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**“something to say upon women’s inconstancy”: fickleness and fleeting  
infatuation in the Shelleys and beyond**

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Abstract

This essay examines the “inconstant” lover, a label that is (mis)applied to women by male authors or male characters in literature. However, when women writers choose to depict wayward, fickle women in amorous affairs, this representation becomes subversive. I focus on Mary Shelley’s “The Bride of Modern Italy” and *Valperga*, arguing that the criticisms afforded to Clorinda and Beatrice respectively are a distorted view of reality controlled by a patriarchal system in which male figures are judged differently. The fates of these protagonists foreshadow the critique by twentieth-century women writers of the limited notion that hapless women do not offer a scope for feminine power. The Shelleys’ collaborative literary relationship indicates their discourse on this topic in their writings; we can examine the wilful male poet-figure in verse but also the very real misfortune of Beatrice Cenci and Mary Shelley’s appreciation of her story. The essay takes as its departure point the passage from Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* in which Captain Harville explains “songs and proverbs, all talk of woman’s fickleness”, and two visual art exhibitions on display in 2022. The argument concludes with some observations on depictions of the inconstant woman in twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry and prose.

Key words: Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, women’s writing, feminism.

Word count: 8422

Meditations on the state of woman and the feminine in art provided the subject for two exhibitions in 2022: *Héroïnes romantiques* at the Musée de la Vie romantique in Paris, and *Feminine Power: the divine to the demonic* at the British Museum, London. The former explored how if “female heroism is illustrated mainly by means of an *amorous passion*, it inevitably ends in a painful exile, a withdrawal from the world, or even a dramatic and untimely death”.<sup>1</sup> The latter promised to deal with feminine deviancy and fallibility, but was altogether more focused on power in a distinguished, stately sense. The journalist Elizabeth Day was quoted in the exhibition *Feminine Power* as saying: “It’s almost as if women aren’t allowed big emotions, big, complicated, messy emotions”.<sup>2</sup> Women who have these “messy” emotions in art must be mired in pathos and tragedy before they are seen as a worthy augmentation of the feminine voice or a part of womens’ advancement and progress. As an alternative, this essay is concerned with how women experiencing “amorous passion” can be undistinguished, but still subversive in their very presence; there is something fascinating about the more nuanced power of depicting that hapless feminine experience, even if it does not lead to notoriety or any kind of grandeur.

Towards the end of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1818), when Captain Harville speaks to Anne Elliot about “woman’s inconstancy”, there is a source for the terms “fickle” and “inconstant”, key determiners of my argument:

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibition interpretation, *Héroïnes romantiques*, Musée de la Vie romantique, Paris.  
<https://museevieromantique.paris.fr/fr/les-expositions/heroines-romantiques-6-avril-4-septembre-2022>  
(emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Day, cited in the exhibition interpretation for *Feminine power: the divine to the demonic*  
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/feminine-power-divine-demonic>.

“Well, Miss Elliot ... we shall never agree I suppose upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse ... I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman’s inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman’s fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men.”

“Perhaps I shall. – Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing.”

(*Persuasion*, 220)

Captain Wentworth writes his tortured confessional letter in earshot as Anne pronounces that it is women who are capable of “loving longest” (221). But this essay is not about loving longest, although it certainly engages with Austen’s/Harville’s assertion on “woman’s inconstancy [...] woman’s fickleness” in literature and art. Anne is the voice of reason in *Persuasion*, and this scene confirms her journey over the course of the two volumes from “only Anne” (9) to a confident individual, losing her passivity.

In contrast, the portraits of passion-fuelled, unpredictable women under duress in *Héroïnes romantiques*, such as Sappho, Ophelia, and Juliet, suggest that the exhibition’s intention was to speak to a different quality of Romantic-period representation of perceived or actual weakness. The interpretation text itself is also explicit in its promise to examine the nineteenth century *and* the broader concept of sufferings in romantic love:

Qui sont les héroïnes du romantisme et comment sont-elles représentées dans les arts au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ? [...] l’exposition invite le public à découvrir des héroïnes revisitées ou inventées par le romantisme : Héroïnes du passé, Héroïnes de fiction et Héroïnes en scène. Ce parcours en trois temps permet de tisser des liens entre les Beaux-arts, la littérature et les arts de la scène

qui jouent au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle un rôle majeur dans la diffusion d'un héroïsme féminin aux accents tragiques. [...] Dans les Beaux-arts, comme dans la littérature ou la musique, l'héroïne romantique vit des passions fortes, éprouve le désespoir et la mélancolie, aime et meurt d'aimer.

Who are the heroines of romanticism and how are they shown in art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? [...] the exhibition invites the public to discover heroines that romanticism reinterpreted or invented: Heroines of the past, Heroines in fiction, and Heroines on stage. This progression in three phases lets us weave links between the Fine Arts, literature, and the dramatic arts which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a major role in diffusing a feminine heroism with tragic undertones. [...] In the Fine Arts, as in literature or music, the romantic heroine endured strong passions, experienced despair and melancholy, and loved and died from loving.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition admits that its scope follows the rule that “Si la création de l'époque est majoritairement l'œuvre d'artistes masculins” (“most of the period's creations are by male artists”) and that the women are “diaphanes et fragiles” (“diaphanous and fragile”). This essay is concerned with how depicting the seeming trivialities of the fickle heroine, writers (especially, but not always, *women* writers) are not negative, but subversive, and the inconstant woman is antithetically a symbol of strength in her very presence. Unlike the figures in *Héroïnes romantiques*, they are not reduced to victims, defined by the fact they are “dénudées, résignées face à un destin inéluctable” (“undressed, and resigned in the face of an ineluctable destiny”).<sup>4</sup> Representation is a way of challenging the gender imbalance in the literature of the time, and for the purposes of my argument, that literature concerned with heterosexual romantic love or passion. Elsewhere we find the comparable fickle male figure, the existence of which implies that some literature sinks into misogyny; that is, inconstant

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<sup>3</sup> Communiqué de presse, *Héroïnes romantiques*.

