

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN ETHICS OF REFUSAL: SYMPATHY, INTIMACY  
AND FIDELITY IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM.

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Despite a current emphasis in Romantic scholarship on intersubjectivity, this study suggests that we still have much to learn about how theories of intersubjectivity operate in Romantic-era writings that focus on the family—the most common vehicle for exploring relationships during the period. By investigating how sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity are treated in the works of Mary Hays, Felicia Hemans, and Mary Shelley, this dissertation discovers the presence of an “ethics of refusal” within women’s Romantic-era texts. Texts that promote an ethics of refusal, I argue, *almost* advocate for a particular mode of relating within a given model of the family as the key to more equitable social relations, but, then, they ultimately refuse to support any particular model. Although drawn towards models of relating that, at first, seem to offer explicit pathways towards a more ethical society, texts that promote an ethics of refusal ultimately reject any program of reform. Such rejection is not unaccountable, but stems from anxieties about appearing to dictate what is best for others when others are, in reality, other than the self.

In this dissertation, I draw from feminist literary critiques that focus on ethics; genre-focused literary critiques; and studies of sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity that investigate modes of relating within the context of literary works and reader-textual relations. Psychoanalytic theory also plays an important role within my third chapter on Mary Shelley’s novel *Falkner*. Scholarship that investigates the dialectical nature of

Romantic-era literature informs my entire project. Through theorizing and studying an ethics of refusal, we can more fully understand how intersubjective modes functioned in Romantic literature and discover a Romanticism uniquely committed to attempting to turn dialectical reasoning into a social practice.

AN ETHICS OF REFUSAL: SYMPATHY, INTIMACY AND FIDELITY IN BRITISH  
ROMANTICISM.

By

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## Dedication

For my family: James, Cameron, and the one on the way

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## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Introduction: Treading Unclear Paths Toward an Ethics of Refusal .....	1
Chapter 1: Sympathy, Revolution and Skepticism in Mary Hays' <i>Memoirs</i> (1796) .....	31
Chapter 2: Colonizing Sympathy and Maternal Intimacy in Felicia Hemans' "Indian Woman's Death Song" and "Madeline, a Domestic Tale" (1828) .....	67
Chapter 3: Fidelity, the Family, and the Abject Figure in Mary Shelley's <i>Falkner</i> (1837) .....	115
Works Cited .....	156

## **Introduction: Treading Unclear Paths Toward an Ethics of Refusal**

In 1800, the poet Mary Robinson published “All Alone,” one of a series of narrative poems in *Lyrical Tales* that emphasizes the harshness of life and difficulty of transcending material reality. In this poem, inspired by William Wordsworth’s “We are Seven,” the narrator converses with a little boy by a churchyard who once had a “dimpled face so fresh and fair” (15), but who, after the death of his mother—having already lost his father beneath the “sea-green wave”—finds himself “left alone” (146, 150). His plight is to care for himself and grieve, to wander the countryside without a brother or a friend. However, the narrator tells the boy that he is not alone, that he, the narrator, has followed the child on his somber walks. Unlike in Wordsworth’s “We are Seven,” the narrator implies that the child might overcome his anguish in lofty thoughts and poetry, pointing out both the menacing and pleasing aspects of the landscape as well as the boy’s own lyrical power—“I heard thee tell thy mournful tale / As slowly sunk the star of day:” (129-130). But the child refuses to alter his perspective, and the poem concludes by emphasizing that physical and emotional loss—the death of loved ones—cannot be transcended, even momentarily, through the sublimity of nature or the allure of poetry.

The poem charts the loving mother’s devotion to her child throughout horrific conditions—the loss of her husband, cottage, and the poverty that ensued. It also alludes to the sympathy steadfastly binding the mother who “blest my [the child’s] infant tone” (83) and the child who “felt her breast with rapture bound / when first I [he] prattled on her knee” (81-82). Using the child’s grief over the dead mother to focus our thoughts, the poem considers how memory preserves human connection, implying that there is

something ethically problematic about seeking to move beyond or forget loss through imagination and art. Readers are left with the bleak consideration that the boy will be forgotten when he dies, and that trading the mother for the muse, so to speak, renders life meaningless and wrongly neglects the memory of his family. Because of the death of his parents, the boy, when “hid in yonder grave” will have “Not one to dress the flowers with stone,” (148-149) no one to mourn his own loss—no one to impart his own life with meaning after it has passed.

While this dissertation does not focus on Mary Robinson’s work, “All Alone” provides a route into the main goals of my project, which include understanding what Romantic-era literature seeks to do with modes of relating that structure interpersonal relationships, often linked to conversations about sympathy and mothers. Romanticism, as we know, is no longer defined as the study of individual genius, of writers who struggle to transcend the boundaries of human subjectivity in isolation and become the voice of nature. The focus has shifted away from Wordsworth’s ever expanding consciousness or Coleridge’s personal Xanadu. Instead, as Robert Mitchell observes, much recent Romantic scholarship considers the “extent to which authors in the Romantic era theorized *intersubjectivity* by emphasizing forces such as sympathy, identification, and love that bound subjects to one another” (24). In considering what would happen—not only to himself, but to the state of human relations—if the little boy were to forget his mother, “All Alone” underscores how Romantic literature asks ethical questions about intersubjectivity that help us better define the stakes of Romanticism. Concentrating on novels and poetry, this dissertation focuses on Romanticism’s investment in bringing about a future in which different kinds of egalitarian families, and,



by extension, a multifaceted society, can thrive, and how this potentially more ethical society may actually depend on texts that refuse to model successfully what that future looks like. Families in this future might be made up of mothers and children, or fathers, daughters, and their husbands, or otherwise, bound together by a diverse range of egalitarian modes of relating, defined, in this project, as how subjects encounter the subjectivities of others.

### **An Ethics of Refusal in Romantic Women's Writings:**

The current interest in the affinities connecting Romantic writers, their texts, their ideas, and their readers has given us a fuller understanding of how literature of the period dealt with a vast range of relationships—between human subjects as well as between human subjects and non-human objects, such as novels. However, we have not yet fully plumbed the depths of how theories of intersubjectivity operate in writings that utilize even the most common Romantic vehicle for exploring relationships in the social and political arena, depictions of the family.

Pursuing this familiar vehicle with an interest in the complicated ways that modes of relating (sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity) are treated in Romantic-era novels and poetry, this dissertation discovers the presence of an “ethics of refusal” within women’s Romantic-era writings. To formulate and demonstrate this ethics, I analyze three texts that explore sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity within the family to investigate the possibility of a more ethical, egalitarian society. Texts that promote an ethics of refusal *almost* advocate for a particular mode of relating within a given model of the family as the key to more equitable relations, but, then, they ultimately refuse to support any particular model. Although drawn towards models of relating that, at first, seem to offer

explicit pathways towards a more ethical society, texts that promote an ethics of refusal ultimately reject any program of reform. Such rejection is not unaccountable, but stems from anxieties about appearing to dictate what is best for others when others are, in reality, other than the self.

Since sympathy was such a significant mode of relating during the period and is important to the novels and poetry that I study, I devote a fair amount of space to this much-analyzed topic. However, this dissertation refrains from a contemporary critical tendency to focus on texts that find a silver lining in sympathy's dwindling reputation during the era, and is thus able to break new ground. Although "All Alone" depicts loving sympathy between a mother and child, sympathy was increasingly seen by the British public as a dangerous mode of relating that had the potential to oppress the sympathized-with subject. Instead of focusing on sympathy's salvageability, my project discovers an ethics of refusal by focusing on works that fully reject sympathy or explore alternate forms of relating like intimacy and fidelity. Also, critics often emphasize women's Romantic-era writings that hope to replace oppressive intersubjective relations with more positive visions of society. Or, conversely, critics focus on works that emphasize how patriarchal constraints make more progressive visions impossible. Alternatively, I focus on writings that, in promoting an ethics of refusal, belong fully to neither of these camps, and which therefore have not yet been properly understood.

I begin with Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, which uses mother-child sympathy to suggest that social, literary, and political reform may be impossible. *Memoirs* is the subject of my first chapter because it serves as a precursor to texts that employ an ethics of refusal, using sympathy to investigate how a potential ethical cost—

the perpetuation of oppressive intersubjective dynamics—might hide within a vision of society that respects women’s intelligence and ambition. Next, in chapters two and three, I turn to Felicia Hemans’ poems—“Indian Woman’s Death Song,” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale”— as well as Mary Shelley’s novel *Falkner*, to show how an ethics of refusal operates in the context of different modes of relating, family formations, and literary genres. Both Hemans’ and Shelley’s works reject sympathy outright and entertain the benefits of other modes of relating. Hemans’ verses explore the positive potential of mother-child intimacy—which might prompt mothers to see their children as separate entities, rather than extensions of the self; and Shelley’s novel investigates fidelity’s capacity to construct equitable relations between a father, daughter, and husband, since fidelity enables subjects to forge close relations in spite of others’ unknowability. Intimacy and fidelity are, on one level, more successful than sympathy in creating families that respect and acknowledge one another’s differences. Yet, Hemans’ poems and Shelley’s novel both destabilize the models of relating that they draw attention to, indicating that literary works might, at best, gesture hazily towards progressive modes of interacting that could work for certain readers at certain moments. Ultimately, both works are concerned that modeling successfully reformed intersubjective relations might speak, albeit inadvertently, for all readers’ perspectives within a complex modernity, upholding a practice of exclusion that benefits some at the expense of others.

In this dissertation, I do not intend to provide a survey of Romantic-era texts that exhibit an ethics of refusal. Rather, I demonstrate how several works by well-known women writers strove to think beyond the impasses of sympathy and the potentially

colonizing implications of literary models. My hope is that my close readings of these texts will contribute to the field by providing a heuristic that other scholars can apply and build upon in their own work.

As we shall see, exploring an ethics of refusal helps us locate a version of Romanticism that was extremely dialectical—or simply put, capable of enacting answerless, self-interrogation—while also striving to be practical, in its attempts to convince readers that it is important to remain aware of others’ diverse perspectives and multifaceted interactions when working towards a more ethical society. As I suggest more fully later on in this Introduction, by focusing on women’s writings of the period, I do not mean to imply the absence of an ethics of refusal in men’s work. Rather, I begin where the dynamic appears most prominently—in texts written by authors of the sex that were most directly affected by theories of sympathy, restricted by social and political conventions, and most aware of the consequences of having their voices usurped.

In this dissertation, I draw from feminist literary critiques that focus on ethics; genre-focused literary critiques; and studies of sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity that investigate modes of relating within the context of literary works and reader-textual relations. Guided by the most significant aims of the works within this study, psychoanalytic theory also plays an important role within my third chapter on Mary Shelley’s *Falkner*. Additionally, as I discuss more explicitly in the coming pages, scholarship that investigates the dialectical nature of Romantic-era literature informs my entire project.

### **The Significance of The Literary:**

With my emphasis on ethics, it may seem that I will glaze over the literariness of Mary Hays', Felicia Hemans', and Mary Shelley's writings, but this is not the case. Hays, Hemans, and Shelley were artists first and foremost whose investments in theorizing a more ethical society were closely influenced by their chosen literary mediums, genres and perspectives on authorship. Each of my chapters demonstrates the links between writers' views on intersubjectivity and their craft; how literary form, literary trends, and Hays', Hemans' and Shelley's relationships with their readers informed their understandings of intersubjectivity; as well as how their work was affected by their respective understandings of how persons relate.

I am indebted to Julie Carlson's exploration of how the Godwin/Wollstonecraft family was committed to altering "intimate portions of the private sphere ... by publicizing them" through their writings, helping inspire this dissertation's interest in works that investigate how different modes of relating—the building blocks of the family— might be theorized with implications for real life (9). Also, Carlson's understanding of how Godwin theorizes personal friendship helped inform my interest in texts that are anxious about envisioning a "more ethical" society that actually practices exclusion. Godwin theorizes personal friendship as ethically problematic because friendship is exclusive, and "true friends of man are friend to no particular man (not to speak of woman) because attachment to a part violates, by neglecting, the whole" (Carlson 70). Like a "true friend of man," works advocating an ethics of refusal share Godwin's investment in doing justice to "the whole," or, rather, to a diversely populated modern Britain, by demonstrating that any explicit model of reform provided has limits that must be acknowledged.

Other critics directly inflect how I approach the literary in each of my chapters. In my chapter on Hays' *Memoirs*, I develop a new reading of sympathy's role in the novel from Catherine Gallagher's analysis of how readers sympathized with literary characters. Gallagher examines Hume's theory of sympathy, which theorizes characters as having "suppositional identities belonging to no one" that become extensions of the reader (168). In my chapter on Hemans' poetry, I turn to Lauren Berlant's work on intimacy, and briefly, but crucially, to Andrew Stauffer's and Deidre Lynch's respective work on readers' relationships with poetry and literary characters to suggest that "Indian Woman's Death Song" and "Madeline, a Domestic Tale" together want readers to develop a more ethical relationship with Hemans' verses—one that would allow readers to better appreciate literary form and philosophy within her work. Also, my chapter on Shelley's *Falkner* builds explicitly upon April Alliston's research on the significance of fidelity in novels during the long eighteenth-century. I use her research to help demonstrate how fidelity's principal role in Shelley's novel is to ask a critical question about the formation of the social imaginary that refuses to yield any answers. The literary, in my interpretations of these works, always ties back to the ethics of intersubjective relations, but each of my chapters nonetheless inspires new appreciation of Hays', Hemans', and Shelley's use of literary form and attention to the literary climates in which they wrote.

### **The Study of Sympathy among Romanticists:**

Sympathy is a long studied mode of relating that plays a role within each of the texts in this dissertation. During the Romantic era, sympathy most often referred to a person's sense of feeling what another feels, although whether one could actually

experience another's emotions was widely disputed. As many scholars have shown, there were numerous debates in philosophical treatises and in novels and poetry about the nature of sympathy, including how it is transmitted—through the imagination? through the nerves?—and about whether sympathy was better classified as a force that helps individuals relate and which binds society together, or a force that creates inclusive relationships and imbalances of power.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary criticism about sympathy in Romantic-period literature often focuses either on texts that emphasize sympathy's positive potential to unite writers and readers, or on investigating why sympathy was considered problematic, while still gravitating toward sympathy's positive power within the confines of the texts that they study. Instead of these focuses, this dissertation concentrates on Romantic-era novels and poetry that lack a safe space for sympathy—on literature that disavows any attempt to recoup sympathy as a mode of feeling that can initiate social improvement, or that classifies sympathy as a mode that fails in reality while enabling literary works to compensate for or to mediate this failure. Through investigating texts that entirely reject sympathy, I help show how the complex turn against sympathy during the period coincides with a guarded attraction towards other modes of relating, including intimacy and fidelity, as well as with an ethics of refusal. Analyzing this trajectory helps us better understand how different modes of relating interacted with one another during the era, affecting how writers perceived each mode.

While acknowledging sympathy's ambiguities in the works that they analyze, critics such as Thomas McCarthy underscore how the texts that they investigate theorize sympathetic relationships between readers and writers that are crucial to the success of

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<sup>1</sup> See pg. 41 of my first chapter for a fuller discussion of sympathy's ambiguous status during the era.

the Romantic movement. McCarthy emphasizes that Romantic writers like William Wordsworth develop a theory of reading in which readers responded to a text “alive with feeling” and were charged to “participat[e] in the creative act through a process which emphasizes difference and individuality in order to then attain a genuinely sympathetic understanding” of the author’s ideas (44). Readers respond positively in this model, bringing to the table a balance between their own perceptions and that of the writer’s.

Although authors’ desires for readers to sympathize with themselves and their ideas undoubtedly shaped their theories of writing and reading, critiques like McCarthy’s tend to paint a Romanticism that is a little too one dimensional—that overlooks how sympathy between writers, readers, and their works was also represented as a dangerous power in Romantic literature, in part because the line separating books and persons—as Julie Carlson demonstrates—was so exceedingly thin.<sup>2</sup> Such critiques also do not do enough to connect the implications of sympathy to the long-acknowledged, fraught relationships that both male and female writers held with their publics. Critiques like McCarthy’s depict a Romanticism that cannot easily account for works such as Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, which imagines that readers might sympathize with characters that become projections of themselves, and then treat real persons as they do characters—to the detriment of those actual persons. Nor can they make sense of the poems that I explore in Hemans’ *Records of Woman*, where the dynamics of colonizing sympathy mirror readers’ potential to project intensely their own subjectivities into poems, effectively erasing significant nuances of the poems in the process.

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<sup>2</sup> See Carlson’s discussion of William Godwin’s theory of how books could be friends in Julie Carlson, *England’s First Family of Writers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) 77.



Other scholars such as Jeanne Britton intriguingly explore the darker sides of sympathy and other modes of feeling during the era, but their scholarship is implicitly drawn to works in which sympathy still “succeeds,” in one way or another, within the pages of the literature under scrutiny. In an analysis of sympathy in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Britton contends that sympathy “fails” in the novel because it “is madly and fruitlessly pursued or disastrous in its results,” but that “it might alternatively be understood to succeed [because it] . . . offers a version of sympathy that is constituted by the production and transmission of narrative as compensation for failures of face-to-face sympathetic experience” (“Novelistic Sympathy” 3). In other words, sympathy in *Frankenstein* is not portrayed as a mode of relating that can build fulfilling relationships between actual persons. However, in showing that sympathy fails in reality, Shelley’s work also reveals how genre of the novel “relies on compensatory sympathy.” Hence, sympathy gives novels a purpose because “textual production approximates, preserves, and replaces the visual and auditory engagement that sympathy would otherwise allow” (Britton, “Novelistic Sympathy” 4).<sup>3</sup> Sympathy, in this model, is integral to the novel’s social and literary value.

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<sup>3</sup> Another interesting example is Robert Mitchell’s analysis of Ann Yearsley’s “A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade.” This analysis focuses on sympathy’s salvageability as a social power when influenced by textual intervention. Mitchell argues that sympathy fails in the text as a mode of feeling that can offer social improvement by itself, but that the poem suggests that the intervention of works such as Yearsley’s might nonetheless make sympathy function for the betterment of society, instigating the dismantlement of the slave trade. By instigating an “imaginary negation of the phenomenal world,” readers learn that “one ‘bad’ future [a future in which all familial relationships become economic] is necessarily tied to a multitude of other, potentially more positive, half-actualized actions and expressions” which enable its audience to entertain the possibility of world without the slave trade, where sympathy could be actively sought among all members of society (116). Sympathy, according to Mitchell, is instigated through this poem because the work forces readers to imagine its [sympathy’s] “virtual extinction” between all members of society (115). Although far from straightforwardly, the power of sympathy—guided by the hand of the poet—remains critical to collective improvement in Yearsley’s work. See Robert Mitchell, *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

The above scholarship provides worthy insight into the ways that sympathy retained value within literature of the period, even as British culture became exceedingly skeptical of its capacity for good. But what do we make of Romantic-era literature that finds next to nothing salvageable about sympathy and shifts its attention to other modes of relating? In pursuing novels and poems that reject sympathy entirely, I build on the ideas of critics like Julie Carlson and Jacques Khalip who discover in work of the period an unsalvageable dissatisfaction with sympathy and—in the case of Khalip—turn their focus toward intersubjective modes other than sympathy. In her study of the relationship between writing, reality, and publicity in the Shelley circle, Carlson analyzes Mary Shelley's novel *Mathilda* in which the deeply troubled protagonist experiences an emotionally incestuous relationship with her father, depicting sympathy's potential to yield nothing but disconnection and pain. After the death of her father, Mathilda removes herself from society and forges a friendship with the poet Woodville, but she is unable to gain comfort from this relationship, as Carlson puts it, due to "his penchant to view reality, including other people's sufferings, as rich material for imaginative projects . . . [and] his success at promoting a form of sympathy that, by identifying with the other's pain, allows him to focus on himself" (158). Similarly, Khalip focuses on *Mathilda* and other Romantic-era texts in which sympathy is beyond recuperation to theorize an emphasis on an "ethics of engaged withdrawal." This is an ethics that, in opposition to sympathy, conveys a "toleration for the self's apartness—its reluctance to accede to categorization and display" (135). In regards to *Mathilda*, Khalip suggests that Mathilda's history and relationship with Woodville shows how "the demand to know others and to believe that certain experiences can be and must be mutually shared turns

sympathy against itself” (156). In theorizing an ethics of engaged withdrawal as it evolved in the works of Keats, Godwin, Shelley, and others, Khalip sees Romanticism as “hover[ing] around an anonymity that is as visionless as the uncertainties that haunt liberal hopes for transparency, reciprocity, and acknowledgment” (184).<sup>4</sup> Such anonymity clearly undercuts the desire for “reciprocity and acknowledgement” on which sympathy is generally understood to depend.

While I do not devote much direct attention to Khalip’s ethics of withdrawal in this project, the impulse to reject the potential to know and judge others generally associated with sympathy is integral to my study. Similar to how an ethics of withdrawal rejects any attempt to know or imagine what another is feeling, an ethics of refusal rejects any attempt to suggest for certain that a literary model of intersubjectivity will be of value to all of its readers, whose relationships within the social imaginary are diverse and unstable. However, whereas an ethics of withdrawal suggests that we should not try to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others, and yet still find “community” in spite of disconnection (Khalip 64), an ethics of refusal does not go as far in its commitment to intersubjective relations that treat others as autonomous, inaccessible beings. Hemans’ “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” theorizes an intimacy that allows for moments when mothers and children may feel as if they understand one another. Also, Shelley’s *Falkner* envisions fidelity as a mode of relating that functions well when others’ thoughts and feelings are rendered inaccessible to the other, but which does not require persons to

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<sup>4</sup> One other critic, like Khalip, also traces a Romantic impetus to understand others (and ourselves) as anonymous beings. Adam Potkay explores Wordsworth’s interest in how poetry can help attach readers to “others I [they] cannot fully know or judge,” but not through sympathy (5). In “describing face-to-face meetings with people who are not (and by implication cannot be) comprehended,” Potkay explains, “Wordsworth short-circuits the perceptual sharing of sympathy and suggests a less determinate basis for interpersonal ethics” (10). See Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

reject all attempts to understand one another and to still experience a sense of engagement. Literature that utilizes an ethics of refusal counters sympathy's typical emphasis on presumed knowledge of another, while still functioning within a framework that fits more easily than an ethics of withdrawal within Romantic-era readers' understandings of intersubjectivity.

My theorization of an ethics of refusal is perhaps most directly indebted to Nancy Yousef's monograph on intimacy. The ideas in her work are explicitly connected with my chapter on poetry in Hemans' *Records of Woman* but can also be glimpsed throughout my dissertation. Using poetry by Wordsworth and Coleridge and the novels of Jane Austen, along with the theories of Kant, Levinas and others, Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy* argues that "Romantic-era literature . . . is exceptional in its simultaneous acknowledgement and suspension of the epistemic and ethical demands of sympathy, allowing a backwards and forward glance towards certain impasses in Enlightenment thought," especially the impasse between the desire to achieve shared emotion and the understanding that the self is predicated on an unknowable center (4). Out of this impasse, Yousef suggests, comes the development of intimacy, which focuses on "intersubjective asymmetries . . . radical in their attention to thoughts and feelings that pass and fail to pass between persons rather than to exchanges of thoughts and feelings" (22). Unlike so many philosophical theories of sympathy that theorize specific modes of relating—"by force of attraction (Hutcheson), by instinctive transport (Hume), by the supplemental sense of an 'inward eye' (Shaftesbury)"—intimacy in Romantic literature does not theorize any particular mode of relating, but highlights a variety of "relational exchanges" in which persons sometimes, but not always, and never sustainably, come

close to achieving “sympathetic fellowship” (Yousef 6, 23). My theorization of an ethics of refusal further develops Yousef’s depiction of a Romanticism that theorizes the intersubjective interactions holding together the social imaginary as multiple and transitory. Theorizing an ethics of refusal helps us see that even in Romantic era works that may appear to champion particular familial paradigms based on specific modes of relating, the stronger impulse, on a closer reading, may be the desire to acknowledge the ethically problematic nature of doing so. If intersubjective interactions between others are multiple and transitory, literary depictions of relating that could be interpreted prescriptively threaten to deny the complexity of subjects’ perspectives and relationships and to perpetuate imbalances of power.

### **Three Women’s Texts, but not Necessarily a “Women’s” Ethics:**

I analyze women’s Romantic-era texts that explore modes of feeling and the family not to revive some kind of (now long discounted) binary between male and female Romanticism, or to suggest that an ethics of refusal is absent in the work of male writers. Rather, I do so because an ethics of refusal seems most evident in writings by authors of the sex who, due to their so-called sensitivity to feeling and capacity to create other persons, generally stood the most to gain and lose from writers’ theories of sympathetically relating to another.<sup>5</sup> Women, as we know, were believed to be especially alive to and driven by their emotions and the emotions of others, endowed with “natural sensibility” (Pinch 57). And a mother’s body, due to its ability to bear offspring, served as the material basis of Romantic sympathy. As Julie Kipp explains in *Romanticism*,

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<sup>5</sup> When referring to women writers, for purposes of continuity this dissertation focuses on white, middle-class women (albeit not without monetary pressures) who received some acclaim in their time. It would be interesting also to look more carefully at how models of relating function in the poetry of working class poets, such as Janet Little, or in the autobiography of Mary Prince, the most famous female writer of African descent during the period.

*Maternity, and the Body Politic*, “In its capacity to be more than singular . . . the maternal body seemed to render concrete the abstract ideal of sympathetic interconnection between subjects nevertheless separate” (23). But there was a dark side to this capacity that demonstrates how theories of sympathy can demonize certain populations. Kipp explains how maternal sympathy was often seen as dangerous to children because mothers might “easily confuse” their own emotions with those of their children, as I discuss more fully in my second chapter.<sup>6</sup> Representations of dangerous maternal sympathy made the mother an ambiguous figure during the period—the epitome of positive relations between subjects and the personification of oppression. Because ideas about sympathy were oftentimes predicated on the biological mother-child connection, and women were characterized as especially sensitive to their own emotions and the emotions of others, women writers were keenly aware of the material consequences of theories of sympathy as well as power imbalances within these theories.

Changing expectations about the “proper” middle-class family also made women writers particularly responsive to the damaging effects of restrictive social models. One social development crucial to understanding the development of an ethics of refusal is the shift from the consanguineous-based family to the conjugal-based family during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This shift narrowed a middle-class woman’s world to her husband and children, disconnecting her from ties of kinship (from her father, mother, brothers, sisters, etc.). Ruth Perry traces this shift through eighteenth-century fiction, arguing that novels like Francis Burney’s *Evelina* nostalgically return to outdated familial paradigms while displaying anxiety about present conditions for women in the marriage market. The novel’s depictions of a protective and caring male guardian,

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<sup>6</sup> See pg. 84 of my second chapter for more details.

Arthur Villars, that places his female guardian's wishes before his own is hardly relevant to a society that increasingly marries off its daughters to decrease financial burden on the family (Perry 39). But in its depictions of confusion that arise from Evelina's ambiguous social status, and the concern that surfaces amid the humor over who will become her husband, the novel resonates with apprehension about where women will find a home outside their circles of kinship. For women were increasingly defined by their position in the husband-led nuclear family, due to economic factors that drove siblings apart ("the competition for resources" in an increasingly industrialized Britain) and political factors that emphasized women as "politically representable individuals [without political power, themselves]— rather than members of particular kin corporations" (Perry 129, 131). As Perry puts it, "the weakening of their ties with their brothers, and the increasingly child-centered nature of the family, probably resulted in a net loss" for women (34).

Furthermore, novels that depicted marriages based on love within the emerging nuclear family were not necessarily as progressive as they appear. True, love-based unions were predicated on individual choice, but an emphasis on personal choice *also* drove the demand for increased wealth among the rising middle classes. Perry argues that an insistence on individual choice prioritized the desire for monetary gain over longstanding ties between families or affection, and often led, in actuality, not to love based marriages, but to mercenary marriages that could be detrimental to each party in the relationship, and especially to the wife who held less legal and political power (208, 217-218). Therefore, love-based unions in novels, powered by individual choice, subtly promoted marriages that were anything but emotionally fulfilling. Due to shifting social and literary dynamics that directly affected women, women writers were in the position

to be especially wary of modern expectations about the composition of the family. In the works that this dissertation focuses on, such wariness leads to concerns over the potentially oppressive implications associated with providing any particular model of intersubjectivity that might yield positive outcomes for some readers while providing detrimental outcomes for others.

### **Refusing Clarity and Rejecting Blame:**

Refusing to uphold fully any particular model of relating would not generally have been a socially acceptable stance for women writers to take during the Romantic era. Women writers of this period were typically appreciated most when they acted as social anchors through depictions of laudable sentiment within the proper British family<sup>7</sup> and were often criticized when they did not.<sup>8</sup>

When we study these writers now we often continue to follow the lead of 1990s feminist Romantic criticism, prioritizing texts by women that offer their own clear visions for the home and nation as replacements to problematic, oppressive familial and social dynamics.<sup>9</sup> For example, in *Women's Romantic Theater and Drama* (2010), Greg Kucich explores how the plays of Mary Mitford and Joanna Baillie “stag[ed] pictures of a

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<sup>7</sup> We might think of Hemans' “The Homes of England,” which was generally interpreted during the period as an emblem of domestic patriotism.

<sup>8</sup> This is less true within certain decades and social circles—the Jacobin circle in the radical 1790s, for instance, was much more receptive than the mainstream British public of the early nineteenth century to women writers who provided explicit sociopolitical critiques. Works like Anna Laetitia Barbauld's “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven,” which envisioned a potentially bleak future for a failing England, were typically chastised as inappropriate.

<sup>9</sup> Linking the family to the political arena in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), Mellor discovered that “women writers of the Romantic era offered an alternative program [to the male-dominated political and social arena] grounded on the trope of the family-politic, the idea of a nation-state that evolves gradually and rationally under the mutual care and guidance of both mother and father” (65). See Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Also, Elizabeth Fay argued in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (1998) that women writers strove to replace a sociopolitical model that envisioned the British poet's (and citizen's) subjectivity emerging from the female muse and nature, with the idea of the “maternal nation,” a society in which women are educated to become active teachers of sons who will one day be in charge (69). See Elizabeth Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).



re-imagined past that strategically *revise* male precedents in historiography and historical drama so as to *display social models* for infusing what Mitford calls ‘human sympathies,’ gendered as an empowering female force, into the dynamics of justice and mercy in the national politics of the present” (22-23, my emphasis). As Kucich’s interest in Mitford’s and Baillie’s revisions of male precedents implies, literature that attempts to offer a graspable alternative to Romantic-era patriarchy may seem more empowering than texts that provide more open-ended responses to how to reform Romantic-era Britain. But, while much less certain of exactly how best to revolutionize the family, society, and the political sphere, writings that emphasize an ethics of refusal are actually more capacious in their vision of who and what might be accepted in a more egalitarian modernity.

Along with being interested in literature that provides social programs or models for an improved British Romantic-era society, we typically turn our attention toward women’s texts that critique their current climate without offering readers a strategy for enacting a more progressive future, explicitly because of material and patriarchal constraints. This is a varied group of writings that Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* belongs to (and out of which an ethics of refusal evolves, as I clarify further in my chapter overviews). Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Mary: A Fiction* also fits within this category. *Mary* depicts several potential couplings based on sympathy between the female protagonist and her male romantic interest and/or her closest female friend, which are all ultimately thwarted because Mary was forced (by her mother’s pleading on her deathbed) to marry a wealthy man whom she cannot intellectually relate to or love. There are no positive outcomes to this work—Mary is left, very ill, struggling to make her marriage work with her husband—because of her promise to her mother, a request

made of *Mary* that is implicitly forced by a male-dominated system that improperly educates women as to how to care for themselves and their daughters' interests.

Although there are no positive conclusions in this text, the idea of what *should* be—that couplings should be bound by egalitarian sympathy—is not left open for debate, as it is in texts that promote an ethics of refusal.

