through physical beauty, and then castigating that feminine affect as "artful" manipulation, men such as Rosinberg effectively entrap women in a no-win situation. Any power wielded through beauty must be done so "unconsciously" or else it is a feminine trap to ensnare. Rosinberg's fears, though misogynistic, come true: his homosocial bonds and understanding of male honor, embodied in Basil's military leadership, have been destroyed by heterosexual love and the pathological influence of the female body. But so too has Victoria's domestic life been destroyed by the encounter, and any agency shown in her final moments on stage is really the result of internalized gender behavior which prompts her to sacrifice her body and her life for a man. Though Basil commits suicide because of the dishonor he has brought on himself by not providing to his soldiers an opportunity for glory on the battlefield, this logic is twisted into a continuation of his lovesickness and the infectious feminine weakness Victoria spread to Basil. At Rosinberg's prompting Victoria takes responsibility for Basil's suicide, declaring, "Is this the sad reward of all thy love?/ O! I have murder'd thee!...Dost thou [Rosinberg] upbraid me? O! I have deserv'd it!" (V.ii.138-148). Not only does Victoria assume the blame for Basil's pathological actions, she assigns herself a punishment that isolates her from society (like one would quarantine a diseased patient) and prevents any ability to move on from his loss: "I'll love him in the low bed of death,/ In horror and decay.—/ Near his lone tomb I'll spend my wretched days...Cold as his grave shall be my earthy bed" (V.ii.174-178). She now condemns herself to the "dark, shaded cloister" where visitors will see her "wasted form"; the lovely body that once tantalized and captivated will now be a pathologized marker of grief and wasted life, physical proof of her devotion and penitence (V.ii.158-160). Her promise to "marry" Basil's corpse indicates that Victoria's Romantic

playacting<sup>28</sup> has overtaken her best interests and that she must submit to public criticism and permanent punishment for daring to play her feminine role without fully committing to her suitor. Her female body is no longer suited for marriage and reproduction; her “earthy” marriage bed shall be “cold as his grave,” a “low bed of death.” Rather than life her body shall only produce “horror and decay,” an inversion of the natural order and a final pathologizing of Victoria herself. Pathology twists Victoria’s feminine beauty into feminine lies, while Basil’s death cements Victoria’s position as a pathologized woman, a source of feminine dishonor and death.

#### **IV. Matthew Lewis and *The Captive***

By 1803, not long after Baillie first published *Count Basil*, Matthew “Monk” Lewis (1775-1818), not relegated to closet drama, enjoyed a strong professional relationship with Mr. Thomas Harris, the manager at Covent Garden. Mr. Harris made the generous offer to stage anything the writer might wish to submit. This offer was in part due to the recent success of *Alfonso* (1802), and of course the great popular success of his earlier Gothic drama, *The Castle Spectre* (1797).<sup>29</sup> Writing to his mother on March 18, 1803, Lewis mentioned a new piece of drama but did not seem to have the same confidence in his work as Mr. Harris. “The Monodrama comes out on Tuesday; I have not yet been at a single rehearsal. It cannot possibly succeed,” he wrote (Peck 221). The monodrama in question was *The Captive*, and it turned out Lewis’s prediction was correct. *The Captive* was performed only once before Lewis withdrew it from the stage, despite Mr. Harris’s willingness to stage further performances. Though the monodrama later found popularity as a recitation piece in Lewis’s last publication, *Poems* (1812), and again in Mrs. Cornwell Baron-Wilson’s *The Life and Correspondence of M.G. Lewis* (1839), the circumstances surrounding *The Captive*’s reception are quite curious and help reveal that this

play “failed” partly because of its scandalous exposure of the gender politics on which it depends for audience comprehension.

*The Captive*, a play centered around one actress, encompassing one scene, and building towards one poignant horror, was performed by Mrs. Litchfield at Covent Garden on March 22, 1803. Numerous sources detail the horrific effect of the piece on its audience in terms that clearly pathologize the female audience members – and, by implication, the effectiveness of the actress on stage. *The Monthly Mirror*, *Monthly Meteor*, and the *Morning Chronicle* all describe the audience’s intense reactions to the piece: “Two ladies fell into hysterics [and] the house was thrown into confusion” (*Mirror*, 4.15.1803); “The tears of an audience have generally been accounted the highest species of applause...[but] a poet must have an odd taste who would be rewarded with *hysterical fits*” (*Chronicle*, 3.26.1803). Lewis’s first biographer, Margaret Cornwell Baron-Wilson, wrote, “Never did Covent Garden present such a picture of agitation and dismay. Ladies bathed in tears—others fainting—and some shrieking in terror—while such of the audience who were able to avoid demonstrations like these, sat aghast, with pale horror painted on their countenances” (1:233-234). The women all exhibit signs of hysterics: tears, fainting, shrieks of terror, “hysterical fits”; the men, if not showing signs of hysteria, at least fell into confusion and “sat aghast” in “pale horror.” By all accounts the play’s theatrical power elicited visceral, pathological responses from the audience. And, in a letter to his mother dated March 23, 1803 (the day after the “failed” performance), Lewis himself declared that the play “proved much too terrible for representation” and its “only chance was, whether Pity would make the audience weep; but instead of that, Terror threw them into fits; & of course there was an end of my Monodrama” (Peck 221-222).

Yet this was not really the end of his monodrama. Lewis’s Advertisement to *Poems* (1812), his last supervised publication, includes the admission that he “selected from a great

mass of Verses such as appeared to myself and my Friends to be the least discreditable to their Author; I have endeavoured to remove such faults as were pointed out to me; and indeed have bestowed more time on their improvement, than such trifles can possibly be worth.” Though Lewis judged the single performance of *The Captive* too dramatically effective and therefore ironically unsuccessful, he still included a version of the monodrama in 1812 as one of his “least discreditable” works.<sup>30</sup> *The Captive*’s inclusion attests to Lewis’s regard for this piece and his desire for it to succeed, even if in a “closet” medium. Furthermore, the excuse that the play threw the audience into fits and was therefore unsuited to performance seems a flimsy one, for there are numerous historical accounts of Sarah Siddons so powerfully commanding the stage that audience members would regularly be physically affected by their emotional responses. If the most celebrated stage actress of the late eighteenth century should be praised for eliciting such dramatic responses from her audiences, why should Matthew Lewis, who at nineteen years old had written and published the controversially graphic Gothic horror novel *The Monk* (1796), shy away from the same response?

The answer may lie in the subject of Lewis’ work: the false imprisonment and terrorizing of a respectable English woman, a wife and mother who is betrayed by her husband and placed in an insane asylum. Unlike the fantastical anti-Catholic horror of *The Monk*, which saw a young woman essentially buried alive for daring to defy the Mother Superior in a foreign land, the threat of false imprisonment shown in *The Captive* was a distressingly real possibility in the British homeland. Up until the eighteenth century, madness was traditionally seen as a domestic problem and families would take care of their afflicted members. By the mid-eighteenth century public asylums began to open (such as St Luke’s Hospital, 1751; York Asylum, 1777; Leicester Lunatic Asylum, 1794; Liverpool Lunatic Asylum, 1797), but before the 1774 Madhouses Act there was no regulation regarding private madhouses. The lack of impartial supervision meant it

was entirely possible for someone to be placed in a private madhouse under false pretenses with no recourse for escape.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the graphic horror of *The Monk* and Lewis's clear dramatic flair for spectacle, his letters show him to be a son deeply pained by his estrangements from his father, attentive to his mother, and an empathetic reformer of slave conditions on his Jamaica plantation (though he did not go so far as to become an abolitionist). Lewis dismissively referred to *The Captive* as "merely a picture of Madness" but also conceded that the subject was so "uniformly distressing to the feelings, that at last I felt my own a little painful" (Peck 222). Though *The Captive* is full of dramatic spectacle, it is still rooted in the plausible, which makes the distance created by Gothic horror, often achieved through an historic or foreign setting, ineffective at neutralizing such a reaction here. The play shows the abuse and neglect of a sane woman at the mercy of her jailer and the other patients, thereby upending the more palatable expectations of Romantic society about the treatment of the insane and implicating the audience in their complicity. The spectacle of pathology, however, fails to effect social change. Contemporary reviews pathologized the audience viewing a pathologized female body, and public focus stayed on the horror of Lewis's work, not the clear need for asylum reform, or the much larger task of unpathologizing the female body.

It seems obvious that one could take a traditional feminist approach towards the play and suggest that Lewis uses the piece as a platform against the unethical imprisonment of women and the poor treatment of the insane. Jack DeRochi insists, however,

we must not place too much emphasis on Lewis's gendered political ideology; his works are at best ambivalent regarding such power, and women of both Gothic types—active and passive—receive the same brutal treatment. While there may

be a vestige of a feminist agenda within Lewis's works, the graphic manipulation of the feminine spectacle at the core of his aesthetic vision is unmistakable. (242)

I am inclined to position myself between these two critical approaches, for they are not mutually exclusive. While I do believe Lewis sympathized with the unfavorable situations of women during his time, particularly with those women abused through their submissive positions within society, the aesthetic intentions behind the monodrama are clearly those of a spectacle of terror which rely on the objectified and tortured young female body. This is, after all, the "horror-breeding" Lewis,<sup>32</sup> who relied so heavily on theatrical effects at the expense of plot and character that biographer Louis F. Peck would insist, "Gothic drama was for him primarily a vehicle for thrills and spectacles; plot, dialogue, character, and history in themselves were of little importance... Lewis' success lay primarily in his ability to arrange arresting effects. A great virtue of his melodramas is their complete lack of subtlety of speech and action and the scope they allow for pantomime" (Peck 109-110). Though Gothic narratives routinely expose abuses of power, they also revel in the hyperbolic, and Lewis was well-known for provoking his audience through excessive graphic description and sustained emotional degradation.

Yet, if Lewis's exploitation of the female body is only effective with visual spectacle, it seems odd that Lewis would publish *The Captive* in a volume of poetry, since private closet readings would not provide the same shocking effects as placing such an extremity on the London stage. Perhaps, since he included only the spoken words of this play in his *Poems*, he thought the lack of theatrical imagery would soften the horrific impact of the piece's subject matter and make it more palatable for his audience, who would be able to focus on and be moved by the Captive's words. However, there is a stark difference in the published versions of the play.<sup>33</sup> The Larpent version contains only the lines without stage directions, ending with "My Child!—My Child!—" The version in *The Life and Correspondence of M.G. Lewis* by Margaret

Cornwell Baron-Wilson also ends with the beginnings of a recovery from insanity but includes the stage directions which clearly detail the final pantomime of the Captive recognizing her child and her family rejoicing in her return from her temporary madness. Lewis's version in *Poems* has a few minor differences in word choice, but the final lines read "I'm mad! mad!": her family does not find her, and the Captive remains permanently insane. The glaring difference between endings raises the question of Lewis's intentions with the play. If his stage version shows a mother recovering from madness at the sight of her child, while the "closet" work offers no such resolution, what compelled Lewis to make such a bleak alteration to a work that already contained such a horrifying representation of female madness?

Though the *Poems* version included only the lines, reviewing the dramaturgy included in the Baron-Wilson version will provide a much better sense of how Lewis's theatrical version was staged. The stage directions add significantly to the reader's understanding of the setting, the physical affectations of the actress, and the effect the music had on the theatrical audience. In examining Lewis's dramaturgy, we can see the ways he used the various spectacular components of the theater to pathologize the female body on the stage, and we can also see how the pathology embedded in the language and actions of the Captive and Madman convey Lewis's spectacle even in written form. The pathology demonstrated by the Captive, an ostensibly sane character, dramatizes for the Romantic audience the Gothic horror of female pathology and objectification that was often distanced from the level of the obvious and thereby neutralized. By forcing his audience to confront the spectacle of female pathology, and then, via his character, accusing the audience of complicity through their silence, Lewis simultaneously objectifies and gives voice to the pathologized female body.

Lewis is precise in his descriptions of the stage and setting, which exemplify a Gothic vision of a madhouse prison: "The scene represents a dungeon, in which is a grated door,

guarded by strong bars and chains. In the upper part is an open gallery, leading to the cells above” (226). From the beginning, the Captive sits in chains in the dungeon and the other characters enter from above her through the gallery. Jack DeRochi points out that “Her physical location—beneath the gallery and source of light—reinforces her powerlessness and isolation; the characters who appear are first seen above her, thus portraying roles of power as they bring her light and/or sustenance” (243). The Captive’s lines also describe her wretched conditions: “Cold, bitter cold!—no warmth!—no light!—/Life, all thy comforts once I had;/Yet here I’m chain’d this freezing night” (ln. 21-23). The stage directions in combination with the Captive’s lines create a powerful spectacle of feminine helplessness. The pauses indicated by the dashes between “bitter cold,” “no warmth, and “no light” emphasize and isolate each declaration, ensuring that the impact of each word is felt individually and then compounded. For Lewis’s audience, the description would immediately call to mind and build upon their knowledge of *The Monk* and one of its heroines, Agnes, who is wrongfully imprisoned and left to die of starvation beneath the catacombs of the convent by the evil prioress. Even without the physical stage, it is easy to recall similar Gothic dungeons and to imagine the horrific spectacle of a dirty, damp, cold cell containing a pitiable female prisoner.

During a closet reading, the imagination is helped along by the descriptions of the character’s actions. The stage directions outline the specific attitudes and poses of the actress as she expresses her condition physically:

The Captive is discovered in the attitude of hopeless grief: —she is in chains;—her eyes are fixed, with a vacant stare, and her hands are folded. . . . The noise of the bars falling rouses the Captive. She looks round eagerly; but on seeing the Goaler enter, she waves her hand mournfully, and relapses into her former stupor. . . . He then prepares to leave the dungeon, when the Captive seems to

resolve on making an attempt to excite his compassion: she rises from her bed of straw, clasps his hand, and sinks at his feet. (Lewis 226)

The Captive transitions from “hopeless grief” to a hope that she might convince her jailer to listen to her pleas, but it is a false hope. The earliest moments of the play set up her already altered state, the “vacant stare” and “stupor” in response to her isolated time in the cell, as well as the possibility for recovery: “the Captive seems to resolve on making an attempt to excite.” The “seems,” however, indicates the illusory nature of recovery, suggesting that it is a fleeting possibility; the convoluted, passive wording of the sentence further suggests the hopeless nature of her plea. By sinking to the Goaler’s feet and clasping his hand, the Captive physically submits further to her jailer, acknowledging his power over her and performing the only acceptable response: feminine supplication. She pleads for mercy in both physical and verbal gesture (more on her exact language below) because that is all she can do.<sup>34</sup>

The Captive can only plead with her jailer because of the practical and psychological factors governing her situation. Practically speaking, he can easily overpower her, so it makes sense for her to follow a gesture of aggression (clasping his hand) with an immediate gesture of submission (sinking at his feet). The Goaler is also her only source of nutrition and light, the only person she can turn to for a moment of human kindness. She has enough of her wits about her to know that the Goaler will only respond favorably if she can arouse his pity. She therefore supports her verbal supplications through her physical submission, kneeling at the Goaler’s feet as she kisses his hand. This gesture reverses the typical prostrations of the male asking for a woman’s hand in marriage, grossly turning a gesture of temporary vulnerability and anticipatory happiness into one of female degradation and debasement, suggestive of humiliation and powerlessness. In playing the role of chastened woman, the Captive hopes to elicit sympathy by appealing to the Goaler’s superior sense of self. But the Goaler further demeans her, answering

her pleas with “a look of contempt and disbelief” and leaves immediately, despite her repeated protestations of sanity. The Captive’s performance of “proper” femininity fails.

The Goaler’s behavior is partially in keeping with contemporary asylum practices. In *The Modern Practice of Physic* (1801), Robert Thomas argues that a firm hand must be used to control the insane, but also advises against tyrannical abuse. He writes:

The keeper should convince the maniac, that his power is absolute, and that all impropriety of conduct will be restrained by force. A prudent and vigorous coercion will generally restrain the fury, and sometimes restore rationality very speedily. He must then be treated with lenity and kindness, and with the manners due to his station in life, which will insure the respect of the pupil to his master, upon which every indulgence consistent with safety and propriety may be allowed. It is obvious, therefore, that a system of intimidation without cruelty, of restraint without indignity, of rigid order and discipline, combined with lenity and conciliation, is the only rational and successful method of combating the extravagances of lunatics. (353)

Thomas emphasizes the power dynamic that should be established between the “keeper” and the “maniac” through phrases such as “absolute” power, “vigorous coercion,” and “master.” Thomas also, however, insists upon “kindness” and “indulgence consistent with safety and propriety.” These mixed messages are clearly meant to temper unnecessary cruelty while still maintaining order, but positioning the lunatic as irrational and prone to “extravagances” sets up a narrative in which the mad person’s desires or claims are usually to be ignored in favor of the master’s judgment. The master entirely strips away the lunatic’s subjectivity and allows leniency only to further elicit obedience. According to Thomas, “Insanity, after continuing for a longer or shorter period without relief, commonly terminates in fatuity. This destruction of mind is almost always

incurable” (352). While Thomas’s claim of insanity’s incurability may be true, the material conditions of an asylum that encourage, if not demand, fatuity creates the very result that medicine supposedly seeks to avoid.

