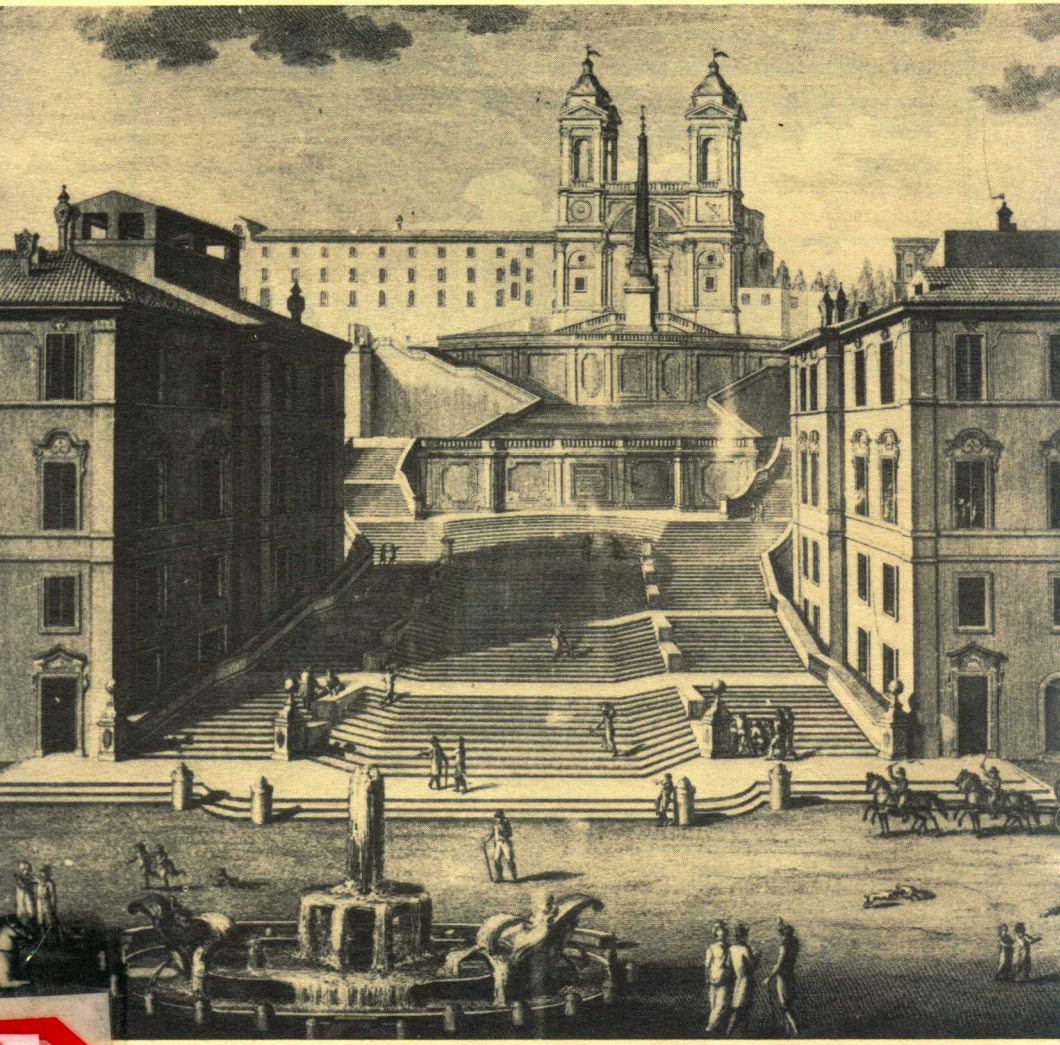
THE KEATS-SHELLEY REVIEW



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MARY SHELLEY'S *THE LAST MAN*: APOCALYPSE WITHOUT MILLENNIUM

by Morton D. Paley

Early in 1826 appeared a book advertized as a 'new Romance, or, rather Prophetic Tale'[1] — Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*. It was published at just the wrong time. Since 1823 the literary world had been preoccupied with a controversy about just who had invented the Last Man, beginning with the publication of Thomas Campbell's poem 'The Last Man' and Francis Jeffrey's suggestion in the *Edinburgh Review* that Campbell was indebted to Byron's 'Darkness' for the idea.[2] Campbell was moved to print an open letter to Jeffrey asserting his own priority and claiming that it was he who at least fifteen years before had suggested to Byron the subject of 'a being witnessing the extinction of his species and of the creation, and of his looking, under the fading eye of nature, at desolate cities, ships floating with the dead ...' [3] According to Campbell, the publication of 'Darkness' had discouraged him from pursuing the theme, but 'I was provoked to change my mind, when my friend Barry Cornwall informed me that an acquaintance of his intended to write a long poem entitled the Last man'.[4]