Socially subversive poetry that rejects the male-female headed nuclear family can also fit this general pattern, as exemplified by Dorothy Wordsworth's "Irregular Verses," which bears the imprint of Dorothy's close friendship with Jane Pollard. Susan Lanser suggests that this poem, written for Pollard's daughter, "imagines a romantic pastoral much like the one associated with Butler and Ponsonby [two ladies who lived together for over fifty years]: a life 'exquisite and pure' in 'a cottage in a verdant dell' enveloped by plenitude" (25). The poem's irregular prosody, more so than the works of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and Samuel T. Coleridge, Lanser argues, "show[s] a fascination with irregularity" and codes "the brightness of youth, the joys one remembers, the beloved's 'rising sigh' for what could not be . . . figure[ing], something that cannot be said straightforwardly" (28). Working in the vein of poetry that links unspeakable desire to irregular meter, Dorothy is especially invested in illuminating the material constraints that limit its fulfillment in reality (Lanser 38). As in *Mary*, in "Irregular Verses" what should be is palpably present—the possibility of female unions linked by mutual sentiment, if it were not for economic and social conventions.

The list goes on, and could include texts ranging from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* to Letitia Elizabeth Landon's *The Improvistrice*. Critical analyses of these works do of course provide valuable insight into how the literary and social climates interacted

and influenced one another across the Romantic period, among other things. I suggest, however, that we have not looked closely enough at texts that do not quite fit the categories of either providing explicit programs of reform through which to transform patriarchal society or promoting intersubjective constructs that *would* be possible, if it were not for the social and material constraints of “the present.” Texts that do not fall clearly into one of these two categories have not been adequately unpacked, confusing our understanding of what these works seek to do.

On one hand, Hemans’ “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” in *Record of Woman* and Mary Shelley’s *Falkner* explore and gesture towards models of relating and family configurations that appear highly progressive. However, turning the conversation away from the social and material constraints of patriarchy that make alternative programs of relating and living impossible, these works ultimately undermine the positive paradigms that they draw attention to without turning the finger squarely towards the culprit of “current” sociopolitical restrictions. This process emphasizes the ethical problems of didacticism, even in its seemingly most benign form. The writers I focus on not only worry about the remnants of patriarchal ideology making their way into programs of reform, as is often the case, but are anxious that *any* particular model of constructing the family, and by extension, the sociopolitical arena, is ethically suspect because of its underlying potential to dictate a homogenous vision of the future. How can a work of literature effectively hail a more egalitarian modernity, these texts ask, if the same work also risks envisioning a future that cannot speak for the intersubjective experiences of all readers?

### **The Dialectical Nature of an Ethics of Refusal:**

Exploring an ethics of refusal in women's Romantic-era texts requires returning with fresh vigor to the long-accepted point that Romanticism is as much about interrogating as it is about upholding Romantic ideology. Since the deconstructive analyses of Romantic texts by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man in the 1970s, earlier narratives of Romanticism defined by quintessential tropes such as "the power of symbol over allegory and the organic unity of mind and nature" have been thoroughly complicated, although the term Romanticism, for de Man and others, still holds meaning (Wang 39).<sup>10</sup> The dialectical nature of much Romantic literature, as recognized by both scholars of Romanticism and writers of the period, plays a role in complicating these tropes. I do not mean Hegelian dialectics, understood in their most basic, traditional sense (now long contested) as resulting in struggle and synthesis—the sublimation of opposites within a greater whole—but rather, dialectics as the fluid, perpetual play between ideas resistant to synthesis. Thinking about Derrida's interest in "the limit, the interruption, the destruction of the Hegelian relive [dialectical synthesis]" (40), we can understand dialectics more along the lines of Theodor Adorno, who, in his rejection of philosophies that theorize identity between objects and subjects, turns away from Hegel's dialectical thinking, as he understands it, to consider the interaction of two opposing concepts that cannot result in unity (143-161). Tilottama Rajan traces this type of dialectical commitment throughout Romantic literature, arguing that Romanticism functions as a "literature involved in the restless process of self-examination and in search of a model of discourse which accommodates rather than simplifies its

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of de Man's desire to "preserve . . . something called *Romanticism*" see Orrin Wang, *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

ambivalences toward the inherited equation of art with idealization” (*Dark Interpreter* 25).

If we understand that Romantic texts often dialectically interrogated the ideas that they favored, what do we gain from specifically analyzing the dialectical nature of the works focused on in this project? The answer involves distinguishing the highly dramatic, apocalyptic verse by canonical Romantic writers like Blake and Shelley from the works that I discuss. The works in my project explore modes of feeling and the family using conventions that are more realistic than those used by canonical Romantic writers, underscoring a Romanticism that is unique in coupling a strongly dialectical approach with a desire to help readers glimpse how a more egalitarian modernity—their own future society—depends on understanding that others’ perspectives and intersubjective relationships are versatile and multifaceted.

Standard examples of dialectical works include Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, likely the most overtly and complexly dialectical work of the period. As Harold Bloom suggests, this work turns upside down what constitutes good and evil while mixing references to epic poetry, mythology, and biblical proverbs that question whether heaven and hell legitimately stand, in the first place, as opposites for Blake to merge (501). Additionally, Percy Shelley’s verse dramas *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* work in conversation to interrogate the possibility of enacting a modernity free of patriarchal values—a future that will not demonize new ideas, perpetuate mental slavery, and subjugate certain populations.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, Shelley’s texts question whether

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<sup>11</sup> Note that *The Cenci* was meant by Shelley to be a popular work since he believed that the “interest of the plot is greater and more real” than other “modern” plays of the period. See Percy Shelley, Letter to T. L Peacock. July 1819. *The Works of Shelley in Verse and Prose*, Ed. Harry Buxton Forman Vol 8-Prose 4 (London: Reeves and Turner, 1810) 112. But *Prometheus Unbound* was not written for

progressive visions of the future can actually free themselves from the mental blinders of the past.

While such works interrogate metaphysical constructs and ideology by pitting form against content or abstract representations of utopia against patriarchal triumph in a sixteenth-century Italian family, the texts that I focus on rely much more so on accessible depictions of intersubjective relationships when they refuse to offer readers any specific models for achieving ethical relations—only a future based on the dialectical interrogation of whatever progressive models arise. The texts by Hays, Hemans and Mary Shelley that I analyze explore the dangers of basing “progressive” models of relating on personal perspective—no matter how progressive such perspectives appear—through concrete depictions of familial relationships (mother-child; and father, daughter, husband), held together by different intersubjective modes. While Hays’ *Memoirs* remains entirely skeptical that post-1790s Britain will be able to enact any kind of real social improvement, Hemans’ poems, along with Shelley’s *Falkner*, suggest that progressive intersubjective modes (in plural) may be achievable, but that they depend on continually promoting the perpetual, dialectical interplay of multiple perspectives through realistic, relatable examples. By offering, interrogating, and undercutting concrete models of relating that seem at first seem very promising, these works emphasize that even in the apparently best of situations, a static approach towards reform is never

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the ordinary public, as Mary Shelley suggests. She asserts, “It requires a mind as subtle and penetrating as his [Shelley’s] own to understand the mystic meanings scattered throughout the poem. They elude the ordinary reader by their abstraction and delicacy of distinction, but they are far from vague.” See Percy Shelley, *Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Ed. Mary Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1847) 127. Read together, in comparison with the texts that this dissertation analyzes, the dialectical conversation between *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound* is not as directly connected to images of family that would have been applicable to the “ordinary reader,” to borrow Mary Shelley’s phrase. This makes Percy Shelley’s dialectical exploration of whether or not an egalitarian modernity is possible seem more heady and elusive than the dialectical explorations in the works that I discuss.

acceptable. Texts that promote an ethics of refusal are exceptional in their attempts to make legible to readers that such a dialectically based ethics could and should be adopted within their own lives.

### **Ethics and Failure:**

The concepts of ethical failure and ethical refusal are close cousins, and failure is tied to the dialectical nature of Romantic literature, so a word should be said about Romantic failure. The works that I analyze depict modes of relating (sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity) within family paradigms that are programmed to fail, to some extent, for ethical reasons. In their “failure,” they hope to disable readers from imagining that their own particular intersubjective experiences might serve accurately as a blueprint for others they encounter.

Charles Altieri discusses contemporary critics’ focus on ethics in literature, noting that their investment in ethics includes “a deconstructive concern for an ethics of letting be that is acutely aware of the imperializing work usually done by professors of empathy and sympathy since it is the responder who gets to specify what those emotions involve” (34). Inherent in the Romantic-era texts that I explore is the idea that there is potentially imperializing work embedded within all particular modes of relating and familial formations that literary works espouse. That is, if the author—like Altieri’s sympathizing responder—specifies what a successful model of interrelationship involves, then that model is suspect. Instead, the literary works that I examine present the ultimate failure of models of sympathy, intimacy, and fidelity to gesture towards more progressive intersubjective relations while attempting to avoid the imperialist impulse to decide what works best for the other.

Like dialectics, failure has a long legacy in Romantic literature and scholarship. From works like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" or Percy Shelley's "Alastor" that trope the failure to grasp the ever-illusory ideas set in motion by the imagination; to the Romantics' realization that allegory will never achieve the wholeness of symbol, as theorized by de Man; to the failure of Romantic critics to disconnect themselves from the ideology of Romanticism, as observed by Jerome McGann. McGann also sees failure as integral to Romantic and sentimental poetry, which, as he notes, have crossovers and distinctions with one another. In an essay titled "The Failures of Romanticism," McGann points to a "spirit [during the period] committed to disempowerment . . . an inevitable resort from the grand illusions entered through enlightenment and science [such as the capacity to know the world through empirical study]" (285). While Romanticism generally delights in this commitment "only to raise up cries of resistance, or build temples in excremental places," it is "sentimental poetry that brings all of its illusions, including its lost illusions, down to earth" (McGann 285).<sup>12</sup> Sharing something with sentimental poetry that, in McGann's terms, addresses grand illusions within the context of history and the material world, the works in this dissertation seek to interrogate whether literature's capacity to promote defined and ethical models of relating is an illusion in reality.

Jan Bennett, too, defines Romanticism as a movement that is exceptionally aware of its capacity to fail. She analyzes writings by Schlegel in the journal *Athenaeum* (1798-1800) to suggest that the desire for plenitude—for continuity between language and

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<sup>12</sup> I am not focused on distinctions between sentimental and Romantic traits in the works that I study nor on making a case for something called Romanticism, which has already been laudably accomplished by writers such as Orrin Wang in *Romantic Sobriety*. Assuming that the term Romanticism has value, it seems to me that Hays', Hemans', and Shelley's writings are all Romantic in the standard sense—in their commitment to interrogating sociopolitical norms as well as the ideas that they were drawn to.



meaning; between the human and the transcendental—is often considered to be a fantasy by Romantic writers (who, as we have seen, dialectically interrogate the things they long for most). These moments, for Bennett, are where Romanticism does its best work, played out in its attention to form. She contends, “insofar as Romanticism itself is self-conscious of its own naivete [in its desire to “harmonize experience and make the world whole again”], and its preference for the form of the fragment is evidence of this self-consciousness—it is worthy of endorsement and supportive of the ethics of finitude” (77). The fragment in Romantic literature, for Bennett, while it “aims at completion,” makes known “the deep finitude of all things, including oneself” (77). While none of the works in this project use fragments, their understanding of the inevitable limitedness of particular models of relating is linked to the realization that literary works are finite in their power to specify what a more progressive society should look like.

### **An Overview of Chapters One, Two, and Three:**

The writings that I focus on are didactic in their refusal of didacticism. They adopt a Romantic dialectical approach and apply this approach to specific modes of relating within particular family formations, which appear, on one hand, very much beyond reproach, but which are then problematized and rendered ethically suspect.

Chapter One explores Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, in which the ethical problems underlying a model of reform based on mother-child sympathy are used to question if sociopolitical reform is possible. This novel worries that revolutionizing gender relations, its readers’ perspectives on the genre of the novel, and political philosophy may be unachievable in the turbulent 1790s. Colonizing sympathy, a model of sympathy in which the sympathizer imagines the sympathized-with-entity as an

extension of the sympathizer's own subjectivity, is at work in this novel's critique. *Memoirs* uses a mother's colonizing sympathetic response towards her child to explore the impossibility of social, literary, and political, transformation, and the novel's gothic elements help to suggest that reform may very well be unattainable. *Memoirs* does not employ an ethics of refusal, since an inequitable social climate—with values so entrenched that they contaminate all programs of reform—is the main reason that the novel advocates that reform might never be realized. That is, the novel does not find anything inherently concerning about models of reform depicted in literature. But by using a strongly relatable mother-child relationship to show how models of reform, highly promising on one level, might also contain traits that strip them of revolutionary potential, this novel serves as a precursor to the ethics of refusal that emerges in Hemans' and Shelley's writings.

Chapter Two focuses on two poems in Felicia Hemans *Records of Woman*, “Indian Woman's Death Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale.” Like *Memoirs*, Hemans' poems also explore mother-child sympathy. Together, these poems wonder if non-colonizing models of relating could be developed for mothers so that they can develop healthy inter-subjective mother-child relationships, even while wracked with sadness and jealousy. For Hemans, the answer is, partially, yes, since her poems evaluate and offer an alternative to a model of sympathy that was popular during her period. In “Indian Woman's Death Song,” Hemans demonstrates how this ideal model for achieving non-colonizing sympathy developed by Adam Smith is hard for mothers to adopt. She then provides her own revised, Smithian-based model for achieving a different form of relating—maternal intimacy—in “Madeline, a Domestic Tale.” However, although

“Madeline, a Domestic Tale” responds to the problem of a mother’s colonizing sympathy by theorizing a model of maternal intimacy, the poem ultimately undercuts this particular model of intimacy to question its efficacy for all. “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” together suggest that the only mode of relating that should permanently replace sympathy is a program of intimacy that endorses a wide range of intersubjective interactions. Thus, “Madeline” suggests that a more progressive modernity depends on acknowledging that intersubjective connections are multiple and ever shifting, and cannot be encompassed within a single paradigm of relating.

Chapter three begins by noticing how Shelley’s novel *Falkner* is highly drawn towards fidelity, a mode of relating that on one level—similar to Hemans’ model of intimacy in “Madeline, a Domestic Tale”—works to replace an intrusive sympathy that expects full disclosure of the other’s emotions, or what appear to be the other’s emotions. The novel also features a family that is connected through fidelity, a father-daughter-husband family unit that provides an alternative to the one-size-fits-all, nuclear family led by a husband. The father-daughter-husband triad, bound together by fidelity, *does* provide a happy picture of a family in which the female at its center is influential, appreciated, and respected. But *Falkner* refuses to fully support fidelity and this family, or any other particular mode of relating or familial model, by revealing that patriarchal traces remain within its so-called model family and by linking the family to a significant question that remains unanswered throughout the novel: whether it is possible to have fidelity to the abject, that which is both threatening to the culture and strongly alluring—something, according to Julia Kristeva, that is “radically excluded and draws [one] . . . toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). I also employ Jerrold Hogle’s

interpretation of the abject as something that allows aspects of the self that threaten the experience of a unified subjectivity to be “thrown off” or “thrown down under,” rather than acknowledged (“Frankenstein as Neo-gothic” 178). By refusing to clarify whether having fidelity to the abject is possible, and, in fact, grounding the family showcased in *Falkner* on the dialectical interplay between two opposing responses to this question, the novel envisions a family paradigm whose very structure is always transforming. Ultimately, *Falkner* bases its vision of a more egalitarian future on an ever-evolving understanding of how the family might be joined affectively and configured.

Certainly, we cannot say that Hays’, Hemans’, and Shelley’s writings are successful in formulating and exhibiting an ethical approach that, if taken to heart and enacted by readers, would have helped produce a more egalitarian society. These texts’ commitments to singularity could have unintentionally established a modernity in which it would have actually been impossible to rid society of unethical modes of relating and restrictive family formations. This is because enacting a wide range of more egalitarian models of relating would inevitably violate the views of those who did not believe in the necessity of reform—and, in turn, contradict an ethics of refusal’s commitment to acknowledging the diverse perspectives of everyone. Whether an ethics of refusal truly had the potential to be successful, however, is not the point. Through theorizing and studying this approach, we can more fully understand how intersubjective modes functioned in Romantic literature and discover a Romanticism uniquely committed to attempting to turn dialectical reasoning into a social practice.

## Chapter 1: Sympathy, Revolution and Skepticism in Mary Hays' *Memoirs* (1796)

Since Mary Hays openly based *Memoirs* on her experiences and included her personal letters, it becomes difficult to separate the protagonist, Emma Courtney, from the author. As Gina Luria Walker notes, Hays was candid about the extreme similarities between her own experiences and Emma's story.<sup>13</sup> However, we must be careful not to conflate Hays with the main character of her fiction because, when we do, we confuse the protagonist's approach towards socio-political reform with the contentions of Hays' novel. A reading that conflates Emma with her author would overlook this chapter's claim—that *Memoirs* fears it might be impossible to transform gender relations, readers' views on literary genre, and political philosophy in tumultuous, late eighteenth-century Britain. It would remain unaware that Hays' fiction uses sympathy to investigate the plausibility of such transformation, and that the novel's gothic elements help to signal its doubt.

If we fail to realize the differences between the main character and Hays, we risk concluding that *Memoirs* offers readers a colonizing model of sympathy to emulate and are unable to see that this novel serves as a forerunner to works that advocate an ethics of refusal. In *Memoirs*, the sympathizer imagines the sympathized-with-entity as an extension of the sympathizer's own subjectivity. Emma's sympathy for her adopted son culminates in a coercive relationship, as will soon become apparent. If we believe that Emma's sympathy serves as a model for Hays' audience, we find a paradigm that

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<sup>13</sup> See Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays, (1759-1843): the Growth of a Woman's Mind* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate: 2006). Walker discusses how Hays' essay "'On Novel-Writing' gives Hays a chance to . . . articulate her rationale in *Emma Courtney* for exploiting personal experience" (72).

contradicts Hays' own socio-political philosophy while failing to understand how the model functions in the text. For *Memoirs* promotes Jacobin values, characterizing subjects as individuals who should be taught to trust their own complexly developed powers of reason. In the preface to the novel, Hays declares, "Free thinking, and free speaking, are the virtue and characteristics of a rational being." Yet, the text also shows its skepticism of this Jacobin viewpoint by both relying on and critiquing a sympathy capable of molding others into facsimiles of the sympathizer, a sympathy that shapes the novel's ideas about gender and the work's generic form.

Certainly, some recent critics have argued that Hays' depictions of feelings in the novel expose tensions within her philosophy of reform. None have fully examined, however, how and to what end the novel explores several kinds of reform through sympathy, only to have the potentially promising avenue of sympathy clash with Hays' Jacobin tenets and lead to nowhere. But before considering how contemporary scholarship has responded to *Memoirs* and where my argument fits, we will benefit from a summary of the text, by gaining a sense of the ways *Memoirs* was critically received in its day, and from a brief overview of the political climate and attitudes towards sympathy during Hays' period. These discussions will help us better understand the novel's dynamics and its suspicious reaction to the achievement of what Hays longed for the most: wide-scale philosophical reform that would bring about a more egalitarian society. This novel, I argue, belongs fully to a genre of reflexive Jacobin fiction that treats political change ambivalently, since *Memoirs* contends that Hays' contemporaries might be ideologically trapped.

### ***Memoirs* in Brief:**

Emma Courtney, like Hays, passionately seeks an atmosphere in which women can love openly and think expansively, rather than remain oppressed by the dictates of gender prejudice. However, Emma runs into extreme complications during this pursuit. She discovers that the man she sympathizes with, falls in love with, and who is her intellectual match—Augustus Sr.—will not openly return her feelings nor explain his refusal. After several strong and painful rejections, Emma marries Mr. Montagu out of financial necessity; this is a man that Emma respects but does not feel passionately about. Her lack of romantic feelings eventually strains the marriage, especially when coupled with Emma’s adoption of Augustus Sr.’s secret son, Augustus Jr., whom Augustus Sr. bequeaths to her on his deathbed. Ultimately, Emma becomes severely drained by unrequited sympathy and love, frustration over having been unable to financially support herself, and, most intensely, the deaths of Augustus Sr., Mr. Montague, and her daughter. In the final pages of the novel, the fading Emma does herald a future in which Augustus Jr., will serve as a catalyst for a transformed society, one that will allow women to be treated equally to men. Yet, while Emma’s final words nearly prophesize this prospect, the novel is critical about such a future’s inevitability.

### **Critical Responses to *Memoirs* in the 1790s:**

Critics who reviewed *Memoirs* debated whether or not Emma Courtney’s unsolicited feelings for the male protagonist Augustus Sr.—so shocking in a female character—were detrimental to the morals of Hays’ readers. And since the novel does blur the line between author and protagonist, each review defends or derides Hays’ own “feminine” character in accordance with the review’s interpretation of the protagonist’s purpose. For example, the *Analytical Review* emphasizes that Hays’ mind is “elegant and

cultivated” and praises the novel as a cautionary tale against indulging in the passions (293). Likewise, the *Monthly Review* (1797) implies that Emma’s actions are objectionable, but that they provide a good example of how not to act; thus, Emma’s character does not damage the author’s since the protagonist functions as a warning to readers. This same review argues that the “oppressive load” of “incumbent mountains of circumstance” forces Emma into the position of “giv[ing] vent to the wildest feelings, with conscientious sincerity” (294). Rather than censure Emma for the anguish that she so overtly expresses, the review blames Emma’s social environment, which harshly subjugates women.

*Memoirs* was certainly written to critique women’s status in an oppressive British society. Reviewers, however, typically remained so invested in their defense or ridicule of Emma’s “inappropriate” feelings, and so drawn into the love plot, that they focused on the novel’s disregard of gender values or its critique of gender relations at the expense of Hays’ more nuanced analysis of the efficacy of fiction, sympathy, and Jacobinism—critiques related to the novel’s assessment of gender strictures, but not synonymous with it. Both positive and negative reviews, such as the *Analytical Review* and the *British Critic, a New Review* respectively, denigrated the fact that Emma marries Mr. Montague out of necessity rather than romantic affection (293, 297). But how such a plot twist might work in conversation with other Jacobin novels to question eighteenth-century romance plots, or how relationships in *Memoirs* interrogate the ways that feelings pass between characters, stand generally unacknowledged by Hays’ critics.

In contrast, the critical reactions to *Caleb Williams* (1794), a novel written by the male Jacobin author William Godwin, were typically aware that his text worked in



complex, multifaceted ways. In the *Ladies Magazine*, one contributor highlights the vexed reactions that Godwin's novel produces in readers, advocating that he "seems to direct the passions as he chooses; pity, fear, disdain, and involuntary admiration, are alternately roused, when we read his *Caleb Williams*" (284). And reviewers discovered a critique of genre alongside Godwin's political statements. Indeed, according to Ingrid Horrocks, "a reviewer in the 1794 *Monthly Review* [suggests that] . . . the reader of the text is chastised by the text . . . for susceptibility to gothic fears . . ." (37). While Godwin's treatment of the gothic genre is certainly linked to his critique of British politics, Godwin's attention to genre also stands out to this reviewer *as* a topic of critique, in and of itself; this differs from how critics responded to Hays' multiple analyses.

Through its harsh assessment of gender relations in the 1790s, Hays' novel advocates for a society in which the gender of a writer would eventually not matter in the reception of a work. However, such an environment was yet (and still may be) a dream of the future. Since even Hays' most supportive contemporary critics remained generally unaware of the text's critical *turns*, at least partially due to her status as a woman, it is fitting that her novel worries that the British lack the vision necessary to alter their society. Put differently, both Hays' novel and the tenor of critical reactions to *Memoirs* raise the same question: will subjects ever actually be able to enact real gender reform when so entrenched in their society's gender strictures? And the larger question that arises is: could reformers break from present systems of thought when so deeply embedded within them?

### **Contemporary Reactions to *Memoirs*:**

Contemporary scholars, unlike their predecessors, do argue that Hays' novel offers a layered critique of gender strictures, and/or political philosophy, modes of relating, and genre. Laura Mandell, for instance, emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the text through an analysis of the protagonist's unusual romantic impulses; according to Mandell, these impulses cause Emma not, simply, to fall in love with Augustus Sr., but to "fall for a family." For Mandell, the novel challenges a corrupt patriarchal system through an inclusive and unusual familial model that combats the concept of a nuclear family and a male head of household (62-63, 65). Miriam Wallace, like Mandell, sees *Memoirs* as a reformist novel, but discovers in it a Jacobin investment in acknowledging that politics, history, and emotion are intertwined categories. For Hays, as Wallace sees it, "feeling as personal is not opposed to history as abstract and impersonal, but . . . feeling is *part* of historical location and knowledge" (236-237). In Wallace's interpretation, "shared experience" functions in the text as an effective mode of teaching, and "sensibility" is "celebrate[d]" as the backbone of reason (252, 239). However, it is hard, as I will suggest, to embrace strongly the marriage between feeling and reason in the novel as a straightforwardly happy one. Sentiment and thought often clash, without ushering in a clear philosophy for readers to adopt.

Jonathan Sachs, with a focus on genre, is a little more guarded than Wallace in his assessment of the novel's revolutionary tone. Yes, according to Sachs, *Memoirs* and other Jacobin texts show that the genre of the novel "can supplement or replace classical history as a means of promoting virtue"—that a new form of literature is necessary for revamping social and political structures (255). However, Sachs believes that such "novels are simultaneously critical of the novel's potential frivolity, and hopeful" about

its potential to reform subjects' mentalities, sending a double message (259). Thus, Sachs is uncertain of how strongly *Memoirs* advocates a turn to novels, away from classical literature. Further exploring the ambiguities of how *Memoirs* functions, other critics have also analyzed the revolutionary power of its plot "failures," which can be interpreted in different ways. Tilottama Rajan, for instance, insists that Emma's relationship with Augustus Sr. "must" end badly because a successful romance narrative cannot adequately represent Emma's longing to be recognized as a person with intellectual and professional aspirations ("Autonarration" 225). The "failure" of Emma's relationship with Augustus Sr., then, is actually a positive outcome—a mark of her subjectivity as a woman *and* a thinker with the drive towards self-sufficiency. This analysis of the novel's ending contrasts with Nicole Fisk's interpretation, which contends that Emma ultimately becomes "a woman who accepts the values of conventional society . . . [who must] suppress all but maternal passion and consequently experiences both physical and psychological pain" (140). In Fisk's reading, Emma's failure to achieve romantic love is not empowering in itself; however, by portraying Emma's suffering, the novel attacks the system responsible for Emma's suppression. Through this brief comparison of Rajan's and Fisk's analyses, we see that narrative "failure" wields the power of reformist critique in two alternative interpretations.

My own analysis builds on exegesis that studies how "failure" in *Memoirs* functions as critique, such as Margaret Kathryn Sloan's interrogation of Emma's fixation on "heterosexual love" (234). Sloan and I do differ in focus: Sloan emphasizes Emma's unshakable "obsession with the union of an Augustus to an Emma" (234), while I concentrate on Emma's ultimate failure to achieve egalitarian sympathy between herself

and her adopted child. Yet, I agree with Sloan's assertion that the novel "becomes a revolutionary text in that it is revolving, marked by rotation: no progress is possible" (234). By demonstrating, however, that the act of reforming gender relations and readers' perceptions of genre—through sympathy—is a flawed endeavor in *Memoirs*, that it conflicts with a Jacobin understanding of what shared experience should look like, I explore the intricacies of the novel's "revolutionary rotation," expanding our understanding of the capaciousness of Hays' critique.

I investigate how the novel arrives at a gothic cul-de-sac—a disconcerting philosophical impasse—when the dynamics of sympathy clash with the novel's advocacy of individual autonomy, and I thereby set *Memoirs* more firmly in line with complex, self-reflexive Jacobin criticism that explores the concern that perhaps "no progress is possible." This criticism includes texts such as *Caleb Williams* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), which strive to surpass while examining the difficulty of breaking out of ideological prisms. While Godwin's text depicts the glaring need for reform, Robert Kaufman argues that it is also deeply skeptical about quests for clear truths—promising avenues of progress—in the volatile climate of the 1790s (546). Wollstonecraft's unfinished *Wrongs* also has a highly ambiguous ending, which arguably leans towards disbelief in the possibility of a society that is less oppressive for women. The emotional reunion of a mother and her infant child, separated by a tyrannical father, is either a signal that reform is on the horizon or a complete delusion of the mother's. Since, as Julie Kipp puts it, "motherhood is depicted in the novel as a condition pregnant with possibilities which will subsequently be aborted

because they are conceived in violence . . . thwarted by greed” (85), reading the reunion as a delusion may be the more appropriate interpretation.

My reading of *Memoirs* corresponds most closely with Louise Joy’s analysis of the text. Joy establishes that sympathy serves as a locus point of conflict in the novel, and she argues that there is a tension between “disorderly passion” and “the regulated emotions that eighteenth century moral philosophy—including . . . [Hays’] own—so optimistically . . . and yet so persistently recommends” (221-222, 228-229). To Joy, *Memoirs* exposes that “novelistic realism,” in contrast with philosophical treatises, is capable of illuminating this tension and, in turn, of underscoring the inadequacy of Jacobin expectations about the ability to regulate feeling, or to conceive of the boundaries of one’s own emotions. What I want to emphasize, however, is how this tension between emotion and moral philosophy reveals the difficulty of treating others as “free thinkers and speakers” *when* sympathy, the novel’s chosen mechanism of socio-political reform, proves incompatible with it. Therefore, because of how (at least) two different reformist impulses clash with one another in *Memoirs*, I read their collision, not so much as affirmation that the Jacobin values shaping Hays’ philosophy of reform are inadequate for living within the realm of “real” emotion, but rather as the novel’s signal that late eighteenth-century Britons might be ideologically stuck, their ideas about change too constricted to truly imagine a revamped society. *Memoirs* suggests that subjects might lack the ability, especially in their present climate, to develop perspectives that can see beyond such conflicts. My critique also shows how this type of work builds a foundation for texts that adopt an ethics of refusal, rejecting any particular revolutionary model.

## Revolution and Sympathy in Britain in the 1790s:

Britons' attitudes towards reform were highly conflicted in the years immediately following the French Revolution. Hays and likeminded reformers of the volatile 1790s<sup>14</sup> felt especially motivated to refute and demolish modes of thinking that conflicted with what they discerned as egalitarian realities. Yet, in a tale now so familiar to scholars of the period that it appears self-evident, the time when "Reason seemed the most to assert her rights" was soon marred by the scar of Jacobin terror (Wordsworth, *Prelude* XI 113). Violence detracted from the revolution's legitimacy and, in turn, made reformist writings—especially those by women—appear particularly "dangerous." Look no further than Richard Polwhele's oft quoted poem "The Unsex'd Females" (1798), which demonstrates the potential of outspoken ladies to be seen as "defying NATURE'S law" (12). (Hays herself was lampooned within this poem). The female body was a site of conflict during the Romantic era, signifying Britain's own imperialistic and subversive tendencies,<sup>15</sup> and such signification especially posed problems for women intellectuals who defied expectations. All in all, the atmosphere of the latter 1790s suggests that arguments for radical reform, especially those formulated about women by women, appeared all the more pressing and precarious. Thus, Hays' novel has good reason to express a sense of discouragement.

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<sup>14</sup> Such reformers included Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, as well as William Frend—the latter serving as the inspiration for the influential male character Augustus Sr. in *Memoirs*. For more details, please see chapter five in Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays, (1759-1843): the Growth of a Woman's Mind* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate: 2006).

<sup>15</sup> For example, in *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science and Literature 1650-1865* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky: 1999) 4, Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash illustrate how white, middle-class British women were often portrayed as civilized "mothers" in comparison to their subordinate, colonial "children." Yet, such women's slippery status made "[their] ability to complicate the maintenance of national or racial differences" in texts such as Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui* (1809) (Greenfield and Barash 9), resonate all the more powerfully.