Thus, it is easy for the Goaler to dismiss the Captive’s claims of sanity because medical doctrine in 1803 claimed insanity had no cure, and the context of their social positions within the madhouse meant that her subjectivity had already been denied her. The Goaler interprets the Captive’s pleas as further evidence of her madness, and in doing so further pathologizes her. Though her actions and words are completely rational, especially under the circumstances, the Goaler does not question the disparity between the Captive’s rational behavior and her irrational surroundings. Her position in a cell pathologizes her, reframing her increasingly desperate pleas for freedom into hysterical fits. The Goaler pathologizes the Captive not because she commits violence or babbles senselessly, but because she is a woman, a woman in a cell, and her authority and autonomy can be easily dismissed. Women, according to early nineteenth century gender roles, were like the insane and vice versa; women, children, and “idiots” all shared the same legal status. To be a woman in an asylum was to intensify this inhumane situation, and so the Captive writes large the already pathologized status of women.

The neglect, disbelief, and contempt of the Goaler represent both the apathy and the anti-feminine aggression of a social structure which allows for such mistreatment. He is one authority who represents a thousand. He provides only the barest necessities of life; a little light, a little water, a little bread. Though it is within his power to do more for the Captive, he does not. Though he could listen to and believe her earnest insistence of her sanity, he does not. Though he could contact her family for her, he does not. The Captive is restricted to a cell and cut off from all friendly human interaction and all the other “comforts” of life, all of which is presumably “for her own benefit.” The injustice of a sane woman locked in an asylum, however, only adds to and

compounds the injustice of, first, the wretched conditions in which the other patients live and, second, the circumstances that have led to her imprisonment: as a second-class citizen beholden to her husband, she is unable to counter his word; because her voice holds no power over men, she is silenced. Through both his actions and his passivity, the Goaler condemns the Captive to her contained femininity just as surely as she is condemned by the society which allowed her to be imprisoned in the first place.

Additional stage directions embedded throughout the monodrama clearly describe the physical gestures that communicate the Captive's wretched state to the audience:

She shivers, and wraps her garment more closely round her... Interrupting herself hastily, and pressing her hands forcibly against her forehead... She remains fixed in this attitude, with a look of fear, till the music, changing, expresses that some tender, melancholy reflection has passed her mind... With a smile... With agony... With a look of terror... With a sudden burst of passionate grief, approaching to frenzy... She falls, exhausted, against the grate, by the bars of which she supports herself. (Lewis 227-8)

All of these physical gestures and dramatic "attitudes" indicate the wide scope of her emotional reactions, which, as expected given the circumstances, show a woman suffering. These physical gestures provided by Lewis's stage directions follow the standard examples of attitudes catalogued by Henry Siddons, which the actress performing the piece would have likely emulated and of which Lewis, with his knowledge and admiration of the theater, would no doubt have been aware. The figure for Terror, one of the attitudes Lewis specifically mentions, is half-crouched, leaning to the side, and angled away, as if to both make herself a smaller target and indicate movement away from the subject which terrifies her (see Figure 3). Her hands are crossed protectively over her chest, covering both her heart and the vulnerable throat area. Her

head is tilted back and her eyes raised, either to indicate she is shorter than the terror-inspiring subject on which she is fixated, or to further show submissive fear.



Compare this physical embodiment of Terror to that of Horror (see Figure 4). The figure expressing Horror has her arms raised against the horrifying subject, left arm fully extended and hand flat in the universal signal for ‘stop,’ her right arm gathered closer and shielding her body while the right hand is also flat and upturned. Her body is partially turned away but still mostly oriented toward that which horrifies her. Her head is also tilted, but tilted down and away, her eyes closed as she bends her body, perhaps curling in to protect herself. Her mouth, curiously, is closed—no scream of horror bubbling from her lips. I draw this comparison because Lewis, known for his elements of horror in *The Monk*, specifically describes the Captive’s attitude as “a look of terror,” a choice that indicates not only the physical embodiment of the actress, but also

of the character and her reaction to her situation: though she is confronted by real threats to her sanity, there is still more to dread, more that she must endure.<sup>35</sup> This fear, of course, proves true, for almost immediately after—“(With a look of terror) I’ll drive such thoughts away; (In a hollow hurried voice) They’ll make me mad! They’ll make me mad!” (228)—the Captive’s prophetic words become reality as she faces the horror of the Madman.

Lewis’s other written descriptors also indicate the Captive’s complicated dramatic position, for though the Captive has good reason to be fearful, to experience “passionate grief,” these reactions are also used against her. The words “tender,” “melancholy,” “passionate,” and “frenzy” in the stage directions are all coded language which describe an established standard of feminine madness, the pathological signs of a sick woman out of control and in need of a male medical authority. Her femininity is thus a double-edged sword: if she performs the role of pitiable woman correctly by shivering and suffering in the cold and the dark, she is also performing the role of sane woman incorrectly when her grief overcomes her and she approaches “frenzy.” The scattered nature of her responses indicates the scattered condition of her mental faculties, the push and pull between two incompatible, and thus impossible, positions. By literally supporting herself on the bars which contain her, she physically demonstrates a continued dependence on the edifices of a social structure which only enforces her compliance. Whether she is a body on the stage or in the closet, the Captive exhibits an extreme dramatization of the internalized pathologized performance of a woman entrapped by social expectation.

The arresting physicality of Mrs. Litchfield’s performance of the Captive was aided by the music composed for the piece, which by all accounts added considerably to the emotional power of the play. Dr. Thomas Busby (1755-1838) composed the music for *The Captive*. The stage directions track the changes in the music and the effects Lewis desired by way of Busby’s accompaniment. “Slow and melancholy” music opens the scene, ceasing when the Captive first

speaks, and return again as “harsh music” when the Goaler rejects her pleas for help; then, “with a look of contempt and disbelief, forces his hand from her grasp, and leaves her. The bars are heard replacing” (226). The stage directions then state that there is “music expressing the light growing fainter, as the Gaoler retires through the gallery” (227). Jeffrey Cox comments that this particular stage direction “gives us some idea of the demands made upon the composers for both monodramas and melodramas,” noting how the music expresses the movement of light and punctuates the emotion of the scene (227).

In addition to the music expressing the changing conditions of her surroundings, Lewis also directs the music to express the psychological turmoil of the Captive: “She remains fixed in this attitude, with a look of fear, till the music, changing, expresses that some tender, melancholy reflection has passed her mind” (227). Soon after the music changes, the Captive recalls her child and laments that he has likely forgotten her by now. It is clear that the music accompanying melodramas was composed to communicate both physical and psychological action as well as emotion<sup>36</sup> and that Busby was quite talented in his efforts. The April 15th, 1803 edition of the *Monthly Mirror* complimented his work: “Dr. Busby’s music was admirably adapted to the action and character of the subject, and displayed great depth of science, and knowledge of effect” (qtd. in Cox 227). The review compares Busby’s music to a “science,” and no doubt the music would have worked in tandem with the stage effects, the “loud shrieks, rattling of chains, etc.” that audibly signaled the Captive’s pathology, emphasizing through music her fear and melancholy (228).

Music and sound also introduce the final catalyst for the Captive’s madness: the violent entrance of the Madman. The Madman and his terrorizing of the Captive was the most effective horror of the performance. Moments after the Captive asserts “I am not mad! I am not mad!” and “falls, exhausted, against the grate,” come the “yells and cries” of “some furious madman” (In.

49-51). As the Captive cries for help, the “madman appears at the grate, which he endeavors to force, while she shrinks in an agony of terror. . . . Scared by her cries, the madman quits the grate. The madman again appears above, is seized by his keepers, with torches; and after some resistance, is dragged away” (239). Since the stage directions and the Captive’s own lines have previously described how the stage lighting was deliberately dark, no doubt the man threatening her with a firebrand in the 1803 performance would have cast a horrific play of light and shadow onto her body to highlight her looks of terror. Once he had retreated into darkness, he would have shockingly reappeared above her, indicating that the threat persisted and that she remained below, trapped in her cell, unable to fully escape his frenzy. Lewis juxtaposes two striking images of male and female pathology. The irrational, anonymous madman is an aggressive, violent example of male fury; the agonized woman shrieking in terror and exhaustion is the hysterical helpless female. The two stereotypical examples of pathology are compounded by each other’s presence: the Captive’s horror making the Madman more horrific; the Madman’s violence driving up the Captive’s hysteria. Feeding the frenzy of this spectacle was the music, which one can imagine punctuated these tense moments quite effectively. The same *Monthly Mirror* review that praised Dr. Busby also isolated this moment as the most appalling one for spectators, insisting that the “effect was too strong for the feelings of the audience” and that several women fell into hysterics while the rest of the house was in “confusion.”

Despite the reliance on music and the spectacle of the madman brandishing the firebrand, the compelling performance of Mrs. Litchfield narrating her tale of horror likely had the greatest effect on the audience and most clearly depicts the negative consequences of pathologizing women. Even without the accompaniment of theatrical spectacle, the words as written convey the despair and eventual terror of the speaker, which explains the play’s survival, and even popularity, as a recitation piece. The nameless Captive’s first lines emphasize her rationality and

her attempts to overcome her situation by both eliciting compassion and performing the proper feminine behavior:

Stay, Gaoler, and hear my woe!

She is not mad who kneels to thee,...

I'll rave no more in proud despair;

My language shall be mild, though sad:

But yet I'll firmly, truly swear,

I am not mad! (*Then kissing his hand.*) I am not mad! (ln. 1-8)

The Captive offers verbal confirmation of her feminine submission and goodness by stating she will shun pride, adopt “mild” language, and be truthful in her declaration of her sanity. The keywords “rave” and “mild” carry the appropriate pathological connotations of a madwoman vs. a respectable English woman; she must not be too passionate, too excessive, too *womanly* in her desperation. “Mild” sadness is the appropriate response, because any other heightened reaction would be akin to desperate ravings and only further proof of madness. When her efforts to prove her sanity result in harsh dismissal, the Captive cries, “He smiles in scorn, and turns the key!/He quits the grate! I knelt in vain!—/His glimmering Lamp still...still I see!—/’Tis gone...and all is gloom again!” (ln. 9-12). Both her earlier comment regarding pride and her statement that she “knelt in vain” clearly indicate that the Captive was once a woman of high standing, which, in class-conscious England, no doubt makes her imprisonment that much more outrageous to the audience.

The Captive repeats her assertion that she is “not mad!” ten times over the four pages of the monodrama, the phrase almost always punctuated with an exclamation point. In the final moments of the “Tragic Scene” she cries, “I *am* not mad...but soon *shall* be!” Eight lines later, the echo has changed to “I’m mad! mad!” and, in the *Poems* version, the play ends here. The

repetition has the opposite effect of her intentions; in repeating that she is not mad in the face of her situation, the Captive manages to upend her agency and betray her own will: she becomes mad. Vacillating between performing appropriate womanhood and challenging her surroundings and her circumstances as unnatural, the Captive's only recourse in an impossible scenario is madness. She cannot make sense of her surroundings, she cannot maintain her acceptable female performance, and she cannot stop herself from accepting the sentence to which her husband subjected her: he desired her to be mad, and so she has become.

However, she is the sole narrator of her own descent into madness. The Romantic monodrama, a form of "illegitimate" theater, would only have permitted one speaker during the performance, which necessitates the Captive's isolated presence on the stage. She can be the only speaker, the only person to communicate her circumstances to the audience. Her prophecy, "They'll make me mad! They'll make me mad!" emphasizes the power of her captors and their ability to pathologize her, but also the importance of her own declarative powers. Lewis saves the repetition of his character's lines for moments in which she tries to assert her sanity, even as the stage directions describe her "hollow hurried voice," the "agony" of her mental torments, and the "sudden burst of passionate grief, approaching to frenzy" that accompanies her despair over her separation from her child. The Captive has the power to voice her story, but cannot prevent herself from voicing her madness.

Jack DeRochi argues that the theatrical spectacle outweighs all other aspects of the play.

Unable to escape the Madman's gaze even after he has departed...the woman submits to her impending madness. This, of course, is Lewis's ironic twist: the Captive becomes deranged upon being seen, after begging for light and human interaction at the beginning of the drama. But, as with all female figures in high Gothic texts, the interaction she receives is torment, not salvation, further

illustrating the masculine Gothic ideology of the play to reduce the feminine to mere spectacle. (247)

If we accept DeRochi's premise, this ideology leaves the woman in Gothic narrative in an impossible position. The power of the male gaze—which the audience comes to share—reigns supreme here. Attention of the wrong kind drives her to madness, while neglect and isolation also drive her to madness. However, both options work to pathologize the Captive by upending her agency and placing her sanity at the mercy of her surroundings, her inherent reliance on male attention and care due to a social structure that prevents a viable alternative. Both circumstances require a particular submission that falls within the long history of abjected, female spectacle that is a silenced object, stripped of power.

But the play does not end in mere silence, nor is there only one ending. The *Poems* version ends with the Captive's assured madness. The theatrical ending of hope and redemption through a mother's love for her child is rejected in favor of the perhaps more realistic, but far more indicting and troubling, ending in which the Captive declares her madness without recourse. She declares, "I feel the truth! Your task is done!—(*With a loud shriek.*) I'm mad! mad!" This "closet" version clearly directs an accusation toward the audience with its direct address, unlike the more passive "'Tis done! 'tis done!" of the theatrical version. "*Your* task" makes it clear that the mission to subjugate the disagreeable, "unruly" female is part of a larger social agreement, not just the wishes of her husband (emphasis mine). This larger accusation against the complicit audience manifests itself through the physical and social conditions of the asylum and the apathetic treatment of the Gaoler, which represents the larger apathy and inequality of a society that pathologizes a woman and allows her to be locked up despite clear evidence of her sanity. Therefore, the permanent pathological change in the Captive is a far more subversive statement than one of restorative motherhood. The monodrama links her behavior to

her mindfulness of her position, and in denying the Captive her sanity, Lewis demonstrates the powerful effects of women's social inequality and mistreatment and how forcefully they can overcome an individual's agency.

The Captive is forced to perform her gender through hysterical madness: she has been placed in this asylum and must now conform to the expected behavior if she is meant to survive. Those in power around her insist that she is mad, and in the end, her individual will cannot go against the authority of her surroundings. If space articulates a site of encounter<sup>37</sup> and works as a physical embodiment of access and control, then the negation of the Captive's ability to navigate her space freely demonstrates her utter lack of independent agency and control. Just as Victoria's pathologized body infected Basil, so does the Madman's pathology infect the Captive. The "agony of terror" she experiences because of the Madman is possible because of the Gaoler, her husband, and British patriarchal society. The madhouse is now her reality, and so the final stage directions describe the Captive "dash[ing] herself in frenzy upon the ground," "shriek[ing] in terror, and hid[ing] her face," and finally bursting into a "delirious laugh" before she "remains motionless with vacant stare" (229-230). In restricting her to a dark dungeon, denying her voice, and surrounding her with madmen, the Gaoler and her husband compel the Captive into identifying her space, and thus herself, as one of madness.

The two versions of Lewis's *The Captive* and the differences between them highlight the power imbalances of male and female authority and the ways in which feminine agency and identity is undermined by the larger patriarchal structure of English society. Though one version offers a restoration of mental health and the other permanent insanity, in both cases the Captive maintains the totalizing attitude of her new social position, madness or restored motherhood, and is therefore codified into the typical expectations of either result. It is no coincidence that the family that appears to rescue the Captive in the theatrical version are mostly men: two brothers,

one younger sister who supports the older father, and the male son of the Captive, who “advances with a careless look” (230). That “careless” look is incredibly telling—“careless” implies a lack of thought, consideration, or responsibility; a neglectful attitude towards his mother’s condition or her surroundings. It is horrifying that a sane woman should succumb to madness, but it is also more acceptable for an insane woman to remain in an asylum, in her place, than for a sane woman to be held there; better that she ‘earn’ her placement, that she be ‘neutralized’ by her restricted access and isolated position, than continue a path towards a ‘restoration’ that cannot redeem the men who have failed her.