[https://museevieromantique.paris.fr/sites/default/files/actualite/visuel\\_liste/mvr\\_cp\\_heroines\\_rom\\_vdmail.pdf](https://museevieromantique.paris.fr/sites/default/files/actualite/visuel_liste/mvr_cp_heroines_rom_vdmail.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Communiqué de presse, *Héroïnes romantiques*.

women are seen as victims of their own creation, but inconstant men are romantic heroes. In the works of Mary Shelley, we see a woman writer subverting the trope of the fickle heroine, critiquing the patriarchal depiction of the inconstant woman in contrast to the admiration afforded to male counterparts with similar whimsical or self-indulgent characteristics.

Alongside the faithful heroine, how prevalent and how important are the fictional women subject to transient and intensely enamoured attraction, which may be either explicitly sexual or romantic, or both? Anne Elliot is in some ways diaphanous and fragile; she has made mistakes, used Wentworth “ill; deserted and disappointed him” with her “weakness and timidity” (54) – and yet she is a heroine indeed, and the focus of the audience’s empathy, and it is the change in her, her inconstancy, that is key. Turning to another major novelist of the Romantic period alongside Austen, we can also argue that Mary Shelley’s “inconstant” women often have that label imposed on them by their male counterparts: it is a quality delivered by a patriarchal system rather than the women themselves. I am going to examine the depiction of the fickle heart, considering the portrayal not of enduring, devoted love, but of intense infatuation which is both dangerous and fleeting; what is Mary Shelley representing when devising women so easily swayed by circumstance or persuasion? One of my examples, the prophet Beatrice in *Valperga* (1823), is described from the perspective of her lover thus:

She was a strange riddle to him. Without vow, without even that slight shew of distrust which is the child of confidence itself, she surrendered herself to his arms. And, when the first maiden bashfulness had passed away, all was deep tenderness and ardent love. Yet there was a dignity and a trusting affection in her most unguarded moments, that staggered him: a broken expression would sometimes fall from her lips, made him start, as if he feared that he

had acted with perfidy; yet he had never solicited, never promised,— what could she mean?  
(*Valperga*, 230)

Percy Bysshe Shelley's depictions of a passionate, but arguably fleeting and intense rather than deep and consistent, love in *Julian and Maddalo* (1818) and *Epipsychidion* (1821), provide echoes of the fickleness of a wayward lover that function in dialogue with his wife's work, as she subverts such tropes. Moving away from romantic love to corrupt, violent gender dynamics, Percy Bysshe Shelley's own Beatrice in *The Cenci* (1819) is important here. It was a work that Mary Shelley explicitly commented on with regards to her involvement in its composition, recalling "we talked over the arrangement of the scenes together" ("Note on *The Cenci*", 283). However, the play also provides a raw darkness in feminine suffering that is often uncomfortably placed alongside the romantic heroine; Beatrice Cenci's inhuman treatment and suffering shaped by the male gaze, perhaps apt for lament, but not empowerment or progress, and indeed, her supposed portrait (see Curran, xi) is on display in *Héroïnes romantiques*. Moving forward to the twentieth century, authors including Wendy Cope and Jean Rhys write bold feminine voices that critique the notion that women in fiction, art, and poetry, cannot be fickle in love without being seen as a failure to any developing ideal of women and progress. As such their creativity can be read as further commenting on Mary Shelley's original challenge to lot of the passive, fickle-hearted heroine, in an interesting trajectory of readings of the feminine anti-hero across time.

The argument made in this essay was inspired by a specific section of Mary Shelley's "The Bride of Modern Italy". This short story is most commonly read as a direct response to the situation surrounding the composition of Percy Bysshe Shelley's semi-autobiographical work *Epipsychidion*. Charles E. Robinson summarizes this history:

Mary Shelley's inspiration came from her own experience, for Clorinda was modelled on Emilia Viviani, whom Mary met in December 1820 and described as "a beautiful girl wearing out the best years of her life in an odious convent" [...] while awaiting her marriage, which was being arranged by her parents. But Emilia first enthralled Percy Shelley and became the subject of his "Italian Platonics" and of his poem *Epipsychidion*. (Robinson, 376)

Sometime between Emilia's marriage in March 1822 and "The Bride of Modern Italy" appearing anonymously in the *London Magazine* in 1824, Mary Shelley wrote her satire, in which she mocks all involved. At the start of the tale, she depicts Clorinda's (a version of Emilia) inconstancy thus, with a snide aside from her companion Teresa:

"He will never come!" exclaimed Clorinda.

"I fear the dinner bell will ring and interrupt us, if he does come," observed Teresa.