Yet, where does sympathy fit into this narrative? How do ideas about sympathy align with attitudes towards radical reform during this period? By the close of the eighteenth century, British subjects did view sympathy's healing, unifying, and leveling powers with increased skepticism. Ildiko Csengei explains that subjects' suspicion of sympathy was heightened by the general mood of the latter half of the century, an atmosphere created by "war on the Continent, discontent in America, and the French Revolution" (49). Yet, although sympathy seemed capable of conflicting effects, Romantic-era thinkers—such as William Hazlitt—remained captivated by its potentially positive possibilities (Caldwell 33-37), and much of Hays' work before *Memoirs* suggests that she had thought hopefully of its capacity to unite, for instance, individuals to God and to one another in happy marriages. In Hays' *Cursory Remarks on an Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship* (1792), sympathy creates the conditions for youthful devotion, since God is most easily worshiped "in the contemplation of an innocent, and amiable family; with hearts overflowing with tenderness for each other, and adoration for the author of the social blessings they enjoy" (14). In *Letters and Essays* (1793), furthermore, Hays emphasizes sympathy's efficacy in building strong matrimonial relations. Similar to Mary Wollstonecraft's derogatory impression of partnerships formed upon "sensual . . . fondness . . . [wanting a foundation of] friendship" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 183), Hays states that "no cause has been more productive of complicated wretchedness, than the union of persons whose minds . . . are dissimilar: 'sympathy is the charm of life'" (*Letters and Essays* 124).

Even in *Memoirs*, in the desire to stop readers from rashly condemning Emma Courtney's behavior, Hays asks the audience to enter into "sympathy" with the

protagonist. *Memoirs*' preface encourages Hays' readers to assess their own past actions, and to consider the reactions of a hypothetical outsider that might judge harshly, before shunning the "extravagance and eccentricity" of Emma (36). The text urges "those readers, who feel inclined to judge with severity . . . [to] look within their own hearts; and should they find no record, traced by an accusing spirit, to soften the asperity of their censures, [then they can judge her]" (Hays, *Memoirs* 36). Hays indicates that such a record could be discovered and, if thoughtfully contemplated, that it could stimulate readers to sympathize with Emma, notwithstanding this character's apparent faults. Indeed, the preface to *Memoirs* shows that Hays wants to spark sympathy between readers and Emma in order to be able to establish perspectives capable of shifting mainstream views. However, the true strength of sympathy's promise is a question that *Memoirs* investigates with anxiety, eventually affirming sympathy's harmful potential.

### **Sympathy in *Memoirs*:**

Hays characterizes subjects, and especially the protagonist's son in *Memoirs*, as individuals who should be taught to trust their own complexly developed powers of reason.<sup>16</sup> But *Memoirs* also paints sympathy as a controllable force—one that enables a single individual to become the designing influence over others' subjectivities. Most significantly for my purposes, the novel showcases Emma Courtney's craving to transform her son into an automaton who embodies her own perceptions, thereby undercutting other stimuli that might shape his perspective. Emma accomplishes this

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<sup>16</sup> Hays wants her son to think "philosophically." See Laura Mandell, "Bad Marriages, Bad Novels: the Philosophical Romance," *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction, 1780-1830*. Ed. Heydt-Stevenson, Jillian, and Charlotte Sussman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008) 51. Mandell asserts, "by 'philosophical,' . . . Hays meant . . . to be critical . . . by using the Lockean/Hartleyian analytical method." In this process, "one analyzes one's associations, determining whether they have become associated in one's own mind by prejudice, culture, or personal experience, and then decides whether the association is 'rational' or 'just.'"



through a model of sympathy that obliterates the potential for the sympathized-with-individual to maintain a distinct subjectivity—a model rejecting the Jacobin idea that subjects should be enabled, as best they can, to form their own thoughts.

Through the lens of David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), we will see how sympathy in *Memoirs* operates to “facilitate” reform across British society, only to have the novel reveal sympathy’s frightening repercussions for sympathized-with parties and ultimate inability to deliver substantial socio-political change. This all happens alongside the powerlessness of Emma, the novel’s Jacobin stand in, to see the colonizing nature of her relationship with son; she looks to the future with the sense that her perspective is truly revolutionary, a signal that real reform may be long in coming. The subtly problematic dynamics of Humeian sympathy help show the coercive nature of the sympathy that Hays’ novel portrays, only to render flawed. Given Hays’ interest in Hume’s reflections on empiricism, religion, and gender,<sup>17</sup> it is not surprising that her philosophical fiction interacts with Hume’s ideas. However, a Humeian critique of sympathy in *Memoirs*, as far as I am aware, has not yet been produced.

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<sup>17</sup> While my Humeian reading of *Memoirs* does not argue that Hays consciously appropriates Hume’s paradigms in her critique, it is interesting to note that Hays was steeped in Humeian thought. Hays’ analyses of Hume’s philosophies are not always accurate, but she is keen to employ his work to support her own concepts and to use points of disagreement as opportunities for insight. Referring to a letter to William Godwin in 1794, in which Hays asserts that “We know nothing of causes (says Mr. Hume [in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*]) but from their effects,” a footnote clarifies that “Hays . . . apparently ignor[es] [Hume’s] . . . avowal that causal necessity is an arbitrary connection and that ‘every effect is a distinct event from its cause.’” See Mary Hays, *The Correspondence (1779-1843) of Mary Hays*. Ed. Marilyn L. Brooks (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004) 386. Hays apprehends enough of Hume’s religious philosophy, however, to be doubtful of his deism, notwithstanding her inaccurate phrasing in arguing that diverse environmental factors frame experience. In Hays’ *Letters and Essays* the model character Melville—an extension of many of Hays’ values—“was delighted with the genius, as well as shaken by the sophistry of Hume” (44). Furthermore, Hays was aware of Hume’s perspective on women’s worldviews. See Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays*. Walker contends that in *Memoirs* “Hays responds to Hume’s challenge that the study of history might teach women that ‘love is not the only passion that governs the male world,’ [and] . . . does so by record[ing] an individual female history in which learning and love ignite the heroine” (145).

*Memoirs* also develops a selectively fine line between literary characters and persons, as it depicts the struggle to reform gender relations and readers' estimations of the value of "the novel." Through sympathy in *Memoirs*, certain real individuals—children—are rendered "fictional," strategically inhabitable by another, real individual—their mother. This is a process perhaps best understood through Catherine Gallagher's theorization, via Hume, of how literary characters in novels of the period can function as "nobodies" by being occupied—or colonized<sup>18</sup>—by actual readers. By focusing on the permeability of the boundaries separating characters from readers in Hays' novel, I add additional nuances to our understanding of how genre and literary character play a significant and vexed role in the Romantic era, as writers explore dynamics that explain how subjects relate to one another. With much concern, *Memoirs* wonders what might happen to interpersonal connections if certain persons were treated as fictional characters in novels.

On the surface, sympathy in *Memoirs* appears straightforwardly radical. Through a structure of sympathy that mirrors Humeian sympathy, Hays' novel, at first glance, seems to pursue social reform and to advocate that novel reading can be a healthy practice for marriageable female readers. If we put aside the Jacobin emphasis on the importance of "thinking philosophically," or of relying on the discrimination of one's own thoughts, Hays looks as if she is employing the protagonist's maternal sympathy as a positive example of how *to* relate, and as if she is promoting sympathy in order to alter problematic exchanges between female readers and male literary characters. In this light,

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<sup>18</sup> In my use of the term "colonized," I should note that I rely most specifically on the work of Jacques Khalip, who defines it as the desire to impose one's own values onto a controllable other and to define another in terms of oneself. See Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Lives: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) 64-65.

*Memoirs* seems to argue for the benefits of novel reading, striving to transform British gender relations in the process. Yet ultimately, the novel illustrates that Emma's sympathy is not laudable—that the tactics of reform showcased in the text do not pay off.

*Memoirs* offers a revised model of how women readers “should” relate to fictional heroes in novels, as Catherine Gallagher's analysis of Humeian sympathy can help us understand. Gallagher argues that Humeian sympathy, most easily achieved between like individuals, can work as follows: “I feel your emotion because you are already in some sense mine, but once the feeling is mine, it is no longer distinguished by being yours” (170). In this model, the construct of the self maintains prominence as perceptions of others actually arise from the semblance of self-knowledge.<sup>19</sup> According to Hume's *Treatise* in regards to this model of sympathy, the sympathizer perceives the sympathized-with-entity's feelings as an extension of her own perspective because “our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that 'tis not possible to imagine, that anything can in this particular go beyond it” (317). But the sympathizer, it could be argued, does not realize that each person's *own* imagination ultimately rules her perspective; thus, in this paradigm, the sympathizer perceives that the sympathized-with-entity feels as *she* feels, whether or not this is so.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hence, “another's internal state becomes ‘intimately present’ only by losing its distinct quality of belonging to somebody else” (Gallagher 170). See Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women in the Marketplace 1670-1820* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Humeian sympathy, as Gallagher suggests, “is complete when it dispenses with its original ‘object’ . . .” (171). Gallagher argues, via Pall S. Ardal, that Humeian sympathy produces selfishness because “if you have a desire for a glass of whiskey . . . and I sympathize with you in a Humeian fashion, all that's been accomplished is that I want a glass of whiskey, too” (170). But besides simply enabling a situation in which the sympathizer will simply act selfishly rather than aiding the sympathized-with-entity, the fact that the sympathizer's experience of the sympathized-with-entity's feelings always come from “ideas . . . impressed by *imagination* . . . into . . . ourselves” means that the sympathized-with-entity's feelings may not actually match up with the sympathizer's perception of them. For Adella Pinch, this model of Humeian sympathy also places the sympathizer's own emotions at the heart of sympathy, rather than the sympathizer's actual experience of the sympathized-with-entity's emotions; for Hume “asserts that feelings are individual, and that philosophy itself as well as social

Once we observe the insular nature of the sympathizer's perspective, we come to realize the significant role that this model of sympathy plays in novel reading. Hence, "Hume's *Treatise* reveals why fictional characters were uniquely suitable objects of compassion. Because they were . . . suppositional identities belonging to no one, they could be universally appropriated . . . could be . . . occupied, identified by anybody" (Gallagher 168). In encountering a character, a bodiless entity offering "free" sentiments, a reader can sympathize more easily than if this entity were "real." She can more effortlessly impress the idea of this character's sentiments, through her imagination, into her own being and feel "corresponding" sentiments. This is because the character's sentiments, belonging to no one, seem to stem from the reader herself. The bodiless character is not actually perceived as a separate individual, and thus the character's perspective can effortlessly become an extension of the reader's *own*—occupied by the reader as a "nobody."

This theorization suggests that appropriating the sentiments of certain fictional male heroes, or certain nobodies, might have disconcerting implications for the happiness of marriageable women. Fiction might make it easier for marriageable female readers to activate their sympathy for marriage partners offered to them, and (since their own imaginations are at the heart of the process) to project their own longings onto these potential partners. This is because fiction "enables" such readers to practice sympathizing rewardingly with a variety of fictional male heroes (such as Belinda's Clarence Hervey) that novelists offer (Gallagher 194). Problematically, novels could

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and aesthetic experience depends on individuals who can rely on the individual authenticity of their own emotional responsiveness" (19). See Adella Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion, Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

arguably make it simpler for marriageable women to sympathize with real prospective marriage partners, even if such partners did not actually share their perspectives. For marriageable female readers still operated under “the prevalent belief that women were not to love before they were beloved,” and reading fiction might bolster this expectation by “help[ing] women conform their emotional lives to” it (Gallagher 192, 194).

Therefore, this process of practiced identification with fictional male heroes has the potential to make marriageable female fiction readers pawns in the marriage market instead of active players—to damage their abilities to choose compatible mates. Since happy matches, for Hays, must be founded on a partner’s mutual “respect . . . [of one another’s] virtues and attainments” (*Memoirs* 108), Hays would have detested a process that induces women to accept potentially unsound matches.

Hays’ own depictions of the protagonist Emma and her love interest, Augustus Sr., do emphasize the problem with identifying with fictional male heroes and then transferring this sympathy onto non-fictional prospects. *Memoirs* thus joins other contemporary novels that seek to highlight problematic exchanges between certain readers and characters. Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* (1782), for example, declines to “reward the reader” adequately for her emotional investment in certain characters, refusing to censure harshly “evil characters” and to “exalt . . . virtuous ones.” In *Cecilia*, “identifying with nobody [or the romantic hero] must end in default,” and thereby divorce Burney’s audience from desired and expected identification with this hero (Gallagher 248, 250). But unlike Burney’s novel, *Memoirs* does not immediately appear to be assessing a problematic dynamic that arises from how readers relate to fictional

characters in Hume's model of sympathy.<sup>21</sup> Identifying with "nobody" in *Memoirs*, it seems initially, does not have to end in the reader's lack of identification with a fictional hero.

Rather, Hays' novel appears to argue that marriageable female readers' strongest sympathies are focused on the wrong "nobodies," but that this can change; it seems to assert that one might develop a program of gender reform predicated on altering, rather than doing-away-with already established relationships between literary characters and readers. Emma's relationship with her adopted son, Augustus Jr., indicates that marriageable female readers' intense sympathies for fictional male love interests might be *transferred* from them to fictional children in novels—or different nobodies.

Significantly, *Memoirs* extends this transfer of sympathy from nobody male heroes to nobody children beyond the text, indicating that marriageable female readers' sympathies might be transferred from fictional male love interests to children in novels, and then, to actual children.

### **The Threat of the Nobody Lover:**

Hays' depictions of Emma and Augustus Sr. do challenge actual female readers to become self-reflexive about their compassion for fictional nobody lovers, which is a truly

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Khalip complicates Gallagher's reading of how Humeian sympathy functions between two actual human beings. See Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Lives*, 88. He argues that we enter into sympathy "not entirely knowing who we are in sympathy with" and that this "contributes to a more advantageous form of self-fashioning" than Gallagher illustrates (88). Yet, noting this lack of self-knowledge seems less advantageous when visualizing exchanges between female readers and heroic characters, rather than between actual people. Perhaps in life, the dynamics of Humeian sympathy could "preserve us from a debilitating contempt at the hands of those who know us too well, and . . . allow us to seek a greater personal mobility among those we don't know at all" (88). However, the effects are different within a textual context, one in which women are conditioned to sympathize and to love on cue. Such readers are not at risk from being manipulated by the "debilitating contempt" of the imaginary hero, as they might be in reality. By the time that such protection might be needed in actuality, the conditioning process that Gallagher locates has arguably already taken effect. Thus, because of the subtly passive position in which female readers are situated as they sympathize with literary heroes, it seems that Humeian sympathy would have been likely to prepare a marriageable reader to welcome an offered hand, but less likely to help her resist a marriage partner.

progressive action, in and of itself. First, Hays underscores Augustus Sr.'s position as a nobody by having Emma fall in love with descriptions of Augustus Sr. and with his portrait, rather than the actual man. As Katherine Binhammer argues, Emma's "love object, Augustus Harley, enters the novel, but more as an apparition, a projection of Emma's imagination, than as a physical being . . . She projects onto the empty signifier Harley her perfect romantic hero" (10).

Emma initially hears of Augustus Harley when she first goes to visit his mother. Readers learn that "the image of Augustus . . . which . . . [Emma's] lively companion had portrayed with more than her usual vivacity, played in . . . [Emma's] fancy . . . [she] entered the mansion of Mrs. Harley, [Augustus's mother], with a swelling emotion, made of complicated feelings—half tender" (Hays, *Memoirs* 86). Primed by this emotion, and having heard from Mrs. Harley that Augustus is extremely sensitive and smart, Emma then returns to Mrs. Harley's home on another occasion and is confronted with "a portrait of . . . [Augustus] . . . hung up in the library" (Hays, *Memoirs* 91). Directed by Mrs. Harley, the most prominent "author" of Emma's developing sympathy for Augustus Sr., Emma finds herself mesmerized by this portrait and interprets it as the picture of a romantic hero. Emma exclaims, "I accustomed myself to gaze on this resemblance of a man, in whose character I felt so lively an interest, till I fancied I read in the features all the qualities imputed to the original by a tender and partial parent" (Hays, *Memoirs* 91). The features themselves tell her nothing, but are a template for Emma's imagination. In the dynamics of Emma's gaze, Hays implicitly positions Emma as a reader, Augustus Sr. as a nobody, and Mrs. Harley as the guiding authorial hand behind Emma's projection.

Augustus Sr.'s status as a nobody is substantiated by Emma's literary tastes, which underscore her status as a reader of romantic novels. Hays depicts a young, avidly bookish Emma who dreams of "Grecian Heroes" as well as Rousseau's ill-fated Abelard, St. Preaux (*Memoirs* 57, 58, 60). In falling in love with Augustus Sr.'s image, Emma directly conflates it with St. Preaux. She writes, "he was the St. Preux . . . of my sleeping and waking reveries" (Hays, *Memoirs* 91).

Emma not only explicitly falls in love with Augustus Sr.'s simulacrum, but also overtly warns the reader that this act is calamitous. She exclaims "I felt, that I loved an ideal object (for such was Augustus Harley to me) with a tender and fervent excess; an excess, perhaps, involving all my future usefulness and welfare" (Hays, *Memoirs* 92). Throughout the novel, Emma's attachment to Augustus Sr. "prey[s] incessantly upon . . . [her] heart [and] . . . bec[omes] a vice from its excesses," unsupported by the sympathy that Emma craves (Hays, *Memoirs* 197). Because Augustus Sr. explicitly refuses to return Emma's sympathy, Emma's attachment also precipitates her marriage to Mr. Montague. This union provides friendship and financial comfort but leaves Emma unsatisfied, as she has expended all of her emotions on Augustus Sr. A tragic spiral of events precipitated by this marriage indicates that conjugal relations void of desire are fruitless, and thus Emma's previous, misplaced obsession has doomed her chances of happiness.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, Emma's love for a man built on the projection of her desires generates unhealthy expectations, ones that are not lived up to by the "actual" Augustus Sr. Female audiences should be wary, Hays thereby claims, of projecting their romantic dreams onto reality.

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<sup>22</sup> These events include Mr. Montague's jealousy, which leads him to commit infanticide and to his own suicide. See Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Ed. Marilyn L. Brooks (Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000) 211-217.



### **Re-inscribed Sympathy and the “Substantial” Nobody:**

Emma’s sympathy for Augustus Sr. does not look as if it will go to waste, however, as it is instead re-inscribed onto a hypothetically more worthy character: Augustus Jr. is rendered a nobody in the text by virtue of his enlistment as nobody Augustus Sr.’s replacement. Hays overtly links Augustus Jr. and Augustus Sr. together by name and Emma clarifies that Augustus Jr. is “the living *image* of him, whose destiny involved mine” (my emphasis, Hays, *Memoirs* 221). But Augustus Jr. does not only become Augustus Sr.’s replacement after his death. Augustus Jr. becomes Augustus Sr.’s substitute with a difference—the new nobody hero upon whom marriageable female readers “should” expend all of their sympathy.

Raised lovingly by Emma, his sole educator up until his early adolescence, Augustus Jr. matures into adulthood within a dynamic that, in terms of the tenderness between mother and child, would have been highly relatable to the reader. Augustus Jr. is his mother’s object of sympathy, imbibing her revolutionary sentiments. He is “bound” to Emma’s heart with “a cord of affection,” exhibiting within himself Emma’s own tender disposition and strong capacity for innovative reason (Hays, *Memoirs* 220).<sup>23</sup> He possesses strong powers of reasoning, gratifying Emma’s maternal efforts and manifesting as a “moral martyr” who *will* champion Emma’s values and reform society accordingly (Hays, *Memoirs* 218, 220). As Emma, worn out from a life of unrequited love and related stressors, forlornly embraces the “social affections [that she] still . . . bind[s] to [her] heart,” she heralds the seeds of gender reform that “will” be enacted through Augustus Jr. (Hays, *Memoirs* 220). With prophetic longing, Emma exclaims,

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<sup>23</sup> These capacities are shown through Augustus Jr.’s display of “infantine sweetness” towards his sister, little Emma, as well as his strong predilection for science and architecture. See Hays, *Memoirs*, 218-219.

“Ere I sink into the grave, let me behold the son of my affections . . . escaped from the tyranny of the passions . . . to the dignity of active, intrepid virtue,” to an apparently “unshackled” state of mind capable of prompting societal reform (Hays, *Memoirs* 220).

Following in a tradition of associationist thought, Hays anticipates Teresa Brennan’s twentieth-century theorization that “subjectivity begins with a “gift” of affect from mother to child” (quod. in Mitchell 91). But “begins” is a key concept in Brennan’s theory that implies an end—an eventual lessening of the mother’s influence over the child’s subjectivity, which the Emma-Augustus Jr. dynamic in *Memoirs* does not acknowledge. In adopting her charge and adoring him as her own, Emma visualizes creating a long-term copy of herself out of Augustus Jr. Through her sympathy for Augustus Jr., Emma is able to “form . . . [his] mind” in line with hers to “every active virtue, to every generous sentiment” (Hays, *Memoirs* 218).

In contrast with Augustus Sr., therefore, Augustus Jr. is not a nobody who will disappoint Emma’s hopes and desires. Raised sympathetically by Emma from his infancy, his subjectivity an apparent projection of hers, Augustus Jr. should be deeply involved in establishing less sexist values.

### **Beyond the Text-Real “Nobodies”:**

Augustus Jr. is certainly a fictional entity, but Hays does not depict his potential as imprisoned within *Memoirs*. This is where the text’s subtle gothic undertones, which I will soon address, begin to emerge. *Memoirs* infers that the dynamics of sympathy between Emma and Augustus Jr. might be enacted in reality; that a marriageable female reader might at some point inhabit Emma’s position; that Emma’s nobody son might be substituted with a real somebody and yet retain Augustus Jr.’s nobody capacity to exist as

projection of his mother's perspective—sympathetic to her frustrations and receptive to her radical ideas. To produce this effect, Hays implies that the dynamics of her model of sympathy might be transferred from fictional characters in texts to actual individuals in reality by depicting a parallel dynamic within *Memoirs*: Emma's transferal of sympathy from the "more fictional" Augustus Sr. to his "more real," reformist son. Augustus Jr. is rendered "more real" because Emma develops a lasting and concrete relationship with him, while his simulacrum—his portrait—is crucially not the catalyst for her sympathy. In depicting the possibility of this transfer, *Memoirs* seems to emerge as a kind of conduct book for how marriageable female readers should utilize novels to engage with the world beyond the novel, one that appears to make practicing sympathizing with child characters<sup>24</sup> through fiction empowering for the marriageable female reader.<sup>25</sup> However, such empowerment would be purchased at a very high cost to Jacobin reformist philosophy due to its colonizing underpinnings. *Memoirs* as a guide implodes upon

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<sup>24</sup> When I refer to children, I mean those that they will someday have or those presently under their influence. Young widows, of course, would be marriageable female readers who may already have children. But what do we make of the fact that most marriageable female readers would not yet have children? Children already under the influence of marriageable female readers do not have to be the readers' own children, *Memoirs* implies. Mother-child bloodlines are of little consequence in the novel considering Augustus Jr.'s status as an adopted child.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the only infanticide that occurs in *Memoirs* comes at the hands of a jealous husband, rather than at whim of an all-too-sympathetic mother. Tortured by his guilt in having had an affair, Mr. Montague suffocates his illegitimate child (Hays, *Memoirs* 217). His act epitomizes the darkest side of Hays' contemporary social system, in which competition and self-interest trumps altruism and leads to destruction—including self-destruction. (Mr. Montague commits suicide after the infanticide (Hays, *Memoirs* 215)). Mr. Montague's murdering of his bastard infant counteracts "the focus on women in the discussions of child murder in the 1790s . . . [a focus which] accentuates an unmistakable misogyny in the discourse of child murder—so that the murder of children, from this point onwards, is usually associated with the horror of femininity" (McDonagh 72). See Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720-1900* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The contrast between Mr. Montague's behavior and Emma's suggests that the wrong party is often scapegoated, thereby energizing the perpetuation of a corrupt social order. Mr. Montague's behavior epitomizes consuming emotions that obliterate opportunities for social change, while Emma's intensely sympathetic mothering ostensibly creates revolutionaries. But the contrast between them is less strong than it first appears after Emma's coercive sympathy becomes apparent.

itself, underscoring how Hays' contemporaries might lack the vision to truly transform their society.

The novel's implicit assertion that the sympathies of marriageable female readers can be "rewardingly" redirected is founded on the concept that female readers can sympathize with real "Augustus Jr.s" as if they—the real "Augustus Jr.s"—were *fictional*. Children, the text postulates, while certainly not bodiless, are like fictional characters in that their identities resemble the way that characters have "suppositional identities belonging to no one" (Gallagher 168). Like many others and the philosopher Helvetius, whom she venerated, Hays argues elsewhere that very little about children is innate. In discussing the education of boys and girls in the *Monthly Magazine* (1797), Hays suggests that even "physical differences, [let alone mental, could be] . . . an effect rather than a cause" of upbringing (194); however, by positioning children as literary characters, *Memoirs* interrogates one extension of this reasoning with potentially harmful consequences for real children, while also casting doubt on fiction's reformist efficacy within Hays' environment. The child, in the logic *Memoirs* puts forth for the reader's consideration, might become a real projection of the sympathetic mother. Like Augustus Jr. seems apt to do, these children will then presumably exhibit the mother's (or mother figure's) assumed desire for gender equality, and pursue this goal. But ultimately, this novel demonstrates that altering the literary character the reader identifies with will *not* offer real socio-political transformation, and consequently, that the genre of the novel might actually be somewhat limited in offering models for reform, at least in Hays' period. Children come across in this paradigm as hollow beings who can be colonized by

their mothers through sympathy's power of projection—simulacrum that twistedly authorize gender reform, in a way that *Memoirs* registers as deeply disturbing.

### **The Ethical Cost of Nobody Children:**

True, as a Humeian reading of sympathy in *Memoirs* illustrates, Hays writes a story that seems innovative—a novel potentially capable of revising readers' sympathetic literary responses so that they interrogate women's second-class social status. By enabling this insight, the text seems to implicitly refute Hays' contemporaries who damn the novel as a medium that “was a debased form, mad, bad, and dangerous, particularly for impressionable female readers” (Gilroy and Verhoeven 147). The novel was seen to “waste” a reader's energy, because by the end of the eighteenth century, “the sentimental reader,” like a reader of the gothic, came to be portrayed as an “emotional addict, craving fictional identification and powerless to disengage from it” (Gallagher 279).

Alternatively, *Memoirs*, on one level, conveys the impression that the “emotional craving” induced by the novel in marriageable female readers was something non-wasteful that readers could learn to control—that, with the help of works like Hays', they could become aware of their readerly sympathies and, by following Emma's model, utilize them to their real life benefit.

Yet, as Hays' envisioning of simulacrum children illuminates, empowering maternal sympathy in *Memoirs* comes at the cost of a Jacobin sense of personal autonomy—a price that illuminates the real, colonizing effect that sympathy might have if it functioned as it is depicted here. And *Memoirs* self-reflexively interrogates if the novel really is all that safe of a space for revising modes of shared experience, in its

portrayal of a thin boundary between certain subjects and literary characters that has potentially negative implications for select, real individuals.

Now certainly, when authors envisioned permeable boundaries between books and people, these porous margins were often thought of positively. As Julie Carlson explains, radical writers of the period characteristically pictured an easy and affectionate interchange between real individuals and texts. Godwin perceives, for example, that “books are friends . . . because interchange with them fulfills the specifications for proper attachment: won or earned, linking head and heart, valuing approbation over compassion, expanding rather than contracting the heart” (Carlson 77). Yet, nearly as soon as the novel became popular, writers such as Charlotte Lennox began to question what it meant to cross to the other side of the border—to treat life as fiction. Like works such as *The Female Quixote*, *Memoirs* considers the potential hazards in visualizing a permeable border between literary characters and individuals, but it further interrogates this idea with a focus on the hazards for the real-life “character”—the sympathized-with-entity—rather than the reader. Through its portrayal of the anti-egalitarian power dynamics between mothers (“readers”) and children (“characters”) that could result from applying reader-character models of relating to the real world, *Memoirs* expands the question, with anxiety: books might be friends, but what might happen to interpersonal dynamics if we were selectively to treat real subjects as fictional characters?

Hays’ novel thus offers up an empty token of gender and genre reform, a panacea for Emma’s failed love that depends on the totalizing projection of the self onto another human being—specifically, on the projection of Emma onto Augustus Jr., and, in turn, the projection of the marriageable female reader onto her child(ren). Crucially, the

enactment of reform through sympathy as it is depicted in *Memoirs* would conflict with Hays' philosophical emphasis on the importance of individual reasoning, as the novel makes visible. For how can the children of marriageable female readers analyze their own associations and become moral martyrs with unshackled minds, if they lack the separate selves necessary to accomplish this? They cannot, in the vision of radical solipsism displayed in *Memoirs*; they would instead become "characters" inhabited with their mothers' exported subjectivities, unable to separate their own analyses from hers. Considering the sense of claustrophobia and uncanniness this vision produces, we can call this vision gothic.

### **The Gothic in *Memoirs*:**

One might be tempted to read this novel's gothic touches—its allusions to states of entrapment and the experience of inescapable hauntings—as straightforwardly radical. And they are definitely radical, but not all in obvious ways. Throughout much of the novel, Emma's longing for Augustus Sr. and her intellectual fervor chafe against the confines of a constricting society. Emma is haunted by desire that is frustrated by cultural expectations and by a failed marriage that originated from her lack of opportunities as a woman to support herself. Thus, Hays seems to have written a novel with clearly radically gothic aspects, similar to Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) or Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* (1798), in which the gothic returns home as a form of social critique. In such novels, formidable Italian castles are replaced by local, metaphorical fortresses—oppressive laws and societal expectations, for example—while villains appear both as concrete figures and as psychological, internalized manifestations of legislation and social strictures that marginalize certain subjects.

But while an oppressive society and its advocates appear the villains in *Memoirs*, villains that the text clearly chastises, Emma's colonizing sympathy makes this novel's radical gothic bent more nuanced than it first seems. In spite of Emma's own appearance as a gothic victim, persecuted by discriminating social strictures, sympathy in *Memoirs* also implicitly renders Emma a gothic villain with an ability to dominate others' perspectives.

To explain the full extent of this dynamic, I want first to clarify that the recipient of *Memoirs* is ostensibly Augustus Jr., but in reality, is Hays' audience. Therefore, when Emma chronicles her loving relationship with Augustus Jr. and imagines him as a sympathetic, passionate reformer (Hays, *Memoirs* 220-221), the text is positioning the reader as capable of embodying Augustus Jr.'s vantage point, with gender reform hinging on this dynamic. Borrowing from Julie Carlson's analysis of Maria's child in Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, we might think that Augustus Jr. simply signifies Hays' "writing to the future"—towards a "virtual reality" yet to be accomplished but which, given the "right" minds and conditions, could be enacted (39). At the end of the novel, however, qualifiers give way to assertive verbs that articulate that Hays' audience *will* "enact" radical social reform rather than merely calculate its possibility. Emma writes: "Moral martyrdom may possibly be the fate of those who press forward, yet, their generous efforts will not be lost—Posterity will plant the olive and the laurel . . . emancipate the human mind from the trammels of superstition, and teach it, that its true dignity and virtue, consist in being free" (Hays, *Memoirs* 221). Through situating the reader as the sympathetic Augustus Jr., the text posits an interaction by which the reader's subjectivity theoretically "would be" filled exclusively with Emma's



perspective at the expense of other, potentially contradictory impressions. If readers reacted like their literary character stand in, Augustus Jr., this sympathetic interaction would eradicate counterrevolutionary values from the minds of Hays' readers, replacing these values with the female character's radical beliefs. However, by calling attention to the power imbalance between Augustus Jr. and Emma while placing the reader in the position of Augustus Jr., the novel makes the encroaching nature of this dynamic personal, thus forcefully conveying that Emma's sympathy could have harmful consequences for the sympathized-with-entity.