CHAPTER THREE: HAUNTINGS, FRAGMENTATION, AND MELANCHOLY IN  
 KEATS'S *ISABELLA*

**I. Introduction**

I concluded my previous chapter with a stark analysis of Matthew Lewis's *The Captive*, a monodrama that embodied Lewis's penchant for melodramatic flair and Gothic pageantry. The formal archetypes of the Gothic—scheming patriarchal figures, the constant threat of violence, secrets of the past coming back to haunt those in the present, underground crypts, suspected or real ghosts, to name but a few—serve complex thematic functions which are designed to arouse psychological terror. The Gothic is particularly notorious for pathologizing the female body, objectifying it and turning it into a spectacle for horror. Though John Keats's poem, *Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil* (published in his 1820 collection of poems, the last one printed during his lifetime), has not been universally identified as a Gothic text, its threatened, fragmented sense of the home and the female body which inhabits it clearly echoes the Gothic framework laid by the poem's literary predecessors. The pathologization of Isabella's body throughout the poem, in combination with Gothic supernatural elements, amplify Isabella's internalization and re-enactment of female pathology.

In *Isabella*, where he both echoes and alters a late-medieval *Decameron* tale by Giovanni Boccaccio (known to him in a 1620 English translation), Keats deftly shows the traumatic consequences of patriarchal power and hyperbolic female pathology as it affects the poem's young lovers through not only a description of fragmented physical spaces but also a rendering of fragmented bodies. Both the body and the space it inhabits become symbolic markers that transgress the laws of man and ultimately work together to create a fragmented sense of house and home that foreshadows the later fragmentations of Lorenzo's body and Isabella's mind. Keats uses this thematic fragmentation to call attention to the pathologized tension between

individual desire and familial obligation, which, in the context of my larger project, further demonstrates the pathologized, liminal position of women and the negative consequences of their required social performances in the Romantic era.

In this chapter, it is not my intention to discuss the architecture of Isabella's home in a way that merely contrasts the masculine and feminine orders traditionally associated with the city and nature. Such a reading would oversimplify Keats's poem and the complex imagery he uses to communicate the movement and fragmentation of his characters' bodies. I instead wish to consider the house as a spatial, and of course Gothic, metaphor that highlights the narrative's explorations of patriarchal power, class subversion, and feminine trauma through structural description. In *The Gothic and the Rule of Law* (2007), Sue Chaplin argues that "Gothic narratives repeatedly negotiate traumatic relationships of power and persecution through configurations of space" (84). Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Chaplin shows how "spatiality acquires political as well as aesthetic significance in Gothic fictions," particularly in those spaces of the patriarchal family home (84).

In *Isabella*, Keats's description of the house literalizes a fragmented, suppressive environment and shows how space can affect feminine subjectivity. As Jane Rendell has aptly proposed, not only are "spatial metaphors...epistemological statements which can highlight the importance of space in the construction of identity" but that, "by considering the subject as positioned or placed," we can use "spatial references in order to deal with knowledge through positionality. Our position, where we live and where we work, where we come from and where we are going is important in understanding ourselves as human subjects. How people define their own spaces and experience them is important in constructing identities" (107). If we accept Rendell's argument, then Isabella's identity—as daughter, sister, woman, lover—is caught up in the space she occupies and both her physical and social position within the patriarchal home. To

understand Isabella's home, then, is at least partly to understand Isabella. Furthermore, Keats has enhanced the home's architecture and the movements of its inhabitants with specific Gothic elements drawn directly from Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. The eerie tension created by Keats's use of these classic Gothic apparatuses emphasizes the pathologized female body and mind as it suffers from both quotidian and supernatural pressures. Indeed, Isabella's mental breakdown after her "vision" of the dead Lorenzo is precipitated by her melancholic, pathological longing *before* she realizes he is dead.

This chapter will thus also explore the pathological tension created by Keats's use of Romantic-era theories of melancholy, theories that pathologized female grief into hysteria and/or depression. The medical definition William Buchan articulated in *Domestic Medicine*, which I outlined in my introduction, is as follows: "Melancholy is that state of alienation or weakness of mind which renders people incapable of enjoying the pleasures, or *performing the duties of life*. It is a degree of insanity, and often terminates in absolute madness" (289 emphasis mine). Though one could argue Keats countered this definition in his 1819 "Ode on Melancholy" (which commands the reader to "glut thy sorrow on a morning rose"), in his characterization of Isabella he plays it out. In my first chapter, I discussed the Romantic perception of madness and how it affected the feminine performance of Mary Lamb. A consistent self-characterization of Mary was her "weakness of mind," an identification and internalization of feminine pathology that she sometimes turned into a performative quality to deflect from her self-perceived inadequacies as a Romantic woman. We see that same "alienation or weakness of mind" in Isabella's behavior, in her detachment from her world and her life, in her solipsistic obsession with Lorenzo's decapitated head. It is well known that Keats trained as an apothecary before his writing career and that his medical understanding of sickness and the body affected his writings. In considering Keats's medical education<sup>1</sup> and his familiarity with Robert Burton's *Anatomy of*

*Melancholy* (1621), which still held educational and cultural influence in the early nineteenth century, Isabella's inability to perform her "duties of life" as a bourgeois woman and her pathologized feminine performance of love and grief take on new, medically-inflected internalizations of the cultural demands of English society in the early nineteenth century. In *Isabella*, Keats presents a macabre, melancholy look at suppressed love and the dangers of a pathologized gender dynamic which privileges money, patriarchal power, and familial honor above feminine autonomy both within and outside the home.

## II. The (Gothic) Home of the Father

In her prologue to *Gender Space Architecture*, Leslie Kanes Weisman writes: "The built environment is a cultural artifact. It is shaped by human intention and intervention, a living archaeology through which we can extract the priorities and beliefs of the decision-makers in our society. Both the process through which we build and the forms themselves embody cultural values and imply standards of behavior which affect us all" (1). Weisman suggests that power relations are inscribed in built space, and that kinship networks, social economy, and concepts such as 'public' and 'private' spheres are articulated within the context of these physical and metaphorical spatial boundaries. Though we must acknowledge the fluid and arbitrary nature of gender construction and the false notion of totalizing binaries that set up oppositional subjectivities, we traditionally associate the home with the feminine, and therefore the private, sphere. This link is due in part to the notion that as "material culture, space is not innate and inert, measured geometrically, but an integral and changing part of daily life, intimately bound up in social and personal rituals and activities" (Rendell 102). To this day, almost all domestic architecture in Western culture is meant to provide a space of comfort, of nurturance, of emotion, of sanctuary from the busy, public, 'masculine' world of money, war, and politics.<sup>2</sup>

Sondra Archimedes has shown how the increasing industrialization of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries resulted in this more segregated, gendered understanding of public and private spheres. She explains that many businesses were “home-based,” with all family members working together in various capacities, until widespread industrialization created situations wherein a woman could become less involved, and “it became a mark of status and respectability for a man to be able to afford to support a wife and children in idle comfort. Thus, the physical separation of home and workplace led to an ideological separation between male and female spheres, imagined as public and private” (28-29). Furthermore, “despite the very real economic and historical circumstances that allowed many women to function in non-stereotypical ways, the idealization of home and hearth appealed to the self-image of the middle classes” (29). Archimedes succinctly explains the middle-class ideologies that would have influenced Keats’s rendering of Boccaccio’s tale and how it would have been received by his audience.

However, I would now like to introduce a complication to the assertion of the domestic sphere as inherently feminine. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida characterizes the ‘archive’ as both commencement and commandment: the archive coordinates two principles, “*there* where things commence—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, there where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle” (1). The meaning of the Greek *arkheion* initially came from a “house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house...that official documents are filed” (2). The archons not only ensured the safety of those

documents, they also interpreted the archives, thus empowering the archons to speak the law and consequently creating a “place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*” (3). Thus, the law originates in domestic space, in a locality firmly controlled by powerful, privileged men, who used their political position and authority to dictate the law, both historical and present. The home, then, is an archive of the law of the father *and* the Father.

Derrida’s connection between patriarchal authority and domestic space applies directly to the entrapment of Isabella (clearly a partial precursor for the one in Keats’s poem) in and underneath the home of the villainous Manfred in Walpole’s foundational Gothic text, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). After the shocking death of his son, Conrad, to whom Isabella was engaged at her father’s command, Manfred proposes marriage to Isabella so that he may secure his bloodline and his (ill-gotten) position of wealth and power. Isabella is “half-dead with fright and horror,” and she “dread[s] nothing so much as Manfred’s pursuit of his declaration” (Walpole 80). Though she knows not “whither to direct her steps, nor how to escape from the impetuosity of the prince...she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the church of St. Nicholas” (82). Entering the secret passage, Isabella finds that the lower part of the castle was hollowed into several intricate cloisters; and it was not easy for one under so much anxiety to find the door that opened into the cavern. An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror;—yet more she dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics to pursue her. (82)

Isabella is trapped within the physical walls of the castle, a site of historical significance and the residence of a publicly recognized authority, Manfred. Manfred has given Isabella a command to

marry him, inspiring dread and anxiety that is compounded by the nomological weight of his patriarchal power as represented by and threatened through the physical structure of the castle. He has interpreted the law to suit his own desires, and Isabella cannot directly confront his privilege so she instead retreats. But even though she is no longer in Manfred's immediate physical presence, she cannot escape the force of his will. There is an "awful silence" throughout the "subterraneous regions," yet every "murmur struck her with new terror" of Manfred's pursuit. The castle itself contributes to her terror by the physical attributes of its labyrinthine passages, the wind echoing through the hollowed cloister. In other words, the Gothic house, the site of patriarchal power, maintains Manfred's threat in his absence.

Not only does the physical architecture of the castle contribute to Isabella's terror, Walpole's descriptions of her psychological turmoil pathologize her "impressionable" female mind:

Every suggestion that horror could inspire rushed in her mind.... Words cannot paint the horror of the princess's situation. Alone in so dismal a place, her mind imprinted with all the terrible events of the day, hopeless of escaping, expecting every moment the arrival of Manfred, and far from tranquil on knowing she was within reach of somebody, she knew not whom, who for some cause seemed concealed thereabouts, all these thoughts crowded on her distracted mind, and she was ready to sink under her apprehensions.... For a considerable time she remained in an agony of despair. (83-84)

The ubiquitous Gothic motif of a descent into darkness manifests itself within the terrorizing and pathologizing of the female body pursued by tyrannical male power. Isabella's episode solidifies the Gothic metaphor of a "long labyrinth of darkness" representing the terror and confusion of a "distracted mind... ready to sink under her apprehensions." The pages spent describing Isabella's

terror, the dread that rushes into a mind “imprinted with all the terrible events of the day,” remaining in an “agony of despair”—all these descriptions pathologize Isabella’s fear and hyperbolize the emotional turmoil of her escape. The suggestion that Isabella’s mind is “imprinted” with horrific events, along with the fact that these imprints have affected her ability to think rationally, echoes the Romantic-era theories of sensibility and the “impressions” that affected women’s “more delicate” nerves. As I indicated in my introduction, doctors like Robert Thomas asserted the “exquisiteness” of feeling in order to pathologize feminine emotion as a psychological weakness often leading to hysteria. By emphasizing Isabella’s heightened sensibilities and hyperbolizing her emotions while simultaneously describing the haunting catacombs of a castle, Walpole inextricably ties together the pathologized female body with a key Gothic aesthetic.

Walpole achieves this connection of pathologized body and pathologized space because of the violence wielded by patriarchal law, especially within the boundaries of ancestral property, which guards the privilege of its owner. In *Glas*, Derrida argues that the law produces and reproduces itself as a sacred dwelling place, as “home, habitation, apartment, room, residence, temple, tomb....If a common sense is given therein, it is the guarding of the proper, of property, propriety, of one’s own” (133). There is a clear line of possession at work within this thinking: the archons, the lawmakers, the privileged men are “guarding” what is theirs, and this conception of property refers to not only objects within the home, but also to a larger sense of “propriety” or any abstract concept of social correctness dictated by the resident in power. This kind of ownership creates physical and metaphysical boundaries perpetuated and enforced by the very walls of the house. From the home, the center of patrilineal genealogy, a “myth of sacred law is generated that is premised upon an entirely phantasmic opposition between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ spaces,” which in turn creates a haunting of the space by what its dwellers choose to

incorporate or abject from their home (Chaplin 85). We codify and confront our worlds through our delineation of space, specifically our self-produced boundaries between the inside of the sacred home and the chaotic outside world. Space thus reflects social organization and the power of those who can influence and control such an organizing principle (i.e., patriarchs and lawmakers).

The wielding of such power is necessarily violent. Derrida expands on this concept in “The Force of Law” by arguing that, in the founding of law or in its institution, the “problem of justice will have been posed and violently resolved, that is to say buried, dissimulated, repressed....Justice, as law, is never exercised without a decision that *cuts*, that divides” (963). There can be no justice without violence, without transgression, without punishment. Furthermore, there can be no legal violence without illegal violence, and ultimately, any difference becomes arbitrary: the law perpetuates violence in order to justify itself. The exercise of power always results in a vestment of authority that must be divided and separated from that which must be repressed. This exercise in fragmentation is perpetual and infinite: “To be just, the decision of a judge, for example, must not only follow a rule of law or a general law but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstating act of interpretation, as if ultimately nothing previously existed of the law, as if the judge himself invented the law in every case” (963). The result is an ongoing cycle of “legal” violence and justification of such violence, with the justification being predicated on a myth of tradition and authority which expels outside the law that which undermines the law (thus the word “outlaw” designates a transgression of the boundaries of law through metaphorical spatiality). Whoever occupies the position of the judge, whoever occupies the role of homeowner, renews, rearranges, and interprets the law according to his own logic of what should remain within and without its boundaries. Thus, by seizing the property of Otranto through violence, Manfred perpetuates that violence in order to justify and

solidify his position. And when Keats continuously fragments his characters' bodies, he enacts the violent division of the law going on in the larger social order as his poem conceives of it.

However, as Mark Wigley argues in *The Architecture of Deconstruction*, the “‘outside’ of a house continues to be organised [sic] by the logic of the house and so actually remains inside it” (107). Whatever we might expel from our house, it remains as a spectral figure, like the ghosts in *The Castle of Otranto*, a haunting reminder of what we hope to negate in contrast to what we hold dear and wish to protect within sacred walls. The effect of this organization is a collapsing of what we might consider interior vs. exterior and in its place a creation of a liminal space, an awareness of space that transcends physical barriers: though we may be standing outside the home, we can see through to the interior, and what we once considered private has now been made public. Most importantly, once we have shaped such a space, it is no longer a neutral background but rather a foundational structure that influences and can be influenced by its inhabitants and those law-giving figures who are internalized by them.

To associate the home, what should be a place of stability and safety, with violence and intrusion is to pervert the intended nature of the domicile; or rather, to uncover the violence that is always already within because the house can never be detached from itself as a site of lawful subordination.<sup>3</sup> Wigley asserts:

The house is not simply the site of a particular subordination, a particular kind of violence. It is the very principle of violence. To dominate is always to house, to place in the domus. Domination is domestication. Yet the house does not simply precede what it domesticates. The house is itself an effect of suppression. The classical figure of the feminine is that which lacks its own secure boundaries, producing insecurity by disrupting boundaries, and which therefore must be housed by masculine force that is no more than the ability to maintain rigid limits

or, more precisely, the effect of such limits, the representation of a space, a representation that is not only violently enforced by a range of disciplinary structures (legal, philosophical, economic, aesthetic, technical, social, and so on), but is itself already a form of violence. (137-8)

To place the feminine in the home and designate it *her* space is to subject her to the “rigid limits” of masculine force supported by patriarchal law (not to mention the violence of placing/positioning a subject without his or her consent). If the law stems from the house, then to threaten the house is to threaten the law.

All of this applies to the central house in Keats’s *Isabella*. Except for the scene of Lorenzo’s murder and Isabella’s grave-robbing out in the forest, *Isabella* takes place entirely in one central home, a Gothic home that seems to “come alive” and affect its residents. In Isabella’s case, the house and its inhabitants further her pathology. Keats achieves this effect in two ways, both of which are rooted in Gothic motifs. The first is an emphasis on voyeurism and a physical and psychological male occupation of domestic space. The home takes on the character of its owner and facilitates a patriarchal environment, but at the same time is fragmented by Isabella’s defiant love affair and her resistance to complete patriarchal power over space. The second is a mutual haunting of the lovers by each other, characterized as love-sickness, which nonetheless transforms the home into a ghostly space well before Lorenzo’s ghost visits Isabella in a “vision.” In this manner, Keats injects a Gothic aesthetic into Boccaccio’s tale while simultaneously pointing up Isabella’s increasing pathology, effectively doubling down on the Romantic-era pattern of pathologizing the female body.