Barry Cornwall's acquaintance was Thomas Lovell Beddoes, who had been projecting a play on the Last Man, but who now gave up on the subject at least temporarily. 'Meanwhile let Tom Campbell rule his roost and mortify the ghost of Sternhold', he wrote acerbically to his friend Thomas Forbes Kelsall. 'It is a subject for Michael Angelo, not for the

1 See Jean de Palacio, 'Mary Shelley and the "Last Man" ', *Revue de la litterature comparée*, XLIV (1968), p.40. The precise date of publication was 23 January 1826. See *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, edited by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore, 1980-88), I, 512 n.8.

2 *Edinburgh Review*, LXI (1824-25), 284.

3 Campbell's widely circulated response is reprinted in Cyrus Redding's *Literary Reminiscences and Memoirs of Thomas Campbell* (London, 1869).

4 Ibid., p. 305.

painter of the Marquis of Granby on the sign-post.'[5] Beddoes's withdrawal may have been prompted by the mirth Campbell's claims had elicited from the literary press. 'How could he submit, in short, to produce a last Last Man, when the first conception was his?' asked the *London Magazine*.[6] The anonymous author went on to recall the first of all Last Man narratives, published anonymously in London as *Omegarus and Syderia, a Romance in Futurity in 1806*.[7] Campbell's claim was ridiculous, 'the idea of the Last Man being most particularly obvious, or rather absolutely common-place, and a book with the taking title of *Omegarius (sic)*, or *The Last Man*, having gone the rounds of all circulating libraries for years past'.

By 1826 the subject of the Last Man had come to seem not apocalyptic but ridiculous. Behind the ridicule, however, there is a suggestion that the imagination resists the idea of Lastness, an idea that presupposes a recipient or reader whose very existence negates the Lastness of the narrating subject. This supposed unimaginability is the theme of an essay published by *The Monthly Magazine* entitled 'The Last Book: with a Dissertation on Last Things in General':[8]

> The word 'last', it is to be lamented, is not sufficiently final to preclude the emulative subsequency of all we leave behind: we cannot close the doors of language on the thousand little beginnings that tread on the heels of the safest conclusion. A term should be invented comprehensive enough to include those superlativerly late comers that usually follow the last . . . . But, as words are at present, last things are generally the last things in the world that are last.

[5] Letter postmarked 25 March 1825. *The Works of Thomas Lovell Beddoes*, edited by H.W. Donner (London, 1935), p. 600. Donner (pp. 753-54) points out that Thomas Sternhold's translations of the Psalms had been satirized by Dryden in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

[6] New Series, I (1825), 284-86.

[7] The identity of the author and the fact that the novel was a translation from French were not known at the time (see Supplementary Note below). As the novel was thought to be an English one, I shall refer to it by its English title.

[8] New Series, II, (1826), 137-43.

The Lay of the Last Minstrel and *The Last of the Mohicans* are among the instances that illustrate 'the inadequacy of the word to include contingencies and possibilities', and the existence of more than one Last Man — 'Mr. Campbell's prior and poetical candidate' and Mrs Shelley's subsequent and sibylline one — demonstrates the self-contradictory nature of the subject. 'In short, there is no getting at the last of our never-ending, still-beginning language ...'

We can see that in the year that Mary Shelley's novel was published, its very subject seemed to invite derision, although behind that derision one senses a certain eschatological anxiety that may account for the virulence of some of the reviews. 'A sickening repetition of horrors', said *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.*; 'The offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste', said the *The Monthly Review*.[9] *Blackwood's* cruelly called it an 'abortion'.[10] A writer in *The Literary Magnet*, without even having seen the book, condemned it as 'another Raw-head-and-bloody-bones', presumably referring to *Frankenstein*. This reviewer also recalled *Omegarus and Syderia*: 'There is, we believe, a novel already published, entitled Omegarius [*Sic*], or the Last Man, a bantling of the Leadenhall press; a fact which might have spared Mr. Campbell the trouble of writing his long letter to the editor of the Edinburgh Review, on the subject of the originality of the conception of *his* Last Man.'[11]

It's as if the critics were trying to annihilate with their rhetoric the very possibility of writing a novel on this subject. The author's gender was of course not spared. In a mock announcement *The Wasp* published the title as *The Last Woman*[12], while two publications combined misogyny with the now familiar play on lastness: 'Why not *the last Woman*?' asked *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres*. 'She would have known

9 *The Literary Gazette*, no. 474 (18 February 1826), 103; *The Monthly Review*, New Series, I (1826), 333-35.