For any trace of a separate perspective for Augustus Jr.—one that might be independently, rationally persuaded rather than colonized by his mother—is demolished rhetorically.<sup>26</sup> Emma's advice to her son is overwhelmed by several anaphoric employments of the phrase, "let me behold." These are followed by proclamations of *her* desires for Augustus's future, along with references to "my Augustus" and multiple uses of the pronoun "I" (Hays, *Memoirs* 221). At this point, Emma writes of the "disappointment of [her] rational plans of usefulness," followed by an indictment of "the constitutions of society" and a declaration of her faith in Augustus Jr.'s reforming powers (Hays, *Memoirs* 220-221). Furthermore, any hint of Augustus Jr. as an individual is erased by the fact that his words never appear on the page. They are buried in letters from him that are referred to but not included in the novel. While responses from Emma's mentor, Mr. Francis, are intertwined within the text, Augustus Jr.'s "letter, which Joanna a few days since put into my hand," is not even momentarily quoted (Hays,

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<sup>26</sup> Joy's analysis of the novel's opening in "Novel Feelings" applies here too. When clarifying her purpose for writing her memoirs to Augustus Jr., Emma "imposes her passions on [him] . . . . Although she states that her motivation to write is her concern for her son's suffering . . . . She immediately makes the emotions at issue her own" (Joy 226-227). See Louise Joy, "Novel Feelings: Emma Courtney's Point of View." *European Romantic Review* (21.2): 221-234.

*Memoirs* 42). In writing an Emma who sympathetically “occupies” Augustus Jr.’s and “the reader’s” identities, Hays offers a character comparable to Caleb William’s oppressor, Mr. Falkland, who sought and arguably succeeded in colonizing Caleb’s perspective—or in indoctrinating Caleb Williams into accepting Mr. Falkland’s own “innocence.”

Mother-child incest in *Memoirs* also manifests as disturbingly gothic. Laura Mandell suggests that when Emma accepts the care of Augustus Jr., she partakes in a “marriage to a child”—in effect, her own child—in a pact that helps decontaminate a system by defying its customs (62-63). But instead, Emma’s colonization of Augustus Jr. illuminates that this mother-son “marriage,” at its root, actually encourages interpersonal relationships that perpetuate power imbalances resembling those fostered by the present social system. Put another way, in the context of gothic horror, Hays’ novel implicitly interrogates the kind of mental “passivity” that works such Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* argue must be transcended in order for individuals to assert control over their lives (Botting 75). Gothic horror, as theorized by Ann Radcliffe’s “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), functions by exposing the mind to ideas that cannot be thought through, such as the concept of death, or to “excess[es] that cannot be transcended” by the subject; gothic horror thus overwhelms and freezes the mind of the subject experiencing the horror (Botting 75). Therefore, even while the dynamics of colonizing sympathy and gothic horror are not easily compared, the effects of colonizing sympathy on Augustus Jr., as depicted by *Memoirs*, are similar to the effects of gothic horror on a subject. In creating a model of sympathy that renders the son a near simulacrum, Hays strikingly showcases a passive individual who is saturated by an

“excess”—Emma’s perspective—that cannot be transcended. Such a state of being, according to Ingrid Horrocks, in which a person is “exclu[ded] . . . from his or her own subjectivity . . . must, [for Godwin] be avoided at all costs” (39-40). *Memoirs* seems to agree.

Perhaps one other reason that *Memoirs* feels gothic is because of its epistolary form. There is certainly an unsettling disparity between the radical connotations of the epistolary genre and the domineering tone of Emma’s letters. Emma’s letters stand for inadequate copies of truly radical texts, and therefore might be loosely interpreted as “gothic doubles” that are integral to the novel’s character. Janet Altman’s analysis of the epistolary form is instrumental to my reading because it contends that epistolary novels are meant to elicit (actual) readers’ distinctive responses to narrative—responses that, in turn, shape the meaning of the text (Altman 89). “The epistolary form,” Altman suggests, “is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)” (88). While Altman explains that the epistolary form’s encouragement of a reader’s agency should not be overemphasized,<sup>27</sup> she affirms, “The epistolary experience, as distinguished from the autobiographical, is a reciprocal one. The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him” (Altman 88).

But if a novel composed of letters does not indicate the letter writer’s desire to be affected by her readers, Altman argues, the novel is not actually epistolary. In truth, “if there is no desire for exchange [in the novel], the writing does not differ significantly

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<sup>27</sup> Please see Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1982). Altman states that “Epistolary mythology tends to locate power with the reader . . . . The external reader’s experience is partially governed by the presence of his internal counterpart” (111). Even so, Altman clarifies that epistolary works give *more* power to the reader than do other kinds of fiction.

from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of a letter” (Altman 89). And the same criteria could be applied to Emma’s letters in *Memoirs*, only to find them—although not the novel itself<sup>28</sup> —“not actually epistolary” in nature. In sync with the oppressive way that Emma sympathizes, Emma’s letters generally treat her correspondents’ own perspectives as viewpoints that should be rejected. For evidence of this, we only have to glance at the strongly worded rebuttals that Emma provides to those that interpret her predicament differently than she does, rebuttals that wind to a forcefulness calculated to preclude the adoption of views other than her own. While deferring to Mr. Francis’ belief in women’s capability (which she herself advocates), Emma yet chastises him for “mockery,” inquiring: “Why call woman, miserable, oppressed, and impotent, woman—*crushed, and then insulted*—why call her to *independence*—which not nature, but the barbarous and accursed laws of society, have denied her?” (Hays, *Memoirs* 173). While a reader may agree with Emma’s arguments and understand her anger, the rhetoric in her letters that leaves next-to-no room for debate chafes uneasily against the expectations of the epistolary novel.<sup>29</sup>

If we acknowledge the imperfect parallels within the comparison, Emma’s letters might yet be understood as playing the role of “gothic double” to radical works, such as *Memoirs* itself. The double developed the capacity in England to mean “two persons who strikingly resemble each other” in the 1790s, with the publication of the novel

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<sup>28</sup> The novel is rightly labeled epistolary by many critics. For example, see Tilottama Rajan, “Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays’ ‘Memoirs of Emma Courtney,’” *Romanticism, History and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature, 1789-1837*. Eds. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge, UK: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 216.

<sup>29</sup> Actual letters, of course, are not expected to follow the conventions of the epistolary novel—they can seek as much or as little of their listener’s opinion as they choose. But in the context of an epistolary novel, Emma’s letters are thrown into striking contrast with the epistolary genre’s goal of inviting readers’ active, multifaceted reactions to ideas that are expressed, as theorized by Altman and Jeanne Britton. See also Jeanne Britton, “Translating Sympathy by the Letter: Henry Mackenzie, Sophie de Condorcet, and Adam Smith,” *Eighteenth Century Fiction* (22.1): 72-96.

*Geraldina* (1798) (Daffron 77), while the gothic double can be defined as “the essential duality within a single character on the further presumption that the duality centers on the polarity of good and evil” (Strengell). Without question, Emma’s letters are not characters who “strikingly resemble” other characters. However, since Emma’s letters function from within *Memoirs* in an anti-epistolary way, they represent false replicas of real revolutionary texts, operating as a clue that oppressive impulses may sometimes be found in so-called radical works. Like gothic doubles that illuminate a disturbing duality within characters, Emma’s letters exemplify the negative potential lurking inside a “good” cause—the Jacobin movement. From this perspective, Emma’s letters convey a warning against polemics that don’t fully deliver, while implying that perhaps Jacobinism can’t help but breed disquieting copies of itself.

### **The Murderous Power of Sympathy-Little Emma’s Gothic Death:**

Through the death of a character I have not yet introduced, Emma’s child by her husband Mr. Montague, we come to perhaps the most gothic event in the novel. With this event, *Memoirs* explicitly acknowledges that sympathy can be harmful and that trying to follow through on multiple reformist endeavors may be unfeasible for the reader. The mature Emma sympathizes deeply with her daughter, little Emma, and, like Augustus Jr., little Emma—raised with Augustus Jr.—is basically a replica of her mother.<sup>30</sup> According to Rajan, little Emma is “the generic female child, who passes almost unnoticed in the sentimental idyll that encases her, [and who] functions as a part-object on which Hays vents her ambivalence about the obligatory reproduction of woman as mother” (“Dis-Figuring Reproduction” 213). But her demise also has a further

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<sup>30</sup> The sympathetic ties that apply to Emma’s relationship with Augustus Jr. also apply in exactly the same way to her relationship with little Emma; both children are raised together under Emma’s care. See Hays, *Memoirs*, 218-219.

implication, for Hays eradicates Emma's daughter just as she would have been able to marry Augustus Jr. and produce descendants. This would have signaled the extension of Hays' reformist philosophies far into the distance of future generations (*Memoirs* 219, 220). *Memoirs* instead nullifies this possibility, overtly critiquing colonizing sympathy as it clashes with a Jacobin understanding of what shared experience should be. In other words, little Emma's passing signifies how such sympathy can destroy distinct subjectivity, cancelling out the effects of other impressions beyond Emma's perspective, and—because of sympathy's position as a mechanism of gender and genre reform that contradicts with Jacobin philosophy—how reformist endeavors can end in death-like impasse. Little Emma's death, on this wider scale, therefore, registers the potential impossibility of expansive socio-political transformation during Hays' moment, or the difficulty of keeping alive multi-pronged revolutionary platforms without a major paradigm shift that may not be possible to enact.

Because little Emma is destroyed, the text gestures towards an incestuous marriage—a potential brother-sister union—that, in its absence, signifies the conundrum of establishing reform through a self-replication that abolishes individual autonomy. The possibility of the marriage is crushed under the weight of its Russian doll effect; the union of Emma's extensions would theoretically only breed more Emmas. In the mature Emma's description of the event, little Emma herself is “killed off” by rhetoric that refuses her individuality, signaling the damaging nature of colonizing sympathy and its clash with a Jacobin philosophy of reform. As Emma laments her daughter's loss, deeply painful due to the sympathy that bound little Emma to herself and Augustus Jr., she calls little Emma “*your* little Emma and mine” (my emphasis, Hays, *Memoirs* 219). Little

Emma then disappears into the metaphor of a sickly flower, as a “lovely and fragile blossom . . . blighted by a killing frost” (Hays, *Memoirs* 219), her mother’s poetic sentence eradicating the girl behind the image. And all the more chillingly, these concrete depictions of the damaging potential of sympathy in the novel are superseded by Emma’s assertions that reform will inevitably come, propelled by the Augustus Jr.s of tomorrow. The assurance of the novel’s final page clarifies that the lure of “reform” at any cost, for some, may be too attractive to censure too harshly. But the potential for real reform is nullified in the text, as the means of social and literary transformation showcased in *Memoirs* is characterized as nothing more than a mirage.

However, despite the novel’s near complete lack of faith in socio-political reform and in sympathy’s role in enacting it, *Memoirs* does imply something subtly encouraging about literary depictions of mother-child relationships: that textual representations of the excessively passionate, sympathetic mother may one day become history. This point may seem counterintuitive, considering my analyses of Emma’s colonizing relationships with her children. Yet, because of the novelistic context in which Hays embeds Emma’s sympathy for Augustus Jr. and little Emma—since Emma’s oppressive perspective is exemplified by how she sympathizes with her children as characters—*Memoirs* implies that colonizing sympathy is not inherently linked to the “naturally” overly-emotional makeup of mothers. Instead, the novel infers that oppressive maternal sympathy stems from a learned, flawed mode of reading children—of interpretation that leads to projection. Therefore, the novel subtly points the way forward towards other texts that seek to explore different means of configuring close mother-child relationships. It leaves room for other authors, such as Felicia Hemans, to consider if the story of colonizing

mother-child sympathy might someday have another ending, although defining that ending poses a problem. And in using a contemporary mother-child relationship to deeply problematize a program of reform that appears quite promising on the surface, the dynamics of *Memoirs* anticipate the ethics of refusal that emerges in several of Hemans' poems within *Records of Woman*—the focus of my next chapter.



## Chapter 2: Colonizing Sympathy and Maternal Intimacy in Felicia Hemans’ “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” (1828)

By analyzing two poems in Felicia Hemans’ *Records of Woman*,<sup>31</sup> “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline, A Domestic Tale,” this chapter investigates Hemans’ exploration of ethical mother-child relations and ultimate turn towards an ethics of refusal. As my previous chapter demonstrates, Hays’ *Memoirs*’ signals that non-colonizing, mother-child sympathy might become the established norm when it implies that Emma’s acquired interpretive skills, rather than innate characteristics, are responsible for her treatment of Augustus Jr. In a similar vein, Hemans’ poems ask: can a reliable model of relating be developed for mothers so that they can achieve healthy intersubjective relationships with their children, even when filled with feelings of loss and possession?

For Hemans, the answer is, partially, yes—her poems critique and offer an alternative to a paradigm of sympathy esteemed in her culture. First, in “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” Hemans depicts an ideal model for achieving non-colonizing sympathy developed by Adam Smith as difficult for mothers to emulate. She then offers her own altered, Smithian-based template for achieving maternal intimacy in “Madeline, a Domestic Tale.” In this poem, intimacy allows the mother character to experience strong emotion while respecting a distinction between herself and child. While Smith wants sympathizers to disconnect as much as possible from their own perspectives—to judge

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<sup>31</sup> When analyzing poems in *Records of Woman*, I used the versions published in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, Ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

their feelings through the viewpoint of an “impartial spectator” and to temper their emotions according to this perspective—Hemans’ poems suggest that there is a more viable alternative to oppressive maternal sympathy. “Madeline” presumes that if mothers imagine relating to their children in the future, they could overcome their oppressive feelings towards their offspring. If mothers were able to perceive that their *own* consciousnesses shift perpetually, they could also sense that their children’s consciousnesses are constantly in flux—that their children’s consciousnesses cannot be comprehended from moment to moment and treated as extensions of their own consciousnesses.

Moreover, the model of intimacy that Hemans establishes also comments on her audience’s relationship to her poetry, in the context of Romantic-era readers’ fervent personal investment in Hemans’ work and even sense of ownership over her verses. In conversation with “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” “Madeline” contends that ethical intimacy may help transform readers’ feelings of possession over Hemans’ verses—feelings based on individual experiences and expectations—into literary engagements that are highly personal *and* perceptive, more receptive to the complex connotations of the work.

However, while Hemans critiques Smith’s model of sympathy for rendering idealized sympathy out of the reach of most mothers, she implies the limits of her own model of intimacy through a violent event in “Madeline.” Violence in “Indian Woman” has long troubled critics,<sup>32</sup> and in “Madeline” the convenient death of Madeline’s

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<sup>32</sup> The question revolves around whether the violence in “Indian Woman” is more critiqued than lauded, according to the purpose of the poem. In *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic*, Julie Kipp argues that infanticide in “Indian Woman’s Death Song” critiques patriarchal society and “the very nature of sympathy itself” since death is the only way of maintaining it—violence is presented

husband—crucially affecting the mother-child relationship—complicates the idea that this model of intimacy can always act as a cure for oppressive sympathy. “Madeline” indicates that mothers can find healthier ways of relating to their children than offered by standard Smithian sympathy<sup>33</sup>, with implications for how readers interact with Hemans’ poetry, but that upholding any single model of relating as a given solution to colonizing maternal sympathy is short sighted and dangerous. Ultimately, the ethics Hemans supports most in this poem is intimacy in its most capacious sense, intimacy as an umbrella term that acknowledges the possibility of different levels of attachment at different moments, even in a single relationship. This definition of intimacy includes the potential for salubrious, mother-child closeness, while acknowledging that persons’ ever-transforming subjectivities render particular affinities between individuals shifting and unsustainable. By championing this definition of intimacy, “Madeline” suggests that any single paradigm of intersubjectivity may not be able to maintain healthy mother-child relations and advocates for an ethics of refusal.

### **The Critical Landscape of Intimacy and Ethically Intimate Readers:**

According to Nancy Yousef’s study of intimacy in the Romantic era, intimacy “refers both to what is closely held and personal and to what is deeply shared with

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as entirely devastating (91). Kathleen Lundeen, however, emphasizes that Hemans “ennobles an act of violence, a form of conduct unsanctioned by English society, in order to valorize by proxy her own unspeakable desire” (89), her own longing to be heard. See Kathleen Lundeen, “Who Has the Right to Feel? The Ethics of Literary Sympathy,” *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Culture, Ethics and Literary Theory*. Eds. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville, VA: University Publications of Virginia, 2001). See also my wider discussion of Lundeen’s, Sharifah Aishah Osman’s, and Jason Rudy’s interpretations of infanticide in the poem later on in the chapter.

<sup>33</sup> Smith’s understanding of sympathy was complex, and he theorized different types of sympathy, such as conditional sympathy. Rae Greiner notes that “on occasion, we can have what Smith tantalizingly calls ‘conditional sympathy,’ an acknowledgement that *if* we ‘took time to consider [the other’s] situation’ we *would* sympathize—and yet, we do not . . .” (19). See Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). But even so, Smith’s model of the “ideal spectator” was pretty standardized. See footnote five for more on the ideal spectator.

others” (1). Similarly, in the context of the poems I explore in *Records of Woman*, it is understood most concretely as an intense, difficult to maintain connection between individuals—a connection that recognizes strong individual emotion, but which conserves some separation between relating parties, as exhibited in “Madeline” when the daughter’s individual identity and life remain intact. Whereas sympathy is so often fraught with the weight of how the sympathizer might impose similitude upon the sympathized-with entity, intimacy provides a sense of closeness and particularity for both subjectivities without this pressure.

For some contemporary critics, such as Lauren Berlant, intimacy can also encompass a much wider range of attachments than sympathy, connections as slight as when strangers smile at one another on the street, or, alternatively, strong feelings between close family members, or even a shared sense of attachment that involves many people. Berlant’s emphasis on intimacy’s *range* of attachments resonates with how the two Hemans poems I focus on present people’s interpersonal relationships as always in flux, resulting in the experience of a range of attachments even within a given relationship. However, whereas Berlant is not interested in intimacy as an ethical force—as, in and of itself, either a “positive” or “negative” mode of interacting for any of parties involved—Hemans’ understanding of maternal intimacy diverges from Berlant’s in this regard. The range of attachments intimacy signals renders it open, for Berlant, to describing contradictory relationships—the worst of sympathy included. Berlant’s works on intimacy argues that the “intimacy of daily life” includes the dynamics of “people [who] want to be overwhelmed and omnipotent, caring and aggressive known and incognito” (5). Intimacy in “Madeline” does not gesture toward such extremes,

considering its investment in thinking through an “ethical” model of maternal intimacy. And the poems I explore in this chapter imply that the ability to acknowledge that fluctuating desires shape relationships is an essential part of healthy intersubjectivity that refuses colonization of either party in the relationship.

Whereas Berlant characterizes intimacy as ephemeral and does not link intimacy directly to ethics (1, 2), “Indian Woman’s Death-Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” suggest that intimacy is ephemeral and that another being cannot be understood beyond the moment—or colonized—because everyone is always changing. More in line with Hemans’ focus on ethical intimacy and intimacy’s ephemeral nature than Berlant’s criticism, Yousef argues that for writers ranging from Coleridge to Austen, “Romantic forms of intimacy involve dwelling in and on phenomenal grounds where sympathetic fellowship and mutual respect emerge as ideals, even occasionally as exceptional achievements, but never as stable, sustainable modes of relational experience” (Yousef 23). Intimacy for Youself is about a variety of fluctuating, potentially rewarding and healthy connections, which are ever shifting. And for Hemans, such connections are incapable of being described or prescribed by a singular paradigm. In other words, if everyone is always changing, intimacy is also about ever-changing attachments in plural, rather than *a* specific mode of relating—a point that helps us understand why “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” ultimately seems to refuse to set up its own mode of intimacy as “the” model.

The two poems that I explore in this chapter are also implicitly interested in how readers hone their subjectivities through the process of reading and becoming attached to published poetry—public works of art that sold numerous copies—and how readers

retain a sense of strong personal ownership and even authorship over these works. In the Hemans poems discussed in this chapter, the sense of authorship on the part of the reader is understood as a barrier to the reader's potential appreciation of the intricacies of Hemans' poetry. As we shall see, the reader reads the text and fills it up with her own thoughts and feelings (similar to how Humeian sympathy functions for readers identifying with characters in novels). The reader defines herself through the work and, yet, remains impervious to dynamics unrelated to her own emotions. In response to this mode of reading, Hemans briefly imagines conditions that could allow for an intimacy between reader and poem that would transform the reader's reaction to the text to an engagement that is equally passionate and thoughtful, more receptive to the nuances of Hemans' poetry. This kind of intimacy, according to "Madeline, a Domestic Tale," might enable readers to experience a textual attachment that balances the desire to build one's "private" subjectivity through poetry with an understanding that poetry might have something to say about things other than the individual reader. Thus, Hemans' model of intimacy in "Madeline, a Domestic Tale," points to what could be labeled a more ethical relation to poetry, in that the intimacy modeled in "Madeline" should have the decolonizing effect on readers' interactions with poetry described above.

### **Sympathy and Hemans—a Complicated Marriage:**

While I focus on intimacy in Hemans' work—a product of her critique of sympathy—Hemans' writings seemed to her contemporaries to be all about sympathy. In the *Edinburgh Review*, her poems are by credited by Francis Jeffrey with creating images that generate the reader's sympathy with the "whole visible universe" by making the animate and inanimate alike seem lifelike and warranting of an emotional attachment

(552). Yet, what constitutes the “poetic genius” that is responsible for Hemans’ ability to enact sympathy varies according to critic. In the *Monthly Review* (1823), Hemans is praised for her “poetic feeling” in the long dramatic poem *The Siege of Valencia*, through which she “transfer[s the high romantic character of . . . old poetry] into her elegant and polished verse with great fidelity and happiness” (541). While she is lauded in this review for her fidelity to the character of earlier verse—for inspiring her contemporaries to sympathize with and appropriate the heroic spirit of the hero, the Cid—her capacity to generate sympathy is dependent for others on her ability to selectively tailor her depictions, to leave out certain details. In the *Edinburgh Review*, Hemans and other women writers, such as Maria Edgeworth and Amelia Opie, are admired for both their “unerring truth of delineation”—their penetration into the hearts of other persons—and their ability to withhold details that are not suitable for generating sympathy, such as the “revolting or extravagant excesses” of people from previous ages (Jeffrey 551, 552). This merger of truth and calculatedness that the production of sympathy in poetry rested upon makes one wonder, is it possible to chart the experience of sympathy by a model of sympathy any less fraught?

On one hand, the creation of sympathy in verse rests on the writer’s reserve, on the facility to possess “the feelings of a *spectator* rather than that of a *sufferer*,” according to a review of Hemans’ work in *The British Review and London Critical Journal* (532). From this angle, the feelings of a spectator enable the poet’s sense of distance from her characters and her capacity to paint a more controlled image of the scenes that she imagines. But on the other hand, according to *The British Critic*, truly talented women are credited with the propensity to be successful poets, and to move their readers to

sympathy, because of their ability to feel: “A woman is so much more a creature of passion than man; her virtues and her failings flow so much more directly and visibly from the impulse of affection.” In the viewpoint of this review, “woman’s” passion unites “thoughts and feelings” so that her poetry is marked with a “vividness and reality” that men cannot achieve (538-539). Considering the alternative and often clashing ways that Hemans’ work was judged, as well as reviews’ explicit and implicit emphasis on sympathy within their judgments, it seems logical that Hemans’ work would explore contradictions that unsettle the production of sympathy between characters and investigate other forms of intersubjectivity, such as intimacy.

### **Critical Approaches to Hemans’ Poetry:**

This chapter’s focus on mother-child sympathy and intimacy in “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline” builds on scholarship exploring Hemans’ interest in the constructed nature of subjectivity and the ideological tensions on which subjectivity and intersubjectivity are founded. Gary Kelly approaches subjectivity in *Records of Woman* from a gendered and explicitly political angle, arguing that Hemans applies the concept of “meaningful death” to merge different “representations of subjectivity” and develop the “domestic” female liberal subject—not “courtly,” not “plebian,” and as noble a defender of freedom any man—during a period when the individual’s political significance was being newly defined (“Death and the Matron” 196, 198). While, like Kelly’s work, this chapter is invested in Hemans’ exploration of empowering female subjectivities, its interest in Hemans’ critique of ideal Smithian sympathy shares more with Susan Wolfson’s scholarship on female subjectivity in Hemans’ work. Wolfson looks at tensions within constructions of female subjectivity in Hemans’ poetry. She



highlights Hemans' use of female "Byronic heroes" to demonstrate the conflict between "proper" femininity and valor in Byron's work, and to show the social and material consequences for female characters who adopt characteristics of "male" subjectivities ("Hemans and the Romance" 156). Wolfson's thoughts on Hemans correspond with Tricia Lootens', who also suggests that Hemans' work thrives by exploring tensions—that its force "seems to derive from its erratic course among and through contradictions" (qtd. in Wolfson xvi, Introduction, *Felicia Hemans*).

No scholarship that I am aware of, however, has analyzed the way that Hemans investigates sympathy and intimacy within her depictions of mother-child relations. Her work unsettles the concept of stable identity while both employing and interrogating poetry's capacity to offer readers viable models of relating, and to imagine conditions that could create more ethical—by Hemans' standards—readers of her poetry. Since "Indian Woman" and "Madeline" together reject colonizing sympathy and model intimacy *while* exposing the limits of the model, my work provides a different perspective on Hemans' interest in literary models than that offered by Brian Elliott in his work on her ekphrastic poetry. Elliott discovers a Hemans whose descriptions of artworks "create objects of contemplation that are ciphers . . . [which] open up the possibility of intensely personal investment" on the part of the reader, and a Hemans who illustrates maternal sacrifice or a woman's abandonment as "the basis of a 'proper' response, modeled by the poem's speaker" (26). While Elliott's general reading of Hemans' ekphrastic poetry is highly compelling, my work underlines a side of Hemans' poetry that complicates this image of a philosophical poet who offers clear instructions to

the reader. I instead depict a writer whose work remains wary of wholly advocating a proper way of responding to another's feelings.

Possibly most directly related to my argument about "ethical" subjectivity in "Madeline, a Domestic Tale," but with less of an emphasis on gender, is Diego Saglia's understanding of how identity in Hemans' *The Domestic Affections* is partially posited as a fractured experience bound to ever-changing acoustic landscapes that remind the reader of her own transient, multifaceted subjectivity. Yet, these poems, according to Saglia, also emphasize the value of "voices rooted in culture, history" that defy "the mystical sounds of the transcendental dimension or the silence of death," and implicitly serve as an anchor for the self amidst the subject's sense of loss and multiplicity (371). This analysis of subjectivity and contentions in *The Domestic Affections* runs parallel with my interest in shifting consciousness in *Records*, and with my reading of Hemans' refusal to fully endorse its alternative to Smithian sympathy while, yet, still emphasizing the benefits of mother-child intimacy over oppressive sympathy. However, along with the obvious divergences between our chosen foci, my reading differs from Saglia's in demonstrating that transient, fractured subjectivity in Hemans' work is not necessarily something that requires a counterweight, but is instead a perspective that can be harnessed to potentially enact healthier ways for mothers to interact with their children.

It is Helen Luu's scholarship that most capaciously explores Hemans' concern with the constructed nature of the self and shows how *Records* depicts the self as unknowable to others—a concept that is integral to Hemans' turn away from colonizing sympathy toward less oppressive mode(s) of relating. Luu demonstrates that *Records* theorizes female subjectivity as seemingly natural, but really, as culturally constructed,

and that our culturally constructed understanding of others tells us little about what others are actually thinking. Through slight shifts in grammar, “The narrator [of poems in *Records*] is frequently debarred from the characters’ subjectivities,” Luu suggests, “and precisely at the moment the reader desires it most: at the height of her characters’ emotional and psychological distress” in Hemans’ verses (44). While Luu focuses mainly on the social production of the gendered self in Hemans’ collection, Luu’s work implicitly supports my analysis of interpersonal relations in *Records*. If *Records* configures gendered subjectivity as socially constructed and others as ultimately inaccessible, then it is fitting that “Indian Woman” rejects potentially oppressive sympathy—fraught with the sympathizer’s so-called knowledge of the other—and that “Madeline” is ultimately wary about prescribing a model of healthy mother-child intimacy, experienced by perpetually shifting and ultimately illusive persons.

True, critics still view sympathy as one of the main subjects of Hemans’ poetry, and with good reason. Brandy Ryan argues that Hemans’ elegy to her predecessor Mary Tighe “explore[s] the values of sorrow, suffering, and sympathy that she and the women poets who follow her will circulate, exchange, and negotiate,” creating an imaginative sympathetic community in the process (251). Being able to experience sympathy through reading Hemans’ poetry was crucial not only to her contemporary critics, but also to other readers, including women writers of her period. In a letter that Joanna Baillie wrote to Hemans on May 11, 1827, Baillie is spurred by depictions of a lush, free American nation in *The Forest Sanctuary* to “sympathize in the feelings” that imagining being “taken into the arms” of such a country must generate within Hemans’ heart (543). However, although much of Hemans’ poetry works to produce sympathy between reader

and character or reader and author, several of her major works leading up to *Records* also address tensions between perspectives that render sympathy almost unimaginable. They also explore other modes of relating, including their own versions of intimacy. A brief look at these works will provide some context, helping us better understand Hemans' treatment of sympathy and intimacy in "Indian Woman's Death Song" and "Madeline, a Domestic Tale."

### **Sympathy and Intimacy in *The Siege of Valencia* and *The Forest Sanctuary*:**

In Hemans' long dramatic poem, *The Siege of Valencia* (1823),<sup>34</sup> sympathy between characters does not even appear as a remote possibility in the present climate. Amongst the backdrop of a terrible war, in a society that values the honor of family name at great cost to the living, this poem grapples with the pain of feeling trapped inside one's own emotions and the distance between characters that hold wildly diverging viewpoints about life's worth. The main female protagonist Elmina—the mother of two sons—reconciles with her husband Gonzalez, the Governor of Valencia, only when faced with his death. Elmina, who is devastated because Gonzalez allows the Moors to kill their sons to save his legacy from shame, is incapable of moving her husband to pity her—"to be sorry for" or to experience "compassion" for her (*Oxford English Dictionary*)—until it is clear that Gonzalez will perish and Elmina will be left without the comfort of her children and husband. When Elmina attempts to relinquish Valencia to its enemies, she does attain her daughter Ximena's pity, (a crucial emotion in this work that deserves its

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<sup>34</sup> This analysis refers to the version of *The Siege of Valencia* published in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, Ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 177-230. In this version from the Houghton Library, Wolfson clarifies that "Ximena is more militant, Elmina gives fuller voice to maternal claims and values, including a critique of the masculine culture of glory, and Gonsalvo (Gonzalez) is more internally conflicted about the claims of honor over affection" in comparison with other drafts (177). *The Forest Sanctuary* and the rest of the Hemans poems referred to in this chapter are also from Wolfson's edition.

own study). However, only a mother's affection is rendered trustworthy and lasting in this poem, and all Elmina's children perish. Early on in the work, Elmina stresses that interpersonal ties, beyond a mother's love, are often artful rather than genuine—that “there are faces, skillful to put on / The look we trust in—and 'tis mockery all!” (Hemans, *The Siege of Valencia*, Scene I, 426-427).