Keats consistently describes the central home in his poem, using architectural details of the mansion to communicate the aesthetics of the poem’s environment. There are doors, chamber-windows, garden bowers, garden-terraces, courtyards, in-door lattices. All these are

emphasized in the beginning of the poem, when Isabella and Lorenzo engage in their illicit love affair in defiance of her family. Isabella does not live alone or with a standard kind of family which she nurtures and which supports her in turn. There is no mention of parents in the poem, and in their absence another authority takes their place. “With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt” (Keats ln.105), and they have a “plan to coax her by degrees/To some high noble and his olive trees” (ln. 167-8). These men ensure that Isabella’s actions are constantly scrutinized, and this scrutiny requires her to live up to the standards expected of her higher social position: marrying not for love but for patriarchal gain. They consequently “spy” on “Fair Isabella in her downy nest” (ln. 137-8). Just as Isabella in *Otranto* remains under Manfred’s authority (threat) while she remains in the castle, so too is Keats’s Isabella subject to patriarchal pressure whether or not she is in the direct presence of a man. The house signifies and exerts authority even in the absence of a male body through the oppressive atmosphere created by Isabella’s brothers.

The house, however, also reunites the lovers and gives them opportunities to defy its patriarchal structure. In personifying the door and attributing it with “giv[ing]” Isabella to Lorenzo’s sight, Keats presents a home that encourages love and connection between its occupants, no matter the desires of Isabella’s brothers. The use of the space changes the very nature of its power: rather than a home owned by Isabella’s brothers that represents the power of ancient patriarchal law, the building becomes an accomplice to Isabella’s and Lorenzo’s socially defiant behavior. The walls that divide the lovers turn into windows that open up their view, breaking down the barrier of impropriety and allowing increasingly transgressive pursuits in the name of love. The result is a Keatsian spin on the Gothic home: the architecture, seemingly in league with the lovers, offers secret meeting places and opening doorways that “give” up those pieces of each lover’s body to the other.

Lorenzo also contributes to the constant male voyeurism Isabella experiences. Keats describes the physical interactions of the lovers as they move throughout the house, strategically plotting their patterns of behavior around and through the architecture that both helps and hinders their affair:

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,  
 Before the door had given her to his eyes;  
 And from her chamber-window he would catch  
 Her beauty farther than the falcon spies. (ln. 17-20)

Lorenzo's "watch," as "constant as her vespers," is all-consuming (ln. 21). With "sick longing" he "spies" on his beloved through her chamber-window, and the only reason his stalking does not tread past creepy into the realm of possibly homicidal is that this is a 'romance,' so Isabella reciprocates his feelings (ln. 23, 20). Nevertheless, Isabella remains under surveillance from her brothers and her suitor, both patriarchal stand-ins for her markedly absent father. Keats creates this pervasive sense of voyeurism in part through the architecture of the house, which both separates and reunites the lovers within an atmosphere of dueling male surveillance.

This voyeuristic atmosphere, moreover, pathologizes Isabella in and of itself. Lorenzo has usurped the function of the home and the power that traditionally rests not only with a lady's family, but also with herself. Through this male occupation of 'feminine' domestic space, Isabella begins to lose what little autonomy she had as mistress of the house and succumbs to love-sickness, her "untouch'd cheek" falling "sick within the rose's just domain" (ln. 33-34). Lorenzo usurps her domestic activities through his dominating, inescapable presence: he constantly watches her and finds ways to observe her from afar, for they cannot live in the "self-same mansion" without feeling each other's presence (ln. 3). He occupies her physical, and subsequently her mental, space. We do not know how Isabella spends her time other than to

weep tears into her pillow and sew Lorenzo's name into her embroidery, spoiling that faithful standby of individual female domestic activity. This all-consuming love, a dominating love that affects Isabella's ability to focus on anything other than Lorenzo, is a clear pathology in the world Keats has created. Isabella, from the poems earliest lines, is sick and unable to function as a traditional feminine presence within her domicile because of her "malady" (ln. 4).

Additionally, the voyeuristic male gaze is overlapped with a narcissistic female gaze: Isabella revels in her solitary love and the knowledge of Lorenzo's constant watch, and thus her love-sickness becomes a literal physical and emotional dependency, irrevocably tying her well-being to her secret male lover and to desires of her own that exist independent of familial duty and bourgeois feminine performance. Her inability to perform her feminine obligations, to "perform the duties of life" as Buchan wrote in Keats's day, pathologizes her.

The haunting quality of the ever-present male gaze, in fact, compounds Isabella's solipsistic, pathologized behavior and encourages her to seek solace in her "self-same" counterpart rather than through open social interaction. The middle-class idealization of the home is thus ruined by this intruder, Lorenzo, who distracts the feminine presence from her familial duties and defies the patriarchal dominance articulated by Isabella's brothers, Keats' symbol for destructive, capitalist patriarchal power. However, the brother's efforts to remove Lorenzo and reassert their authority prove futile. Now that he has made this once "pure" space of patrilineal genealogy impure, Lorenzo cannot be extracted from the home, even in death. Despite the brothers' homicidal efforts, Lorenzo's spectre returns and continues to haunt Isabella, prompting her to venture out of the 'safety' of the patriarchal home to further her civil and legal disobedience through her grave-robbing. But, as Terry Castle points out, the haunting of a space can occur without a literal ghost.

In “The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,” Castle persuasively argues that Ann Radcliffe engages in a late-eighteenth-century phenomenon that Castle terms “the spectralization of the other: this new obsession with the internalized images of other people” (237). In brief, Castle asserts “romantic self-absorption” and the power of the imagination and memory work together to impress upon a person’s mind the mental pictures they wish to see, and these internal images, these specters, can become more meaningful than a living person. In Radcliffe’s seminal novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), the supernatural appears in everyday life by haunting her characters with internal spectral images of those they love, with familiar objects and places that recall the person’s image with metonymic power. Lovers are particularly inclined to conjure ghostly images of someone living or dead because “lovers—those who mourn, as it were, for the living—are subject to similar experiences.... A haunted lover can do nothing, it seems, but haunt the haunts of the other. To love in the novel is to become ghostly oneself” (235). Romantic reverie allows the other to “be appropriated, held close, and cherished forever in the ecstatic confines of the imagination” (249).

Not surprisingly, given Keats’s unabashed fondness for “Mother Radcliffe,” we can immediately see her influence on the ghostly hauntings in Keats’s *Isabella*.<sup>4</sup> Both during and after their courting, we see the ways Isabella and Lorenzo spy on one another through the various openings of the house and day-dream about images of each other when they are alone:

He might not in house, field, or garden stir,  
 But her full shape would all his seeing fill;  
 And his continual voice was pleasanter  
 To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;  
 Her lute-string gave an echo of his name...  
 And constant as her vespers would he watch,

Because her face was turn'd to the same skies;  
 And with sick longing all the night outwear,  
 To hear her morning-step upon the stair. (ln. 11-24)

The lovers' constant awareness of the other creates a Gothic haunting in that the images of each other follow the lovers from room to room, transgressing the boundaries of public and private space and contributing to the feeling of intrusion into the domestic space. Lorenzo physically haunts Isabella through watching her at vespers, listening for her on the stairs; physically returning to the places she goes within the house. Isabella is also haunted by Lorenzo's ghostly presence when he is not physically present. She hears his voice throughout the house, his name in the music she plays. He in turn imagines "her full shape" in every part of the grounds, so much so that her image "all his seeing fill[s]." Their mutual haunting blocks out the real world in favor of a ghostly one.

There is a clear danger, however, in such obsessive imaginings. Castle comments that, within such ghostly spectralization,

immediate sensory experience gives way, necessarily, to an absorption in illusion—an obsessional concentration on nostalgic images of the dead. Yet these recollected 'presences,' it turns out, are paradoxically more real, more palpable-seeming, than any object of sense. No external scene, not even the most horrid or riotous, can undermine this absorbing faith in the phantasmatic....Unpleasant realities cannot compete with the marvelous projections of memory, love, and desire....The terrible irony—indeed *the pathology*—of the romantic vision is that even as other people come to hold a new and fascinating eminence in the mind, they cease to matter as individuals in the flesh. (246-9 emphasis mine)

Though Lorenzo may walk the lovely grounds of Isabella's home, all he can see is her. Though Isabella may enjoy the sounds of a Romantic landscape, she still imagines Lorenzo's voice laid over the wind or the stream. The ghostly presence of the other creates hallucinations, and continual haunting becomes a solipsistic obsession that pathologizes the minds of the lovers, effacing themselves and the other in favor of fantasy.

This effacement is particularly true of Isabella. Though both lovers suffer from lovesickness at the poem's start, Isabella is the one consistently described as sick, feverish, and suffering from a malady throughout the entire poem. Lorenzo only speaks his love when he sees how terrible Isabella's condition has become—"how ill she is" he exclaims, noticing how she has turned "sick" and "pale" (Keats ln. 37). She has weakened herself, her lovesick mind psychosomatically attacking and pathologizing her body. While Isabella awaits Lorenzo's return from his supposed trip abroad, her pathological lovesickness worsens. Even before she discovers his murder and plants the corpse's head with basil, Isabella "weeps alone for pleasures not to be" (ln. 233) and "brooded o'er the luxury alone:/His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,/And to the silence made a gentle moan" (ln. 236-8). Isabella's deteriorating health is directly tied to Lorenzo's absence and the obsessive dependence she has cultivated while previously indulging in her desires.

### **III. Fragmented Spaces, Fragmented Bodies**

Lorenzo's presence in Isabella's home, then, intrudes upon the patriarchal authority vested in ancestral property. This intrusion, however, is complicated by the physical walls of the home which restrict movement. Not only does the architecture serve as an accomplice to an illicit love affair, even as it remains an oppressive site of patriarchal power; the house's structure also effectively fragments the bodies under surveillance in ways that mimics the poem's themes of tragic social transgression, violent patriarchal law, and female pathology. Bodies in the poem are

thus broken, abnormal, pathologized—divided by the continuously renewing cycle of patriarchal surveillance and justice.

Keats consistently uses synecdoche throughout the poem to fragment and call attention to the lovers' bodies, suggesting by these means, among others, that these bodies inhabit a suppressive environment. Isabella cries that she will not see another night if Lorenzo's "lips breathe not love's tune" (ln. 30), and just as the "house, field, or garden" (ln. 11) is narrowed down to a latch and a door, so too is Isabella's "full shape" reduced to a "gentle hand." While passing through her home, Lorenzo listens for a disembodied voice that will indicate Isabella's presence. He strains to hear her "matin-song,/ Or the light whisper of her footstep soft" (ln. 195-6). Rather than search for Isabella in her entirety, Lorenzo seeks the physical evidence of her individual body-parts that indicate her presence. After hearing a "laugh full musical aloft," he discovers her by looking "through an in-door lattice" and sees her smiling "features bright" (ln. 198-200). The lattice, an interlaced wall-like structure usually used as a screen or to provide support for growing plants, simultaneously hides and reveals Isabella from Lorenzo. Thus, the divided rooms of the home, which are meant to create separate spaces and provide a sense of dwelling and individual ownership for the inhabitants, cannot withstand the pervasive male gaze as it literally peers through walls in pursuit of its object: the female body.

Additionally, the lattice establishes a new multiplicity of boundaries that cannot simply be enclosed by facades. The lattice simultaneously mediates Lorenzo's sight and becomes an object of his sight: the latticework permits him to look on Isabella while preventing him from seeing her figure in full, yet it also becomes part of the scene that makes up her body. The overlapping lines of the lattice crisscross Isabella's body, forcing Lorenzo to focus on her material body as part of her domestic environment and at the same time, while breaking her up into parts, make him imagine those parts which he cannot presently see. His vision is both direct

and indirect, haunted by the memory of her complete physical body even as he voyeuristically haunts her rooms. I agree with Nicole Reynolds's suggestion that "Keats's emphasis on framed, obscured, or even deceptive sight contradicts the impulse expressed by other Romantic poets to visually absorb and be absorbed by—spontaneously, transparently—the world around them; his casements [windows] symbolically invoke the contest between visual mechanics and visionary transcendence" (10). As employed by Keats, the lattice frames, obscures, and creates "deceptive" sight of Isabella. It alters her body and thereby adds another layer of pathology. Additionally, the literal splitting of the walls of the home breaks through the idea of home as one large enclosed space and draws attention to the tension between inside/outside, public/private, and even male/feminine desire, suggesting that such binaries are far more fluid and arbitrary than they appear.

This aesthetic strategy of fragmentation is not restricted to the lovers. The brothers' workers are also reduced to the materiality of their bodies:

And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
 In torched mines and noisy factories,  
 And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
 In blood from stinging whip; —with hollow eyes  
 Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
 To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood. (ln. 107-112)

While Keats goes on to describe in further detail the various financial resources of Isabella's brothers, the initial portrayal stresses the means of their wealth, which is dependent on bodily labor. The synecdochical depiction of labor progresses from "weary hand" to "hollow eyes," demonstrating the shift from a physical exhaustion to a spiritual one. These bodies are hollowed out, blinded by the "dazzling river" and its rich ores, their humanity broken up and melted as

easily as their flesh “did melt/In blood from stinging whip.” These lines emphasize the violence done to human bodies in the pursuit of money, and this ruthless fragmentation dehumanizes the workers in the name of patriarchal power, much like Isabella is dehumanized into property for the marriage market. Thus, Lorenzo’s murder by his employers is only an extension of the brothers’ brutal philosophy. To kill Lorenzo, their disobedient servant, is in their eyes merely to discard defective property.

All these fragmented bodies, whether divided by the architecture or Keats’s poetic technique, build towards that most famous fragmented body of the poem: Lorenzo’s severed head encased in a pot of basil. “With duller steel than Persean sword,” Isabella cuts away “no formless monster’s head,” but “Love impersonate” (Keats ln. 393-398). Isabella takes her “prize” home in “anxious secrecy,” and “calm’d its wild hair,” “pointed each fringed lash,” and “wrapp’d it up” in a silk scarf to secrete the head in a “tomb” of a garden-pot, topped with basil (ln. 401-414). The description of Isabella caring for Lorenzo’s severed head, so reminiscent of mad Salome with the head of John the Baptist in the Bible as well as Boccaccio, further fragments the body, reducing focus from not only a body to a head, but also to the individual lashes that decorate “each eye’s sepulchral cell” (ln. 404). Isabella’s mourning of Lorenzo is transmogrified into a dedication to and fetishization of his corpse. She uses man-made objects to “calm” the wildness of his appearance, to bring a sense of human decorum and order to this now inhuman object—and to keep it with her in the home. We can also see in her actions a reversal of the active fragmentation Lorenzo once performed through his voyeurism: during their courtship, Keats focuses on the ways Lorenzo’s voyeurism through the structure of the house fragments Isabella’s body; after Lorenzo’s death, Isabella reciprocates and furthers her lover’s actions by literalizing the fragmentation in her decapitation of Lorenzo’s corpse. Isabella’s actions, however, are far more obviously pathological. Her passionate obsession with Lorenzo has

transferred itself to Lorenzo's corpse, further pathologizing Isabella by turning her already solipsistic devotion into a pathological fixation on the body of her dead and fragmented love.

By fragmenting Lorenzo's body and bringing it back into the home, Isabella achieves two significant paradoxes. First, the head/plant hybrid reconfigures the home through its simultaneous decorative (public) properties and its intimate (private) meaning. Nicole Reynolds notes that the "domestic interior" is both "an architectural surface (articulated through decoration)" and a "new topos of bourgeois subjectivity" (9): one's identity was partially articulated through the semi-public decoration of one's private home. She notes that by the nineteenth century middle-class and upper-middle-class women had increasing influence on architectural discourse due to their position "as purveyors of domestic comfort" (9). Part of a woman's function in the home, then, was to create an environment which represented the occupying family to the outside world: visitors would enter the home, make their observations about the domestic interior, and carry those observations with them when they left. For Isabella, that family now includes Lorenzo, and her insistence on bringing him home with her, in whatever form, and making him presentable demonstrates her desire to include him in the impression the home makes upon herself, as permanent occupant, and on other temporary visitors. Isabella therefore re-enacts the daily process of female domesticity: maintaining a welcoming environment for her family, particularly her husband, and guests. By tidying up Lorenzo's head, Isabella defaults to her bourgeois feminine duties and thus demonstrates how deeply her sense of social etiquette is ingrained, so deep that it becomes uncontrollable, pathological. Keeping a decapitated head in the home is inarguably the result of a damaged psyche, but it is also an intensification of the traditional internalization of pathologized female behavior Isabella has demonstrated throughout the poem.

Furthermore, the nature and function of the basil plant becomes both illusive and elusive, as its purpose lies not in its original construction as decorative object but through its new use as tomb.<sup>5</sup> Isabella creates a secret tomb out of a garden-pot, filling a receptacle for life with a combination of life, dirt, and death; she creates an urn that houses Lorenzo's remains within the illusion of life. The hollow structure of the pot creates a private space for her grief, as she cannot publicly mourn Lorenzo through the pomp and circumstance of a Florentine funeral. However, the transference of her love for Lorenzo to the pot of basil is the open secret of the poem; her endless tears are the visible sign of her melancholy, a private condition that cannot help being made public. These tears, small fragments of Isabella's body, betray her mourning: "Her brethren, noted the continual shower/From her dead eyes" (ln. 451-2). The "continual shower" indicates Isabella's behavior has gone past mourning and into a real, depressive illness, an illness made even more pathological by the descriptor "dead eyes"—that which is dead should not be able to produce life. Therefore, the space the head occupies becomes an environment which reveals Isabella's pathologized trauma even as it conceals the direct source, a hybrid of organic life that still participates in human social spheres, both as a finite aesthetic object and as a determining subjective factor that influences and pathologizes its surroundings.