"some cruel obstacle doubtless prevents him," continued Clorinda, sighing —"and I have prayed to St. Giacomo, and vowed to give him the best flowers and a candle a foot long next Easter."

Teresa smiled: "I remember," she said, "that at Christmas you fulfilled such a vow to San Francesco,—was that not for the sake of Cieco Magni? for you change your saint as your lover changes name;—tell me, sweet Clorinda, how many saints have been benefited by your piety?"

Clorinda looked angry, and then sorrowful; the large drops gathered in her dark eyes: "You are unkind to taunt me thus, Teresina;—when did I love truly until now? believe me, never; and if heaven bestows Giacomo upon me—oh! that is his bell!—naughty Teresa, you will cause me to meet him with tears in my eyes." ("The Bride of Modern Italy", 33)



I have written elsewhere about this idiosyncratic short story and its undeniable connections with Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, including the reality of the situation as discussed in Mary Shelley's letters, and the fact that it was actually Claire Clairmont's journal of 23 July 1821 that provided the phrase: "Emilia says that she prays always to a Saint, and every time she changes her lover, she changes her Saint, adopting the one of her lover" (Clairmont, 243). But although Mary Shelley's dry humour is evident in the above passage (she makes Clorinda a fickle and inconstant figure), she actually ridicules another character, the "young English artist" (36), even more. Clorinda's lover Giacomo befriends this artist, Marcott Alleyn, a Percy Bysshe Shelley-esque creative. Giacomo then travels to Sienna to discuss the potential marriage to Clorinda with his father, leaving "the cares of his love in the hands of this gentleman" (Alleyn), who had "been a year in Rome, but he had never been within a convent" (36). Alleyn is intoxicated by the setting, and eventually by Clorinda herself. He muses on entering the convent for the first time: "Well, thought he, I am now in for it; and if I do not lose my heart, I shall at least gain some excellent hints for my picture of the Profession of Eloisa" (36). Mary Shelley's narrative may indeed be critical of her husband's dalliances with Emilia, but I argue that she also uses this story to introduce the quality of the inconstant, fickle woman to subvert expectations. Clorinda is a clear depiction of fleeting amorous, dramatic love: "There was neither constancy in Clorinda's love, nor dignity in her conduct" (34). However, this characterisation of her as flawed and weak is designed to contribute to our response, as readers, to Alleyn's departure and desertion of her once he has become too embroiled in their flirtatious contact. Clorinda invites Alleyn to escape with her, but the reality of the situation soon sets in, and he withdraws. "I have sown a pretty crop, but I am not mad enough to reap it" (38-39), he reflects, offering in response to her declarations of passionate love "expressions of real sorrow, but of small consolation" (40); the sorrow is undoubtedly self-pity rather than any kind of deep reflection or regret. Alleyn's dalliances

with Clorinda reap no retribution or punishment for him. Clorinda, however, is married off to a man selected by her parents, and her ideas of romantic escape or marrying for love are destroyed. The story ends with Alleyn simply going to “paint my Profession of Eloisa” (42). Such is the conclusion of Mary Shelley’s tale where “inconstancy” from both parties does damage to the position of the woman, but simply inspires the man. Regretfully for her protagonist, Clorinda, it seemed, had become genuinely infatuated:

Giacomo was, alas! forgotten. [...] She was fretful if Alleyn did not come; when he was announced, she would blush, sit silent in his presence, and, if any of his sallies provoked her laughter, it was quickly quenched by tears. Her devotions even lost their accustomed warmth; Alleyn had not tutelar saint; no Marcott had even been honoured with canonisation, not had any of the bones found in the catacombs been baptized with that transalpine name. “Marry, this is miching Mallecho; it means mischief,” – the brief mischief of *inconstancy*, new love, and all the evils attendant on such a change. (38, emphasis added)

The allusion is to *Hamlet* III ii ll. 147-48, a moment of tension showing Hamlet’s cruel treatment of Ophelia. The “pen” of men has provided examples of mistreatment and that is the undertone here. In a comparable but less direct allusion to past masters, Clorinda’s boudoir is described in a way reminiscent of Belinda’s “Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux” (I, l. 138) in Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), and the moral decay apparent in Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” (1732), including (in Clorinda’s case) “tattered books and female apparel”, “flowers, gathered for the dedication and drooping for want of light”, “some migionette, basil, and heliotrope, weeds o’ergrown, flowered in a wooden trough at the window; a broken looking glass; a leaden ink stand – such was Clorinda’s boudoir” (35). She is untidy (perhaps akin to those “messy” emotions women should not have) but, it is implied, these features are worthy of our attention. We are told

more detail of Clorinda's mess than we are of Alleyn's so-called "art"; his work also alludes to Pope – the verse epistle "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717). Mary Shelley is undercutting the expectation of women as "messy" as provided by male writers, perhaps aware of Mary Wortley Montagu's satirical response verses to Swift, but also in alluding to Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard", a poem about faithful lovers, thereby mocking Alleyn's fickle passion. Such a perspective shows a different side to Mary Shelley, approaching her a writer beyond *Frankenstein* (1818), the novel that so often defines her. In the examples below she is assertive on the topic of women in society, but she is crucially also very ironic and witty. Rather than her portrayals of inconstant woman existing to insult her own gender, I suggest Mary Shelley's intention is to tackle and subvert those stereotypes and gendered norms in creative works.