Indeed, the poem's overarching point is that interpersonal relationships are bound to be vexed within a society that values the defense of honor above earthly love. Transitory moments of what can be called intimacy do foster interesting connections, however. For instance, intimacy at least offers Elmina a short glance into the priest Hernandez's feelings and the sense that not only she suffers the agony of parental loss. When Elmina seeks aid for her sons from the Hernandez, the experience ends in failure, but not without Elmina's exposure of her anguish, Hernandez's clarification that he too, has experienced the loss of his son,<sup>35</sup> and his gaining of Elmina's pity—the product of their confidence. Hernandez does not know why he feels compelled to tell his story to Elmina, but he and Elmina do divulge their sorrows to one another, although the experience ends in anger and does not enable Elmina to save her sons (Hemans, *The Siege of Valencia*, Scene II, 327-430). Within the poem's focus on violence and disconnection, however, Elmina's conversation with Hernandez suggests that even those who hold deeply contrasting perspectives may be capable of briefly appreciative encounters—significant within such a volatile environment. While the text certainly critiques a hierarchy of values that holds honor much higher than maternal love, this

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<sup>35</sup> His loss, however, was the result of his son becoming a traitor, only to fight and be killed by his father in battle.

work also investigates interpersonal engagement void of sympathy's expectations about closeness and similitude.

*The Forest Sanctuary* (1825) also demonstrates Hemans' interest in exploring different paradigms of relating within a text focused on extreme "mental conflicts" (Hemans, advertisement 269). In this poem, the sixteenth-century protagonist escapes with his child from the Spanish Inquisition to America, having lost his friend to the fire and his wife on the journey over. At various points, while his love for his child remains strong, the text highlights the main character's deviating levels of connection with the others he encounters. When he remembers his experiences in Spain, we learn that he felt strangely detached from the victims of the Inquisition he was about to see burned, that he "marked its victims with a tearless eye" as they "moved before [him] as pictures, wrought / Each to reveal a secret of man's thought, / On the sharp edge of sad morality" (Hemans, *The Forest Sanctuary*, Part I, XXII, 193-195). In the same section of the poem, however he is extremely moved by two sisters he knows and who become victims, but whose exact emotions are pointedly beyond his reach, and thus guarded from misplaced claims of sympathy. It is "some sustaining passion's wave" that held Theresa up as she faced death, but not one of which he can be certain (Part I, XXXVI, 320).

Yet, the protagonist remembers in his younger days feeling as connected to his best friend, Alvar, as he felt he was to God, and thus a deep sympathy bound them early on (Part I, XXIII, 201-202). Connections between subjects, in the poem's view, can be partial and meaningful, or intense and transient, or simultaneously close and disconnected. While the thoughts and feelings of others are rendered inaccessible to the protagonist during certain moments in the text, during other moments thoughts and

feelings are *too* easily accessible. Once the protagonist has become a dissenter from Catholicism, for example, he must “make a shield” to disguise his “inward being” from those who do not believe, including his wife Leonor. Even while love remains, knowledge of the other does not necessarily lead to sympathy—for the main character and his wife, “Silence rose up where hearts no hope could share” (Part II, XXXVIII, 336; XLV, 420). Unsurprisingly, it is only Leonor’s death that brings love pure of difference, —“A thing all heavenly!—cleared from that which hung / As a dim cloud between us, heart and mind!” (Part II, LXVII, 611-612). Sustained affection based on perfect sympathy is impossible in this vexed life, but we are left, it seems, with a range of intersubjective modes that enrich and complicate our experiences. Such connections point us towards the reality that intimacy—in its broadest sense—is the fabric of life. The conversation in *Records* between “Indian Woman” and “Madeline” is informed by these long dramatic works, for intimacy in these two poems is dependent on the idea that interpersonal relations are ever shifting. Unlike their lengthy predecessors, however, these poems closely investigate the mechanics of *how* interpersonal relations may or may not be achieved, while imagining, and, in the end, destabilizing their vision of an intimacy that would allow Hemans’ readers to feel deeply engaged with her poetry and maintain a critical distance from it.

**Felicia Hemans’ Critique of the Impartial Spectator in “Indian Woman’s Death Song”:**

Writing indirectly about Hemans in *The History of a Nonchalant* (1830), her friend and fellow writer Maria Jewsbury suggested that “there was no room in her [Hemans’] mind for philosophy” (561). However, as is apparent from the critics I have

already discussed, scholars continue to add rich layers to the proof that this assumption is wrong, as will my reading of “Indian Woman’s Death Song.” Nanora Sweet and Kate Singer theorize “a speculative Hemans weaving her way through various topoi, genres, forms and influences” (1-2), and such a Hemans is reflected in the way that “Indian Woman” considers an established theory of sympathy in poetic form. In the space of these verses, Hemans critiques Adam Smith’s model of sympathy, interrogating Smith’s concept of the “impartial spectator.”

Adam Smith’s model of sympathy and theory of the “impartial spectator” are formulated in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>36</sup> That work, while often positive about sympathy’s effects, suggests that sympathy could corrupt the unities it generates. As in Hume’s model of sympathy, individuals imagine rather than actually experience the emotions of others.<sup>37</sup> As the restraints between individuals are broken, “We sometimes

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<sup>36</sup> Smith’s theories lived on during the Romantic era, and the impartial spectator was often referred to in literature of the period. In a 1785 translation of Dante’s *Inferno*, for example, Henry Boyd suggests that, to understand God’s punishment of the Devil and his angels, we must consider “how general rules of morality come first to be formed . . . Self love can only be corrected [in ourselves] by the eyes of an impartial spectator” (220-221). See *A Translation of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, Henry Boyd, A.M., Vol. 1 (London, 1785). Furthermore, in William Godwin’s *St. Leon*, the narrator uses the concept to indicate the admirable sensibility of his daughters. He explains, “My daughters received the intelligence of my death with a decorum and sensibility, which in the eyes of every impartial spectator, would have reflected honor on their characters, a sensibility beyond what could have been imagined in daughters who now have not seen their father for twelve years” (39). See William Godwin, *St. Leon: a Tale of the Sixteenth Century*. By William Godwin. In *Four Volumes*, Vol. 4 (G.G. and J. Robinson: London, 1799). Present critics, such as Jean Britton, affirm more generally that Romantic-era writers were invested in appropriating and interrogating Smith’s theorization of sympathy. See, for instance, Britton’s argument in “Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” *Studies in Romanticism* (48.1): 3-22.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Lamb’s analysis of how sympathy functions in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* complicates this reading. Lamb points to Smith’s attestation that “Sympathy . . . cannot be regarded as a selfish principle . . . though sympathy is very properly said to arise from an imaginary change of situations with the person chiefly concerned” (*The Evolution* 8). This is because sympathy, in Lamb’s gloss of Smith, actually places one “inside” the other: hence, “this imaginary change is supposed to happen to me in the person and character of the person with whom I sympathize” (*The Evolution* 9). See Jonathan Lamb, *The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009). But, still, I would argue that even while Smith emphasizes the change of persons and characters that sympathy instigates (late in his treatise), the sense of an individual imagination through which the concept of *me* is generated still stands at the root of this change. In other words,



feel for another a passion which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from reality” (Smith 12). Thus, unable to break away entirely from our own perspectives, we can experience too intensely our own feelings at the expense of the emotions of others, even while imagining ourselves in their shoes.<sup>38</sup>

Smith offers one solution to this problem: considering one’s own feelings and actions through the eyes of an “impartial spectator,” and tailoring one’s feelings and actions to match the impartial spectator’s perspective. In sum, “if, when we place ourselves in the situation of [an impartial spectator], our own actions [and emotions], appear to us under agreeable aspect . . . we must . . . be pleased with our own behavior” (Smith 208). Imagining both myself and the object of my sympathy through the eyes of the “impartial spectator” detaches me from myself. I am shown if I carry too much intense personal emotion into my imagined experience of another’s feelings. If I do, I should regulate my feelings so that they correspond to the feelings of the “impartial spectator.”

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the experience of a separate person with a separate imagination still drives this imagined inhabitation of another’s “person and character.” As I see it, therefore, while Smith attempts here to argue that sympathy is selfless, his assertion cannot dismantle one darker implication of his theorization: the propensity for the passionate self to color its experience of another’s “person and character” with its own sense of intense emotions.

<sup>38</sup> James Chandler argues that Smith’s “projection sympathy,” in which we experience “what *we* would feel in the situation” of another, rather than the actual “feelings of another, [the sympathized object],” was not considered as dangerous as the experience of actually feeling the emotions of another. Chandler writes, “the more the contagious element in sympathy is emphasized, the less the regulatory function can be counted on” (147-148). See James Chandler, “Placing the Power of Sympathy,” Ed. Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano. *The Atlantic Enlightenment* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub. Co, 2008). However, as “Indian Woman’s Death Song” will suggest and as the dynamics of Smith’s theory intimate, the ability to regulate emotion cannot necessarily be associated with projection sympathy; the potential to project the self’s passions onto *another* seems, in certain situations, as difficult to regulate as the ability to ward off the feelings of the sympathized-with-entity.

Inheritors of Smith's philosophy acknowledged the difficulty of actually marshaling the "impartial spectator" during moments of intense feeling. For example, Karen Valihora argues that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) "emphasizes . . . illusion and absorption, and so stages a major challenge to [Smith's impartial spectator, to] . . . the idea of, or possibilities for, disinterestedness" (90). Indeed, even Smith at one point acknowledges that for the passionate individual attempting to assume a detached perspective "can produce nothing but vain regret" (221). This difficulty of achieving a perspective of disinterestedness had a special bearing on the mother-child relationship, the subject of "Indian Woman." During the early nineteenth-century, the capacity to confuse the self with the other was especially associated with mothers because the mother-child relationship seemed to defy the boundaries between two separate bodies. Julie Kipp clarifies that if mothers' sympathized too *much* with their children, or, in the frame of Adam Smith's theory, projected their own personal emotions too strongly onto their children, their children might become poorly adjusted citizens. Even worse, poor and mistreated mothers, highly emotional in response to their own perilous situations, seemed likely to commit the ultimately paradoxical act of "sympathy," infanticide that would place their children out of misery's reach (Kipp 250). Yes, mothers were often considered exemplary sympathizers—living embodiments of the Madonna—but they were also typically characterized as more "naturally" passionate than men, more likely to lose track of where their own feelings began and ended. The capacity of a mother to adopt the impartial spectator's view would have appeared especially weak during the era, given her ostensibly volatile emotional make-up.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> To glimpse the customary expectation of the impassioned woman, we can briefly turn to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft locates the pervasive belief that

In “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” Hemans addresses the difficulty of seeing through the eyes of an impartial spectator, and draws upon cultural expectations about maternal feeling to make her point. By critiquing the viability of attaining the vantage point of an impartial spectator during moments of intense passion, “Indian Woman” underscores the suspicion that sympathizers risk constructing unbridled, phantasmic representations of others if there is no way to check their emotions.

Depicting in her poem someone with a disastrously speculative perspective, Hemans constructs a mother who feels “too much” for her daughter—a parent who is unable to adopt a disinterested vantage point from which to assess her own feelings, and who consequently projects her own emotions onto her child as she sympathizes. This mother is introduced by a “spectator,” a narrator who sets the scene of the poem—a figure who is a fixture in many of Hemans’ verses. However, unlike the narrators of Hemans’ other infanticide poems, “The Wife of Asdrubal” and “The Suliote Mother,” this spectator’s voice is distinctly separate from the narration in the poem’s main body. Instead, the voice stands alone, appearing solely as an initial presence. By crafting a narrator who enters the poem, reveals the Indian Woman’s present state of mind, and then disappears, Hemans focuses our attention on the text’s general lack of a potentially detached voice, and consequently, our inability to rely on such a viewpoint in the poem—an impartial spectator that would assess the crisis more neutrally than the protagonist. As Kathleen Lundeen observes, “the narrator’s voice appears to merge with the Native woman’s voice since there is no comment by the narrator after the Indian Woman

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women are more emotional, and thus, more irrational than men, and refutes this belief by arguing that “into similar inconsistencies [as women] are great men often led by their senses” (quod. in Wolfson, *Borderlines* 13). See Susan Wolfson, *Borderlines: the Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2006); but society, on the whole, was not in agreement with Wollstonecraft.

concludes her song” (91). However, does this action mean, as Lundeen argues, that “the reader is involuntarily implicated in . . . questionable empathy” (91), finding herself adopting a vantage point that enables her to understand and accept the Indian Woman’s actions? Because the mother’s actions are rendered so problematic by Hemans, I think the answer is more “no” than “yes.”

The poem’s first 15 lines establish a claustrophobic intersubjective dynamic, driven by the Indian Woman’s heartbreak, without the possibility of mediation. The Indian Woman’s husband has fallen in love with another. In ironic Byronic splendor,<sup>40</sup> the protagonist embarks with her infant daughter on a deathly canoe journey. Her act can be analyzed sympathetically as a heroic defiance of patriarchal strictures or the result of a tragically gender biased society. As Sharifah Aishah Osman demonstrates, this is one of several infanticide poems by Hemans that theorizes a “maternal nationalism [that] challenges ‘masculine’ notions of heroism based on military glory and political conquest through . . . [the] privileging of feminine psychological rebellion” (6). “Indian Woman,” “The Wife of Astrubal, and “The Suliote Mother” depict “ambivalent representation[s] of motherhood . . . [that] reflect her [Hemans’] implicit critique of a patriarchal culture that is so inherently oppressive as to make . . . women perceive death as a perverse ideal, and motherhood as synonymous with martyrdom” (Osman 6). But “Indian Woman’s Death Song” diverges from the other two poems. It implicitly suggests that the mother’s sympathetic perspective is as much of a problem as the more obvious trappings of

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<sup>40</sup> Wolfson argues that Hemans was “rethinking this infatuation [with a feminine idea that Byron could never realize] from a female point of view.” She contends, “Hemans sets her suicidal wife in a posture of Byronic heroism . . . [by] recas[ting] the famous stanza near the close of *Childe Harold*” (“Hemans and the Romance of Byron” 168). See Susan Wolfson, “Hemans and the Romance of Byron,” *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave, 2001).

patriarchal culture in “The Wife of Astrubal” and “The Suliote Mother.”<sup>41</sup> The mother is distinctly not being pursued by murdering Turks or Romans, but by personal pain that seems as if it might not automatically apply to her daughter’s situation. Adding to this, Jason Rudy argues that “Hemans’ demand that the ‘mind [be] the ruling power over passion hardly accords with the impulse to throw oneself over a cataract-and with one’s daughter, no less-because of a ‘wasting of the heart’” (560). Hemans’ *Records* actually advocates for the control of extreme feelings, Rudy suggests, and the Indian Woman’s fateful journey is therefore something to be criticized rather than lauded.

The poem’s meter and the Indian Woman’s lyrical outbursts reveal the protagonist’s inability to sympathize with her daughter, insofar as any future, imagined perspective of her child remains distinct from her own. Written in heptameter couplets like Chapman’s *Iliad*,<sup>42</sup> the poem introduces the Indian Woman’s infant as an entity trapped in the epic story of the mother’s own life. Focusing on the magnitude of her own pain, the Indian Woman sympathizes in her death song by confusing her own heart with her child’s. She addresses her infant: “Smile!—to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave thee not” (Hemans, “Indian Woman” 37). The mother initially marks her child as somewhat separate from herself via the word “thou,” noting the presence of an intimate relation that is not “me.” However, the following phrase, “my babe!”, is the first in a series of exclamations that mark the child’s conceived separateness as always momentary (Hemans, “Indian Woman” 36). When the mother refers to the babe as “born,” a birth the reader knows to be recent, this reference to the child is immediately succeeded by the

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<sup>41</sup> More aptly put, as we shall see, the poem critiques the concept of the impartial spectator that was expected to check the mother’s sympathy. Note, I do not mean to suggest that the poem is interested in laying personal blame on the Indian Woman (and actual mothers). Rather, the poem depicts the Indian Woman’s outlook negatively to argue that personal perspective can be as dangerous as war.

<sup>42</sup> See footnote 5 to the version of the poem printed in *Felicia Hemans*, Ed. Susan J. Wolfson, 379.

phrase “like me”—instantly propelling the reader from the daughter’s fresh existence back to the mother’s own oppressed perspective (Hemans, “Indian Woman” 36). Moreover, the babe, while sleeping, is told by the mother not to fear, because “She bears thee . . . [to a place] where the unkind one hath no power again to trouble sleep” (Hemans, “Indian Woman” 40-41). But while sleep, in actuality, is hardly a present concern of the slumbering child, it certainly is for the mother.

The more intensely she sings of lost love, the more the mother calls the stream to roll faster—to heave herself and her daughter into death. But death, here, is not only literal. The daughter’s potentially distinct identity is also extinguished (Hemans, “Indian Woman” 20-23). The Indian Woman’s viewpoint is perilously solipsistic. Within the context of the protagonist’s passionate state and the narrator-spectator’s early exit, it seems morbidly laughable to expect the mother to adopt an impartial spectator’s view. While later Victorian novelists, such as George Eliot, depicted Smithian sympathy as an imaginative encounter that has little to do with experiencing the feelings of the sympathized-with other, and everything to do with imagining the other’s thoughts and decisions amid her particular circumstances (Greiner 29), this poet keeps the power of passion squarely in the foreground of this sympathetic interaction. Emotion, for Hemans, is inevitably a main driver behind sympathetic encounters, shaping the way the other’s assumed thoughts and feelings are imagined by the sympathizer. By critiquing unbridled personal passion and, implicitly, the solution of the impartial spectator, Hemans’ poem suggests that it is necessary to reject Smithian sympathy. When “Indian Woman” strongly criticizes colonizing, speculative sympathy, but eliminates Smith’s solution

without providing an alternative, the poem leaves the reader with little confidence that Smith's model of sympathy is salvageable.

This poem's concerns speak to those raised by Wordsworth in the "The Discharged Soldier." In this poem, the narrator meets a desolate looking soldier along an isolated road. According to Adam Potkay, as the verses unfold, the "proprietary gaze [of the narrator] threatens to turn the other into the self" (55). When Wordsworth's "speaker . . . conced[es] that he has no real idea of what the other is thinking or feeling," however, the speaker responds to the threat that the gaze poses for the other by refusing to attempt to interpret the other's thoughts and feelings (Potkay 55). Realizing that he cannot actually access and understand the soldier's perspective, the speaker learns to abide by a different, more ethical mode of connecting—to acknowledge, respect, and willingly help the other despite the other's elusiveness. Emmanuel Levinas's theorization of "the face"—a visible sign of the other which defies actual knowledge—intimates how this type of exchange, which hard to grasp, works best: *because* of the other's otherness, "that face facing me, in its expression—in its mortality—summons me, demands, me, requires me . . ." (24). It is not knowledge of the other's thoughts and feelings, but rather the other's sheer humanity that calls us to respond. Clearly, the Indian Woman in Hemans' poem does not acknowledge her daughter's "face"—she has no sense of her daughter's potential difference from herself. But Hemans' critique of Smithian sympathy in "Indian Woman" shares something with Wordsworth's response to colonizing sympathy in "the Discharged Soldier." While Hemans' "Indian Woman" does not offer an alternative mode of interacting, its critique leaves open the possibility that less assuming models of mother-child relations might offer more ethical modes of interacting.

### **The Literary Implications of Colonizing Sympathy:**

We can also understand Hemans' "Indian Woman's Death Song" as a poem that comments on the downside—for the author—of writing poetry for readers that become deeply emotionally attached to texts and see them as their own. In the context of nineteenth-century readers of Hemans' poetry, we can visualize the "Indian Woman" as interrogating the tension surrounding the fact that the writer is able to engage her readers' feelings so fully.

"Indian Woman" is a poem that touches upon the problems, especially for a female writer of verses, of having an audience intensely emotionally connected to one's work. These are readers who whose subjectivities are constructed, in part, through the popular imagery within Hemans' verses. Hemans' works resonated intensely with the experiences of many Victorian women, such as the tragedy of losing a child, and, as Andrew Stauffer suggests, her poems were annotated, recited, and returned to by her readers year after year, becoming a "touchstone for personal grief" (378). Hemans' work was part of a larger movement of "nineteenth-century verse, that was predicated on its adaptability to readers' emotional lives, enacted via recitation, annotation, and other practices of investment" (Stauffer 373). Hemans' own process of writing the "Image in Lava," one of the "other poems" in the collection *Records of Woman: With Other Poems*, alludes to the reader's process of becoming deeply engrossed in a poem and making it hers. Hemans, Stauffer asserts, writes the "Image in Lava" after reading about the remains of the mother and child in Pompeii, and in coloring this poem so thoroughly with her own interpretation of the story and her own personal feelings, she models a reader's



“sentimental fill,” in which the reader brings to the poetry “an intense investment of personal emotion and imaginative elaboration” (375).

Hemans’ readers’ deep attachment to her poetry was essential to the significance and popularity of her work, and I agree with Stauffer’s observation that we should not simply state that “Hemans’ readers got it right for the wrong reasons: they admired her poetry while misunderstanding it . . .” (373). But at the same time, even while there is value in seeing that Hemans’ poetry served a crucial role in the emotional lives of her audience, I think that “Indian Woman” does allude to the worry that readers are for the most part unwilling to consider, or are simply unaware, that Hemans’ writings have much to say about anything beyond their own direct concerns—about poetic form, philosophy, and more.

There is a similarity between the actions of the Indian Woman and Hemans’ readers, which can be explained by turning back to the poem. We remember that in “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” the narrator opens the poem, sets the scene, and then departs, leaving most of the verses to the Indian Woman to sing. In the context of the retired narrator, the Indian Woman becomes the controlling perspective in the poem. The very movement from the narrator’s initial blank verse to the protagonist’s regulated rhymes that constitute over 60% of the poem<sup>43</sup> accentuates the Indian Woman’s status as the entity who takes charge of these verses, although not her own emotions. Not dissimilar from the process in which a nineteenth-century audience member absorbs and imbues Hemans’ verses with her own personal stamp, description and proscription blur as the Indian Woman grabs the reigns of the poem and cries: “Roll swiftly to the Spirit’s

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<sup>43</sup> Her lyric comprises 28 out of 43 lines.

land, thou mighty stream and free!” (16).<sup>44</sup> And comparable to how the Indian Woman intensely projects herself into her infant daughter, interpreting this child’s needs and desires as synonymous with her own, we have seen that Hemans’ readers often treated her poetry as extensions of their experiences over which they gained ownership. The Indian Woman’s infant daughter might be interpreted as a stand in for the reader’s “own” poem, wrested from Hemans’ control, if we consider the parallel between the Indian Woman and Hemans’ target audience and established literary conventions that treat an author’s writings as her children. While Joseph Addison’s persona in the *Tatler* imagines his writings as children “struggling towards birth” (59), and Mary Shelley bids her own “hideous progeny to go forth and prosper” (*Frankenstein*, para 15), the Indian Woman’s own offspring also signify a kind of literary progeny. However, in the context of the poem’s dynamics, the Indian Woman’s infant is best understood as the progeny of the “author-reader” rather than the original author; she is a child that meets a violent end as she is interpreted by the reader who adopts the work as her own and, in doing so, inhabits the position of the writer. From this perspective, the Indian Woman’s embodiment of her child as an extension of herself—read as Hemans’ verses—comes across as a barrier to recognizing Hemans’ work on its own terms. The infant daughter, we recall, has no opportunity to ever develop into a separate entity—to chart her own story—in the gaze of her agonized mother. Similarly, Hemans’ nuanced verses become deeply inlaid with the story of the reader. While her poetry was no doubt meant to provide comfort and to

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<sup>44</sup> In *Records*, only “Arabella Stuart,” “Properzia Rossi,” “Juana” and “The Grave of a Poetess” contain more lines that are delivered from a lyrical perspective—or in the personal voice of a distinct character that relays her emotions to her audience. Yet, since the lyrical voices in these other poems are granted sway over the entire bodies of their respective verses, except for descriptive prose at the start, their vocal strength is taken as a given, and is therefore more inconspicuous. The Indian Woman’s descriptive control, by contrast, surges after the narrator bows out of the poem entirely. Her voice stands out powerfully as it takes over the story from the departed narrator.

be cherished intensely by her audience, this poem registers violence and a loss associated with the process of the “sentimental fill” that Stauffer defines.

As others have argued, Hemans herself can be seen as colonizing the Indian Woman by adopting the voice of a non-English woman, a cultural other, treating this character as a source available at her whim for her own personal critiques. Lundeen asserts that “Hemans . . . appropriates nonwhite culture as a filter for her own desperate voice. The poem is, thus, a cultural conundrum in that Hemans speaks on behalf of a Native woman so that the Native woman can speak for her” (Lundeen 90). While I do not believe that Hemans’ voice is itself desperate in this poem, it is certainly viable to read her creation of the Indian Woman as appropriation that leads to a cultural conundrum. The possibility of thinking about this poem in the framework of the relationship between Hemans’ audience and her poems during the era adds another nuance to the objectification associated within the poem, albeit a nuance that the author has some control over, considering her decision to write and publish poetry—the Indian Woman’s real live counterparts had no choice in Hemans’ (and other writers’) decisions to utilize “their” story. Viewing the poem from this angle, however, we can see that considering the reader’s place in the reader-poem equation turns the tables a little on Hemans’ appropriation. It is Hemans work, through characters like the Indian Woman, that becomes the outlet for expressing the audience’s own experiences—sometimes, perhaps, at the expense of their rich layers of meaning within the poetry.

As discussed earlier on in this chapter, we know that Hemans was not writing simply to sanctify hearth and home. The vast range and depth of what she was trying to claim and explore about her craft, her politics, and philosophical matters—let alone the

complexities of gender relations during her period—is a fascinating topic that contemporary literary critics continue to investigate. It is worth remembering that Hemans herself was apparently hesitant early on about being molded into a purveyor of sympathy and affection that should stick to poems that woo the heart and stay out of writing about wars and politics. Barbara Taylor’s recent article on the publication history of Hemans’ *The Domestic Affections* (1812) emphasizes this point by tracing the relationship between Hemans’ mother, Mrs. Browne, Hemans’ sister, Hemans and Hemans’ patron Matthew Nicholson, an older man with literary connections who sought to cultivate a “charming Author” (13). In response to the range of verses by Hemans sent to Nicholson by Mrs. Browne in 1809, a collection that included overtly political poems such as “England and Spain,” “The Call of Liberty,” “The Wreath of Loyalty,” and “War and Peace,” Nicholson wanted Hemans to publish poems that display “the cultivation and expression of the tender sensibilities of innocence and nature—the sympathetic feelings and descriptions of afflicted virtue— and the conscious possession and glowing raptures of Affection.” He points to the verses “‘The Silver Locks,’ ‘The Lamenting Mother and Daughter’ in ‘War and Peace’—and above all ‘The Angel of the Sun’ [as those that] affect and interest [him]” (quod. in Taylor 13). It was Mrs. Browne that eventually sent Nicholson the specific poems that would become *The Domestic Affections*, and, as Taylor clarifies, Hemans’ own correspondence with Nicholson is very cordial but likely implies “some slight separation between herself and her mother’s publishing project” (18). Hemans’ relatively “muted” response to Nicholson’s publication of *The Domestic Affections* suggests a resistance to the image a “poetess”

who writes purely of sympathy and of wronged virtue, even while she declares that the war in Spain was not a “proper” subject for her at the time (Taylor 16, 20).

True, *The Domestic Affections* does not simply hand Nicholson what he asked for, acquiescent to his assertion that poems with “sympathetic feelings” are Hemans’ proper subject matter and would be most arresting and popular with her readers. It does provide “an equally complex comment on the sexual politics of her particular situation” (Taylor 21-22). That said, this collection does represent a much more limited range of poetic subjects than Hemans would likely have published if she had had sole control over her work. This is all to say that, from the start of her career, even while she maintained the image of the “poetess” throughout it, Hemans showed subtle signs of irritation at the way that patrons, publishers and the market they orchestrated and catered to were striving to dictate the scope of her work. Hemans must have felt a similar frustration throughout her profession, as expressed implicitly in “Indian Woman’s Death Song”—the concern that her readers would be limited in their capacity to realize that *Records of Woman* offers audiences inspiring, relatable, and arresting imagery while also joining in conversations about politics, philosophy, and poetry.

**“Madeline, a Domestic Tale”: Healthy Spectatorship:**

While Hemans critiques Smithian sympathy in “Indian Woman” without providing any alternative models for engagement, another poem in *Records* strives to show that close mother-child relations can be egalitarian. In “Madeline, A Domestic Tale,” Hemans models an intensely passionate mother, who, through a different kind of spectatorship, permits her daughter’s difference from herself while experiencing an intimate connection with her. In short, different from Smith’s model of sympathy, by

becoming a spectator to her imagined, *future* self, Madeline's mother is able to adopt a viewpoint from her daughter's eyes without fully subsuming this perspective in her own suffering, and to experience intimacy: a closeness with and separation from her child that exist simultaneously.

"Madeline, A Domestic Tale" asserts that becoming a spectator to one's own life—if not an impartial one—can help restrain intense, self-focused feelings from destroying one's sense that other perspectives exist, and bring about a healthy intimacy.<sup>45</sup> In order for a mother to become a kind of spectator to her own life, and, as a result, to be able to feel intense personal passion while seeing beyond her own emotions, "Madeline" implies that mothers should imagine themselves within a future moment as they consider their children's perspectives. This advice is conveyed through Madeline's mother's urgent lament to her daughter, just before her daughter is set to sail across the ocean with her new husband.

As so many poems in *Records of Woman* begin, "Madeline" opens by focusing on a distraught female character. But unlike some of the quieter, more dignified characters in the collection, Madeline's mother is highly emotional; the reader doubts that this mother will be any different than the eponymous figure in Hemans' "Indian Woman."

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<sup>45</sup> As Wolfson's notes to the poem in *Felicia Hemans* explain, "the romantic couplets link 'Madeline' formally and thematically with 'Costanza'" (397). In "Costanza," a scorned lover patiently secludes herself away from the world and is eventually rewarded—for what it is worth—with her lover's dying apology. This scorned lover is momentarily figured as a soothing and strong mother figure (89) who initially made the mistake of loving her lover too much. Implying a sad but necessary lesson regarding the partial restraint of feeling, Costanza exclaims: "I loved thee with such worship, such deep trust / As should be Heaven's alone—and Heaven is just!" (114-115). Thus, the implicit lesson of "Costanza" positioned just before "Madeline" in *Records*, supports my inclination to read "Madeline" as advocating a modified version of intense sympathy—rather, a positive intimacy. That is, an intimacy that is apparently *mediated* by the underlying realization that the self is not the other, and, thus—in Costanza's terms—the realization that the other's emotions and actions cannot be trusted to correspond exactly with the self's; such a complete closeness in "Costanza" and in "Madeline" is only possible to experience with an understanding God.

“Madeline” opens with the mother’s desperate cry: “My child, my child, thou leav’st me!—” (Hemans 1). As the mother imagines the stark reality of her daughter’s absence, she envisions and vocalizes her own future turmoil. She “shall miss the sound / Of thy [the daughter’s] light step amidst the flowers around, / And thy soft-breathing hymn at twilight’s close” (Hemans, “Madeline” 4-5). The mother’s sadness swells, permeating the lush soundscape in which she is despondently placed. The mother, we learn, shall “sit alone / And the low breeze will have a mournful tone” (Hemans, “Madeline” 7-8). Projecting her feelings onto the surrounding terrain, this mother, it seems, is entirely lost in her own pain. She appears, at first glance, to have little chance of imagining any point of view beyond her own.

And yet, while definitely not an “impartial spectator,” she is *not* an Indian Woman, entirely trapped within the solipsistic projection of her sympathy with her daughter. Indeed, as she pictures her daughter’s emotions upon departing, the mother’s own pain does remain paramount. She exclaims “while I think of thee, / My child! And thou, along the moonlight sea, / With a soft sadness haply in thy glance, / Shalt watch thine own, thy pleasant land of France, / Fading to air—Yet blessing with thee go!” (Hemans, “Madeline” 9-13). The “Yet” after the dash reveals a conflict between the daughter’s envisioned feelings and the mother’s own imagined woe, signaling the difficulty of granting her daughter this blessing. However, it is a blessing that, nonetheless, also suggests the mother’s sympathy for a daughter she views as a *distinct* other within this imagined moment.