10 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, XXI (1827), 54.

11 *The Literary Magnet*, New Series, I (1826), 56. The *London Magazine* writer on the Campbell controversy (see note 6 above) misspelled Omegarus in the same way. One wonders whether either had actually seen the book.

12 I (1826), 79 (edited by Jean de Palacio, *Mary Shelley dans son oeuvre*, [Paris, 1969] p. 664).

better how to paint her distress at having nobody left to talk to ...'[13] (Actually, this last point touches inadvertently on an important point to be considered later). Although the novel was reprinted in Paris by Galignani (1826) and then in Philadelphia (1833), it was not a success, and it may be for this reason, as Elizabeth Nitchie suggests, that its author 'avoided the unnatural'[14] in her subsequent novels.

One theme sounded in some of the humorous and satirical essays already discussed appears in a number of reviews of *The Last Man* – the supposed impossibility of representing the subject.

> This idea of 'The Last Man' [said the *Monthly*] has already tempted the genius of more than one of our poets, and, in truth, it is a theme which appears to open a magnificent and boundless field to the imagination. But we have only to consider it for a moment, in order to be convinced that the mind of man might as well endeavour to describe the transactions which are taking place in any of the countless planets that are suspended beyond our own, as to anticipate the horrors of the day which shall see the dissolution of our system.[15]

Even a sympathetic critic could reach the same conclusion. Reviewing Mary Shelley's *Lodore* in 1835, *The Literary Gazette* said '*The Last Man* had passages of great power,' but continued:

> Details, which usually strengthen, here weaken the general effect. 'Of that day no man knoweth.' The imagination penetrates the unknown by dint of its own strong sympathy: and with that terrible future we have nothing in common; ere it arrives all the usual emotions must have perished.[16]

[13] *The Literary Gazette*, no. 949 (1835), 194. Elizabeth Nitchie reports a similar gibe in the *St James Royal Magazine*; see *Mary Shelley: Author of "Frankenstein"* (New Brunswick, 1953), p. 151.

[14] Nitchie, *Mary Shelley*, p. 152.

[15] *The Monthly Review*, 334.

[16] *The Literary Gazette*, no. 949 (1835), 194.

The conviction shared by most of the book's early critics, whether reflective or vituperative, is of the impropriety of the subject. In 'Darkness' Byron had envisaged apocalypse without millennium[17]; Mary Shelley made this, for the first time since *Omegarus and Syderia* the subject of a novel and moved almost the entire critical establishment to deny the possibility of imaging Lastness.

The Last Man was the first ambitious work undertaken by Mary Shelley after her husband's death and her consequent return to London. Almost everyone who has written about this novel adverts to the personal element of isolation in it and cites Mary's journal entry for 14 May 1824: 'The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me.'[18] This feeling is amplified in a letter dated 3 October 1824, while her novel was being written:

> The happiness I enjoyed and the sufferings I endured in Italy make present pleasures & annoyances appear like the changes of a mask — . . . My imagination is not much exalted by a representation mean and puerile when compared to the real delight of my intercourse [with] my exalted Shelley ... and others of less note, but remembered now with fon[dness] as having made a part of the Elect.[19]

This dark weather of the heart may also, as Brian Aldiss suggests,[20] have recalled to her the extraordinary meteorological events of the summer of 1816, called 'the year without a summer', causing her to include these as well as the 'Elect' in her work-in-progress.

[17] A reviewer of the first American edition called *The Last Man* 'a sort of detailed and prose copy of Byron's terrible painting of darkness'. *The Knickerbocker Magazine*, II (1833), 315; quoted by W.H. Lyle, *Mary Shelley: an Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1975), p. 175.

[18] *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, edited by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols (Oxford, 1987), II, 476-77.

[19] *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, I, 450.

[20] See his introduction to *The Last Man*, (London, 1985), giving as examples the appearance of a black sun and a four-month windstorm in volume III.

As the autobiographical aspect of *The Last Man* is widely recognized,[21], it requires only brief mention here. Percy Bysshe Shelley is resuscitated (only to be drowned at sea in the end) as Adrian, Earl of Windsor, who would have been King of England had not England become a republic in the year 2073. He is a beautiful if not ineffectual angel, his mind 'frank and unsuspicious ... gifted ... by every natural grace, endowed with transcendent powers of intellect, unblemished by the shadow of a defect (unless his dreadless independence of thought was to be construed into one)...'[22] He is, needless to say, a republican and opposes the revanchist plans of his mother, the dour Countess of Windsor. Byron, who died while the novel was in its earlier stages, appears as Lord Raymond, at times the Bad Lord B. whose countenance is convulsed by a spasm of pain as he says, 'Even the ghost of friendship has departed, and love' — only to break off and curl his lip in disdain (p. 34). As for the author, she divides herself into two characters: Lionel Verney, the Last Man and narrator, and Lionel's sister Perdita, who is also compounded of Mary's step-sister, friend, rival, and thorn-in-the-flesh, Claire Clairmont. Perdita is allowed to realize Claire's fantasy of marrying Byron/Raymond, but must suffer his infidelity with the Greek princess Evadne and then commit suicide after her husband's death. Thus Mary Shelley in *The Last Man* reconstituted in an idealized form her little band of the Elect and killed them off again except for her narrating self.