But "The Bride of Modern Italy" *is* a comedy; it is meant to be lighthearted. What of Mary Shelley's more complex women that suffer in love? There has been much discourse in later nineteenth-century literary study on the "fallen woman" wronged by men, the category which perhaps befits Beatrice of Ferrara in Mary Shelley's second full-length novel, *Valperga*. Beatrice is a young woman seduced and deserted, and crucially, her lover decides to portray her as simply inconstant and fickle, revealing his misanthropy and malevolence. As Betty T. Bennett explains:

In love with Castruccio, she "surrendered herself to his arms" [...] believing their sexual relationship to be a blessed union. Still engaged to Euthanasia, Castruccio deserts Beatrice, who as a result becomes a deranged beggar. In Beatrice's last days Euthanasia, knowing the truth of Beatrice's story, nevertheless shelters her. In contrast, Castruccio merely eases his conscience by insisting on an elaborate state funeral for the girl he seduced and abandoned. (Bennett, 58)

Castruccio's abuse and neglect of Beatrice is clear. However, I want to suggest that it is Mary Shelley's depiction of Beatrice as a fickle, inconstant, wayward creature is a more layered portrait than simply fictionalising one man's cruel treatment of a woman. For Beatrice, it is her lover that deems her inconstant, it is not evident in her conduct – a state comparable to Clorinda in that it is others (Alleyn, Teresa) that deem her to be unreliable. In a crucial scene in *Valperga*, Castruccio informs Beatrice he loves another (Euthanasia), and Beatrice is then described as sinking “down pale and lifeless, pressing her hands upon her eyes [...] he left her aghast, overthrown, annihilated” (235). A revealing section of the tyranny of his character is subtly explored below, as we are treated to his inner monologue, which dismisses her overwhelming pain thus:

[Beatrice] would soon forget him: thus he reasoned; hers was one of those minds ever tossed like the ocean by the tempest of passion; yet, like the ocean, let the winds abate, and it subsides, and quickly again becomes smiling. (235-36)

Here again is Mary Shelley's dark wit. It is something that we do not see often in her novels – more often in her short stories, a good example of which is the mocking of the cast of characters in “The Bride of Modern Italy”. The almost comical indirect justification of actions in Castruccio's mind – his trivialization of her as a person and of women – an assumption which will prove to be utterly wrong – provides an interesting perspective on Beatrice. Her prophetic ways, her overbearing and excessive love for him, and then her utter despair, rather than convincing this male protagonist of her worth and seriousness, instead provides him ample excuse to dismiss her. He justifies his treatment in that “utter hopelessness of ever seeing him again would cause her to forget him” (236), consoling

himself that she can return to “her old habits” (236) and that her many friends would heal the wounds that he had inflicted.

Similarly, Alleyn in “The Bride of Modern Italy” offers “expressions of real sorrow, but of small consolation” (“The Bride of Modern Italy”, 40) – in *Valperga* we hear of Castruccio’s “attempted consolation” (233) and that ultimately his words “brought despair, not comfort” (234). The sincerity of the sorrow is an ironic aside in both cases. Mary Shelley plays into the “inconstancy” of women as depicted in men’s tales, recalling that all-important power-wielding “pen” in *Persuasion*. But unlike Anne Elliot, Beatrice’s dreadful trajectory is the result of a persistent misunderstanding of her true character, and the novel does not provide her with the opportunity to prove that a woman can, indeed, love longest, without it also destroying her.

The characterisation of Beatrice as vulnerable is an example of Mary Shelley’s social commentary. She recognises self-sacrifice existing within the patriarchal structures of the Italian past (“Euthanasia and Beatrice [...] recall a whole battery of powerful and often maligned medieval Italian women”, Kelley, 627) and in her contemporary life in Europe, too. Sharon M. Twigg has written about the language of contract and freedom in *Valperga*, explaining that “as a displacement of Shelley’s nineteenth-century British present to fourteenth-century Italy, her counterfactual history offers a sustained critique of the economic and moral claims contracts make on women” (484). Mary Shelley positions an argument for the pain of Beatrice (and indeed Euthanasia, who I do not have space to discuss here) within a historical novel format. She brings forward the women involved in history and has them demonstrate that they are as important as their male counterparts, and that such negative

characteristics and inconstancy and seeming passivity are simply products of social norms.

As Tilottama Rajan has written:

Shelley's bold insertion of two fictitious women into a historical narrative makes *Valperga* one of the earliest examples of the counterfactual history later envisioned by Virginia Woolf when she imagines Shakespeare's "sister". (Rajan, 9)

And as Patricia A. Matthew argues, work on Shelley *should* step away from limited biographical readings to focus on how she and other women writers "utilize the lives of others to tell stories and pose complicated questions about the effects of women's choices and desires on a domestic and national level" (Matthew, 382). Mary Shelley is using the novel here to challenge expectations surrounding the wronged woman as simply diaphanous and fragile, a vessel for embodying a specific view of feminine tragedy celebrated by a traditional male gaze. Beatrice becomes increasingly unwell and eventually dies. One of the most powerful features of the text is the relationship that develops between the two women, Euthanasia and Beatrice: "Euthanasia hardly ever left her bed side; and she became as pale, and almost as weak, as the dying Beatrice" (393). As summarized by Rajan:

Much of the novel is devoted to Castruccio's intrigues, military campaigns, and growing power. But its most compelling segments concern Euthanasia's relationship to Beatrice, whom she gives a home, and whose radical pessimism both defeats and energizes her more Shelleyan will to "hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (*PU*: IV ll. 573-74). (9)

Herein lies one example of the complexity in the Shelleys' interlacing oeuvres. At once Mary Shelley's political novel has that allegiance with what she believed was Percy Bysshe Shelley's view that "mankind only had to will that there should be no evil, and there would

be none” (“Note on the *Prometheus Unbound*”, 277), again exemplified in Rajan’s quote about hope taken from *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) above. Moreover, Mary Shelley is emphasising the harm that explicitly patriarchal social structures can cause to both women and men, as Castruccio’s vehement self-interest and the sufferings of Beatrice and Euthanasia in love *and* power show.

Indeed, as Michael Rossington has documented, a contemporary commentary on *Valperga* in the conservative press criticised Beatrice, displeased by “what is here put into the mouth of a frantic girl, mad with love and misery”. John Gibson Lockhart continues in his dismissal of the text that such style and content “has been of late put forth...frequently, and in...many different forms, by the writers of that school, with which this gifted person has the misfortune to be associated”, meaning the “Satanic School”, that is, Lord Byron and those associated with him, including Percy Bysshe Shelley (Rossington, xviii). The works of Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, created in intense collaborative and reciprocal literary interaction with one another, offer different perspectives of gender and experience. These authors are connected by their writings, not just by biography – thus my approach is to consider the way their creative works interact, rather than focusing on other aspects of their marriage; this is the approach they took themselves, with writing transcending the vicissitudes of everyday life. The characters of Beatrice and Clorinda do, in many ways, connect Mary Shelley’s writing with that of her husband. Her work, like his, is highly allusive; Dante Alighieri’s Beatrice is a figure that has great resonance for them both. The Shelleys would often read Dante together, and in Pimlico in London, before they arrived in their adopted land of Italy, Dante’s country, Percy Bysshe Shelley once translated some lines of Dante replacing the name Beatrice with “Mary” (“What Mary is”, l. 1. See also Mary Shelley’s *Journals*, 86). However, in the case of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s major poetry, the wayward woman is often

the source of pain in relation to the correspondingly fraught poet-figure. The maniac's fate in *Julian and Maddalo* for example, is apparently caused by a fickle woman:

“Alas, what drove him mad?” “I cannot say;  
A Lady came with him from France, and when  
She left him and returned, he wandered then  
About yon lonely isles of desert sand  
Till he grew wild” (ll. 245-49)

I have written elsewhere about how we should not align Mary Shelley with “the lady” here. It is unlikely she felt aggrieved by this poem, composed in 1818; there are other more pertinent poems relevant to the Shelleys’ emotional tensions, for example *Epipsychidion*, composed in 1821. So as an abstract figure, it is interesting that the lady’s desertion (was it cruelty, inconstancy, or tragedy?) is not made explicit. The focus is on the lament of the man, and our sympathy for him is elicited. So, is the depiction of inconstant feminine figures in love at odds with the expected sincerity of the forlorn man, even when the love of such male figures could be read as overwrought and transitory? The free-love advocate in *Epipsychidion* is sincere to the point of intensity, and such a tone stems from the confessional narratives of writers like Jean Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the likes of which we know the Shelleys read (see *Journals*, 88, 90).<sup>5</sup>

Percy Bysshe Shelley depicted tragic women too, most notably another Beatrice in *The Cenci*, but her sufferings at the hands of her father are very different from the disastrous effects of romantic love here. Her fate is simply, darkly, miserable; she is physically and

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).



emotionally abused by the Count. A portrait of Beatrice Cenci appeared in the *Héroïnes romantiques* exhibition, with the following interpretation:

Beatrice Cenci est une aristocrate romaine du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle qui a tué son père violent. Surnommée la «Belle Parricide», elle fut décapitée à l'âge de vingt-deux ans malgré les protestations du peuple et devint un symbole de la résistance. Cette histoire tragique a inspiré des œuvres picturales, littéraires, musicales et dramatiques. Le peintre et graveur italien Calamatta propose ici une gravure d'après une huile sur toile attribuée au peintre italien du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle Guido Reni, qui représente les Cenci au visage doux aux traits presque enfantins.

Beatrice Cenci is a 16th century Roman aristocrat who killed her abusive father. Nicknamed the «Beautiful Parricide», she was beheaded at the age of twenty-two despite the protests of the people and became a symbol of resistance. This tragic story inspired pictorial, literary, musical and dramatic works. The Italian painter and engraver Calamatta offers here an engraving after an oil on canvas attributed to the 17th century Italian painter Guido Reni, which represents the Cenci with a soft face with almost childlike features.<sup>6</sup>

The juxtaposition of the soft face and the childlike features with the horrors of Beatrice's sad tale again says something about difficult, inconstant women and the ways in which art can attempt to soften them into something idealised. Beatrice Cenci and Beatrice of Ferrara in *Valperga* refuse to act according to patriarchal expectations. They do not conform, and consequently, they suffer.

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<sup>6</sup> Exhibition interpretation, *Héroïnes romantiques*.