The lines between “my child!” and “Yet” are the first in which the mother does not directly lament her own feelings; they are the first that provide just enough space,

amidst the mother's own imagined pain, for her daughter's separate viewpoint to emerge. We must first imagine something in order to describe it. Thus, the mother's portrayal of her daughter's eyes—organs that are a register of the bride's emotions—signifies the mother's perception of her daughter's perspective. As the daughter "watches," her own "pleasant land" fade, the mother also watches herself virtually fade away from the vantage point of daughter's view (Hemans, "Madeline" 10-12). However, the mother's lack of anger suggests that she is briefly situating herself "within" her daughter's separate, imagined perspective, temporarily feeling what her daughter "feels," *rather* than her own full loneliness. This implicit shift in perspective becomes clear when the mother asserts that her daughter must "go . . . with blessings" to he that has "wooded her with a voice of love away" (Hemans, "Madeline" 27), implying the difficult realization that *her* own loneliness is not her daughter's. These lines suggest that there might be a way of mediating colonizing sympathy, even in moments of intense emotion.

Certainly, the difference between the maternal perspectives of the Indian Woman and Madeline's mother arises, in part, because the Indian Woman's child is an infant who is incapable of coherently expressing emotions different from the mother and is therefore more easily projected upon. Yet, since *Records* is invested in critiquing the effects of rampant passion, as Rudy argues, and since "Madeline" is one of the few poems in the collection that does not end in death, it seems that a more complex dynamic is present. To understand this, we must turn to Madeline's mother's use of future tense verbs.

While Hemans' Indian Woman mainly laments her daughter's woe in the heat of action,<sup>46</sup> through present tense phrases such as "I leave thee not" (Hemans, "Madeline"

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<sup>46</sup> There are moments in the poem in which the Indian Woman imagines herself in the future (32-35, for instance), but it is a self that is *dead*, and therefore a self not easily characterized as a distinct self



37), Madeline's mother imagines her own feelings during her daughter's departure through three "shalls" and one "will." Hemans' choice of verb tense raises the question, what might occur when mothers picture themselves within an imagined, future moment, rather than remaining entirely focused on the present? Might the problems of a colonizing sympathy based on projection be avoided?

Returning briefly to Wordsworth's poetry helps clarify where these questions are coming from. Scholarship on Wordsworth has long theorized his poetry's exploration of the feeling that the self is really made up of several different selves within a single consciousness. According to Brian McGrath, the experience of "tranquility"—or, simply put, recollection—gained in *Lyrical Ballads* is structured around the oftentimes-noted temporal differences among the poet's present self, the person writing the poem, and the previous self enshrined in the poem. In moments of tranquility, Wordsworth notes a sense of being aware of two separate selves, of "Two consciousnesses, [of being] conscious of myself / And of some other being" (quod. in McGrath 566). This "tranquility," however, can be disconcerting for reader and poet, since it yields an experience of "estrangement from the self" (McGrath 66). Daniel Robinson also highlights the fractured sense of consciousness exhibited by the narrator in "Tintern Abbey," a poem in which "Wordsworth recognizes a past self that once considered itself a present self, while the current present self can only imagine the past" (9). Wordsworth's poetry, when focused on his life, demonstrates "the *effort* required to believe that one's self, if not coherent, is at least contiguous" (my emphasis, Robinson 17). The idea of a stable, continual subjectivity is struggled with rather than taken as a

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of the future. That is, as a self who reveals the potential for *real* distinct selves to emerge. These lines focus on the potential attributes of heaven that "may" soothe the Indian Woman rather than on exactly what she will feel, since even to the most faithful the specifics of heaven are not known.

given in Wordsworth's verses—a fractured consciousness lurks beneath a façade of continuity. How such a splintered consciousness can be leveraged to create intimacy is the subject taken up in “Madeline.”

In “Madeline,” we can see how imagining oneself in the future could have an effect that mirrors Wordsworth's tranquility. By contemplating her imagined future, Madeline's mother can perceive herself as two separate selves. While Madeline's mother hovers at the shoreline, visualizing her daughter's goodbye, the self within Madeline's mother's imagination emerges as an individual already alone, pining for her lost child. Through Hemans' use of future verb tenses, this self is accentuated as a clearly outlined, later version of the mother, and consequently, a faintly different version from her presently conceived self. As the order of events in “Madeline” implies, this imagined speculation about a slightly removed, future self appears to temper the effects of solipsistic sympathy.<sup>47</sup> At the height of her sadness, just as Madeline's mother projects her own imagined, future feelings onto the surrounding terrain, she is suddenly able to “see” her child as a separate unit—to stop entirely focusing on what she will hear and feel, herself, and to “think” of her daughter (Hemans, “Madeline” 9). And this happens through a lyrical lament, a suspended moment in which she pauses to imagine the future.

As critics have long asserted, lyric is a form of verse that can deconstruct the concept of a stable identity. One way the lyric can do this, according to Yopie Prins, is

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<sup>47</sup> Of course, when one actively imagines oneself in another's shoes, one also pictures oneself in divergent circumstances. Such hypothetical circumstances should, it seems, lead one to perceive oneself as a potentially *different* self. This very exercise of looking through another's eyes seems as if it should generate the same realization of our capacity for different selves, as does imagining oneself relating to another in the future. But when the act of imagining oneself in another's shoes takes place within the *present*, rather than in the future, sympathizing with another “now” makes the self feel more unified than the does act of imagining oneself as a future self. Hence, if I imagine myself in the position of another, “now,” my experience of myself through this other's eyes seems to happen to a *present* me, a me, therefore, experienced as more relatable—or more “myself”—than a future me.

by revealing the “ontological paradox” of a stable self. Prins claims that for the poetess, “seemingly authentic effusions of the lyric ‘I’ . . . are, on the contrary, purely conventional, an emptying out of subjectivity rather than expression of it” (quod. in Luu 49). The lyric, in other words, sets up a knowingly false stability of consciousness, an “authentic” subjectivity that is embodied by readers and that illuminates the impossibility of a singular self, original and impervious to change. The lyric “I” in “Madeline” reveals its fragmented nature, as the mother’s sense of self conveyed by lyric is situated in “the present,” while the mother’s lyrical voice remains focused on the new self that she will shortly become.

Harnessing this sense of fragmentation that the lyric can produce, “Madeline” suggests that linguistic conditions emphasizing the self’s difference from itself could make it especially challenging to ignore another’s distinct subjectivity. If there is not a single self that can be identified, colonization of another could be theorized as an ideological impossibility. From how the poem depicts this interaction, there does not arise any contiguous self that can subsume another, nor any contiguous other capable of being subsumed. During this moment in “Madeline,” Madeline’s mother’s perspective fosters a sense of intimacy—a brief and deep, but not an all-consuming closeness, possible even amidst intense feeling.

Certainly, the experience of a fractured self could yield the desire to dominate the other in the attempt to counteract a sense of being many selves. Such a perspective, therefore, could work against the experience of intimacy, as it is depicted in “Madeline.” When Wordsworth imagines his own and his sister’s future selves in “Tintern Abbey,” his future self is a potentially deceased self and Dorothy’s future grown-up self is as an

embodiment of his present self. Dorothy, in her “after years,” will provide her “memory . . . as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies” that ultimately enables her brother to live on in her, as her (Wordsworth “Tintern Abbey” 138; 142-143). While Madeline’s mother’s imagining of a future self enables her to gird herself for separation from her daughter, “Tintern Abbey’s” narrator’s future self shows Wordsworth ramping up against the possibility of such a division. The narrator actually becomes closer bound to Dorothy when he visualizes his own loss of imagination and death. Hemans, therefore, departs from Wordsworth’s exploration of consciousness in her own theorization of intimacy when she visualizes a positive outcome to the experience of a splintered self.<sup>48</sup>

### **Ethical Reading and Intimacy in “Madeline”:**

As a counterpart to “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” we can also understand the relationship between the mother and daughter in “Madeline” as Hemans’ brief vision of a literary climate where her readers are capable of being “intimate” with poetry. To

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<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, although Hemans could of course not have known it, this poem demonstrates the potential for intimacy to be depicted as a radical force before intimacy became co-opted by a future, twentieth-century mainstream, heteronormative society that “links intimacy only to the institutions of personal life, making them the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development” (Berlant and Warner 317). This later society that Berlant and Warner write about—American, but very similar to British society in its demarcation of public and private spheres—is a culture in which, “community is imagined through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction” (318). Intimacy in this society is allied with mainstream cultural expectations in such a way that it cannot be linked with relationships that fall outside of the nuclear family model, connections between persons that may be slight and subtle, or powerful and sweeping, but that have nothing to do with building a home and producing children. See Lauren Gail Berlant, *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). True, Hemans’ depictions of intimacy in Madeline are explicitly linked to “personal life” (close familial ties rather than momentary interactions with acquaintances or strangers), and work within a heteronormative framework in that they clarify reproduction and marriage as the expected paths to take. However, Madeline’s mother’s mode of experiencing an “ethical” intimacy with her daughter by “imagining herself in the future” momentarily disrupts the way that Hemans’ society links “the future” for women so explicitly to marriage and children (for Madeline herself). In this poem, intimacy is coupled with the idea that the story of a woman’s life may not, at least, have to end solely in death if a marriage is cut short. Madeline’s survival, if a seemingly mournful one, indexes that there are other narratives that women may eventually be able to claim. This poem, then, is not entirely dissimilar from “Properzia Rossi,” which emphasizes the female artist’s creative potential and points towards eventual alternative routes for women.

understand this dynamic, it is helpful to remember that Hemans' society perceived a close correlation between the process of relating to texts and relating to actual individuals. Readers of novels in the Romantic era, for example, sympathized with increasingly "deep" characters that helped them practice the interpretative powers "necessary" for fostering relationships between actual individuals (Lynch 126, 140). Late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britons assumed that interacting with characters was pretty much like interacting with persons,<sup>49</sup> and characters become modes of helping individuals develop their own complex identities as fictional figures acquired a new sense of depth. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Hemans' poems in collections like *Records of Woman*—credited by readers and reviewers with evoking deep sympathy—are, like characters in novels, often strongly inflected by the reader's experiences during the reading process. In this context, it is not much of a leap to suggest that Hemans designs an intimate relationship between Madeline and her mother that implicitly responds to the intense closeness many Romantic-era readers felt towards her poetry.

The intimate mother-daughter relationship depicted at the start of "Madeline" seems to depend on a mindset that which, if adopted by Hemans' audience during the reading process, could help them engage with her poetry with both intensity and a degree of detachment. Madeline's mother demonstrates a capacity for strong emotion and subtle separation from her daughter that, if applied to readers' relationships with texts, could

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<sup>49</sup> According to Jonathan Lamb, much like literary characters, persons were conceived as imaginary constructs during the long eighteenth century. Explaining what constitutes a person in contradistinction to the concept of public character during the eighteenth century, Lamb explains what makes fiction and persons alike: "As part of the broad propensity to fiction that is probable because it shapes the circumstances in which we live, novels operate according to the same preposterous principles and accomplish the same ends as one of Hobbes's or Locke's persons. It is a matter of keeping faith with the concrete results of imaginative effort" ("Lay Aside" 278). For more about persons, see Jonathan Lamb, "Lay Aside My Character: the Personate Novel and Beyond," *The Eighteenth Century* 52 (2011): 271-288.

grant Hemans' audience the experience of both deep attachment to *and* clear critical distance from her poetry. As Madeline's mother is able to visualize herself and her daughter as two distinct selves during a moment of intense connection, readers who are intimate with Hemans' verses should be able to do the same with her work. Through Madeline's mother's display of intimacy before Madeline's departure, the poem charts an "interpersonal" dynamic that could allow Hemans' poetry to be highly affective, but not entirely subsumed by the reader, and, therefore, more likely to be recognized for the arguments that it makes and ideas that it interrogates having to do with poetic form, culture, and history. Readers that are capable of developing a sense of separation from persons during moments of intense personal passion should also be able to maintain the distance from Hemans' work necessary to sense that it is highly nuanced poetry.

Such readers might come closer to understanding that Hemans' verses explore cultural ideologies and counter-ideologies, such as those analyzed by Christopher Stokes who finds in Hemans an exploration of the benefits of and problems with how—as we now term it—Foucauldian "discipline" works as a "way of organizing female experience into socially legible identities" (103). Or, to turn to a different kind of reader, critics who could maintain some separation between themselves and Hemans work, who could keep their own culturally defined expectations about a "poetess" verses somewhat in check, might see, for example, that Hemans' writings deeply engage with form. They might consider, as the contemporary critic Michael T. Williamson does, that this poet uses her in-depth knowledge of contemporary art criticism and the "elevated stance of the classical ode" to consider alternatives to the elegiac form, arguably consumed with cultural loss, and to place herself in a lineage of artists that might channel "intimations of

cultural immorality” into present and future masterpieces (25, 38). Clearly, no amount of detachment would have guaranteed that Hemans’ audiences would have grasped these particulars, nor could we argue, of course, that these specific dynamics were intentionally written into Hemans’ poetry. But through maintaining an intimate perspective, as Hemans defines it in “Madeline,” Hemans’ everyday readers and literary critics would have been more likely to notice that Hemans’ verses have more to offer than arresting and sympathetic imagery for the readers’ personal investment.

### **Towards an Understanding of Violence in Hemans’ Model of Intimacy:**

The poem’s violent undercurrent, however, complicates the text’s promotion of Madeline’s mother’s intimacy at the start of the poem, and, combined with the ending, warns against adopting this paradigm as the “solution” to ideal Smithian sympathy, while rendering tenuous the hope that readers can become deeply engaged with and thoughtfully detached from Hemans’ poetry. This is where the poem’s turn towards an ethics of refusal emerges alongside its attraction to the particular model of intimacy that it develops. The violence in “Madeline” subtly becomes apparent in the lines between Madeline’s mother’s lyric and the daughter’s own expression of relief at end of the poem, just after Madeline, embracing her future life, “Look[s] on the home that promis’d hearts untried / A bower of bliss to come” (Hemans, “Madeline” 46-47).

Within these lines, Hemans first positively conveys Madeline’s sense of autonomy upon her departure. In the version of “Madeline” in *Records*, as opposed to the originally published copy in the *Literary Souvenir*, Hemans alters her description of Madeline’s actions upon leaving home to emphasize the character’s distinct identity. She changes the narrator’s phrasing from “Pour’d forth her low solemn vesper song / To

chiming waves,” to “Pour’d forth her own sweet vesper song, / Breathing of home” (Hemans, “Madeline” 38-39). This shift from “her low” to “her own” and from “To chiming waves” to “Breathing of home” underscores Madeline’s sense of ownership over her literal and metaphorical voyage into adulthood, which should lead to an auspicious future, as appraised by her “calm’d heart” (Hemans, “Madeline” 37). Although it is not a shock that tragedy strikes again in this collection, war is not the culprit here. Just as Madeline appears ready to reap the benefit of her full autonomy from her mother, the poem conveniently does away with Madeline’s partner. This character lived only in the margins of the poem and, in expiring, becomes a mere plot point for enabling parent and child to reunite. To see the husband’s demise, we turn to Madeline and him at the end of their voyage:

That home was darken’d soon: the summer breeze  
Welcom’d with death the wanderers from the seas,  
Death unto one, and anguish how forlorn!  
To her, that widow’d in her marriage-morn,  
Sat in her voiceless dwelling, whence with him,  
Her bosom first belov’d, her friend and guide,  
Joy had gone forth and left the green earth dim. (51-53)

Her dwelling becomes “voiceless,” signaling the literal loss of the sound made by two people conversing as well as the fact that the final voice we hear—Madeline’s assertion to her mother to “take back thy wanderer from thy fatal shore” (Hemans, “Madeline” 101), dependent on the “voicelessness” of the dwelling—is filled with loss. Sound carries so many implications in Hemans’ poetry, but silence, the result of being



“voiceless,” often represents dreams and desires in Hemans’ work “that cannot find viable expression” in the characters’ given circumstances (Beshero-Bondar 418)—here, the desire to transition into adulthood by becoming a wife, rather than simply a daughter. But how does the husband’s demise connect to Madeline’s mother, and to the poem’s ultimate rejection of any particular model of intimacy? Turning back to Potkay’s analysis of Wordsworth’s “The Discharged Soldier,” discussed earlier in this chapter, will help explain the subtly aggressive implications of intimacy in “Madeline” that seem implicated in the husband’s death.

In “The Discharged Soldier,” Potkay argues that attempting to relate to another person without thinking that you can imagine her thoughts and feelings can lead to aggression: “recognition of the otherness of the other is accompanied by a sublimated desire to kill the other who resists absorption” (55). As the narrator of Wordsworth’s poem realizes the soldier’s otherness, a desire to destroy him manifests in the imagery of “an arrow’s flight” and a hostile mastiff (Potkay 55). This other, however, is ultimately saved from the narrator’s violent longing for revenge (Potkay 55, 52). Readers discover that the scene remains peaceful. The narrator eventually “hail[s] the stranger,” thereby “going out of . . . [his] way to speak and to give to a stranger whose strangeness is recognized and respected” (Potkay 56). In the end, the narrator of Wordsworth’s verses rejects the longing to envision the soldier’s thoughts and feelings. The poem does not seek sympathy, but a relation to the other that, in Potkay’s terms, “chafe[s] against the creative imagination” by “dramatiz[ing] the ethical movement *away* from imaginative interiority” (52). This kind of ethical relation depends not on attempting to envision what is going on in the other’s mind, but on letting the other exist solely as an other.

There are certainly large divergences that make this poem of Wordsworth's very different from Hemans' "Madeline," including the fact that the violence of war is clearly built into the subtext of "the Discharged Soldier" and that the narrator's expectations about his interaction with the soldier are extremely different from Madeline's mother's expectations about her daughter. However, the absence of direct conflict in "Madeline" does not mean that a preoccupation with interpersonal aggression is absent in the poem's shadow, considering the prominence of violence in other poems in the collection, such as in "Pauline" and "The Bride of the Greek Isle." Also, wronged mothers in *Records* are implicated in brutal events, such as the Indian Woman whose sympathy leads to the death of herself and her child, as well as the mother of the slaughtered Muslim boy in "The Indian City," whose tale of loss functions to "unsheath the sword[s]" that initiate a war of revenge (Hemans 164). Maternal aggression, sometimes justified but never satisfying, is certainly not absent from the collection, and thus there are more similarities between "A Discharged Soldier" and "Madeline" than first meet the eye.

Despite the differences between Wordsworth's and Hemans' poems, therefore, I think we can learn something about the more severe implications of Hemans' "Madeline" from Potkay's analysis of how violent imagery signals Wordsworth's narrator's desire for *revenge* against the soldier. The takeaway from his analysis of Wordsworth's poem suggests that the husband's convenient death in "Madeline" is connected with the daughter's resistance of absorption in Hemans' model of intimacy, or with the mother's recognition of her daughter as other. The subject positions of two otherwise very different characters—Wordsworth's narrator and Madeline's mother—are similar. Madeline's mother, like Wordsworth's narrator, seeks engagement with an other who is

perceived by the seeker during healthy intimacy as a separate entity. At that moment, Madeline's mother, like Wordsworth's narrator, must recognize another's otherness. She is not seeking sympathy, with all its potentially colonizing baggage, but a relation that in the poem demands closeness *and* separation—the acknowledgement of the daughter's ultimate distinction from the mother. Through this comparison to Wordsworth's poem, we can interpret Madeline's husband's death as exhibiting the mother's subliminal aggression in the face of her daughter's otherness. And since Madeline's mother feels close to her daughter, she feels much more of a sense of ownership over her child than Wordsworth's narrator feels toward the soldier, potentially making her implicit aggression all the stronger than his.

Yet, different from the workings of aggressive desire in “The Discharged Soldier,” Madeline's mother's underlying anger is displaced onto Madeline's husband—the entity that “forces” her to see Madeline as an other, rather than onto Madeline herself. Indeed, without the husband's intrusion, Madeline could more easily, at least figuratively, have remained the babe nestled “unto thy mother's bosom” that her mother fondly remembers—a babe whose eyes (and soul) automatically seek its mother's (Hemans, “Madeline” 19). And through the husband's death, Madeline does become simply a daughter again, incapable of leading a married life, as exemplified by her reconnection with her mother. Thus, while the poem's happy ending—the reuniting of living mother and daughter—is unusual, and while, on one hand, it revolutionarily enables both mother and child to live, it is also somewhat disquieting—not dissimilar to how, in a very different poem, Jupiter's sinking “dizzily down” in *Prometheus Unbound* has made many critics pause during the otherwise peaceful conclusion (Percy Shelley 81). “Madeline's”

ending is not entirely cathartic fantasy,<sup>50</sup> I argue, when it exhibits a kind of tunnel vision, ultimately deeming the mother-daughter relationship paramount and permanent at the expense of other possibilities, even though the daughter is given an individual perspective—a voice—within this dynamic. This individual perspective leaves no chance of a new husband for Madeline and of Madeline becoming a mother herself.

The ending of the poem, coupled with the subtle aggression beneath the surface of the text connecting Madeline's mother to the husband's demise, complicates any attempt to read Hemans' model of intimacy as *the* clear answer to oppressive maternal sympathy. However, crucially, intimacy between mother and daughter in "Madeline" appears less overtly compromised than Smith's paradigm of "ideal sympathy" in "Indian Woman's Death Song," and to offer Madeline's mother the ability to see her daughter separately at a pivotal point in the text. I believe, therefore, that intimacy in "Madeline" still appears a viable mode for enabling some mothers, during moments of intense feeling, to acknowledge their children's distinction from themselves. The darker implications of Madeline's mother's perspective do not fully destroy the model of intimacy provided, but they do undercut its strength. They infer that no single model of intimacy can work for all readers (let alone for a single reader at different points in time). Hence, the violence in the poem signals that healthy intimacy can be fleeting and that the paradigm provided in the poem will not always be able to counteract domineering maternal affection and enact healthy mother-child relations. This dynamic becomes clearer when we consider something as simple as the trajectory of the plot. By first depicting the benefits of the

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<sup>50</sup> Wolfson calls this a "poignant fantasy of restoration . . . . While nostalgia for childhood is a famous male Romantic sigh . . . the purchase of "Madeline" is to realize the female form of the wish" (*Borderlines* 53). While the poem is certainly fantasy, this chapter argues that the poem is also doing something *more* than enacting fantastical wish fulfillment.

model, but then illustrating a return to early mother-child dynamics at the close of the poem, the text implies that adhering to any single paradigm of mother-child intimacy could inaccurately lend a sense of permanence to transforming relationships and mistakenly overlook that there may be other ways that mothers can relate to their children without visualizing them as extensions of themselves.

As Brian Elliott contends, Hemans' work is sometimes concerned that her poetry is incapable of representing the particularities of actual individuals. Writing about "The Image in Lava," Elliott argues, "while the poem celebrates the form's [ekphrasis'] ability to represent the idea of motherhood, it subtly reveals the anxieties linked with the object's failure to immortalize the lost mother herself" (38). Since ekphrasis poetry focuses on works of art, Hemans' main anxiety is that that an artistic image attempting to speak to all cannot adequately embody the singularity of the person behind the image. "Madeline's" underlying concern with its "solution" to problematic sympathy goes further in its investment in singularity, expressing interest in its each reader's particular individualities. While modeling healthy intimacy, the poem's violence subtly critiques poetry's capacity to provide readers with sound models of intersubjectivity, in plural, because even a vast collection of verses could never completely capture the unique and continually transforming perspectives of its audience. The conversation between "Indian Woman's Death Song" and "Madeline" is certainly layered, complex, and invested in contradictions, in typical Hemans fashion. It critiques oppressive maternal sympathy and models healthy intimacy, while intimating that ever-changing identities should produce ever-changing forms of attachment. These poems acknowledge intimacy in its most

capacious sense and, despite a strong attraction to the model of intimacy depicted in “Madeline,” decline to advocate fully for any particular paradigm of relating.

### **Intimacy in Context-an Ethics of Withdrawal:**

Writers explored modes of intersubjectivity other than intimacy as alternatives to oppressive sympathy. One mode in particular may have made Hemans feel pressed to attempt to define a paradigm of healthy intimacy in *Records*, despite concerns that lead the above-discussed poems to turn towards an ethics of refusal. Hemans may very well have been aware of the ethics of relating that Wordsworth investigates in “The Discharged Soldier” and anxious about its consequences for readers. This is an ethics that Jacques Khalip calls “an ethics of engaged withdrawal” (135), which writers ranging from Wordsworth to Keats explored, partly in reaction to sympathy that enabled exploitative relations. Hemans would likely have found an ethics that treats individuals as obscure persons with thoughts and feelings that should be acknowledged, but never imagined, a poor alternative to oppressive sympathy, and especially impossible for mothers who cannot help but feel strongly connected to their children.

The negative implications of such an ethics are addressed in Hemans’ lyric, “The Broken Chain” (1829). For mothers and non-mothers alike, “The Broken Chain” connects the concept of relating to others to the idea of relief, suggesting that the outpouring of emotions releases one from being “bound, till thy race is won, / By the might of all in the soul of one” (Hemans 33-34). True, anxiety sneaks into the speaker’s confident assertions of her own freedom, and although she does not carry a “shaft in [her] bosom” (Hemans, “The Broken Chain” 29), it becomes unclear that she, let alone anyone, is able to actually share their emotions with anyone outside themselves. We are left with

the question, “Dreamer, fond dreamer! oh! who is free?” (Hemans, “The Broken Chain” 36). Even with this question, however, an ethics of withdrawal would not be healthy, the poem suggests. While others ultimately are unknowable, treating them as fully closed books would cause a sense of being trapped inside the self. The paradigm of intimacy depicted in “Madeline” serves as a kind of midway point between oppressive sympathy and an ethics of engaged withdrawal, allowing the mother to momentarily glance through her daughter’s eyes and, yet, still see her as a separate self.

In Hemans’ poem “The Mirror in the Deserted Hall” (1830), the speaker fondly considers a time when intersubjective relations no longer matter—when the expectations of others will not make us prideful—a time, in death, when our souls return to God, “Reflecting but the images / of the solemn world on high” (31-31). Alternatively, through the conversation between “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline, A Domestic Tale,” Hemans theorizes what healthy interpersonal relations might look like between mothers and children here and now, with the acknowledgement that such relations should never be expected to remain static and that fully supporting any particular model of relating has challenging ethical implications. “Madeline” does not so much offer a fantasy of a mother-child reunion void of life’s complications, but, rather, imagines and then problematizes the conditions of an intimacy that would enable readers to be both highly engaged with and more receptive to the complex dynamics of Hemans’ poetry. Similar to Mary Shelley’s *Falkner*, the focus of my third chapter—which more staunchly adopts an ethics of refusal—my analysis of “Indian Woman’s Death Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale” suggests that we should look more carefully at what

happens when Romantic-era texts turn against sympathy to consider other modes of intersubjectivity.



### Chapter 3: Fidelity, the Family, and the Abject Figure in Mary Shelley's *Falkner* (1837)

Chapters one and two of this dissertation explored the problem of sympathy in Mary Hays' and Felicia Hemans' respective investigations of mother-child sympathy in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Records of Woman*. My final chapter turns from sympathy to fidelity in Mary Shelley's *Falkner* (1837) to demonstrate how an ethics of refusal operates in this late Romantic-era novel. Fidelity, or "the quality of being faithful" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), typically used in reference to husband-wife relationships in novels of the period, is a mode of feeling that is not often studied in relation to this work or the Romantic period. Fidelity is also the explicit theme of Shelley's final novel. Along with turning from sympathy to fidelity, the final chapter of this dissertation concentrates on familial relationships other than mother-child affinities. This wider perspective is important for understanding how *Falkner* is strongly drawn to the father-daughter-husband family unit at the novel's center, but refuses to endorse this family fully.

Fidelity provides benefits to the family at the center of *Falkner*, including allowing a daughter to remain close to her father after marriage.<sup>51</sup> While the concept of

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<sup>51</sup> *Falkner* joins a range of fiction that challenges the nuclear family, consisting of a husband, wife, and children—a model that did not accurately reflect the family of Mary Shelley and many of her contemporaries. The DeLacey family in Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one example, which encompasses a father, daughter, her brother, and the brother's love interest. Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* signals a family that defies patriarchal relations, consisting of a mother wrongly imprisoned in a madhouse, her caretaker, and the child taken from her. Also, although Amelia Opie's much less radical *Adeline Mowbray* ends by explicitly upholding the idea of marriage, marriages in the novel fail and readers are left with a scene of affection among the dying Adeline, Adeline's nurse, and Adeline's mother—a family of sorts. Although actual Romantic-period families did not necessarily adhere to the conjugal-based paradigm, Shelley lived during a period where the conjugal-based, nuclear family model was increasingly showcased as "the norm,"

sympathy is typically burdened with expectations around thinking and feeling along with another, fidelity, as the key theme in Shelley's work, thrives when knowledge of another's inner self is characterized as unattainable. The father-daughter-husband triad—connected by this less intrusive mode of relating—serves, on one level, as a positive alternative to the husband- and wife-based nuclear family that was popular during the period. However, this family is ultimately unable to model a society that is entirely free of the types of oppressive power dynamics so often connected with sympathy. This new vision of the family is not perfect in any utopian sense, but full of unresolved tensions.

Yet, the tensions within this new vision of the family do not make *Falkner* a failure. Instead of undermining what is often understood as the novel's main argument—its quest to create a modern egalitarian family and, by extension, utopian society—unresolved tensions are integral to a wider critique that *Falkner* makes about family models. By placing tensions, including an unresolved question connected to fidelity of at the heart of this family, *Falkner* provides a fuller rejection of monolithic family paradigms than any “perfect” family model could. These dynamics render the father-daughter-husband family structure dialectical and evolving—a structure that, by default, refuses to acknowledge a “correct” family paradigm. Thus, Shelley's final novel acknowledges the possibility of a range of family paradigms while raising a question about intersubjectivity that writers and philosophers are still asking.

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principally for economic reasons. As Ruth Perry argues, “the shift from an economic system that redistributed resources among a kin corporation to one that accumulated property in the patrilineal line was reconfiguring the priorities of kinship. Marriage, as the key to the consolidation and transfer of property across generations, was fast becoming the crux of this new system of accumulation” (217). See Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Publishing, 2004). I discuss the rise of the conjugal-based family more later on in the chapter.

At the center of this family lies the unanswered question: is the rejection of the abject necessary for the preservation of the Western subject? Or, might fidelity towards the abject be maintained and subjectivity be formulated in some other way, at less cost to whoever fills the abject's role? The abject is that which is both threatening to the culture and strongly alluring—something, according to Julia Kristeva, that is “radically excluded and draws [one] . . . toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). I also use Jerrold Hogle's definition of the abject, based on Kristeva's, as something that allows aspects of the self that threaten the experience of a unified subjectivity to be “thrown off” or “thrown down under,” rather than acknowledged (“Frankenstein as Neo-gothic” 178).<sup>52</sup> *Falkner* focuses on the unanswered question of whether it is possible to maintain fidelity to the abject. In doing so, fidelity functions as a sign of this late Romantic-era novel's ability to investigate the psychosocial dynamics that underwrite the social imaginary of early nineteenth-century Great Britain. That imaginary consists of Britons' subjectivities and intersubjective relations, which revolve around the meanings of familial relationships at that time.

### ***Falkner*—an Overview:**

*Falkner* is comparable to other Romantic-era texts in its investigation of social systems through the prism of the family, interest in questioning social boundaries, and its gothic undertones, grounded on the presence of an absent mother. However, as Jonas

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<sup>52</sup> In this chapter, along with the above-mentioned theories of abjection, I turn to George Haggerty's and Jerrold Hogle's respective analyses of the abject in *Frankenstein*. I also put the significance of Shelley's theory of the abject in context through the work of Christine Harold. See George E. Haggerty, “Dung, Guts and Blood’: Sodomy, Abjection and Gothic Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Gothic Studies* (8.2): 35-51; and Jerrold Hogle, “Frankenstein as Neo-Gothic: From the Ghost of the Counterfeit to the Monster of Abjection,” *Romanticism, History and the Possibilities of Genre: Reforming Literature, 1789-1837*. Eds. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge, UK: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also see Christine L. Harold, “The Rhetorical Function of the Abject Body: Transgressive Corporeality in “Trainspotting,”” *JAC* (20.4): 865-887.