The second paradox of Lorenzo's severed head is both simple and complex: the pot of basil is mobile. Isabella carries the pot with her wherever she goes, thereby allowing Lorenzo's body to transcend both designated private space and the idea of a fixed "final resting place." Where before his death, Lorenzo's mobility in the house was limited to what he could accomplish under the watchful eyes of Isabella's brothers, this post mortem invasion is not confined to the pot itself, but rather belongs to the entire sequence of social spaces within the home, engaging those spaces anew and disrupting the enclosure created by the brothers. Lorenzo, within the *memento mori* that evokes him, still haunts the home. This fragmented vestige of

Lorenzo's body, this poem's ultimate Gothic image, can transgress normal restrictions of public and private spaces: it is a liminal object.

Since Isabella carries the basil with her everywhere, she connects herself to this symbol of obsessive, melancholic, pathological love. She can now be with "Lorenzo" whenever, wherever she chooses without restriction. Isabella's human intention and intervention as manifested in the basil pot transforms the home around her from a place of patrilineal authority and power that delimits the movements of its residents into a home haunted by the fragmented body of its previously ejected occupant. As both a metaphorical ghost and literal head, Lorenzo's remains remain within and continue to affect the home he occupies. After Isabella's brothers steal the basil pot and "examine it in a secret place," they leave "Florence in a moment's space,/Never to turn again" (ln. 473-79). Lorenzo's fragmented body ejects the brothers from their own home, subverting the power of patriarchal lineage in favor of Isabella's melancholic will. This breaking of norms converts her status as victim into a new kind of agency: Isabella's desire alters the space it inhabits, permeating the home and permanently changing its nature. With the ejection of the brothers and the endurance of Isabella's pathological desire, the home no longer houses the seat of patriarchal power. The home is now a pathologized space, its original masculine purpose fragmented by the endurance of Isabella's pathological feminine desire.

The idea of "home" oscillates between a physical structure and a state of existence, a sense of belonging. What was previously the seat of patriarchal power is transformed into a haunted structure, a battleground for Isabella's autonomy and love. Rather than perform their expected roles of servant and lady, through their obsessive watching and peering through keyholes, Isabella and Lorenzo turn the "pure" space of the private, sacred home into a public arena for socially defiant flirtation and, eventually, perverse consummation. If we return to Derrida's notion of the home as a sacred authoritative space of patrilineal authority, we have an

architecture which now acquires transgressive autonomy and a subsequent subversive significance: the multiplicity of dwellers within the home complicates the rigid binary of “pure” vs. “impure,” “public” vs. “private,” and creates a haunting of desires that transcends physical barriers. Keats creates a dialectic of permeability through the architecture of the home. Though they meet in public spaces accessible by Isabella’s brothers and presumably other servants, the lovers act as if they are in private: love takes place in liminal space, a space created to exceed the original intentions of the architects or the owners, a space that is constantly changing and adapting according to the desires of its occupants. Perversely like the imaginary, spectral gaze that completes Isabella’s figure behind the lattice, the lovers find transcendence in this fragmented, pathologized liminality.

#### **IV. Fragmented Desire, Fragmented Mind**

My focus up to this point has been on the ways in which Lorenzo and Isabella physically interact within and throughout her home despite the patriarchal power wielded by Isabella’s brothers and their contribution to Isabella’s pathology. I turn my attention now from Lorenzo’s and Isabella’s fragmented bodies to Isabella’s fragmented mind. The pervasive male gaze and consistent voyeurism of her brothers and Lorenzo, combined with the opposing desires to honor her family and find personal love, creates an identity conflict for Isabella and subsequently affects her internalization of feminine performance. Because she must perform the role of obedient domestic woman while also having an affair, and then must suffer a great loss and try to mourn her lover in secret, Isabella internalizes the fragmented nature of her assigned role of domestic, obedient woman. “Incapable of enjoying the pleasures, or performing the duties life,” Isabella directly adheres to Buchan’s medical definition of melancholy. Her already fractured performance of respectable femininity undergoes further strain from her greater psychic anguish, which in turn leads to a fragmented, pathologized mind at a point of no return.

The poem begins and ends with Isabella's "malady," but Isabella's melancholy following Lorenzo's death, as I have already suggested, is not the same melancholy of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," wherein Keats reframes the traditional paraphernalia of grief in order to luxuriate in the exquisite pleasure of that very emotion more fully, proposing that loss is a necessary part of consumption and experience. Rather than explore the desirable and ephemeral qualities of melancholy as he does in "Ode on Melancholy," in *Isabella* Keats uses melancholic, self-destructive pathology to show the underlying violence of "simple" romance and the destructive consequence of a performative feminine self-denial and repression that, in Isabella's case, results in an exaggerated denial of reality that leads to insanity and death. The tragedy of Isabella serves a larger purpose of criticizing pathologized female repression, class conflict, and the irrationality of social inhibitions that restrict personal expression.

Before we can address Isabella's fragmented, pathologized mind, we must first discuss the social restrictions on female behavior in the nineteenth century, particularly the repression of feminine desire. In *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation* (2014), Rachel Schulkins helpfully offers this: "By the mid-eighteenth century, a new kind of woman emerged—the passionless domestic female. Throughout this period and more so towards the turn of the century, countless female conduct books, ladies' magazines and instruction manuals posited a feminine ideal that rested on the notion of the religious, pious, moral and asexual woman" (19). Schulkins suggests that this "passionless domestic female" emerged from two sources: the adoption of the two-sex model,<sup>6</sup> which biologically separated the sexes and eliminated the requirement of female desire for procreation, and the belief that sex was a social act which excluded the female, who "was bound to the private realms of domesticity....rather than being negotiated into the social and expressed" (13). Writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Hannah More repeatedly stressed the importance of female modesty, purity, and virtue, and we need only look to what happened to Mary

Wollstonecraft's reputation after 1798 to see how the public would turn on a woman they believed to have fallen from the standards of female piety.<sup>7</sup> In consequence, women were forced to adopt "a theatrical display of innocence" in order to be considered respectable, marriageable, and even desirable—Mary Poovey's "proper lady." The "proper lady" is of course an absurd social gambit that denies and pathologizes complex, expressive female identity. As Ben Jonson and Andrew Marvell have both lamented, women must play the "coy mistress" in order to secure male favor, ultimately to the detriment of both sexes.

We can see the consequence of this enforced asexuality in the voyeurism of Isabella's brothers that prevents sexual expression in the private/domestic sphere of the home. Though there are nearly 50 lines of poetry before Isabella and Lorenzo's bashful courtship leads to consummation, Isabella (who hardly speaks at all in the poem) has barely three lines of dialogue over that span. She confesses to her pillow, "O may I never see another night,/Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe no love's tune" (ln. 29-30), and when Lorenzo finally does approach her, she "lisp'd tenderly,/ 'Lorenzo!'—here she ceas'd her timid quest,/But in her tone and look he read the rest" (ln. 54-56). Somewhat like Baillie's Victoria, Isabella is performing a part, timidly lisping her lover's name and using her body, her "look," to signal her sexual interest instead of vocally expressing her desire. Her interest is signaled through a body language which must be interpreted correctly. This kind of passive ambiguity, as well as her inability to properly express herself, points to feminine suppression and performance—and to a sustained pathologizing of her sexual desire.

Isabella's behavior is a hyper-pathologized performance of a "proper lady" on multiple levels. First, she must not be too forward or aggressive in her encouragement of Lorenzo's affections; otherwise she could step outside the bounds of respectable female sexuality and paint herself a whore rather than a Madonna. Even in her own home, her own private space, Isabella

must maintain a performance of female submissiveness even as she simultaneously enacts a direct defiance of patriarchal law by choosing her own suitor. Her performance of female modesty is so ingrained that she must continue to wear the mask even when she deviates from the script, such as when she grooms Lorenzo's head as if it were a decorative object.

Second, Isabella is by no means free to express her desire without alerting her brothers to her illicit yearnings. The narrator exclaims surprise at their discovery of the affair: "How was it these same ledger-men could spy/Fair Isabella in her downy nest?....How could these money-bags see east and west?" (ln. 137-8, 142), but these lines are followed by the narrator's confirmation that Isabella's brothers learn "by many signs/What love Lorenzo for their sister had./And how she lov'd him too" (ln. 161-163). The suggestion that the brothers are so focused on their empire that they cannot see past their ledgers is a poor one, for Isabella is part of their economic enterprise and therefore under their constant gaze. And it is indeed a male gaze that spies on Isabella, that possesses and attempts to restrict the movements of her body and reads the "many signs" of her disobedience to her brothers' patriarchal authority. It is clear, then, that Isabella's "proper" performance of an obedient sister has started to break down in earnest, fragmenting under the happiness, the recklessness, the stress of expressing her desire in secret. The stress of splitting her desire for personal happiness and the compulsion for female obedience results in a poorly executed repression that foreshadows the later division of Isabella's mind.

Third, since Isabella must suppress her desires under the watchful male gaze of her brothers, she is divided between personal desire and family honor, and her initial suppression of her physical desire, her initial "malady," explodes into pathologized sexual obsession and masturbatory hallucination. Rachel Schulkins has convincingly linked all Keats's romances through the theme of female sexual repression. She argues his romances always contain a "female character who fails to suppress her sexual desire in the manner advocated by the image

of the asexual female yet is socially unable to express it. As such, female desire in Keats's poems is presented as a conflict between the wish to gratify one's sexual yearnings and the social demand to suppress it" (Schulkins 4). Schulkins argues that Keats resolves this conflict through entry into the imagination, a space free of social restriction. In *Isabella*, this realm of imagination is represented by the basil, which grows and flourishes beyond normal expectations: "Isabella does not feed a mere plant, but a plant of memories she associates with her sexuality and Lorenzo, from which she refuses to part. In her efforts to retrieve and reconstruct her sexuality by secretly attending the basil pot, Isabella steps outside social norms to a realm no longer controlled by her brothers" (85). However, I would argue that the imagination does not provide resolution for Isabella because it further pathologizes her. Her stymied sexual desire causes her to "nightly weep" for Lorenzo (ln. 8), and in his absence she "weeps alone for pleasures not to be" (ln. 233). Isabella's love and desire are pathologized into a melancholic nymphomania. Rather than finding solace in her memories of Lorenzo, Isabella falls into a solipsistic depression that prevents her from mourning him properly and thereby prevents her from moving on after his death. Repression turns into fantasy which turns into pathology, and any inward turn toward the imagination does not provide freedom from social restriction but instead leads to Isabella internalizing her pathologized desire into a lovesick body in the tradition of female melancholy.

We know from Keats's end note to *Lamia* that he was very familiar with Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), including its humoral theories of melancholy that still had some influence in the Romantic era. Schulkins therefore asserts that "Isabella's physical and mental deterioration are directly associated with her ungratified desires. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female hysteria and melancholia were believed to be associated with sexual frustration" (75). Indeed, Robert Thomas's first remark on nymphomania is, "This disease comes on with melancholy" (514), and nearly a third of *The Anatomy of*

*Melancholy* is dedicated to the causes and symptoms of love-based melancholy, a pathology caused by unsatisfied love and for which the best cure was sexual gratification. Therefore, since Keats's Lorenzo is no longer available to sate Isabella's desire, she joins the long literary tradition of women driven to insanity and suicide by the death or betrayal of her lover.<sup>8</sup>

Robert Burton's description of melancholy, after all, is as follows. For him patients are constantly

fretting, chafing, sighing, grieving, complaining, finding faults, repining, grudging, weeping...vexing themselves, disquieted in mind, with restless, unquiet thoughts, discontent either for their own, other men's or public affairs, such as concern them not; things past, present, or to come, the remembrance of some disgrace, loss, injury, abuse, etc., troubles them now, being idle afresh, as if it were new done. (138)

Burton clearly offers a theory of melancholy that emphasizes both the physical and psychological effects of the disease, unlike his classical sources that only discuss the body. This "integrated physiology" perhaps explains why Burton's influence lasted for so long and was of particular interest to a Romantic medicine that concerned itself with organic unity and psychosomatic treatment. His list of symptoms, however, is so vague and widespread that sadness and disquiet are pathologized into serious depression. "Grieving" and "complaining" are conveniently ambiguous, common behaviors that suddenly become pathological within the context of female melancholia. Isabella's attempts to process her loss are prolonged, her troubles "new done," and so her behavior following Lorenzo's absence conforms to the myriad of symptoms Burton describes:

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;  
Sorely she wept until the night came on,

And then, instead of love, O misery!  
 She brooded o'er the luxury alone:  
 His image in the dusk she seem'd to see,  
 And to the silence made a gentle moan,  
 Spreading her perfect arms upon the air,  
 And on her couch low murmuring 'Where? O where?' ...  
 She fretted for the golden hour, and hung  
 Upon the time with feverish unrest—(ln. 233-44)

There is fretting, there is weeping, there is restlessness and lethargy, there is “discontent” with her brother’s public affairs: with “an eye all pale” Isabella constantly asks after Lorenzo, complaining that business keeps him from her (ln. 257). The previous, already scant descriptions of female domestic duties have now disappeared entirely. Isabella’s feminine activities are reduced to lying on a couch and brooding over Lorenzo. She seems unable to be productive or perform her domestic charges, spending her days weeping for lost pleasure and her nights engaging in a sexually-charged solipsism.<sup>9</sup>

Burton himself admits that “the symptoms of the mind in lovers are almost infinite and so diverse that no art can comprehend them....Every poet is full of such catalogues of love symptoms, but fear and sorrow may justly challenge the chief place” (277-78). Isabella exhibits the symptoms of such a love-melancholy in ways that would have been immediately recognizable to Keats’s audience, yet also might have been diagnosed without great specificity if she had been admitted to a Romantic-era hospital. Until the late eighteenth century, medicine was mostly “symptom oriented,” which meant all symptoms in an illness were considered with equal weight in the diagnosis and treatment. According to Hermione De Almeida, “the new and clinical sense of a living pathology owned by Romantic medicine changed this to stress... the

symptoms of diagnostic significance or the physical signs that could be read and interpreted in the context of both the living body and the generating disease” (49). This sense of the larger context of the body, coupled with the “integrated physiology” that led to a practice of psychosomatic medicine, meant that female maladies would be attributed to vague causes such as “nerves” or hysteria.<sup>10</sup>

Take, for instance, Case VII from Joseph Mason Cox’s *Practical Observations on Insanity* (1804):

I cannot pretend to pourtray [sic] what beggars description; but a more interesting or distressing case could scarcely be imagined; suffice it to say, the period of festation was passed without any peculiar corporeal indisposition, but the unhappy patient pined in secret, her vivacity and spirits, like her deceitful lover, abandoned her, and her countenance exhibited the most striking traits of guilt and despondency. A protracted and painful parturition reduced her delicate frame to extreme debility and emaciation, while her ideas became confused, and her mind was obviously diseased. (64)

The patient’s depression and anorexia is explained away by her love-melancholy and the vague declaration that “her mind was obviously diseased.” In the Romantic and even into the Victorian era, the physician frequently would have opted for two standard diagnoses for female patients: melancholia or hysteria, both of which claimed a vulnerable mental state was the cause of physical illness. Helen Small astutely observes, “This is a narrative which speaks only of the causation of sickness and not of its cure. The confinement of its focus to the moment at which health fails is underlined by the way in which the case-study reduplicates the narrative so that the lady’s health repeats her lover’s unkindness and abandons her” (46). After the excerpt quoted above, Cox goes on to describe his treatment plan, which focuses on a holistic approach in

attempts to restore her physical body, with the idea that the restoration of the mind will follow. Romantic medicine therefore relied on traditional views of the madwoman—often in association with Shakespeare’s Ophelia in *Hamlet*, perhaps the most influential example of female madness, according to Small—and the need to integrate the philosophies of mind and body in medical practice, even as its very understanding of symptoms and its causes remained contradictory.

The subjective malleability of the female melancholic in Cox’s treatise, then, points to the long acceptance in Western poetic, cultural, and medical tradition of the malady stemming from the subject’s erotic obsession with a lost or absent love-object. But Isabella’s melancholy also anticipates more recent critical and psychological theory. Her inability to properly mourn Lorenzo due to her desire for secrecy and familial obligation puts Isabella into an impossible position of solipsistic melancholy: she cannot come to terms with her new reality, and the impossibility of this new identity of a woman adorned in “stifling widow’s weeds” leads to her fetishization of Lorenzo’s head as a melancholy love-object (ln. 229).