Additionally, there is an interesting echo of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* in "The Bride of Modern Italy" which I believe has previously gone unnoticed. Before Alleyn arrives, Clorinda, frustrated by Giacomo's dismissal of her plan for flight, exclaims: "something must, something shall, be done" (36). In Act III, scene one of *The Cenci*, following her suffering at the hands of her father, Beatrice decries at a pivotal moment in the play:

'Tis the restless life  
Tortured within them. If I try to speak  
I shall go mad. Aye, something must be done;  
What, yet I know not (III, i, l. 84-87).

The foreboding of misery that is evoked from the futility of these actions which fail to empower the women is marked here. Although Mary Shelley choosing to allude to *The Cenci*, such a horrific, dark subject, might provide a sense of bathos for Clorinda, again there is the potential for understanding Clorinda's plight as set up for failure. Mary Shelley alludes to the play in her widowhood journals to reflect sincere sorrow (*Journals*, 395-96). Many of Mary Shelley's allusions to male-authored literature emphasise the unfair tradition of labelling women as inconstant, whereas by bringing in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci*, a work she admired (she called the fifth act "the finest thing he ever wrote", "Note on *The Cenci*", 286) and collaborated on, she introduces and acknowledges the existence of a more nuanced take on women as complicated or difficult in literary history.

In Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, the speaker muses on the nature of love:

I love thee; yes, I feel  
That on the fountain of my heart a seal

Is set, to keep its waters pure and bright  
For thee, since in those *tears* thou hast delight.  
We — are we not formed, as notes of music are,  
For one another, though dissimilar;  
Such difference without discord, as can make  
Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake  
As trembling leaves in a continuous air? (ll. 138-47, original emphasis)

The image of the music notes – we can visualise many on a page – implies a larger coming together of a collective: not monogamous love, as of course we know the extension of love is at the heart of *Epipsychidion* overall (famously in ll. 160-61, “True Love in this differs from gold and clay, / That is to divide is not to take away”). So, what of the women in *Epipsychidion*? Their fickleness is seen as the source of the poet-speaker’s pain:

In many mortal forms I rashly sought  
The shadow of that idol of my thought.  
And some were fair — but beauty dies away:  
Others were wise — but honeyed words betray:  
And One was true — oh! why not true to me?  
Then, as a hunted deer that could not flee,  
I turned upon my thoughts, and stood at bay,  
Wounded and weak and panting; the cold day  
Trembled, for pity of my strife and pain. (ll. 267-75).

The blame is grounded in the fickleness of the women betraying, or not being true, and the “strife and pain” of the male speaker here is said with deep sincerity. It is a poem showing Percy Bysshe Shelley in his darkest state of lament: this is true love and suffering, and we

treat it sincerely as such. The speaker here cannot be dismissed as Beatrice in *Valperga* was, “one of those minds ever tossed like the ocean by the tempest of passion” (235-36), but that will return to a calm state eventually. Even more so, to compare Percy Bysshe Shelley’s other erotically charged verses, the group of texts known by Shelleyans as the “Jane poems” have been read as sincere celebrations of desire, and here the poet is ascribed an even more genuine grandeur in his amorous yearnings. “Unlike *Epipsychidion*, Shelley’s Jane Williams poems [...] are part of a dynamic process of courtship, both actual and mediated”, and although as critics we must accept an “inability to determine the relations between poetry and lived experience”, the poems themselves suggest the speaker’s wholehearted infatuation and therefore permissible pain (Cian Duffy, 617, 626). Deep sincerity is evident (“For our beloved Jane alone.”, “With a Guitar, to Jane” l. 90), and as Nora Crook explains:

By 1821-2 there seems little that could have been said to [Percy Bysshe Shelley] about his relations with women that he did not already – at least subliminally – know, or could not make superb poetry out of. In “The Zucca” he admits that he has loved “I know not what,” though recognising it fleetingly in “the rare smile of woman” (20, 37); in *The Triumph of Life* the “shape all light” is “forever sought, forever lost” (431). The exquisite lyrics to Jane Williams attempt to hold in precarious balance his yearning and her unattainability. (Crook, 78)

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s specific depiction of intense adoration in which passionate women, again as Crook notes, “feel unsatisfied desire and bring desolation when they depart” (76), might also be prevalent in other literary works. Indeed, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s account of creativity itself uses the word “inconstant”. In *A Defence of Poetry*, he writes:

A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. (531)

The question is, can fickle women also achieve the same romantic greatness as the poet-speaker in the Jane Poems or *Epipsychidion*?

Mary Shelley's implicit acknowledgement that inconstancy is a male judgement rather than a feminine trait anticipates twentieth-century feminist treatment of such themes. Wendy Cope's poem "Rondeau Redoublé" (1986), like "The Bride of Modern Italy", is ostensibly comedic. But Cope's invocation of a common experience implies not just that women endure untenable, unreliable romantic attractions but also that they give their hearts wholly to that. She implies that chastising fickleness is a patriarchal way of seeing a woman failed in love as a problem with herself. In words rich with irony, the "blame" is assigned to the subject:

There are so many kinds of awful men –  
One can't avoid them all. She often said  
She'd never make the same mistake again:  
She always made a new mistake instead. (ll. 1-4)

Cope, in a typical quasi-autobiographical way, traces various examples (the hippy, the banker, and perhaps most pertinently, "the budding poet", l. 17), before concluding: 'she'd lived and learned and lived and learned but then / There are so many kinds.' (ll. 24-25). That conclusion *redoubles* the actual message at the poem's heart: in trying to engage in these

romances, it is a misplaced societal failing to implore women seeking heterosexual relationships take a look at *only* themselves. Carol Ann Duffy's ultraviolent poem "Little Red Cap" (1999) sees the redemption of a misplaced teenage love redeemed with a literal axe; the protagonist, also tellingly undone by a creative ("You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry." l. 13) finally emerges at the end of the poem:

I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up

Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone. (ll. 41-42)

The preceding line alludes to "grandmother's bones" (l. 40), potentially indicating a succession of this kind of feminine suffering at the hands of a comparable man (or here, a "wolf", l. 6).