Cope clarifies, the novel is especially “structurally neat” (232), and *Falkner* was considered by Shelley’s contemporaries to be unusually deep for its genre. This novel is one of Shelley’s “silver fork” fictions—a genre that typically highlights “high society manners” (Vargo 17). But *Falkner* was praised (unlike most novels within the genre) as a “stor[y] of thought and feeling, rather than [simply] of manners and character” (*The Athenaeum* 166).<sup>53</sup>

Mary Shelley begins each of the three volumes of *Falkner* with an epigraph about fidelity from Percy Shelley’s “Rosalind and Helen” (1819):

there stood  
In record of a sweet sad story,  
An altar, and a temple bright,  
Circled by steps, and over the gate  
Was sculptured, ‘To Fidelity!’”

The mournful speaker of the epigraph, called Helen in Shelley’s poem, has lost her lover, Lionel, but the quotation actually refers to the faithfulness of Lionel’s mother’s dog who saved Lionel’s mother from the sea, expired in exhaustion, and is honored by his mother with a shrine. The context of the epigraph is fitting, as the fidelity that binds together the chief characters in *Falkner* remains strong no matter the apparent cost. However, unlike the dog in Shelley’s poem, the three main characters ultimately develop fruitful, loving relationships that bring them happiness rather than death.

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<sup>53</sup> Shelley’s contemporaries find correlations between *Falkner* and previous works by Shelley’s husband, Percy Shelley, and father, William Godwin, but they also credit Shelley with creativity and intelligence, characterizing this novel as a study of the mind. *The Monthly Review*, too, emphasizes that Shelley garners from her readers an “absorbing interest in behalf of *Falkner* . . . by an acute and delicate dissection of motives and temptations” (376). See *The Monthly Review, from January to April Inclusive* 1 (G. Henderson, London: 1837).

*Falkner* charts the life of Elizabeth Raby, whose parents—outcasts from their family due to a marriage that defies social hierarchies—die when she is a little girl. After her mother's death, which succeeds her father's passing, Elizabeth is unclaimed by her rich relations and is discovered and adopted by the pensive loner, Rupert Falkner. She dramatically meets Falkner, saving his life by stopping him from committing suicide at her mother's grave. Falkner harbors a dark, secret past, to which readers are given access. He is responsible for the death of Alithea, the woman he loved, having attempted to "rescue" her from a loveless marriage by carrying her away by carriage from her husband and children to a cottage near the sea. When she attempts to escape, she drowns in an estuary. Alithea is also a good friend of Elizabeth's mother, and would have adopted Elizabeth after her mother's death if Alithea had been alive. Instead, however, Falkner educates Elizabeth and lovingly raises her into an intelligent and practical, yet dreamy, young woman. When it turns out that Falkner might be connected in a horrible manner to the mysterious death of the mother of Elizabeth's love interest, Gerard Neville, Elizabeth remains convinced of her adopted father's innocence, while Neville has spent his life seeking his mother's killer. In the end, Falkner confesses to the kidnapping, Alithea's body is exhumed, and Falkner stands trial for murder. Ultimately, his name is cleared and—after some consideration—Elizabeth, Falkner, and Neville live together in apparent contentment, away from the judgmental eyes of society. The British public in fact does not condemn the trio when people see the genuine happiness of Elizabeth, Falkner, and Neville, predicated on their intense fidelity to one another. In the end, after many struggles, the family seems void of any problems, but the complex psychosocial dynamics that underpin its structure make this a far from perfect family.

### **Contemporary Critiques of *Falkner* and the Power of Incest:**

I am not the first to address the subject of familial models in *Falkner*. The novel has received some critical attention over the past twenty years. However, few scholars have chosen to focus on fidelity. Perhaps because fidelity is the explicit theme of the text, it seems too obvious a choice, although it is a rich subject that deserves careful analysis. Similar to Melissa Sites, who finds the makings of “utopian domesticity” in the family that emerges in *Falkner*—a new society that “entails radical reorganization of the most basic levels of society, centering around the home and family” (149)—I discover in this novel a reimagining of fidelity which suggests that modes of relating, familial formations, and social expectations, are malleable. Yet, whereas Sites sees “utopian domesticity”—culminating in the father-daughter-husband triad—as a clear “model for social reform” (149), the connotations of the family paradigm are more enigmatic than Sites suggests since the family is haunted by the ghost of Neville’s abject mother and other patriarchal dynamics.

However, fidelity and the family in *Falkner* do progressively suggest that women might not have to submit to the increasingly narrow role of “wife” within the nuclear family. In her analysis of Shelley’s posthumously published novel *Mathilda*, Julie Carlson highlights Shelley’s emphasis on the negative impacts of literature that confine women. Carlson argues that *Mathilda*, published in the mid-twentieth century, “is Mary Shelley’s story—not that her ‘excessive and romantic attachment’ to her father is incestuous, but that her formation as a daughter-subject is informed by . . . a literary tradition that has little language for characterizing deep connections between fathers and daughters other than incest” (112). In *Mathilda*, father-daughter incest is harmful since

the father and daughter are unable to develop connections with anyone beyond each other. *Falkner's* attempt to alter this literary tradition is certainly connected to the triangulated relationship between Elizabeth, Falkner, and Neville that enables Elizabeth to maintain an extremely close relationship with her father without becoming emotionally destroyed.

Incestuous overtones take a different, much more positive turn in *Falkner* than they do in *Mathilda*. As Ranita Chatterjee argues, “this novel returns to the incest topic through its portrayal of symbolic father-daughter intimacy,” yet, somehow does so without restricting Elizabeth from marrying happily or remaining extremely close to her father (37-38). Also, Elizabeth’s relationship to Neville shares something in common with the brother-sister love that Richard Sha discovers Percy Shelley employing in *Revolt of Islam* to question the emerging pressure of conjugal relations on women. Incest in *Revolt of Islam* provides a clue as to how incestual “symbolic father-daughter intimacy” escapes the problems of father-daughter incest in *Mathilda*. For Sha, brother-sister incest functions in *Revolt of Islam* as “a temporary but necessary corrective to the patriarchal incest that is marriage” (10). If we apply his theory to *Falkner*, once the father-daughter (Elizabeth and Falkner) and “brother-sister” (Elizabeth and Neville) duos are merged into one family unit, it seems that the revolutionary energy of the latter form of incest transfers over to and reverses the negative connotations of the former. To perceive the incestuous connotations within the relationship between Neville and Elizabeth, we only have to understand that if Falkner and Alithea had formed a union after her marriage to Neville’s father, and Elizabeth *had* been adopted by Alithea after her mother had died, Neville and Elizabeth would have grown up brother and sister (similar to Frankenstein

and Elizabeth).<sup>54</sup> Neville and Elizabeth are happy, and the brother-sister incestual nature of their relationship works to defy Shelley's contemporaries' expectations of what heterosexual marriage should be, while the trace of father-daughter incest remains harmless, denuded of its patriarchal oppression. A queer family—linked through fidelity—is created.<sup>55</sup>

Graham Allen is the only critic that I am aware of who makes fidelity the focus of his critique of *Falkner*. He offers a theoretical and biographical approach to the text, investigating how “public and private fidelity”—or the desire to be publically faithful to someone's memory, and to protect that person from public defamation—conflict in the novel, and are connected with a cycle of repetitive experiences that suggest characters' lack of control “beyond their own intensions or desires” (236). He demonstrates that characters' experiences of a clash of fidelities towards other characters drive much of the work—although these clashes are, for the most part, resolved. Allen points out that Neville is trapped when it comes to his mother, for “To protect the previously exposed (defamed) mother, Neville must resist his father's desire for a new public trial . . . . Yet, to resist such a public exposure of the father's and thus Elizabeth's name, would be for Neville to risk repeating the very trauma . . . his whole life has been spent in attempting to heal and undo” (236). My interest in the question of whether it is possible to have

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<sup>54</sup> For focused comparisons between *Falkner* and *Frankenstein* see Betty T. Bennett, “Not this time, Victor!': Mary Shelley's reversioning of Elizabeth, from *Frankenstein* to *Falkner*.” *Mary Shelley in Her Times*. Eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 10, 13; and Kate Ferguson Ellis, “Falkner and Other Fictions,” *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Ed. Esther H. Shore (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 152.

<sup>55</sup> By queer, I mean a family that welcomes the fluidity of sexual roles. I borrow from Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer, which refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically” (8). See Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). One could also certainly argue that Falkner's relationship with Neville is queer, but there is no need to belabor the point for my purposes.



fidelity to the abject coincides with Allen's attention to the quandaries that he finds connected with fidelity. I agree with Allen that fidelity plays a complicated role that questions characters' psychological control over their thoughts and actions. Indeed, the novel explicitly refuses to characterize fidelity as a solely positive force. During an intimate conversation with Falkner, Elizabeth exclaims, "We are not parent and child . . . but we have a strong resemblance on one point—fidelity is our characteristic . . . I am not quite sure that it is not a defect: at least in some cases, as with you, it proved a misfortune. To me it can never be such; it repays itself" (Shelley, *Falkner* 279). When noting fidelity's potential to be a defect or to cause misfortune, Elizabeth refers to Falkner's intense fidelity to Neville's mother, Alithea, which resulted in her death and his own agonized existence. Unlike Allen, however, I focus on how *Falkner's* refusal to champion fidelity fully allows the novel to point towards a future in which many different kinds of families might thrive.

Allen also ties moments where Falkner and Neville lack control over their emotions and actions directly to Alithea, underscoring how crucial the mother figure—whom I discuss in the second half of this chapter—remains to the theoretical weight of the novel. "The mother's name is a contested signifier," Allen demonstrates, "which produces, in the major male protagonists, an experience of repetition which seems beyond resolution" (237). For me, it is Neville's reactions to his mother's remains at her gravesite that are crucial to discussing how the novel utilizes fidelity to defy monolithic understandings of the family and to demonstrate the kind of question that a silver fork novel can raise about the social imaginary that knitted together British society. To set the

stage for this analysis, however, it will be helpful to see what other writers had to say about fidelity during Shelley's time.

### **Fidelity in the Romantic Era and Fidelity and the Family in *Falkner*:**

Fidelity has garnered little attention in current scholarship on Romantic-era texts, although it was highly important to Romantic-period writers. Fidelity, or “the quality of being faithful” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) was a concept that developed many resonances across different genres of writing during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. For Adam Smith, fidelity is an extremely crucial virtue that binds society together and creates security through the rejection of “treachery and falsehood” (422). Subjects’ fulfillment of their promises to one another—their loyalty to their word—is considered “so necessary a virtue, that we apprehend it in general to be due even to those to whom nothing else is due” (Smith 422). Fidelity, in the sense of social glue, as characterized by Smith, is most commonly referred to in political treatises as the capacity to be loyal to the English government.<sup>56</sup> In religious treatises, to maintain fidelity is to preach the “truth” of God’s righteousness,<sup>57</sup> and to adopt an approach towards others that hinges upon God’s rewards and punishments, since “Nothing less than this can make one Man reasonably secure of the Fidelity and Honesty of Another; because nothing [else] can persuade Any Man to forego his Present Interest . . .” (Evans 12). In worker conduct guides, such as *A Present for an Apprentice* (1761), fidelity upholds the social hierarchy; it is characterized as the quality of being loyal to your employer, of rejecting others who

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<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, *An appeal to the candor, magnanimity, and justice of those in power . . . which Does not Oblige them to Violate the Rights of Conscience* (London, 1787) 9; or *A Letter to the Right Honourable Author of A letter to a citizen . . . fairly stated and freely considered* (London, 1761) 28-29.

<sup>57</sup> For example, see John Saunders Piercy, *Fidelity rewarded. Elegiac thoughts, occasioned by the death of that late useful and much lamented minister of the Gospel . . . in the East, London, who exchanged worlds, April 24, 1799. Aged about forty years* (London, 1799) 1-17.

are dishonest, and of maintaining your employer's reputation by vouching to others for his sound character (Barnard 7).

While fidelity informs such relationships between British subjects and their government, God, or other subjects, in advice books and novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries fidelity typically refers to the loyalty of a wife to a husband or a husband to wife, with overtones ranging from serious to humorous. Shelley expands fidelity's range in *Falkner*. But in *The English Letter-Writer*, fidelity is strictly connected with conjugal relationships. A woman who is distraught and feels compelled to denounce God when her husband dies is invited to understand that she will soon meet her spouse in heaven, and is asked to consider, if she had been taken first, "would she not have been sorry to leave behind . . . the pledges of conjugal fidelity?" (Brown 199).

Female characters, more often than not, are the parties expected to demonstrate fidelity in romantic relationships—hardly a surprise—and are denounced for failing to do so. In the preface to the poetic tale *Fidelity, or, Love at First Sight*, readers learn that "the subsequent incident, in which the fidelity of a dog is represented as surpassing that of a lady, though degrading to the sex . . . appeared to . . . contain a moral not totally inapplicable to the present times, in which we perceive, though few, yet too many instances of deviation from that purity of conduct which ought to be the chief boast of a woman" (iv). That is, there are too many women who do not remain faithful to their husbands, as they were expected to. Perhaps the choice of an epigraph to all three volumes of *Falkner* that chronicles a dog's fidelity to a woman, and a woman's fidelity to her deceased dog, subtly comments on these types of comparisons.

That fidelity served as “the chief boast of women” during the period is central to April Alliston’s argument about the significance of fidelity and female literary characters within “the novel” during the long eighteenth century. One key part of Alliston’s thesis relates to how fidelity in *Falkner* binds together a family that does not quite fit the expectations of what the family “should” look like, a husband-wife union that produces offspring.

Elizabeth’s fidelity pointedly extends to her father and her lover at the same time, when Elizabeth refuses to separate from her father after his acquittal of the murder of Neville’s mother, and also accepts Neville as her husband. “Where you go,” she declares to Falkner, “there I will be . . .” (Shelley, *Falkner* 290).<sup>58</sup> And shortly after Falkner’s trial, Elizabeth experiences “an almost painful weight of gratitude and love” for Neville when he makes good on his fidelity to her, forgiving Falkner and willingly becoming her husband (Shelley, *Falkner* 299). Then, there is the fact that Neville and Falkner, in effect, pledge fidelity to each other through Neville’s willingness to forgive Falkner. Neville declares that they “must both join in rendering Miss Raby happy, and both, I trust, remain friends to the end of our lives” (Shelley, *Falkner* 298). “Elizabeth could not break faith with Falkner–Neville could not renounce her . . .” (Shelley, *Falkner* 299), and,

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<sup>58</sup> This quote echoes Ruth’s display of fidelity to her mother-in-law in the Bible. Shelley was no doubt familiar with Ruth’s story, as were her contemporaries. (William Wordsworth wrote his own tale of fidelity and loss in the poem “Ruth” in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)). In the Bible’s Book of Ruth, Ruth’s husband dies and she remains committed to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth tells Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge” (Ruth: 1: 16). Through her fidelity to her mother-in-law, Ruth meets Naomi’s relative, Boaz, and is permitted to glean corn from his fields. Ultimately, through Naomi’s encouragement, Ruth marries Boaz, forming a husband-wife unit bound together through the mother-in-law, and Ruth becomes the mother of the King of David. Ruth is part of a family bound together by fidelity that—in Shelley’s era—can symbolically defy the husband-led nuclear family.

consequently, fidelity between the three characters yields a happy “union,” full of contentment as well as Elizabeth and Neville’s briefly mentioned children.

These characterizations appear striking when we contrast them with examples of fidelity that focus on conjugality and when we turn more carefully to Alliston’s research. Alliston’s work demonstrates that female literary characters that were faithful to their partners in novels around the turn of the eighteenth century often took on an important new normalizing role in society. Instead of possessing honor—the “ideal of conduct enjoined upon early modern women who were considered prone to dishonesty by nature” (Alliston 260)—female characters in fiction of the long-eighteenth-century were shown to “naturally” possess fidelity, which made them capable of standing as the bulwark for the nuclear family, limited to a mother, father and children. The fidelity of female literary characters signified:

. . . the new inner strength of modern women, equipping her to serve as the mainstay of the increasingly monogamous and sentimentalized couple at the core of the increasingly nuclear family through her natural inclination to remain faithful to her husband, rather than continuing to serve as guarantor of dynastic honor in all her roles within the extended family, whether as daughter, sister, wife, mother, etc. (Alliston 260)

While Alliston argues that some novels of the era actually capitalized on women’s newfound “inner strength” to question the institution of marriage, fidelity’s connection to the “sentimentalized couple” is still applicable over 100 years later in Shelley’s silver fork novel *Lodore*, which connects the concept of fidelity to the female protagonist’s adoration of and loyalty to her husband in the face of poverty. Ethel is described as

adoring Edward, for example, with the “. . . fond fidelity of a wife” (Shelley, *Lodore* 366). Shelley treats fidelity differently in *Falkner*, however, a few years later. Since female characters’ conjugal fidelity within “the novel” was often key to representing the nuclear family, serving as the critical trait possessed by “good” female characters, Shelley explores fidelity in *Falkner* to both harness and reconsider these representations of fidelity and family, as well as to weigh in on the values on which her society should be based. These values, according to *Falkner*, are forgiveness and faith, which Shelley equates with “knights of old” (298), in subtle reference to the “dynastic honor” of the alliance system in which daughters’ loyalties to family members other than their husbands mattered the most. Such references would have made sense to Shelley’s readers, since an imagined chivalric past was sometimes used to lament the state of the present and envision a brighter future. In Wordsworth’s sonnet “London, 1802,” for example, the narrator mourns the loss of “manners, virtue, freedom, and power,” which previously had been passed down through the ages, but were now seen to be lacking (8). Also, Book Nine of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* justifies the early stages of the French Revolution as grounded on chivalric “noble ‘passion’ and ‘deeds’” (even if Wordsworth had begun to see that the “chivalric world” also problematically symbolized the ancient regime) (Shaw 420). But Shelley also links forgiveness and fidelity with a more limited family unit—encompassing just three persons—that breaks from the past and resembles the emerging nuclear family as much as it does the old alliance system of chivalric times. The structure of the triad shares something with Jonas Cope’s analysis of *Falkner*,<sup>59</sup> who

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<sup>59</sup> I disagree, however, with the general thesis of Cope’s work on “dynamic” vs. “passive sincerity” in *Falkner*, which argues that we should read Elizabeth as an ultimately ambivalent character defined by “passive sincerity,” or a psychological harmony that comes too easy to her and is unrealistic. He sees in Elizabeth “a domesticated and practicalized version of transcendence that ends up as neither

finds that the novel offers a “Hegelian synthesis” when it both “retains and recasts” certain aspects of romantic ideology in Falkner’s character (136). From this perspective, the family showcased in *Falkner* suggests just how malleable family paradigms might be, borrowing from both the past and Shelley’s present to stress the need for a progressive vision of the future that is grounded in tradition.

### **Fidelity, Fiction, and Unknowable Subjects:**

In her critique of the nuclear family, however, Shelley not only expands conjugal fidelity but also envisions a fidelity that respects the unknowability of “the other” more completely than Hemans’ intimacy does in “Madeline, a Domestic Tale.” To provide context for this claim, I turn back to Alliston. Alliston is the only critic that I know of who carefully attends, within a much larger argument, to the role that fidelity played in novels of the era. She explores the importance of fidelity in representations of the family and in literature of the period, demonstrating how the act of “fidelity provided the gendered aesthetic principle that was just then beginning to define the novel as a narrative form which, borrowing the dramatic principle of verisimilitude, could mediate between romance and history” (260). Characters in novels were assessed according to the probability of their actions, making the genre of the novel different from history, which offers stories that “actually” occurred, and from romance, which provides tales (and, often, characters) that are clearly fantastical.

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quite practical nor quite transcendent” (131). While my focus is not on Elizabeth’s character, I understand her as Shelley’s creation of a female poet legislator of the world, who has powers of vision beyond the everyday person—and an arguably otherworldly capacity for fidelity towards her father—without being transcendent. She helps point the way towards society’s potential for transformation and should be judged as such, rather than according to whether or not, if she were real, she would be an improbable person who struggles too little with decisions she makes. See Jonas Cope, “Passive and Dynamic Sincerity in Mary Shelley’s *Falkner*,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* (63).

The character trait of female fidelity was key to the development of the novel, Alliston argues, because readers had to judge for themselves—through following female characters through a novel—whether such characters possessed the fidelity that was now, in the long eighteenth century, so often depicted as natural to women—an “inherent” part of her being. Alliston’s point is that reading for and discovering a female character’s fidelity does not actually reveal that character’s depth, but rather highlights the calculations that readers perform when reading novels, which were valued during the era for their verisimilitude. Through the process of following a female character through a storyline, readers judge her authenticity by comparing how closely her feelings and actions mirror what they know of actual women. This is a process of comparison that emphasizes how we judge actual others, since we are unable to access what is really happening in depths of others’ minds. We make assumptions about actual others’ through calculations of probability, although we can never be certain that we are correct. For instance, British subjects of the period could not be absolutely sure that an actual woman possessed the fidelity she exhibited, but developed their assumptions according to their experiences of others who exhibited this trait.

Female character and fidelity in the long eighteenth century, therefore, are central to the novel’s capacity to illuminate the *impossibility* of truly knowing other human beings. Alliston contends that during the period, “female character comes to define “character” *tout court*, by functioning as a sign—or *character*—for the empirical unknowability of the interiorized self, as well as that of female fidelity or honor. Both are secret and private truths inaccessible to empirical observation, thus requiring the calculus of probability that, at the same time, came to define the novel” (256-257).



*Falkner* seizes this connection between female character, the “empirical unknowability of the interiorized self,” and fidelity, and in its own way seeks to sharpen the link between fidelity and the internal inaccessibility of persons, so that the fidelity functions, in itself, “as a sign” of someone’s “empirically unknowability.” Characters in *Falkner* retain fidelity to one another in spite of the fact that they cannot access one another’s interiorities. Shelley’s novel forges this link between fidelity and empirical unknowability, in part, through widening the association in fiction between “female fidelity” and “the empirical unknowability of the interiorized self” to include the fidelity demonstrated by all of the main characters in this novel, not just female characters.

The narrator, whose voice Shelley uses to voice her opinions at points in the text, is quick to express that subjects’ inner selves are ultimately unreachable—that “we human beings are so unlike one to the other, that it is often difficult to make one person understand that there is any force in an impulse which is omnipotent with another” (*Falkner* 26); and that language cannot help us truly communicate our inner selves, since “there is no task more difficult, then to convey to another, by mere words, an image, however distinctly it is impressed on our own minds” (*Falkner* 15). The act of fidelity does not rely on revelation, but can be based on trusting another person without understanding him. Elizabeth continually maintains faith in Falkner for the majority of the novel without having access to his story. Like the reverse of William Godwin’s Caleb Williams, she lacked “any desire to pry into her benefactor’s secrets” (Shelley, *Falkner* 56), and is very careful to hide her own internal feelings, as a part of her fidelity to his serenity—to perform a “presence of mind and apparent cheerfulness” when what “secret misgivings” might destroy what Falkner is able to experience in the way of peace

(Shelley, *Falkner* 66). Neville also maintains fidelity towards his mother throughout most of his life, asserting her innocence throughout his childhood and young adulthood, although he does not discover “the truth” until late in the novel. Fidelity can exist with a free flow of thoughts and emotions between characters, but generally occurs when characters maintain faith in others in the face of a lack of knowledge or openness of demeanor. For “the materials of each mind [of man]— the plastic and rocky nature, the mild or the burning temperament” (Shelley, *Falkner* 156) are so very different and ultimately mysterious.

The novel also puts readers in the place of the characters who maintain fidelity to one another although they lack access to each other’s interiorities. *Falkner* highlights readers’ ultimate lack of admission to the thoughts and feelings of characters that are strongly defined by fidelity during the most critical moments in the text. These characters include Alithea—the mother whose final act of fidelity towards her son, her escape from her hiding place and ultimate drowning—can only be accessed by readers through the filtered conjecture of other voices who attempt to make sense of her actions. They also include Falkner— defined by his fidelity towards Alithea and Elizabeth— whose written account of Alithea’s death (and the events within it) are initially interpreted vastly differently by Elizabeth, Neville, and Sir Boyvill (Shelley, *Falkner* 213– 214). These interpretations signal our ultimate incapacity to truly be privy to the interior logic that led to Alithea’s kidnapping and death. Falkner also speaks eloquently of Alithea’s drowning when he is placed on trial for murder at the mercy of “the common sense of twelve men” (Shelley, *Falkner* 253). Crucially, his fate is being decided in a courtroom—a venue of judgment that underscores the necessity of making calculations

relying on impression and probability, similar to the process of novel reading and judging actual others.

**Psychosocial Dynamics, Fidelity, and the Abject:**

This novel explicitly links fidelity to the concept that characters' inner selves, representative of persons' interiorities, cannot fully be accessed. This mode of relating seems ethically sound in comparison with sympathy, which, while fulfilling for certain characters in *Falkner*, appears a highly ambiguously mode of relating for Alithea. Her strong capacity for sympathy—her sensitivity to other's feelings, mixed with a sense of duty—ultimately kills her. While her capacity to sympathize deeply with others besides her children is noted in the novel, her most intense sympathy is for her son. This sympathy ultimately renders her “all mother” (Shelley, *Falkner* 195), rather than lover or friend, inciting her to escape from Falkner to her death. Maternal sympathy in *Falkner* locks mothers into all-consuming and damaging relationships with their children, while fidelity has the potential to be more inclusive, allowing different kinds of familial relationships to thrive.

Along with highlighting fidelity as a potentially more ethical mode of relating, however, *Falkner* also emphasizes persons' unknowability so that fidelity's other payoff seems all the more valuable. Fidelity also signals this novel's capacity to raise a complex query about the social imaginary that is connected to its larger critique of the nuclear family—specifically, the question of whether or not Britons' subjectivities and the maintenance of British society depends on the repudiation of an abject entity. Hence, do persons need to reject an abject entity to experience a unified self? And, by extension, is a unified subjectivity necessary for the sake of sanity and for forging relationships?

To understand this other payoff in light of *Falkner's* emphasis on the inaccessibility of others' interiorities, note that *Falkner* makes a distinction between characters' inner selves and the mental dynamics driving subjects' thoughts, feelings, and actions.<sup>60</sup> Although *Falkner* suggests that we cannot truly see into the cores of particular persons, the novel indicates that readers can gain insight into characters' (and actual persons') mental states through statements such as: "There is, perhaps, no more dangerous mood of mind than when we doggedly pursue means, recklessly uncertain of their end" (Shelley 176). *Falkner* is interested in many mental moods and the impetuses for these moods, including the concept of human repression, returned to throughout the text. For instance, in *Falkner's* struggle to deal with the darkness of his past actions, the narrator suggests, that repression ultimately results in an eruption of the repressed idea, and that a painful pleasure can result from the release of repression (Shelley 77, 155).<sup>61</sup>

While readers' certainly appreciated declarations that explain characters' (individuals) thoughts and actions, this novel's chief reward does not rest on offering

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<sup>60</sup> See Mary Shelley, *Falkner: a Novel*. Ed. Pamela Clemit (London; Brookfield, VT: W. Pickering, 1996). This novel is also fascinated with the concept of physiognomy, which it uses to suggest that "Tones" of mind can be shared and "moods" of mind may be accessed, although each character's particular subjectivity remains a mystery. In describing *Falkner's* relationship with Elizabeth's aunt, Mrs. Raby, we learn that "there is a sort of magnetism that draws like to like, and causes minds of fine and lofty tone to recognize each other when brought in contact" (288). And certainly, at one point, *Falkner's* mind is described as being "imprinted on his brow" and his very acquittal in court owes much to his "dignity added to a look that expressed such entire peace of conscience, that every one who beheld him became prepossessed in his favor" (282).

<sup>61</sup> There is no question that *Falkner* follows in a long trajectory of Romantic-era fiction, and Shelley texts—beginning with *Frankenstein*—that are fascinated with the mental twists and turns that drive human perception. *Mathilda*, mentioned earlier, offers one of Shelley's darkest explorations of human passion and father-daughter relationships, addressing the tyranny of perspective that can arise when deep personal loss—in the form of the loss of the wife/mother—combines with the lack of opportunity to mix in society. *Lodore*, written towards the end of Shelley's career, and with a much lighter touch, nevertheless focuses seriously on consciousness, pointing out the multiplicity with which a single individual views the world: "our several minds, in reflecting to our judgments the occurrences of life, are like mirrors of various shapes and hues, so that we none of us perceive passing objects with exactly similar optics" (123). See Mary Shelley, *Lodore*, Ed. Lisa Vargo (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1997). This statement resonates with the concept of multiple consciousnesses explored in poetry by writers such as Wordsworth and Hemans, discussed in my previous chapter.

readers definitive knowledge about ethics or otherwise. *Falkner* renders fidelity the most prominent sign of this novel's capacity to offset readers' lack of access to particular persons. It uses fidelity to highlight an intriguing inquiry about the nature of intersubjectivity and subjectivity—is it possible to maintain fidelity to the abject (counter to the expectations of the social imaginary)? Can one do so and still perceive life as bearable, and, at its best, fulfilling?<sup>62</sup>

One crucial point in the text where this happens is when Neville, his father, and the men who accompany him exhume Neville's mother, Alithea, from her grave. During this difficult moment, Shelley begins to raise questions about the abject. Shelley considers the abject in relation to the psychologies of her contemporaries, emphasizing Neville's sense of fidelity towards his mother's memory. But simultaneously, the novel also reveals Neville's incapacity to remain faithful to his mother when she fulfills the role of the abject figure, and *Falkner* connects this incapacity to the success of the family that Neville creates in adulthood. This move, as we shall see later on, problematizes the father-daughter-husband family unit showcased in the novel and is integral to the novel's critique of rigid models of the family.

The word abject dates back to the fifteenth century, and referred commonly to “a person, an action, a situation, etc.: of low repute; despicable, wretched; self-abasing, servile, obsequious.” It also referred to the situation in which an individual might find

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<sup>62</sup> Note, *Falkner* does not suggest that being able to access another's inner self would actually be good. In fact, Shelley's novel *Mathilda* emphasizes problems with the desire for such knowledge. As theorized by Khalip, “Mathilda's predicament reveals that the demand to know others and to believe that certain experiences can be and *must be* mutually shared turns sympathy against itself” (156). (See *Anonymous Lives*, “The Art of Knowing Nothing,” Khalip's chapter four, for more on this). But since the desire to access the other's inner self is a subject of many Romantic-era texts—as I touch upon in the second chapter of this dissertation—and this lack is sometimes registered violently, it is interesting that Shelley offers a supplement (deep insight into shared psychosocial dynamics) when fidelity refuses to provide knowledge of others' inner selves.

herself, as “a cast off or cast out; an outcast, exile; a degraded or downtrodden person” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) uses the word in this second way to lambast absolute power. Through the voice of the Spirit of the Hour, it depicts a glorious and free society in which “None / ... Gazed on another’s eye of cold command / Until the subject of a tyrant’s will / Became, worse fate, the abject of his own” (*Oxford English Dictionary; Prometheus Unbound* 119). Mary Shelley thinks of the word similarly. And *Falkner* addresses the abject as seriously as *Frankenstein* does, a concept that many critics have already written about in relation to her watershed novel. George Haggerty, for example, makes a case for the social significance of the abject creature in *Frankenstein*, arguing, “this creature of abjection reaches beyond the novel to claim the position in Western culture that he has earned. Like the sodomite, the creature is used to assert identity. Like the sodomite, his abjection determines public meaning and gives it shape” (45). The significance of the abject in *Falkner*, however, is somewhat more difficult to see.