The Last Man is nevertheless more than a *roman à clef*. Two of its most important aspects have been so expertly discussed as to allow me to concentrate upon a third. Lee Sterrenburg has viewed this book's political – or counter-political – nature as a reaction to the state of Europe after the failure of the French Revolution, the defeat of Napoleon, and the

[21] See Walter E. Peck, 'The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Shelley', *PMLA*, XXXVIII (1923), 196-219; Edmund Gosse, 'Shelley's Widow', *Silhouettes* (New York, 1925[?]), pp. 231-38; Elizabeth Nitchie, *Mary Shelley: Author of "Frankenstein"*, pp. 15-16, 68-75, 94-95, 102-04, 109, 110-17; Ernest J. Lovell, 'Byron and Mary Shelley', *K-S.J.*, II (1953), 36; Angela Leighton, review of *The Last Man*, *K-S.R.*, 2 (1987), 144-48.

[22] *The Last Man* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p.30. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

Congress of Vienna.[23] (As all these events took place during the lifetime of Percy Shelley and tempered but failed to obliterate his revolutionary hopes, the despair of *The Last Man* is in some sense a repudiation of his politics as well.) Anne K. Mellor in her recent literary biography of Mary Shelley has fruitfully explored the theme of the nuclear family in *The Last Man*, arguing that 'In social terms, the novel pits her personal ideology of the nuclear family as the source of psychological fulfilment and cultural values against those human and natural forces which undermine it: male egoism, female self-destruction, and death.'[24] My own concern is the manner in which *The Last Man*, culminating a tradition in which *Omegarus and Syderia* and 'Darkness' are prominent, denies the linkage of apocalypse and millennium that had previously been celebrated in some of the great works of the Romantic epoch, perhaps most fully in *Prometheus Unbound.*

In contrast to the universe of Cousin de Grainville, Mary Shelley's has no sovereign God and no supernatural agency. However, although eschatology has been secularized[25] to a great degree, there remain ghosts of a former paradigm and any rational explanation of the destruction of humankind is conspicuously absent — the plague that kills everyone in the world save four people and then stops remains at least as arbitrary as Calvinist predestination. As in both *Omegarus and Syderia* and in 'Darkness', signs of a millennium appear only to be dissipated. And like both these preceding works and Campbell's 'Last Man' as well, *The Last Man* is presented as an indirect narrative. In this instance, it is the 'Author's Introduction' that displays that 'buffering' that the subject seems to demand.

[23] '*The Last Man*: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, XXXIII (1978), 324-47.

[24] Typescript, pp. 225-26.

[25] See Arthur McA. Miller, *The Last Man: A Study of the Eschatological Theme in English Poetry and Fiction from 1806 through 1839* (Duke University Ph.D. dissertation, 1966), esp. pp. 134-77, and W. Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1982), p. 16.

The introduction recapitulates an excursion to the supposed Cavern of the Sibyl on the Bay of Naples. In reality, that trip had been made by Mary and Percy Shelley with Claire Clairmont on 8 December 1818,[26] and had proved disappointing. In *The Last Man*, the date is preserved, but the nameless and genderless narrator reduces the participants to herself and her companion, and makes it the occasion of a marvellous discovery. While exploring the Sibyl's cave, the author and her companion, like Grainville's narrator, desert their guides, and like him they are consequently initiated into the history of the future. First they enter 'a wide cavern with an arched dome-like roof' (p.2), a setting worthy of a painting by John Martin. There they find 'piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and a white filmy substance, resembling the inner part of the green hood which shelters the grain of the unripe Indian corn.' (*In The Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call attention to the specifically female associations of this debris as well as of the 'dim hypaethric cavern' in which it is discovered).[27] On the leaves they find inscriptions in many languages, ancient and modern.