Feminist study might require a mention of the oft-cited *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and the discourse Jean Rhys introduces in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) where Antoinette Cosway's trauma is compounded from the simple dismissal of her behaviour as "madness". Rhys's heroines are ample evidence for such a discussion on woman and inconstancy from another perspective; her tragic protagonists are often irrevocably damaged, in pain, vulnerable, and powerless. For example, in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), the climax of the novel sees Sasha Jansen sleeping with the unknown man who lives in the hotel room next door (a man she loathes), providing "a deeply disturbing conclusion [...] a surrender to the end of love, a female wasteland" (Elaine Savory, 79). This conclusion is tragic and distressing, but it is Sasha who pulls the man onto the bed saying "Yes – yes – yes...." (Rhys, 159). Rhys portrays Sasha as appearing to have no intention of improving her life or escaping her misery:

Now I no longer wish to be loved, beautiful, happy or successful. I want one thing and one thing only – to be left alone...I had the bright idea of drinking myself to death...I've had enough of these streets that sweat a cold, yellow slime, of hostile people, of crying myself to sleep every night. (37)

The desire “to be left alone” also resonates with Mary Shelley’s “inconstant” women, including Beatrice in *Valperga* and her love-sick wanderings. A highly Shelleyan phrase shows her bitter regret: “my heart aches, and my spirits flag [...] the deceitful veil which is cast over this world, is powerless to hide its deformity from me” (*Valperga*, 344). As with Sasha, Beatrice laments the way she has been treated, but there is a subtext that because she is a woman, there is little hope for redemption: so, self-destruction ensues. Common responses to Rhys include those who understand her novels as “feminine rather than feminist”. Helen McNeil, who made this comment, cruelly distinguished Rhys by claiming:

Unlike Anaïs Nin, Elizabeth Smart or Kate Millet, who implicitly claim a unique sensitivity through the attention-getting emotionalism of a heightened prose, Rhys’s novels wear the protective colouring of minor works, drawing as little attention to themselves as possible. Feminine rather than feminist, her novels, like their heroines, present themselves as victims to the reader. (McNeil, 253-54)

The assertion that “feminine” is a dirty word compared to “feminist” is a problem in itself. The Rhys scholar Helen Carr explains this effect, how “her novels might depict patriarchal oppression, but feminists as well as non-feminists felt that her heroines connived too much in their own unhappiness” (Carr, 11). It appears that women are not permitted to be fallible without a redemption phase. So where does this leave the inconstant woman in love? The criticism of Rhys is emblematic of the idea that inconstancy hinders the advancement of

womankind. Thereby Clorinda in “The Bride of Modern Italy” becomes a ridiculous character, and Beatrice in *Valperga* is simply a figure that pines away, dies, and cannot achieve the stately power and divinity of Euthanasia. How dissatisfying, that women cannot be as self-involved and wayward as a male poet. I want to suggest that in representing these lost women, Mary Shelley is making that point herself: and insisting that these kinds of inconstant women, or women perceived as inconstant, be seen. They are complex, not simply victims; they merit attention, just as how Paula Le Gallez argues specifically against the reputation that Rhys’s heroines have of being “passive”:

It will be seen that the “Rhys woman,” far from being as passive as she looks, is passive only in a culturally determined way, and that underlying this attitude is an ironic awareness that the quality is actually part of the feminine condition in the society in which she lives. (Le Gallez, 4)

Comparably, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen depict ironic versions of inconstant women, but as women themselves, they implicitly challenge the typical male “pen” when alluding to “songs and proverbs... all written by men”, as Harville explains to Anne (*Persuasion*, 220). And so, Le Gallez argues, that by giving her heroines a voice, Rhys’s feminism is “implicit”:

Where Rhys’s heroines are concerned, the struggle concerns itself not with a physical grouping together in solidarity against the oppressive forces, but rather in the more subtle way of each becoming her own maker of fiction. (Le Gallez, 176)

Rhys subverts the “young woman as victim” narrative to offer insight into the reality for a specific young woman in her novels, for example Sasha, laying bare the options left to women in a patriarchal society. Mary Shelley creates characters such as Beatrice and



Clorinda that represent the fallible figure, unusually depicting such women as equally important as dominant male characters.