Theories of abjection vary according to critic. However, as noted at the start of this chapter, I draw my meaning from Julia Kristeva, whose work on the concept remains authoritative, and from Jerold Hogle’s interpretation of Kristeva’s theory. Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, “The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire . . . . The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (1). In its ambiguous liminality, the abject is “radically excluded and draws [one] . . . toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). The abject’s illusiveness confounds the clarity of Western logic, offering an opaqueness that Kristeva shows to be equated with “the

enigma constituted, for reason, by the feminine” (160). Women, such as Alitheia, present a paradox that threatens “rational” reasoning—they have, borrowing from Kristeva’s phrasing, the “power . . . to bestow mortal life” (158). They have the ability to give birth, but, in bringing life into the world, to breathe life into inevitable death, and thus to defy understanding. Because of women’s ambiguous position as both granter of life and death, the abject is rendered deeply alluring but also a feminine horror, a reviled “threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 1). Building on Kristeva’s definition, Jerrold Hogle defines the abject as something that allows aspects of the self that threaten one’s sense of a coherent subjectivity to be “thrown off” or “thrown down under,” rather than accepted (“Frankenstein as Neo-gothic” 178). In the role of the abject, “ambiguous” woman, and especially the mother figure, functions to absorb uncomfortable truths.

Alitheia’s body is a woman’s body, and it is also a dead body, making its association with the concept of the abject all the stronger than it would be if Alitheia were alive. Also, Alitheia “perished on the waste and desolate coast,” on the margins of society, away from so-called civilization and breeding places (Shelley, *Falkner* 133), representative of the margins of civilization toward which we wish to cast abject entities that threaten our views of “the thinkable.” Alitheia’s name, furthermore, plays into her role as an abject entity. Graham Allen points out that “we should, of course, remember that Neville’s mother’s name, Alitheia, literally means ‘truth’” (234), which has to do with the fact that she represents sincerity, maintaining a loyalty to her family that never wavers. But for Allen, the name Alitheia also implies subjects’ lack of control over themselves, since “the mother’s name is a contested signifier, which produces, in the

major male protagonists, an experience of repetition which seems beyond resolution” (37). Building on Allen’s analysis of the darker connotations of Alithea’s signification, I think that Alithea’s name is appropriate because she is also made to represent unwanted “truths” about mortality that subjects push away from their consciousnesses—such as the finitude of the body, which inevitably fractures all family units and their relations, no matter their strength, including Alithea’s seemingly unshakable fidelity toward her son and husband.

In *Falkner*, Neville’s relationship with his mother is frequently defined by his fidelity towards her. When Elizabeth discovers that Neville plans to follow a lead about his mother’s disappearance that would direct him on a voyage to America, she writes to him: “I cherish the hope that it [your journey] will end in the exculpation of one deeply injured—and your being rewarded for your fidelity to her memory” (Shelley, *Falkner* 73). One could argue that Neville’s fidelity towards his mother’s memory is also strongly pronounced during the moment that he encounters his mother’s decaying body. Shelley describes Alithea’s exhumation in detail and specifies the condition of her form as Neville gazes upon her: “the action of the elements, which the sands had not been able to impede, had destroyed every vestige of a human frame, except those discolored bones, and long tresses of dark hair, which were wound around the skull” (Shelley, *Falkner* 215). Neville feels himself pulled towards his mother’s decaying remains, filled with a mixture of agony for the loss of her and faith in her goodness. But he is also drawn towards *and* repelled by her form as one is drawn towards and repelled by the abject, the “place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2). His reaction to Alithea’s bones and hair is strongly mediated by the expectations of the diggers and his father, as one’s response to



the abject is mediated by the social imaginary. His personal emotions are presented in terms of the group's reaction to his mother's grave. As he peers into his mother's sandy resting place, readers learn that a "universal yet suppressed groan burst from all." Neville "felt inclined to leap into the grave, but the thought of the many eyes all gazing on him acted like a check" (Shelley, *Falkner* 215). Aware of these eyes, Neville quickly covers his mother's remains up, since "a second instinctive feeling of pious reverence induced him to unfasten his large black horseman's cloak, and to cast it over the opening" (Shelley, *Falkner* 215).

During this moment, when Neville is encountered with the physical form of his mother for the first time since childhood, his feelings are heightened. Certainly, reverence is an impetus for his covering of Alithea, and he is undoubtedly driven, in part, by the desire to preserve her dignity. However, Neville's performance also casts Alithea away from his sight and back into the ground as swiftly as possible, and in his reverence he also fails, symbolically, to maintain fidelity toward his mother's form as he visually encounters it at the gravesite. He fails to understand her abject remains, so apparently "other," and all they represent (a lack of control over one's life and the inevitable consequences of mortality), as a part of his own narrative. After directly facing the reality of her death, Neville swiftly makes her disappear. The men's expectation that Neville briefly acknowledge and turn away from his mother's bones represents social conventions that affect Neville's psychological response to his mother during this moment in the text. The conventions that restrain Neville dictate that the mother remain the rejected abject figure. Neville must, for the sake of the culture, reveal and then expel "the enigma constituted, for reason, by the feminine," an enigma which "confus[es]

inside and outside, life and death . . . and that is certainly more than a metaphor.” I here quote from Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s assessment of the mother in Western culture, as glossed by Kristeva (160). It is as if Alithea’s decrepit maternal body, a stark reminder of its power to bestow life and death, must be exposed and then shielded in order to protect the happiness of the living.<sup>63</sup>

There is, of course, in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a much more famous depiction of a dead mother’s corpse, which critics have also interpreted using Kristeva’s theory of the abject. After withdrawing in terror from his newly created creature, Victor Frankenstein dreams that he sees and kisses his healthy and “blooming” fiancée, Elizabeth Lavenza, who then instantly appears on the brink of death. A moment later, Elizabeth transforms into the corpse of Victor’s already deceased mother, encased in a “shroud” with “grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.” When Victor wakes up in “horror,” the nightmare becomes reality, as he sees by his bedside “the wretch . . . [he] had created” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 53). In an introduction to a collection of articles about Victor’s dream, Jerold Hogle discusses the view that the creature symbolizes the abject most intensely during Victor’s dream of “being re-enveloped by his mother and death

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<sup>63</sup> Note, this section of the novel does later address the abject’s alluring power from the group’s perspective, although Alithea symbolically remains a rejected abject figure. After Alithea’s affecting exhumation, the local residents who, at first, “did not dare move the cloak” again, do so at the arrival of the jury for Falkner’s trial: the “men looked in; the skull bound by her long hair . . . attracted peculiar observation; the women, as they saw it, wept aloud . . .” (Shelley, *Falkner* 220). After her wedding ring and two other rings are identified as proof of her identity, the narrator articulates that “it was sacrilege to peer at them [her remains] a moment longer than was necessary,” and Alithea is again covered with Neville’s cloak (Shelley, *Falkner* 220-221). Each “beholder” of her bones will now certainly take to their own grave a “lesson on the nothingness of life” (Shelley, *Falkner* 220), and readers learn that the townspeople are also drawn to that which deeply repels them. Thus, although Alithea is undoubtedly cast back into the ground as the rejected abject figure, the townspeople’s response to her—similar to Neville’s—acknowledges the abject’s functionality as an attractive and ultimately repulsive entity; as something that, to return to Kristeva, “draws me towards the place where meaning collapses,” but which ultimately “lies outside . . . [the culture in] its place of banishment” (2). See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

simultaneously.”<sup>64</sup> This dream connects the creature with the “two deepest anomalies that Kristeva sees as the most abjected of all: the visceral sense of being both separate from and absorbed into the mother *and* the sense, both fearful and seductive, of being embraced by death right at what seems the birth of a new form of life” (Hogle, “Introduction”). Though the abject is fearful *and* seductive, the dream ultimately symbolizes the casting off of the abject. “Victor’s non-waking dream,” Hogle notes, “is . . . the exposure of an abjection and the abject, in which the irreconcilable deep differences in the self are made to seem outside it” (Hogle, “Introduction”).

Similarly, the scene at the gravesite in *Falkner* exposes how the abjection of Alithea makes the body’s inevitable demise seem outside the self so that life can be embraced—and new, potentially more egalitarian families can be formed—without the hue of death weighing down too heavily. Without explicitly discussing the concept of the abject in *Falkner*, Lisa Hopkins argues that Neville’s future seems dependent upon her inert, skinless bones—bones that signify her distinct otherness from vital forms. She argues that “Alithea’s mortality is made abundantly, even shockingly clear,” and she suggests that Alithea’s death is necessary to guarantee the unity of Falkner, Elizabeth, and Neville (403). Alithea’s body must be viewed, deemed other, and covered over again, I would add, so that confusion about mortality can be faced, absorbed, and “removed,” so that the living can avoid the realization that we will never understand life’s relationship to death, even though Neville has discovered the history of his mother’s death. Alithea’s abject position ensures that Neville can zestfully turn towards

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<sup>64</sup> Other critics also address the abject in *Frankenstein*, including Diane Long Hoeveler, who analyzes the abject creature as a mother figure, simultaneously rejected and longed for by Victor (51). See “Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory,” *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Ed. Esther H. Schor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

his role as Falkner's son-in-law and Elizabeth's husband—as half of the thriving pair, which “closely linked hand in hand, and with hearts open and true as the sunlight about them, enjoyed the sweetest hour of love” (Shelley, *Falkner* 299). Through the above dynamic, we can begin to see that although *Falkner* is deeply drawn to the daughter-father-husband union at its center, it also recognizes the hidden cost of this family's preservation, which undercuts the perfection of the model. *Falkner* depicts Neville's lack of fidelity to the abject Alithea, which preserves the vitality of the family and represents the culture's sacrifice of the mother as an abject figure.

In the next part of the novel that focuses on the abject, however, Neville responds differently, although not to Alithea. He instead maintains fidelity to his own “feminine” knowledge—that which may seem unreasonable to others—and, consequently, to a living, potentially abject figure affected by his embracement of this knowledge, none other than Falkner, himself. Through the interplay between Neville's reactions during this part of the novel and his response to Alithea at the gravesite, *Falkner* questions whether or not some kind of rejected abject figure is absolutely necessary to hold together British society. The fidelity that is interrogated here no longer relates to a mother and child. It is Neville's fidelity to Falkner, who must become his father-in-law if he is to make good on his fidelity towards Falkner's daughter.

After the trial which acquits Falkner, Neville must decide if he can become Elizabeth's husband and accept Falkner—his “mother's destroyer”—against the dictates of social expectations. However, Neville does not trust himself to form an adequate answer. He instead writes Mrs. Raby, Elizabeth's upper class aunt, (who acknowledges Elizabeth later in life), asking *her* to make the decision for him (Shelley, *Falkner* 295).

Mrs. Raby is now in charge of the family, replacing her father-in-law in his decline. He becomes a “mere cipher,” as she—a woman capable of “generous sentiments and heroic sacrifice”—takes over his role as a strong female head (Shelley, *Falkner* 284). Mrs. Raby is characterized as a woman who struggles with social dictates, but who ultimately does not take society’s expectations as her own law. Initially, at the persuasion of Neville, she had hastened to Elizabeth’s side the night before Falkner’s trial (Shelley, *Falkner* 286). After Falkner’s trial is over, she asked Falkner to accompany Elizabeth to her estate at Belleforest, although others doubt the righteousness of this invitation (Shelley, *Falkner* 289). At first, Mrs. Raby’s “heart, formed for generosity, was tempted to trample on the suggestions of prudence and the qualms of bigotry” (Shelley, *Falkner* 287), and then it does so through her extension of her hand to Elizabeth’s father. She speaks with sage like wisdom when she exclaims to Falkner, “When we turn the page of history, and read of men visited by adversity—what do we say to those fellow creatures who fall off from them on account of their misfortunes? Do we not call them little-minded, and visit them with contempt? Do not class me with such” (Shelley, *Falkner* 290).

It is then Neville who must come to terms with vexed impulses. In the letter he writes to Mrs. Raby after Falkner’s acquittal, Neville asserts that Falkner’s own exquisite “sensibility,” in part, has instilled within himself strong “sentiments, the entire forgiveness of the injury done me” (Shelley, *Falkner* 295). Still haunted by social customs that would require him to reject Elizabeth, and what appear to be the dictates of rational judgment, he asks Mrs. Raby if he can honestly trust the merits of his forgiving emotions. He questions if he should not continue to uphold a grudge against a man who

inadvertently brought about his mother's death. Through this letter, Neville transfers the responsibility of choosing whether to follow the justice of his heart or the "rational" judgment of society onto a female counterpart.

This transfer is significant because of the supposed connection between passion and women during the Romantic era. To remind ourselves of period assumptions about women's intellectual and emotional natures, we can briefly turn to Susan Wolfson's analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft names specific intellectual males who are often irrational and emotional in order to combat stereotypes concerning women's mental capacities and emotional characters. As Wolfson demonstrates, Wollstonecraft lambasts "weak 'reasoners' such as Rousseau and Milton: of Milton's contradictions . . . [Wollstonecraft] remarks, 'into similar inconsistencies [as women] are great men often led by their senses' . . . Rousseau is 'unintelligible,' full of 'nonsense' and 'errors' in reasoning arising from 'sensibility'" (Wolfson, *Borderlines* 13). Through Wolfson's gloss of Wollstonecraft's defensive rhetoric, we see that women were perceived, somewhat paradoxically, as selfless, "'delicate, and beautiful,'" but also as driven by passion over reason (*Borderlines* 13). In many subjects' perspectives, they were ruled by their potentially misled senses rather than their capacities to think.<sup>65</sup>

In *Political Justice*, Shelley's father, William Godwin, does not deny the importance of "feminine" passion, a potentially damaging element of sensibility only when sensibility—a hybrid of reflection and sentiment—becomes overtaken by it.

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<sup>65</sup> For a groundbreaking analysis of how associations between "male reason and female imagination" were deconstructed by Mary Wollstonecraft, see Orrin Wang's chapter covering Wollstonecraft's treatment of this binary in *The Rights of Woman*. Wang argues that, to interrogate the male reason and female imagination binary, Wollstonecraft's polemic "strategically associat[es] 'woman' with a variety of local, contradictory identities" and "destabiliz[es] the opposition between reason and the host of terms the text contrasts with reason." See Orrin Wang, *Fantastic Modernity* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 124.

Godwin considers passion “inseparable from” reason and argues that “virtue . . . will never be strenuously espoused, till [it is] ardently loved” (*Political Justice* 52). In 1798, referring to *Political Justice*, Godwin writes that he “ha[s] a most unequivocal, perhaps unmitigated passion for truth and right modes of sentiment, and therefore eagerly follow[s] every light, apprehended to be such, that is presented to me” (quod. in Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel* 183). But while he appears proud of his ideological persistence, terms such as “unmitigated,” along with phrases such as “apprehended to be such” and “eagerly follow every light,” also imply his self-reflexive fears regarding the extreme zealousness of his quest. They demonstrate his sense of being able to follow rather than necessarily *know* truths. While Godwin defends passion’s virtuous potential, he also concertedly attempts to define the spread of political justice in “masculinized,” scientific terminology. He argues, for example, that truth brought to the “public . . . resembles the motion of a falling body, which increases its rapidity in proportion to the squares of the distances” (*Political Justice* 57). His effort to describe his philosophical quest scientifically, in tandem with his qualifier-driven characterization of its passionate nature, is significant. This depiction suggests Godwin’s underlying fear that his treatise’s foundations closely resemble the foundations of Edmund Burke’s feudal logic, “feminized” in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).<sup>66</sup> Godwin seems concerned that his own apparently rational beliefs may be exposed as the “habit” of “the future,” grounded on sentiment rather than on concrete truths. He worries, in other words, that they are similar to Burke’s ideas, founded mystically “on . . .

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Wollstonecraft’s assertion of her own “manly definition” of the rights of men, in the face of the “flimsy ridicule” which Burke’s “lively fancy has interwoven with the present acceptance of the term” (375). See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, The Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period 1770-1832*. Ed. D.L. McDonald and Anne McWhir (Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2010).

the habit of retroactively choosing to enact the values of such a previous time” (Wang 212).

Godwin’s anxieties about *Political Justice* are important because they provide key context for Neville’s reaction after the trial, helping to illustrate why Shelley would have written a character who—even for all of his radical qualities—struggles with defying social expectations to make what could very well be considered an irrational, “feminine” decision. On one hand, Neville’s transferring of the decision of whether or not to embrace Elizabeth as his wife into Mrs. Raby’s hands makes Mrs. Raby the “rational,” analytical judge of the situation. However, on the other hand, this move also allows Neville to deflect the “feminine” realization of his fidelity towards Elizabeth in spite of Falkner’s actions onto a feminine subject, while revealing his fear that others will “despise” his decision to marry Elizabeth as unintelligible, or lacking strong, proven foundations. Neville wrestles with the question, “can I—may I—so far forget the world’s censure, and I may say the instigations of nature, as unreservedly to forgive?” (Shelley, *Falkner* 295). He does go on to plead Falkner’s cause, but he asks Ms. Raby if he should “act” on “the entire forgiveness of the injury done me” (Shelley, *Falkner* 295).

The novel does not allow Neville to succeed with this evasion—the act of passing off the ultimate decision about his future with Elizabeth onto Mrs. Raby. Mrs. Raby does not reply to the letter, and Falkner takes it upon himself to respond. Falkner asserts that he himself will succumb to the dictates of society so that Neville will not have to live scarred by the judgment of his peers. He will forever leave Elizabeth and Neville once Neville has claimed Elizabeth as his wife. Falkner declares, “Come here, take her at my hand—it is all I ask—from that hour you shall never see me more—the injured and the



injurer will separate . . . once Elizabeth is irrevocably yours, wide seas shall roll between us” (Shelley, *Falkner* 296). At this point in the novel, Falkner, instead of the dead mother, is envisioned as the abject figure (although the dead mother unequivocally remains in the role of the abject). In this moment, however, driven by his fidelity to Elizabeth, Falkner offers himself up to Neville as an embodied, potentially rejected entity who plans to live beyond the shores of British society. His words conjure an image of a possible future self that must be perceived as other in order to confirm the culture’s expectations.<sup>67</sup>

When Falkner pledges his fidelity to Elizabeth by offering to quit England, he gains a position that Alithea is not, ultimately, given the opportunity to inhabit, one that forces Neville towards an important realization. When Falkner openly offers himself up as a kind of social sacrifice for Neville and Elizabeth’s happiness, Neville comes to see that by potentially rejecting his “feminine” desire to forgive the potentially abject Falkner—by refusing to maintain fidelity toward his own reasoning—he is not only casting off an impulse of the heart. Rather, he is also performing an action with implications for very real others, and maintaining fidelity towards Elizabeth means maintaining fidelity towards his own beliefs and towards Falkner, as well.

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<sup>67</sup> As Neville reads Falkner’s letter and encounters the image of a potentially abject figure in Falkner, Shelley references a moment in *Lodore*, when the Byronic protagonist—who is very much like Falkner—feels himself in a role similar to that of the abject. This moment of Lodore’s perceived rejection occurs once he realizes that his wife and mother-in-law have fled from him. He had argued that he, his wife, and child must run off to America, away from his mother-in-law’s overbearing influence, and this plan was not accepted by his wife. Lodore now feels that “they [his wife and mother-in-law] abandoned him. They left the roof from which he was about to exile himself, even before he had quitted it, as if in fear of contamination during his brief delay. Thus he construed their retreat; and worked up, as he was, almost to madness, he considered their departure as the commencement of that universal ban, which for ever, was to accompany his name” (Shelley, *Lodore* 121). While the phrase “almost to madness” signals that Lodore’s concern about a “universal ban” is misplaced, his sense of being a contaminated entity does play out in the text, and he dies in a duel defending his ruined name. In *Falkner*, Shelley takes the idea of a “universal ban” and interrogates the social need for a figure that fulfills this ban.

Because Shelley depicts strong similarities between Neville and Falkner, we might conclude that Neville is led to understand Falkner's pain as his own pain. Falkner manifests himself as an uncanny mirror image of Neville. First, both men enthusiastically undertook painful journeys: while Falkner pursued Alithea in a romantic quest that ended horribly awry, Neville pursued the secret of his mother's death towards a very painful discovery. Also, both men become wracked with internal turmoil as the results of their quests, and both find their future happiness pinned to the same woman. Furthermore, both are depicted as equipped with great sensibility and the desire to make Elizabeth happy. Falkner's letter to Neville intimates their strong parallels. He proclaims that "you and I love Elizabeth sufficiently even to sacrifice a portion of our own integrity to secure her happiness," and that "you must compensate to my dear child for my loss—you must be her father as well as her husband" (Shelley, *Falkner* 296). Considering that Falkner highlights his resemblance to Neville, it would be difficult for Neville not to glimpse himself in the potentially abject figure of Falkner. It would also be difficult for Neville not to realize the potentially abject Falkner in himself.

Falkner's offering leads Neville to appreciate that very real consequences can result from the process of abjection, and, in turn, to welcome the insights gained from his now-embraced, "feminine" sensibility. These are insights augmented by Elizabeth's own conceptions of justice and forgiveness. Elizabeth's own significance, while not the focus of this chapter, should not be underestimated. She stands at the center of the relationship between Falkner and Neville, not as a mere gift binding the men together, but as a force of transformation. She is the inspiration for Neville's now-accepted "feminine" knowledge, which allows him to adopt Falkner as his own father. Kate Ellis is certainly

right in arguing that Elizabeth helps bring about Neville's change of heart, even if it is not simply Elizabeth who, through her fidelity to Falkner's cause, "subdue[s] . . . the desire to avenge his mother's death that drives her lover, Neville, to try to destroy the other man in Elizabeth's life" (152). Ultimately, Neville and Falkner both renounce the need to "seek to account for, or justify the course they t[ake]," after Neville decides that the three of them will be able to live together despite what social conventions dictate. Through Neville's fidelity to the nearly-bject Falkner, and through Elizabeth's affection, these three characters develop into true Godwinians, their fidelity to one another and to what seems right bidding them together. They "remain together through life, despite all tragic and miserable (sic) that seemed to separate them" (Shelley, *Falkner* 299).

Yet it is difficult to analyze Neville's acceptance of the abject *Falkner* without noticing that this dynamic, despite Elizabeth's forceful presence, is stamped with the trace of patriarchy in at least two ways. When Falkner replies to Neville's letter in the place of Mrs. Raby, Neville, as I argue above, is unable to deflect his decision about whether to marry Elizabeth onto a feminine signifier. But the responder to the letter—while a potentially abject entity—is also a male character who gains the authority to reply to Neville in Mrs. Raby's place. Falkner's gender alone within this transfer of authority might not be enough to indicate that the father-daughter-husband triad retains patriarchal influences, since Shelley purposefully muddles the expected link between standard gender traits and sex in the novel's main characters. Falkner is described, for instance, as tending to Elizabeth like a mother (Shelley, *Falkner* 35). But the novel also chronicles Mrs. Raby's replacement of her own father-in-law's patriarchal rule over her family—he becomes a "mere cipher" in his old age—while she embodies enlightened social views

when becoming the matriarch (Shelley, *Falkner* 284). Since the transfer of power to Mrs. Raby is emphasized in *Falkner* as extremely progressive, any transfer of authority away from her—including toward Falkner—appears somewhat suspect.

Further, and more suggestively, even though the novel showcases a strong female protagonist who is central to its resolution, Neville's stance of fidelity toward Falkner and Elizabeth is connected with an Oedipal struggle and resolution between two male characters. Neville at first bitterly resists Falkner, his "mother's destroy," accepting him as his friend and family member only after a long period of time and much consideration. True, this Oedipal struggle is extremely toned down in comparison with that of Victor and the creature in *Frankenstein*. About the Oedipal conflict in Shelley's earlier novel, Mary Jacobus contends that "intense identification with an oedipal conflict exists at the expense of identification with women," and that "only when the two females who double one another in the novel . . . have canceled each other out is the way clear for the scene of passionate mourning in which the monster hangs, loverlike, over Frankenstein's deathbed" (101). While the resolution to the Oedipal struggle in *Falkner* does not cancel out Elizabeth to bring together Falkner and Neville, and, in fact, allows Elizabeth to play a dynamic role within a new family unit, *Falkner* nevertheless posits the existence of this new family on one man's capacity to accept another. Although Neville is the opposite of a patriarchal male character—he is sensitive and thoughtful; "irrationally" spends his days searching for clues to his mother's disappearance; and accepts his "feminine knowledge" in willingly marrying Elizabeth—he is still very much male in his courting of Elizabeth and Byronic loner characteristics. Although the Oedipal struggle in *Falkner* may appear innocuous, it implicitly rivals the significance of the female protagonist's

role in forming the father-daughter-husband triad, adulterating Neville's embracement of his "feminine knowledge" and fidelity towards the near-abject Falkner with the imprint of patriarchal dynamics.

The survival of these latent patriarchal traces within the family showcased in *Falkner* could lead us to think that the novel's progressive impulses fail, or that the novel's chief radical message—similar to Hays' *Memoirs*—is to expose the intense difficulty of envisioning social structures beyond the current ideology. Similarly, Alithea's role as the abject, which helps preserve the vitality of the family, could also appear to suggest that *Falkner* signals a fixed psychosocial dynamic—the need for someone (such as the mother) to serve as the abject figure. If that were the case, Shelley's expanded fidelity would also be deemed a failure in its refusal to offer an alternative to the conjugal-based family that is entirely free of subjugation. Fidelity would remain, like the versions of sympathy that I refer to in Hays' *Memoirs* and Hemans' poems in *Records*, inevitably tied to oppressive dynamics, limited in its capacity to herald social change.

But I think different impulses are driving this novel. Falkner's subtle use of lingering patriarchal traces and the question of fidelity to the abject, I argue, actually work together to critique the nuclear family and static familial paradigms in general. The taint of old power structures within this "utopian" family, potentially damaging to women, helps signal that father-daughter-husband triad—in and of itself—is not a perfect model on which to base future families. Despite the happiness of Falkner, Elizabeth, and Neville, the novel renders this model family suspect by refusing to back any particular familial paradigm. Since Neville does not maintain fidelity to the abject Alithea, but does

embrace his “feminine” realization that he could be faithful to both Elizabeth and to Falkner, the father-daughter-husband triad is ultimately constructed upon opposing responses to the question, is the rejection of the abject necessary for the maintenance of subjectivity and social life, or is it possible to move beyond this psychosocial dynamic? *Falkner* binds the family together through contradictory responses to this query, refusing a definitive answer. Thus, the novel depicts a family built on continuous interrogation, on a dialectical interplay that refuses monolithic structures—“correct” ways of defining the family that work for some but do not work for others. By dialectical interplay, I mean that the two responses to this question challenge one another in the novel without resulting in synthesis. By constructing the “model” family on the dialectical interplay between two opposing responses to the question of the abject, *Falkner* depicts a paradigm whose very structure is always in process and capable of transformation.

By considering how this fraught dynamic in *Falkner* presents the full scope of the problem of the abject to the reader, we become more aware that other aspects of this novel should not be limited to decisive “either or” interpretations. By taking this approach, we might also understand *Falkner’s* general treatment of the motherhood differently than it is often depicted. We do not, for instance, have to argue that the novel’s treatment of maternal love is either overwhelmingly critical (Hopkins 401, 403), nor assert, at the other end of the spectrum, that it is an ultimately “unquestioned ideal throughout the novel” (Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 204). We can instead approach ideas in *Falkner* as Eric Lindstrom does the concept of “things as they are” in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, as that which “does not attempt to decide the question [but which] . . .

present[s] the case, in literary rendering, which awaits an additionally mediated phase of public reaction” (486).

### **The Abject in Today’s Critical Landscape:**

Christine L. Harold analyzes recent debate over the state of the abject in relation to the formation of Western subjects. She argues that “Kristeva introduces a dynamism into the concept of identity—a dynamism that depends on a subject’s ability to recognize and reject the abject—that gets articulated and rearticulated through the self’s interaction with an abject other” (Harold 869). This is a dynamism that Shelley interrogates by considering whether the survival of the British social imaginary truly depends on subjects’ rejection of the abject, illustrated through Neville’s divergent responses to abject figures (Alithea, his “feminine” knowledge) and a potentially abject entity (Falkner). By interrogating a male character’s response to the abject, rather than a female character’s, the novel underscores that patriarchal ideology is currently embedded within psychosocial dynamics, at the greatest cost to women.

By demonstrating that Neville and his mother are deeply connected and that Neville and the potentially abject Falkner are twisted mirror images of each other, Shelley also preempts Judith Butler’s addition to Kristeva’s concept (as it is understood by Harold). Butler theorizes the abject as an “an integral part of the vital subject, [which] serv[es] as a force of identity formation and reformation” (Harold 870). Harold sees this formulation as opposing the “the binary of other/self or of abjection/vitality that is implicit in Kristeva’s argument” (870). But whereas Butler “posits a conception of subjectivity that depends [like Kristeva] on a *repudiation* of abjection” (my emphasis, Harold 870), Shelley’s critique of the abject in *Falkner* approaches the necessity of

repudiation more open-endedly, questioning whether or not the repudiation of the abject is necessary for the preservation of the social imaginary. In other words, *Falkner's* treatment of the abject is more like Harold's. Harold examines the movie *Trainspotting* (1996), discovering within it the argument that one "cannot sufficiently negate the abject . . . that the abject is integral to the pulsing—or, what William S. Burroughs might call a 'constant state of kicking'—on which subjectivity depends" (870). Harold asserts that "by foregrounding the abject, *Trainspotting* temporarily destabilizes a notion of subjectivity that depends on the abject's otherness" (876).

Harold points to the character Mark Renton, a heroin addict that wants to quit his habit and seeks out opium suppositories to help him overcome his addiction. After he takes these suppositories, Renton finds himself out in the neighborhood in the immediate need to let loose his bowels (due to his withdrawal from heroin), and ends up diving into the toilet to rescue his lost suppositories. Harold argues that Renton "learns that the abject in this case, his own feces—is not an unruly quality to be reined in by reason . . . Nor is it an external border against which he can identify himself as an autonomous subject, as Kristeva might suggest" (872). Instead, Harold suggests, "his immersion in his own waste shows [that] the abject is a permeable and local boundary that is always in flux. By forthrightly encountering his own corporeal limits and acknowledging his own contamination, Renton reconfigures himself over and over again" (872). The abject becomes a transitory entity, not static or rejected, but, rather, integral to subjectivity within the social imaginary.

In a much less jarring way, as we have seen, *Falkner* also foregrounds the abject when Neville is forced to confront and accept the abject within himself and ultimately



maintains fidelity to his father-in-law. Different from the toilet scene in *Trainspotting*, however, Shelley's novel places characters in the role, or almost in the role, of the abject to more directly explore the consequences of abjection for actual persons. Falkner, in the end, is not an entity to be overpowered or a discarded other by Neville, but is ultimately accepted as an integral part of Neville's troubled history and future happiness.

Nonetheless, Alithea's dead body remains the rejected abject entity (symbolic of the mother's ambiguous position in the British social imaginary), discovered on the margins of society—an alluring and frightful figure that Neville cannot maintain fidelity towards. Shelley's novel asks readers to consider if Western subjectivity is possible without the rejection of a contaminated figure. Fidelity—integral to this novel's development of an ethics or refusal—becomes the key dynamic that emphasizes the full depth and significance of what a silver fork novel of the late 1830s can accomplish.

Like the rejection of colonizing sympathy in *Memoirs* and investigation of intimacy in “Indian Woman's Death Song” and “Madeline, a Domestic Tale,” *Falkner's* dialectical approach towards the abject utilizes concrete depictions of close-knit intersubjective relations. These types of depictions in Hays', Hemans', and Shelley's writings strive to make complex theories of engaging with others relevant, in tandem with related arguments about the import of novels and poetry. The emergence of an ethics of refusal in Hemans' and Shelley's work signals a type of Romanticism that is unusually preoccupied with attempting to connect open-ended approaches towards modernity directly with the most fundamental intersubjective unit—the family. It remains to be seen what other learnings might arise from further studies of an ethics of refusal, and such critical pathways are certainly worth pursuing.

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