In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud argues that the most striking feature of melancholia is its sense of an indefinable loss, an awareness of loss that does not necessarily include knowledge of what has been lost, or how the loss shall affect the subject. Though Isabella is aware that Lorenzo is lost to her, her transference of her affection from the dead Lorenzo to Lorenzo’s head encased in the living basil plant distances her and allows her to deny his absence. Freud claims, “This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious” (245). It is the inability to articulate the cause, even as one tries to articulate the symptoms, which specifically marks melancholia. This inability to articulate loss does not preclude, however, an ability to recognize or identify markers of loss separate from the subject.

This indefinable nature of melancholy affects the subject's view of himself and leads to an uncanny correspondence between a heightened self-criticism and self-abasement, along with a deepened self-awareness, triggered by such heavy reflection. Freud states that the "shadow of the object" falls upon the ego, and serves to "establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (249). Though Isabella is the title character, she speaks sparingly throughout the poem, and after she retrieves Lorenzo's head and fully lapses into depression and anorexia, her only action is to cry and eventually verbalize the loss of her "Basil-pot" rather than her lover. There is no recovery in her melancholy, only silent tears and self-destruction. Yet there is a masochistic pleasure in Isabella's actions: transfixing and attaching herself to the basil-pot allows her to remain connected with Lorenzo. What emerges, then, is a subject that has identified itself as the object of loss and thus seeks to rectify its shaken ontological position by outwardly projecting phantoms of the lost object that will reflect back and reinforce divided, fragmented notions of the self.

Anslem Haverkemp asserts that, within the melancholy condition, the "cause in this case explains nothing, [and] remains apparently accidental in that it triggers a behavior which cannot be simply reduced to this cause, because it reproduces the cause that produces it and thus appears to be causeless" (Haverkemp 698). Haverkemp articulates the solipsistic nature of melancholy: the subject is caught in a loop of causation that forces the subject to circle endlessly around its loss, unable to shake itself free. The underlying assumption behind this condition, then, is that a divided self is equivalent to an unhealthy self, and, in turn, a "whole" self is the desirable, acceptable, and more truthful condition—Romantic organic unity. But Isabella can no longer be whole, and indeed, due to her conflicting desires, was never really whole to begin with.

Once she has fully succumbed to her pathological mourning, her melancholy, Isabella allows her fragmented body and mind to continue breaking even more, calling out for her lost

basil and forgetting “the stars, the moon, and sun” (Keats ln. 416). All of her energies are directed toward the basil, that she “fed” with “thin tears” so it “drew/Nature besides, and life, from human fears,/From the fast mouldering head there shut from view” (ln. 425-430). Tears are ephemeral in nature, a temporary, material sign of grief, sadness, frustration, even anger. Isabella’s tears appear infinite, a “continual shower/From her dead eyes” (ln. 451-2). Moreover, they are tiny fragments of her body which separate from the whole and join the plant so that they might signify the emotional distress she lacks the power to verbalize. Her tears embalm Lorenzo’s head while “She withers, like a palm/Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm” (ln. 447-8). Isabella exhibits the same bodily signs of “debility and emaciation” as Cox’s patient that “pined in secrecy” after her lover abandoned her. Isabella’s melancholy stems from her thwarted love and the denial of such a loss—but by retaining Lorenzo’s head, Isabella is able to “forget” her loss. The basil covers up the head, covers up her loss, and disguises the real cause of her distress; it is a hiding of a secret and the hiding of that hiding, Haverkemp’s loop of causeless causation.

There is even a fantasy of incorporation in Isabella’s actions with the head: her tears and the basil infuse the dead head with life, preserving and reviving part of the corpse and thereby denying Lorenzo’s loss. Isabella’s brothers wonder over her obsession with the basil pot, for

They could not surely give belief, that such  
 A very nothing would have power to wean  
 Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,  
 And even remembrance of her love’s delay. (ln. 461-4)

They steal the pot and discover her secret “nothing”: “The thing was vile with green and livid spot,/And yet they knew it was Lorenzo’s face” (ln. 475-6). Keats’s use of the word “nothing” in reference to the basil pot is significant, for since Elizabethan times it was used as slang to signify the “no-thing” between a woman’s legs. So Isabella has taken disparate organic elements and

fused their fragments together to make a hybrid living thing, encased in her “very nothing,” a clear reference to her empty womb which will never grow a child.<sup>11</sup> Instead, Isabella will mother the plant and only in that way fulfill her performative role of woman and mother. This fantastical substitution of the basil plant for Lorenzo’s head for Lorenzo’s body proper is a chain of signifiers that separates Isabella from direct confrontation with her loss. Isabella’s melancholic indulgences preserve what she imagines to be her secret love—and her secret crimes in both defying patriarchal law and desecrating Lorenzo’s grave and body.

As Mark Wigley observes of psychological incorporation, “Such fantasy is necessary when normal mourning would expose and destroy the pleasure of a shameful experience with an indispensable object. To preserve this secret pleasure, the subject preserves and protects the object, keeping it alive. Or, more precisely, allowing it to survive, to live on, neither alive nor dead, as some kind of phantom” (144). Isabella no longer needs to remember “her love’s delay” because she has hidden her love’s absence from herself. The trauma of Lorenzo’s death has transformed her psychological landscape, but though she seldom went “to chapel-shrift,/And seldom felt she any hunger-pain,” she is still functioning at a baseline level of performative womanhood because she has hidden the evidence of her psychological transformation within the basil pot (Keats ln. 467-8). Isabella thus performs her mourning in order to disguise it. A true acknowledgement of her loss that forces her to face a reality without Lorenzo would be unbearable, so she instead maintains the illusion that such a loss never occurred. The head is part of Lorenzo and to Isabella represents Lorenzo in full, as whole and alive.

Isabella, then, cannot safely, publicly mourn her dead lover, so she instead mourns her basil and finds solace within her performative attachment to her love-object. Until, of course, her brothers steal the basil. Isabella identifies so fully with her lost love-object that its removal is equal to her murder:

Piteously she look'd on dead and senseless things,  
 Asking for her lost Basil amorously;  
 And with melodious chuckle in the strings  
 Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry  
 After the Pilgrim in his wanderings,  
 To ask him where her Basil was; and why  
 'Twas hid from her: 'For cruel 'tis,' said she,  
 'To steal my Basil-pot away from me.' (ln. 489-495)

“Amorously” reiterates her erotic, pathological obsession with the basil pot, her substitute love-object. Her “melodious” chuckle indicates her fragmented sense of reality: a chuckle is a “laugh of triumph and exultation” yet “lorn” refers to something “lost, perished, ruined; doomed to destruction” or “abandoned” (OED). Isabella’s melancholy disrupts any clear, uncomplicated vocalization of her distress. These contradictory fractures in Isabella’s identity are not new. They have been foreshadowed from the beginning through her love-sickness, her conflicting desires and social performance, her body fragmented by the architecture of the home. When Isabella cries after strangers to return her basil, she attempts to re-organize herself through restoration of the illusion of wholeness the basil provided. It is not “cruel” that her brothers’ “bloody knife” deprived her of her love (ln. 333). Rather, it is the loss of her melancholy fantasy of incorporation, of the hybrid plant made of Lorenzo’s head fed by her tears, which is cruel. Isabella is so engulfed in pathology that when she cannot perform her love, her mourning, or her fantasy, she ceases to perform at all.

In *Isabella* we can see how the collective mediating forces of patriarchal institutions fragment the body, the mind, the family, and the home. Both Isabella and Lorenzo are subject to the will of her brothers, who, in the tradition of threatening Gothic villains, use their privileged

position to wield the law as they see fit. In a patriarchal world, women are confined by the home/domestic architecture, pathologized by the male gaze that transcends public and private spaces, and objectified by the public marriage-market which facilitates a traffic in women. Patriarchal pressures affect women outside the home (where she is commodity for exchange) and inside the home (where she is relegated to domestic role-playing), both of which are spaces where a male authority can pathologize a woman for anything and “no thing.” Isabella’s initial fragmentation of personal desire vs. social responsibility in her performance as a “proper lady” becomes an internalized pathology which can only result in insanity and death. By considering the many ways male dominance affects Isabella throughout the poem, we can see how her internalizations of female pathology hyperbolize and reenact such pathology, demonstrating the liminality and marginalization of the female experience in relation to patriarchal law.

## CONCLUSION

*Do not all charms fly*

*At the mere touch of cold philosophy?*

*-John Keats, Lamia, 2.229-230*

## I.

In a much longer study, it would be possible to document the pathologization of the Romantic-era female body and analyze its short and long-term effects in more detail. The selected works of Mary Lamb, Joanna Baillie, Matthew Lewis, and John Keats I include in this project are a small sampling of the many Romantic texts<sup>1</sup> which demonstrate the ways in which the female body hosted numerous pathological understandings of female behavior, biology, and psyche. These authors' works reinforce, reproduce, and reveal how pathologizing women strengthened male dominance in Romantic society and encouraged women to internalize the very behaviors that undermined their efforts for self-exploration and expression.

And yet, these literary instances of female pathology also point to the disruption of learned social norms and the tragic social cost of repression and self-effacement. We can see in Mary's letters the deep personal cost of her madness and her attempts to engage with others, but also the unique freedom her pathology allowed by her subtle twisting of epistolary convention. Baillie's use of pathology to critique performative romantic courtship shows how pathologizing women affects not only one gender, but humankind as a whole. Lewis's graphic exploitation and objectification of the female body takes on a new quality of resistance when combined with the Captive's provocative accusation of society's complicity in her unethical pathologization and imprisonment.

Finally, John Keats, the most acclaimed and well-known of my chosen authors, points up the real pathology behind romanticized fantasies of love and melancholy. Keats is a particularly

interesting literary subject for this project because of his medical training. As an apothecary and surgeon's assistant who trained at a leading London hospital (Guy's) under one of the preeminent surgeons of his day (Sir Astley Cooper), he would have been taught to seek out pathology, study it, and neutralize it. Therefore, I end my study with some final commentary on Keats, poetry, and the legacy of Romantic female pathology.

## II.

In the fair copy to *Lamia*, the first of the three titular romances (which include *Isabella*) in his 1820 volume, Keats notes, "The groundwork of the story will be found in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*," and he appends the relevant passage to the end of the poem:

Philostratus, in his fourth book *de Vita Apollonii*, hath a memorable instance in this kind, which I may not omit, of one Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going betwixt Cenchreas and Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house, in the suburbs of Corinth, and told him she was a Phoenician by birth, and if her would tarry with her, he should hear her sing and play, and drink such wine as never any drank, and no man should molest him; but she, being fair and lovely, would live and die with him, that was fair and lovely to behold. The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius; who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture was, like Tantalus gold, described by Homer, no substance but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she,

plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant: many thousands took notice of this fact, for it was done in the midst of Greece. (qtd. in Keats 429)

Though there were likely other sources<sup>2</sup> that influenced his treatment of Greek mythology, Keats grounds his poem in an influential medical text that in turn grounded seventeenth-century medicine in ancient philosophical and literary texts. Burton employs dramatic language atypical of strictly medical texts: the supernatural touch of “met such a phantasm”; the parallel structure of “she, being fair and lovely...him, that was fair and lovely”; the characterization of Lycius as “a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions”; the narrator’s interjection of “by some probable conjectures”; the simile “like Tantalus gold, described by Homer”; the melodramatic phrasing “he would not be moved.” These are not the phrases of a doctor, but rather the words of a storyteller. Burton’s habit of digressions full of literary detail transforms *The Anatomy of Melancholy* into a book of philosophical literature rather than a medicinal guidebook. Burton’s dramatic use of ancient mythological “fact” to lend authority to his commentary on “heroical” male melancholy, joined later to Keats’s reliance on Burton’s ancient and medieval allusions to create his own narrative also infused with Romantic medical knowledge: all this creates a Gordian knot of influence that parallels the connections between medicine, literature, and social behavior I have drawn in my project.

Indeed, medicine, poetry, and knowledge have been intertwined since the earliest myths of Greece. Hermione De Almeida rightly observes,

Through the figure of Apollo, Western mythology has connected poetry and the making of music with the creation of medicine and that power of life and death inherent in the practice of physic; in Apollo’s legendary foresight amid his arts it has allied, furthermore, the physician’s tasks of diagnosis and prognostication with the basic powers of divination and prophecy....[Keats’s] presiding deity is

also and simultaneously the author of pestilence, the god of disease, and, as the teacher of prophecy and foresight, the patron of a special kind of perception or interpretive sight that is common to the physician and the poet as conceived by the early nineteenth century. (17-19)

Apollo embodies the power of life and death through his dominion of prophecy, medicine, and knowledge. One could presume his command of “interpretive sight” applies not only to rooting out disease, but may also be extended to the empathetic emotions evoked and represented by music and poetry—his artistic temperament. Like most deities, Apollo’s divine powers are complex, multifaceted, and simultaneous. He is more than one thing.

In *Lamia*, the character of Apollonius is a partial stand-in for Apollo, but Lycius’s teacher only uses his powers of physic, not poetry, and thus propagates death instead of life through his lack of empathy. Apollonius is not given depth of character, only cold calculation. Though Lamia has sacrificed her previous splendor and “[thrown] the goddess off” to win Lycius’s heart “more pleasantly by playing woman’s part” (Keats 1.336-7), Apollonius has pierced her apparent surface with his diagnostic gaze and condemned her as a serpent. Lamia’s enchanting performance as a mere woman falls apart under Apollonius’s medical gaze. But at the same time, her very being upends the claims of the learned philosopher,<sup>3</sup> disrupting the authority of Apollonius and the men of knowledge he represents. It is Lamia, with her divine multiplicity, that is closer to Apollo. Furthermore, “Lamia’s equivocating form questions which state, that of a serpent or that of a woman, is the more complicated one” (De Almeida 193).

Though serpents are a universal feature of deities connected with medicinal powers,<sup>4</sup> Keats’s Lamia defies medical diagnosis or scientific categorization—like Apollo she is divine in her complexity, a “goddess” of knotty and obscure beauty. She is a “dazzling” array of colors, spots, stripes, “silver mail, and golden brede,” crescents, stars, and beauteous gems (Keats

1.158). Her body, a “gordian shape of dazzling hue” (1.47) is serpentine, rainbowed, but also a self-described “tomb”—a place for the dead not “fit for life” (1.38-9). Lamia wants a “sweet body,” a woman’s body, the shape and charm she had before.<sup>5</sup> To achieve her womanly form Lamia undergoes a painful transformation:

her elfin blood in madness ran  
 Her mouth foam’d...  
 Her eyes in torture fix’d, and anguish drear,  
 Hot, glazed, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,  
 Flash’d phosphor and shark sparks, without one cooling tear.  
 The colours all inflam’d throughout her train,  
 She writh’d about, convuls’d with scarlet pain...  
 Nothing but pain and ugliness were left. (1.147-164)

Though she is “a full-born beauty new and exquisite” (1.172), “a maid/More beautiful than ever twisted braid” (1.185-6), she has lost all her multiplicity, her complexity, her vitality.<sup>6</sup> As much as Lamia still has supernatural powers, she has still reduced herself. Her blood, the source of all life according to Hunterian medicine, runs in “madness”; her colors are “inflam’d,” a clear allusion to fever; and after seizures and convulsions she is left with “pain and ugliness”—all signs of pathology. Becoming human means Lamia must also become ill.

Lamia’s female pathology increases, in other words, after her transformation to human form. When Lamia travels with Lycius to Corinth and plays the woman’s part to keep his love, she “moan[s] and sigh[s]/Because he mused beyond her” (2.37-8). Lamia is content with their secluded romance, but Lycius wishes to share their love with society. Their interaction catalogues stereotypical male dominance and corresponding female submissiveness and pathology:

The lady's cheek  
 Trembled; she nothing said, but, pale and meek,  
 Arose and knelt before him, wept a rain  
 Of sorrows at his words; at last with pain  
 Beseeching him, the while his hand she wrung,  
 To change his purpose.  
 He thereat was stung,  
 Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim  
 Her wild and timid nature to his aim:  
 Besides, for all his love, in self despite,  
 Against his better self, he took delight  
 Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new...  
 Fine was the mitigated fury, like  
 Apollo's presence when in act to strike  
 The serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes, she  
 Was none. She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny,  
 And, all subdued, consented to the hour  
 When to the bridal he should lead his paramour. (2.64-83)

Lamia exhibits conventional signs of feminine submission—she is pale, meek, silent, and kneeling before her lover—and feminine pathology: her cheek trembles, she weeps, she feels pain, she is both wild and timid. She is overflowing with emotion, a jumble of contradictions instead of consistent womanhood. Lycius, meanwhile, is “perverse,” possessive, takes “delight” in her sorrow, is full of fury and fancy to “reclaim” her “to his aim.” Not content with Lamia’s company, Lycius desires to direct her charms at others, to boast of their love and his successful

claim, to show Lamia off as his wife, his property. Keats's narrator interjects "Ha, the serpent! Certes, she/Was none" to emphasize the reversal of power dynamics from the first part of the poem to the second. In leaving her forest for Corinth, Lamia has given up her mystical surroundings and must adhere to the human demands of Greek society. Though Lamia remains a powerful enchantress, able to weave spells of illusion and beauty, her human feminine powers are no match for the patriarchal authority wielded by Lycius. However, whether she is serpent or woman, Lamia succumbs to (what she thinks is) love for Lycius and voluntarily effaces herself in order to accommodate him.