It is telling and interesting that an all-important line from Mary Shelley's "The Bride of Modern Italy" is relived in a sensational dark comedy from the 1980s. I want to turn now to a modern text that has echoes of Mary Shelley. The work of Bret Easton Ellis can be problematic, with critical acclaim assigned mainly towards his early novels, but just recently his return to form in *The Shards* (2023) suggests some rebirth for fans and critics. The connection here though is to his second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), which follows a group of students at a liberal arts college in New Hampshire. The text frequently switches between first-person narrator; one of the primary speakers is Lauren, described in the blurb as someone who "changes boyfriends every time she changes majors",<sup>7</sup> recalling in a striking way Teresa's assertion to Clorinda in "The Bride of Modern Italy" (and Claire Clairmont's original observation): "for you change your saint as your lover changes name" (33). Lauren's narrative is often characterised by her statements regarding her wilfulness: "I'm changing majors" (Easton Ellis, 55), "I'm changing my major. Are you listening?" (56) "Victor hasn't called. I've changed my major. Poetry" (127) "I have not painted in over a week. I am going to change my major unless Victor calls" (111). Her final monologue includes the following exchange with another protagonist and her ex-lover, Paul:

We stand there awkwardly.

"so.... What are you now?" I ask. "still... Drama major?"

He groans. "Yeah. Guess so. What are you? Art still?"

"Art. Well, Poetry. Well, actually Art." Stutter.

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<sup>7</sup> Blurb cited here: <https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/The-Rules-of-Attraction-by-Bret-Easton-Ellis/9780679781486>.

“What is it?” he laughs. “Make up your mind.”

“Interdivisional.” I make it easy. (321)

The complexity regarding Easton Ellis’s novels and women and/or “feminism” is frequently tedious and not worth exploring here. However, the significance of one of the only women in his various central protagonists being aligned to a fickle inconstancy is important. It shows how his work as a novelist for a popular audience – and as someone who is *trying* to be subversive (the next book he would publish was *American Psycho* in 1991, a famous battleground for questions regarding the necessity of graphic depictions of physical and sexual violence against women) – grapples with how this idea of the fickle, inconstant woman is a “challenge”.<sup>8</sup> In the film version of *The Rules of Attraction* (dir. Roger Avary), Lauren (expertly played by Shannyn Sossamon) is completely transformed from a hedonist libertine to a disease-fearing virgin, implying that upon its release date in 2002, the idea of the fickle woman was simply not palatable for mainstream audiences, even in an R-rated film. Her promiscuous qualities are introduced into a new character, Lara (Jessica Biel), someone the audience is unequivocally encouraged to dislike. Comparable transitions from best-selling novel to screen adaptation can still be found in the twenty-first century of course: by way of example, it is worth noting that the protagonist of Kathy in Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go* has multiple sexual liaisons, and in fact her various fleeting romantic and physical relationships are crucial to understanding her personality and development. In the 2010 film of the same name (dir. Mark Romanek), such encounters are removed, and Kathy remains ostensibly virginal until she is united with her main love interest, Tommy. It seems genres on the fringes of mainstream film such as horror, comparable to how Mary

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<sup>8</sup> Speaking at The Southbank Centre, London, in February 2023, Bret Easton Ellis denied he was a “provocateur”, but given someone in the audience asked that very question, it seems his reputation precedes him.

Shelley's short story was also (and is) on the periphery of her oeuvre, attempt to redress such things in the following decades. The author of the screenplay for *Never Let Me Go*, Alex Garland, directed in 2022 the folk-horror spectacle *Men*, the crux of the failings of which are summarised in the following review by Hannah Strong:

The thing is, in 2022, what good does it really do to present a woman undergoing traumatic experiences if there is no real commentary or meaning behind it? Garland's film seems to be an attempt to highlight the very real misogyny within the modern world that has no insight on the subject beyond *Women Have Always Had It Quite Bad*.<sup>9</sup>

Should authors strive, as Mary Shelley did, to show how women experiencing mistreatment can overcome stereotypes of the typical victim? The general disjointed tone of Bret Easton Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* is interesting in its inconstancy, and some of the comic scenes, and especially the ending, even hark back to before Mary Shelley: there is a Sterneian humour in the final, incomplete line of the text: "still I turned to her, my eyes interested, a serious smile, nodding, my hand squeezing her knee, and she" (Easton Ellis, 326), comparable to the end of *A Sentimental Journey* (1768): "So that when I stretch'd out my hand, I caught hold of the Fille de Chambre's" (Sterne, 118). In both texts, the speaker is a (wayward, inconstant, messy) man. Easton Ellis's latest work *The Shards* is unapologetically autobiographical *and* a historical novel, looking back to 1980s LA and his own youth, perhaps undermining the traditional view that the quasi-memoir is a long-held (even Romantic, if we hark back to Mary Wollstonecraft as a martyr of the form) feminine tradition. The critical acclaim afforded to *The Shards* indicates his fiction may be worthy of some close critical attention once more, as a piece of Queer literature too, a subject of interest

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<sup>9</sup> <https://lwlies.com/reviews/men/>.

I cannot address in the detail it deserves here, but perhaps speaking to questions of intersectionality, representation, and power or progress in literary works.

Overall, I hope my thoughts here inspire further discussion about Mary Shelley's writing and encourage readers to explore her work beyond her most famous teenage creation: her "hideous progeny". Future study should explore her richness as a complex writer of different genres – including, as shown here, comedy and historical fiction. This aim is perhaps particularly pertinent as we mark the bicentenary of the publication of *Valperga* in 2023. Moreover, I hope that my examination of the "fickle woman" in Mary Shelley's work might encourage others to examine how its stereotypical form is both represented and challenged in other poetry and prose.

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