Lamia's waning powers and growing pathology are clear by the poem's end, when Lycius invites his acquaintances into their home and encourages a critical male gaze to strike down Lamia's "incalculable, self-willed formative power" (Gigante 210). The beginning of the poem saw Lamia in a multi-faceted form, confidently bargaining with Hermes to change her shape and will herself into her desires. She held incredible power in her freedom, in her choice of bodily form and her human lover. But just as she gave up her rainbowed form for the (let's call it) relative simplicity of the female body, so too must she sacrifice autonomy and succumb to human pathology. Preparing for their wedding celebration, Lamia is pathologically unhealthy, silently pacing about "In pale contented sort of discontent" (Keats 2.135). At the final party in this poem, Keats's narrator foreshadows death with a funeral wreath for the lovers, leaves of willow and adder's tongue for Lamia's "aching forehead" (2.223). When Apollonius trains his "demon" eyes on her (2.289), "Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet pride" (2.248), Lamia is literally struck dumb by the male gaze. Lycius no longer sees "the lovelorn piteous appeal" in her eyes (2.257), the "soft-toned reply" (2.261) has gone. Lamia is silent, pale, unable to sustain her performance of beautiful woman under the harsh critical gaze of

Apollonius. Her physical beauty abandons her, and from her previous incarnation of a vivid, blushing bride she transforms into a ghostly embodiment of pathology and death:

“Begone, foul dream!” he cried, gazing again  
 In the bride’s face, where now no azure vein  
 Wander’d on fair-spaced temples; no soft bloom  
 Misted the cheek; no passion to illumine  
 The deep-recessed vision—all was blight;  
 Lamia, no longer fair, there sat a deadly white.” (2.271-6)

The signs of life—a pulsing vein, a flushed cheek, a twinkle in the eye—have been replaced by a “foul dream,” by a deadly “blight.” Pestilence and prophecy have overtaken Lamia’s human form, so her female body is pathologized and undermined by a diagnostic male gaze that proclaims her an inhuman “serpent.”

Apollonius’s public declaration undoes more than Lamia’s enchantment; it undoes her full womanly form. She “breath’d death breath” and the “sophist’s eye,/Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly” (2.299-300). Keats characterizes Apollonius’s knowledge as a weapon, a “cruel, perçant” gaze that strips Lamia of life and undoes her womanhood. He silences her, for she is only able to motion him to be silent with her “weak hand” (2.302) before his echo of “Serpent!” vanishes her “with a frightful scream” (2.306). The female body thus is first pathologized and then erased by male authority. The allegory is complete, the threat of female pathology neutralized. But there is a complication: Lycius is dead. One could easily attribute Lycius’s death as the cost of his naivete, the price of falling in love with a transmogrified serpent instead of a true woman. But counting Lamia as yet another *belle dame sans merci* in Keats’s repertoire once again reduces her multifaceted nature. Rather than continue the narrative of female monstrosity, I offer an alternative reading.

Keats crafts his narrative to encourage sympathy for Lamia, but like Lamia herself the narrative themes are complex, knotty. The traditional Lamia is not a true woman but a monster, a mythological figure of seduction that lures and devours men. Yet Keats's Lamia does not devour anybody and is instead easily defeated by a figure of Enlightenment knowledge. Keats reverses the heroic outcome, however, by casting Apollonius as a villain intent upon ruining young love. Lamia and Lycius become the victims of Apollonius's harsh gaze, but they are not faultless. Lycius's culpability is extended by his "perverse" aim to claim Lamia for his own desires, to direct her nature "to his aim." Lycius's desire to own Lamia, to take delight in her sorrow and countermand her desires in favor of his own, exhibits the worst traits of patriarchal power. Lycius's selfish actions are rooted in his social conditioning, "against his better self," so he does not resist temptation. Lycius is seduced not by Lamia's love, but by the power that her love gives him over her. Lamia, too, is culpable—not because she is a serpent preying on a man, but because she reduces and effaces her true nature in order to be more appealing. She shape-shifts in this way repeatedly: her initial transformation, her throwing "the goddess off," her silent trembling and beseeching of Lycius, her continued presence at the wedding even after Apollonius arrives and places himself directly in front of the couple. Such is the power of internalized female pathology and submission that Lamia allows patriarchal power to dominate her own supernatural talents. Though it is a sophist who made "the tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade," it was Lamia herself who first chose to "unweave a rainbow" and "clip" her own "Angel's wings" (2.234-8).

### III.

One of Keats's most famous letters is that of May 3rd, 1818, wherein he contemplates and compares human life "to a large Mansion of Many Apartments," two of which he describes as the "infant or thoughtless Chamber" and the other the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" (245).

Keats's metaphor for the mind as a mansion full of dark passageways through which the conscious self travels as it changes and grows and learns is preceded by an innocuous comment on his medical education: "I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards...An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little" (243).

Keats was right. Romantic medicine understood only a little. It would be the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that saw radical breakthroughs in the study of disease, bacteria, molecular biology, and other incredible scientific discoveries that early nineteenth-century natural philosophy could not fathom. Medical practitioners and the Romantic writers they influenced were still groping in the dark, operating under "the Burden of the Mystery." Because of this very confusion, we can see how the simultaneous turns to imaginative introspection and medical investigation come together in the Romantic era to create an atmosphere ripe for mental projection of incomplete, and often misogynistic, biological knowledge that worked to pathologize the female body and imbue its physical and psychological nature with a distinctly Romantic pathology.

But Keats was right. Humans are constantly in the doorway of some Chamber of Thought, advancing through the darkness and finding, perhaps even making, our own sources of light. "An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people." I hope this project has extended knowledge a little further.

## NOTES

## Introduction

<sup>1</sup> The University of Edinburgh was famous for its rigorous insistence on scientific observation and experience, the tenants espoused by Francis Bacon which laid the foundation for the modern scientific method. See Allard, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Though Buchan aims this particular comment at women of privilege, throughout *Domestic medicine* Buchan refers to women of different classes, making particularly harsh assessments of the poor and their hygiene practices. He repeatedly charges “civilized” women “of fashion” with laziness. See my comments starting p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Medical practitioners were officially regulated by three organizing groups: the College of Physicians, the Corporation of Surgeons, and the Society of Apothecaries. See Allard, pp. 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Wood comments, “In the period leading up to [the] mid-[nineteenth-]century, doctors, philosophers, and social commentators were scarcely distinguishable from each other in the language they used to expatiate on women’s innate suitability for their special social and moral function. Availing themselves of ready-made assumptions about women’s nature, the spokesman for separate spheres fused the temperamental and the physiological connotations of the concept of ‘nature’ and fixed woman’s social, moral, and emotional lives in biology. As the case for the determining power of biology gained strength from evolutionary science, nineteenth-century medicine took a lead in shaping a bourgeois economy which harnessed women to their bodies and necessitated their exclusion from the public domain” (10-11).

<sup>5</sup> This difference is articulated most clearly in the arguments surrounding the nervous system and the “cultural construction of women’s bodies in terms of nervous sensibility” (Sha 91). For more on Wollstonecraft and female sensibility in the context of nerves see Richard Sha’s *Perverse Romanticism* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> The ideology of domesticity is prominently discussed in one of the most widely read publications of the late eighteenth century, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke frames his nationalist argument within the context of domestic duty and the rights of paternal inheritance and authority. Wollstonecraft responded directly with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), criticizing Burke’s paternalistic position and championing the rights of women and the middle class. She would further this feminist argument two years later with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which demanded a proper education for women because, as mothers and companions to their husbands, women were integral to the prosperous future of society.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Porter names, for example, *Primitive physic: or, an easy and natural method of curing most diseases* by John Wesley, M.A. as one of the most popular medical books read by the general public during the eighteenth century. Yet Wesley’s volume of recipes and treatments for various ailments does not inspire great confidence in his medical knowledge. For instance, to cure “The Asthma” Wesley recommends the patient “live a fortnight on boiled Carrots only. It seldom fails” (26). Still, by the time *Primitive physic* was reprinted in London in 1792, it had reached its twenty-fourth edition and still had many more to go before it fell out of favor with its domestic readers. Wesley’s medical semi-quackery demonstrates one end of the wide range of medical treatises available for public consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and by all accounts, *Primitive physic* was widely consumed.

<sup>8</sup> See Youngquist, pp. 129-160.

<sup>9</sup> Sally Shuttleworth argues, “For women, whether viewed as objects rather than subjects of knowledge or defined as the meeting point of nature and culture, scientific discourse has been especially crucial in constructing reality as something they can embody but not know. Associated alternately with nature and with the unconscious, with matter and with mystery, the feminine body functions as the imaginary site where meaning (or life) is generated; yet, in this scheme, women can never be meaning makers in their own right. Hence the compensatory emphasis in feminist theory on the desiring and speaking feminine subject” (7).

<sup>10</sup> See Hermione De Almeida for a thorough account of Keats’s medical education and apothecary training.

<sup>11</sup> The publication is attributed to both Cooper and Frederick Tyrrell, the surgeon who assembled Cooper’s lecture notes. The volume contains a foreword from Cooper to Tyrrell confirming the “faithful account of the principles of Surgery, which, for forty years, I have been endeavouring to learn, and of the practice which, for thirty-two years, I have been in the habit of teaching...” (6).

<sup>12</sup> Cooper also ties scirrhus tumors in the breast to menstruation and suggests that the “disease occurs more frequently in unmarried woman than in others, and in women who, being married, have had no children, probably because the breast has not undergone that change for which nature had designed it, in being the fountain of nourishment to offspring” (234). Unmarried or childless women are thus punished with tumors because their bodies are not fulfilling their proper, natural function of being “the fountain of nourishment.”

<sup>13</sup> See Andrew Scull, *Museums of Madness*

<sup>14</sup> There is no chapter or section titled “Diseases of Men.” Like most medical studies of the time, the default body described in *Domestic medicine* was male.

<sup>15</sup> He even echoes some of Mary Wollstonecraft’s arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) on the importance of women’s education: “Were the time that is generally spent by females in the acquisition of trifling accomplishments, employed in learning how to bring up their children; how to dress them so as not to hurt, cramp, or confine their motions; how to feed them with wholesome and nourishing food; how to exercise their tender bodies, so as best to promote their growth and strength; were these made the objects of female instruction, mankind would derive the greatest advantages from it. But while the education of females implies little more than what relates to dress and public shew, we have nothing to expect from them but ignorance even in the most important concerns” (Buchan 3-4). See Wollstonecraft, pp. 195-197.

<sup>16</sup> Buchan also found time to denigrate the poor. While speaking of the hazards of filth and the necessity to maintain general cleanliness, he comments, “If dirty people cannot be removed as a common nuisance, they ought at least to be avoided as infectious” (108).

<sup>17</sup> *Émile* (1762) was perhaps the most famous education treatise at this time and reflected general assumptions of childhood education. Jean-Jacques Rousseau denied the value of equal education between men and women, suggesting that women should be educated for the pleasure of men and should stay within their domestic spheres. For Romantic-era criticism, see Wollstonecraft, “Ch. XII: On National Education,” pp. 188-209 in *Vindication*.

<sup>18</sup> He even calls pregnancy, childbearing, and women’s “monthly evacuations” “diseases” due to the “delicacy of the sex, and their being often improperly managed” (353).

<sup>19</sup> For an examination of Buchan’s section on “Menstrual Discharge” as of one of his “Diseases of Women,” see Shuttleworth.

<sup>20</sup> A woman may suffer an abortion from “weakness or relaxation. . .raising great weights; reaching too high; jumping. . .indolence; high living; or the contrary,” and Buchan advises “women of a weak or relaxed habit to use solid food, avoid great quantities of tea, and other weak and watery liquors; to rise early and go soon to bed; to shun damp houses; and never to go abroad in damp foggy weather, if they can shut in” (359).

<sup>21</sup> For a thorough account of man midwifery and the rise of obstetric medicine, see Youngquist, pp. 141-7.

<sup>22</sup> “By the end of the Napoleonic Wars *Domestic medicine* had become the aged celebrity of popular medicine. It made frequent reappearances in the same style that had served the eighteenth century. . . . There had been minor revision but the bulk of the material remained the same between the first edition of 1769 and the last English edition of 1846. . . . any estimate of professional-public relations in the late eighteenth century, and public attitudes to medicine generally, cannot ignore the influence of such a widely read work” (Lawrence 32).

## Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> Charles spent six weeks in a madhouse (likely Hoxton House) in early 1796. He wrote to Samuel Taylor Coleridge on May 27, 1796: “I know not what suffering scenes you have gone through at Bristol. My life has been somewhat diversified of late. The six weeks that finished last year and began this your very humble servant spent very agreeably in a mad house at Hoxton—I am got somewhat rational now, and don’t bite any one. But mad I was—and many a vagary my imagination played with me, enough to make a volume if all told” (Lamb 1:3-4).

<sup>2</sup> At the time, the average admittances to private asylums in Britain was 400 per year. By 1813, Hoxton House alone had 486 patients. See Aaron 99 for more on Charles and the increase in incarceration for madness during this time.

<sup>3</sup> In 1796, the legal ruling of ‘Lunacy’ for cause of death meant that Mary would not be subjected to trial for murder nor subject to a prison sentence. Charles’ earlier hospitalization might have worked in Mary’s favor, as many believed madness to be hereditary. Charles’ recovery, in conjunction with Mary’s episode the previous year, ensured the verdict of Lunacy (Aaron 102).

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Polwhele’s *The Unsex’d Females* (1798) for a contemporary example of such criticisms against unfeminine female authors that challenged men on the topics of politics, history, science, or any other genre usually reserved solely for male consumption and debate.

<sup>5</sup> The classic example of such a social theory in contemporary literature is Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria* (written in 1792, published posthumously by her husband, William Godwin, in 1798, and no doubt an influence on Matthew Lewis by 1803). Maria’s villainous husband imprisons her in an asylum in order to steal her inheritance and quiet her protests over his libertine impulses of drinking, gambling, and whoring. Maria’s story is paired with that of an attendant in the asylum, Jemima, whose life story includes physical abuse, rape, prostitution, and poverty. Though never completed, the work clearly criticizes the systematic oppression of women by exploring marriage, class, sentimentalism, sexual desire, and motherhood. I further explore the public anxiety

over immorally imprisoning an unruly wife in an asylum in my section on Matthew Lewis's "The Captive" in the following chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is also the classic essay that takes to task the deficiencies in female education in the late eighteenth century, arguing that women should be better educated so that they may become better wives and mothers instead of relying on a superficial understanding of correct behavior. Rather than develop their beauty, Wollstonecraft asserted, women should develop their minds.

<sup>7</sup> See *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984), especially pp. 3-47.

<sup>8</sup> The private system would grow to 139 madhouses by 1844, the year that legislation finally compelled "local justices to set up publicly run asylums" (Scull 50).

<sup>9</sup> See Samuel Tuke's *A Description of the Retreat at York* (1813) for more on this particular experiment in moral and psychiatric therapy.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, five days later in a letter addressed to Manning, Charles reiterates his loneliness and his dependence on companionship, particularly Mary's: "I am quite out of spirits, and feel as if I should never recover them...I have been left *alone* in a house, where by 10 days since living Beings were, &--Noises of life were heard...I expect Mary will get better, before many weeks are gone—but at present I feel my daily & hourly prop has fallen from me. I totter and stagger with weakness, for nobody can supply her place to me—" (May 17th, 1800; Lamb 1:203-4).

<sup>11</sup> "I found her this morning calm & serene, far very very far from an indecent forgetful serenity; she has a most affectionate & tender concern for what has happened. Indeed from the beginning, frightful & hopeless as her disorder seemed, I had confidence enough in her strength of mind, & religious principle, to look forward to a time when even she might recover tranquility" (Lamb 1:47).

<sup>12</sup> See *Fatal Women of Romanticism* by Adriana Craciun, pp. 21-27.

<sup>13</sup> Much of Gilchrist's commentary is based on the archived letters, from which she heavily quotes, Charles's autobiographical *Essays of Elia*, and Talfourd's book on the Lambs.

<sup>14</sup> He published another edition after Mary's death that included some of Charles's letters that make direct reference to her insanity, which he had chosen not to publish during her lifetime.

<sup>15</sup> A quality that is also evident in letters that were written during her lucid periods, though Talfourd does not mention this here. More on Mary's letters in the following section.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, specifically pp. 20-24.

<sup>17</sup> Mary succumbs to this belief as well. In a letter to Sarah dated Sept. 18, 1805 she writes, "I have made many attempts at writing to you, but it has always brought your troubles, and my own so strongly into my mind, that I have been obliged to leave off, & make Charles write for me..." (Lamb 2:173). There are other cases where Mary admits Charles would not let her write, or where Charles writes that Mary feels too ill to pen her own salutation so Charles must write for both of them.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to remember that Mary lived with Charles because he had pledged to be her caretaker, despite their older brother's insistence that she be permanently placed in a madhouse following their mother's murder. While they might have lived together anyways (their close bond mirrored the companionship of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary and Charles both write of the loneliness they feel when separated), the terms of her release made Charles legally responsible for Mary.

<sup>19</sup> Mary and Charles were writing during a time when the rising middle class and the changes produced by industrialization created an ideology of domesticity and the social construct of the nuclear family as ideal. As neither of the Lambs could claim spouses or children, their sibling bond mimicked the companionate marriage for which Mary Wollstonecraft and other critics of the age argued. For more on the ideology of domesticity, see the chapter on "Domesticity" by Clara Tuite in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*.

## Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> Trap doors, moving panoramas, fires, treadmills and other mechanical devices all added to the visual entertainment. See Burwick, *Acting and Reacting*, as well as Carlson, "A New Stage."

<sup>2</sup> The newly expanded Drury Lane burnt down in 1809 and was rebuilt, opening again in 1812.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the misogynistic undertones regarding female playwrights whose work was relegated to "closet" status, see Susan Bennett, "Outing Joanna Baillie"; and *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Donkin observes: "Playwriting, as a profession, violated all the rules of conduct. It conferred on women a public voice. It gave them some control over how women were represented on stage. It required that they mingle freely with people of both sexes in a place of work that was not the home. It made ambition a prerequisite, and,

perhaps most importantly, it offered the possibility of acquiring capital. In other words, playwriting was something of a loophole; it allowed women to push the system considerably further than it was prepared to go.” (18)

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Kean (1787-1833) was considered one of the greatest Shakespearean actors of his time, gaining acclaim for his melodramatic portrayals of villains from his sensational debut as Shylock at Drury Lane in 1814. William Hazlitt wrote, “For voice, eye, action, and expression, no actor has come for many years at all equal to him. The applause from the first scene to the last, was general, loud, and uninterrupted” (1). Kean would enjoy near universal acclaim until his own bad behavior (alcoholism, a public affair leading to scandalous divorce) affected his career. For more on Kean and actors of the period, see *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, edited by Jane Moody and Daniel O’Quinn, pp. 3-20.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn Asleson notes that actresses fueled a new celebrity culture, sitting for mass-produced portraits, being publically followed by “curious onlookers,” and having “the minutiae of their personal and professional lives” chronicled in newspapers, pamphlets, and popular biographies (1). Such intense scrutiny no doubt called into question when an actress stopped “performing” for her audience.

<sup>7</sup> See Fanny Burney’s journal (Russell 130) in which she describes her nervousness acting for the male members of her family and their friends. Russell also points out that girls’ boarding schools also used private theatricals as a means to regulate the “femininity necessary for success as proper wives and mothers” (199).

<sup>8</sup> The OED recently added “closet drama” to their lexicon, in which they include two historical references of use to us here: from *Blackwood’s*, “There exists no living dramatic genius, as yet displayed, notwithstanding the late publication of many exquisite closet-dramas” (April 1822); from the *Times*, “Closet dramas, like closet orations, have no reason for the form which they take, since that form is meant for hearers, not for readers” (19 December 1908). Both selections suggest a hierarchy of dramatic form that privileges performance. (np)

<sup>9</sup> Burroughs also points out that in an atmosphere of censorship regarding politically charged drama, “Baillie’s language suggests that the closet play—rather than antitheatrical and politically irrelevant—had the potential to dramatize publically the realities of closet life” (126-7).

<sup>10</sup> See Sky Gilbert, “Closet Plays: An Exclusive Dramaturgy at Work,” and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for a discussion of “closeted” homosexual characters.

<sup>11</sup> According to David D. Mann et. al, there were more than ninety women writing plays between 1789 and 1823, over forty of which saw their plays staged in public or private theaters—a substantial increase from the entirety of the 1700s, which saw only fifty women see their plays staged. See *Women Playwrights in England, Ireland, and Scotland 1660-1823*.

<sup>12</sup> See Ellen Donkin, *Getting into the Act*.

<sup>13</sup> Byron praised her as “our only dramatist since Otway and Southerne” (109), but he also declared: “When Voltaire was asked why no women has even written even a tolerable tragedy? ‘Ah (said the Partriarch) the composition of a tragedy requires *testicles*.’—If this be true Lord knows what Joanna Baillie does—I suppose she borrows them” (203).

<sup>14</sup> For more on reviewers’ emphasis on her leading the redemption of English theatre, see Greg Kucich, “Reviewing women in British theatre,” p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> In line with Kucich’s assessment, Catherine Burroughs comments, “Because the rhetoric of male reviewers often figured the female-authored text as an embodiment of the playwright’s gendered position, expressing a keen desire to see her play in performance, reviews of the period underscore the intense cultural need to fetishize the female body and prescribe proper performances of feminine identity as a strategy to preclude female power. Thus, interest in (the performance of) female playscripts became a way not so much to encourage the proliferation of women writers as to submit them to yet another cultural test of whether they—as writing women—could conform to gender expectations while inhabiting a harshly scrutinizing arena” (4).

<sup>16</sup> Susan Bennett has suggested that since it was so difficult to stage new works, an author might deliberately publish first and then use the popularity of their readership as a marketing tool to persuade theater-owners to stage their productions for an already waiting audience (169). If such a statement reflects Baillie’s intentions, then her efforts were only mildly successful.

<sup>17</sup> She addresses this matter specifically in her “Introductory Discourse”: “It may, perhaps, be supposed from my publishing these plays, that I have written them for the closet rather than the stage. If upon perusing them with attention, the reader is disposed to think they are better calculated for the first than the last, let him impute it to want of skill in the author, and not to any previous design. A play, but of small poetical merit, that is suited to strike and interest the spectator, to catch the attention of him who will not, and of him who cannot read, is a more valuable and useful production than one whose elegant and harmonious pages are admired in the libraries of the tasteful and refined” (108-109). She reiterates this statement in her preface to *Miscellaneous Plays* (1804): “It has been and still is, my strongest desire to add a few pieces to the stock of what my called our national or permanent acting plays.” In the preface of her third edition of *Plays on the Passions* (1812), Baillie further demonstrates her dramaturgy by

calling for smaller stages, subtler acting styles, and new lighting designs. Her calls for theatrical reform would later be echoed by Sir Walter Scott and others throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>18</sup> The volume also included the comedy *The Tryal* and the tragedy *De Monfort*, which was successfully staged in 1800 with John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, and later in 1815 with Edmund Kean.

<sup>19</sup> Burke's treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) very clearly delineates a gender divide between the feminine aesthetics of Beauty and the superior, masculine Sublime. See pp. 86, 89, 157, in Burke.

<sup>20</sup> As Frederick Burwick points out, "With her insistence that drama should address the power of emotions to dictate behavior and compel the overwrought individual to acts of irrational excess, Joanna Baillie engages aberrational psychology. She seeks to ground her analysis of behavior on empirical observation, and to identify the looks and gestures that foreshadow an emotional crisis: the restless eye, the muttering lip, the half-checked exclamation and the hasty start" (104).

<sup>21</sup> I once again turn to Judith Butler's argument regarding parody and gender performance: "The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a "figure" in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin....In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction" (188). While Baillie certainly would not be arguing against gender essentialism, nevertheless her character demonstrates the revealing nature of parody which serves the thematic criticism of gender roles that permeates the play.

<sup>22</sup> See Anne Mellor, particularly pp. 560-4, on Baillie's efforts to dissolve gender binaries through this scene.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft's lament "that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions, which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when in fact, they are insultingly supporting their own superiority" feels particularly poignant here; later on in the play when Rosinberg performs his version of a male lover prostrating himself before the passive beloved, we must once again remember Wollstonecraft's complaint (84).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Crochunis notes that "Baillie exploits the rhetorical possibility of onstage bodies by describing dramatic embodiment explicitly in her plays, making use of elements that are pointedly theatrical—movement within stage space, styles of inflection or gesture, descriptions of bodily gesture rather than character thought" (176).

<sup>25</sup> Much like an aging actress revisiting her previous roles onstage, there is a strange imposition of a woman's previous embodiment that affects every subsequent viewing of her.

<sup>26</sup> This behavior also recalls the Romantic traditions of courtly love as embodied by Lancelot's idolatrous devotion to Guinevere, particularly in *The Knight of the Cart* (1175-1181) by Chretien de Troyes.

<sup>27</sup> John Donne (1571-1631), for instance, uses the phrase "life's blood" in "Sweetest love, I do not go."

<sup>28</sup> Victoria's declaration mirrors the example set by Guinevere following the deaths of her husband, Arthur, and her lover, Lancelot in the most established, famous romances about King Arthur and the knights of Camelot. In Malory, Guinevere lives out her days in a convent.

<sup>29</sup> The play was performed forty-eight times in its first season and was included in the London theater repertoire into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dazzling audiences with its dramatic spectacle and Gothic aesthetics.

<sup>30</sup> In the 23 March 1803 letter to his mother, Lewis also wrote, "I did not expect that it would succeed, and of course am not disappointed at its failure" (Peck 22). This, to me, reads more like the reassurances of a son to his concerned mother than a true confession of his feelings regarding the play's failure. As I have indicated above, Lewis' publication of *The Captive* in *Poems* clearly indicates his esteem of the piece and his hopes for its positive reception.

<sup>31</sup> See Andrew Scull, *Museums of Madness*.

<sup>32</sup> *The Monthly Meteor*, 1 December 1812.

<sup>33</sup> Below I have used the version provided by Jeffrey Cox in *Seven Gothic Dramas*, which merges the text of *Poems* with the stage directions provided by Margaret Cornwell Baron-Wilson in *Life and Correspondence*. See Cox for a full breakdown of the differences between each text.

<sup>34</sup> As evidenced by the stage directions, Mrs. Litchfield's performance would have likely included the codified language of physical gesture used to express passion that Henry Siddons catalogued. Such gestures also recall the "frozen moments" deftly used by Sarah Siddons to express emotion physically, almost displacing speech with a motionless gesture (see Siddons, as well as Burwick pp. 98-99)

<sup>35</sup> The differences between terror and horror in Gothic fiction, first theoretically defined by Ann Radcliffe, is distinguished succinctly by Jerrold Hogle: "[Terror] holds characters and readers mostly in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety, and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past, while

[horror] confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even revolting, consequences” (3).

<sup>36</sup> DeRochi comments, “In terms of shaping the theatrical experience, however, Lewis’s specific description of appropriate music (crescendos and caesuras alike) illustrates the lengths to which he was conveying a spectacle, in this case the horrifying treatment of a female victim” (244-245).

<sup>37</sup> See Bryden and Floyd’s introduction to *Domestic Space*.

## Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> It is good to note that Keats’s medical education would have reflected the increasing reliance on anatomy, and the changes to anatomical representation over the eighteenth century. Anatomical instruction in the eighteenth century was open to the public, any person willing to pay admission. Janis Caldwell and Erin Goss both remark on the gradual disappearance of the corpse’s previous humanity in visual representation, such as the change from drawing bodies in recognizably human social interactions to fragmenting the body and rendering individual parts. The body was so treated as an object that by the publication of Gray’s *Anatomy* in 1858, “the body appears as merely a set of disassembled pieces, displayed and revealed as sheer matter for the purposes of knowledge. No longer moving through represented worlds, these bodies appear entirely dead, entirely material, and therefore entirely available for the generalizing purposes of the study of anatomy” (Goss 34). For a compelling account of anatomical study and the economy of corpses in the early nineteenth century, see Ruth Richardson.

<sup>2</sup> See Everest for a discussion of the capitalist mercantilism represented by Isabella’s brothers.

<sup>3</sup> See Kate Ferguson Ellis for more on the Gothic heroine and the Gothic home.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February-3 May 1819, Keats now famously referred to Ann Radcliffe as “Mother” when discussing his most recent literary efforts, including *Isabella*: “I shall send you the Pot of Basil, St. Agnes eve, and if I should have finished it a little thing call’d the ‘eve of St. Mark’ you see what fine Mother Radcliff names I have—it is not my fault—I did not search for them...” (312).

<sup>5</sup> Castle observes, “Graves and grave monuments are obviously the most fascinating and paradoxical relics of the other, for even as they officially confirm absence (and indeed take on all the displaced pathos of the corpse), they also evoke powerful ‘living’ images of the person they memorialize” (238).

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Lacquer’s *Making Sex*.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Caine comments, “Godwin’s *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft destroyed her reputation. This work has been the subject of much critical comment since its first publication, and it certainly does stress Wollstonecraft’s emotional life while denying her any serious intellectual or political interests. But what is of particular significance here is the impossibility for Godwin to depict Wollstonecraft’s emotional and sexual history in any way that did not render them ludicrous, pitiable, and contemptible. This was so not simply because of Godwin and Wollstonecraft’s personal vagaries, but rather because the idea that women were properly the objects of male desire was so deeply ingrained in eighteenth-century thinking as to make it impossible even to address women as sexual and desiring subjects.” (np)

<sup>8</sup> See Helen Small, pp. 5-6, for more on the history of feminine love-madness.

<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Isabella’s ‘feverish unrest’ points to the medically inflected nature of her indolent occupation. In *Domestic medicine*, William Buchan asserts, “Fever is only an effort of nature to free herself from an offending cause” (152). In this instance, the offending cause is the responsibilities of Isabella’s bourgeois feminine identity, and the implied cure is a reunion with her unsuitable suitor, Lorenzo.

<sup>10</sup> The definition of ‘hysteria’ in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* at this time: “HYSTERIC AFFECTION, or *Passion*, (formed of υτέρα [sic] ‘womb’); a disease in women, called also *suffocation of the womb*, and vulgarly *fits of the mother*. It is a spasmodico-convulsive affection of the nervous system, proceeding from the womb...” (9:49).

<sup>11</sup> For more on Isabella as a mother, see Diane Hoeveler.

## Conclusion

<sup>1</sup> A few more contemporary texts featuring pathologized women: The Countess in Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* (1768); the titular “The Mad Mother” by Wordsworth (1800); Geraldine in Coleridge’s *Christabel* (1816); Beatrice in Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1819); Lucy in *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) by Sir Walter Scott; every Radcliffian heroine and even the ironic Catherine in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (completed 1803, published 1817).

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Tooke, *The Pantheon: Representing the Fabulous Histories of the Heathen Gods, and Most Illustrious Heroes, in a Short, Plain, and Familiar Method by Way of Dialogue: For the Use of Schools* (London, 1753); Joseph Spence, *Polymetus* (London, 1747); and John Lemprière, *A Classical Dictionary: Containing a Copious Account of All the Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors, with the Value of Coins, Weights, and Measures Used Among the Greeks and Romans, and a Chronological Table* (London, 1800).

<sup>3</sup> “Keats’s Apollonius—kin to Apollo with his vision of rational order and a Jesus wannabe—also epitomizes the ‘cold philosophy’ (science) that dispels ‘all charms,’ reduces the sublime rainbow to ‘the dull catalogue of common things,’ and conquers ‘all mysteries by rule and line’ (2.229-35)” (Cox 60).

<sup>4</sup> See De Almeida, pp. 180-3.

<sup>5</sup> Keats does not offer further explanation for Lamia’s powers or her state of being. Susan Wolfson comments, “She shares a name with fabled she-vampires, predatory snakes disguised as lovely, alluring maids. But she also seems cursed: perhaps a woman imprisoned in a snake” (370).

<sup>6</sup> Denise Gigante persuasively argues that Lamia’s complexity and monstrosity are intertwined, citing Romantic theories of organic form: “As Lamia explodes in all the colors of excessive vitality, refusing to be numbered in the ‘dull catalogue of common things’ or bound by the Newtonian bars of the rainbow in Keats’s poem. She breaks free formally from the straitened pattern of neoclassical couplets and the mechanism of allegorical romance that would presume to contain her. I have suggested that the aesthetic category of monstrosity intersected with natural philosophy around the turn of the nineteenth century, transforming the idea of the monster as a static deformity or collection of poorly assembled parts into a distinctly Romantic, vitalist conception of monstrosity as too much life.... Lamia is difficult to contain in representation, and in scrambling Newton’s rainbow she presents a correlative challenge to the biological idea that life can be parsed, mechanically or logically, through bodily organization.” (209-211)

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