"This *is* the Sibyl's cave; these are Sibylline leaves", exclaims the author's companion (p. 3). His exclamation has several associations. There is Book VI of the *Aeneid*, alluded to on the same page, where the Cumaean Sibyl, wielding the talismanic Golden Bough, leads Aeneas underground to his vision of the afterlife. There is also Michaelangelo's powerful representation of her, which Mary would have seen while in Rome during the spring of 1819. A further, modern dimension is provided by Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves* of 1817, in the title of which is implicit the same play of meaning suggested by Mary's authorial persona, self-characterized as the 'decipherer' of these discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages' (pp. 3,4). The line of vision thus passes from the ancient embodiment of female vatic power to the modern imagination, coming to reside in the author. Indeed, in a letter written at the time that the novel was published, Mary Shelley refers to it as 'my Sibylline leaves'.[28] Thus

[26] See *Journal*, 1,242 and Muriel Spark, *Child of Light: A Reassessment of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Hadleigh, Essex, 1951), p. 195.

[27] New Haven and London, 1979, pp. 95-99; *The Last Man*, p. 3.

[28] Letter to John Howard Payne, 28 January (7 February) 1826, *Letters*, p. 508.

the introduction to *The Last Man* has a function similar to that of the beginning of *Omegarus and Syderia* and to the first line of 'Darkness'. We are to be told the history of the Last Man before he exists, and we are therefore relieved of the anxiety of imagining a world in which there are no readers.

The human world projected in the early parts of Lionel Verney's ensuing narrative may at first seem like a realization of the archetype of human development propounded in the works of Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge and amplified in those of Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley. In these Romantic mythologies, the history of the race is repeated in the individual, beginning in primal innocence, experiencing a 'fall', and eventuating in a higher innocence.[29] The integrating factor in this process is the human imagination, which brings into play all the energies of the psyche, harmonizing knowledge and power. These terms – especially imagination and power – recur throughout the novel but in such contexts as to make us aware of enormous fissures between them. Ultimately *The Last Man* is a repudiation of what might simplistically be termed the Romantic ethos as represented, for example, in the poetics and politics of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The 'Romantic' ethos characteristically involves a search for the actuation of true power. At first it seems as if Lionel Verney will be an exemplification of this process, growing up as a boy-shepherd in the Wordsworthian territory of Cumberland. But Lionel, unlike the boy Wordsworth portrays himself as having been, is rough and uncouth. When he says 'my chief superiority consisted in power', he is speaking of mere brute force. Young Lionel is if anything a travesty of the Wordsworthian ideal of power. It is only by the civilizing influence of Adrian that Lionel's conception of himself changes. He is then able to look back upon his past self as one who 'deified the uplands, glades, and streams' (p. 22) and to quote from 'The World Is Too Much With Us', but power no longer seems to be one of his attributes, except perhaps close to the very end where the Last Man regresses to his former propensities of 'robber and shepherd'.

[29] See Hugh M. Luke, Jr., Introduction to *The Last Man* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), pp. xvii-xviii.

In Lord Raymond – at least in that part of the novel written before Byron's death – we see the embodiment of the will-to-power. Returning from the Greek wars, where he has been a victorious general, Raymond inherits a fortune and dedicates himself to becoming Lord Protector. He will rule those who he thinks despised him before he became famous and rich and who now adulate him. 'If the acquisition of power in the shape of wealth caused this alteration, that power they should feel as an iron yoke. Power therefore was the aim of all his endeavours' (p. 27). Raymond enjoys the exercise of power and is both enlightened and intelligent enough to employ it benevolently, but not self-disciplined enough to continue long to do so, and he returns to the Greek wars, where he dies in empty, plague-ridden Constantinople.

When Adrian falls in love with the Greek princess Evadne, we are told that his heart 'had power, but not knowledge'. The result of such division had been described in *Prometheus Unbound*:

> The good want power, but to weep barren tears,
> The powerful goodness want – worse need for them,
> The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
> And all best things are thus confused to ill. [30]
>
> (I, 625-28)

A conjunction of these separated human qualities is achieved at the end, when Demogorgon can speak of 'Love from its awful throne of patient power/In the wise heart...' (IV, 557-58). Likewise Wordsworth desires (in a passage not known to the Shelley circle) 'Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power'.[31] Such a synthesis seems not to be attainable by Adrian or by anyone else in *The Last Man*, however much it may be wished for or simulated. 'We aided the sick', says Verney, 'and comforted the sorrowing; turning from the multitudinous dead to the rare survivors, with an energy of desire that bore the resemblance of power...' (p. 230).

[30] Citations from the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley refer to *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977).

[31] *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), p. 174, line 425 (1805).

At first it may seem that Adrian's imaginative qualities may offer compensation for his inability to unite knowledge and power. Indeed, he is given a speech that sounds something like a statement by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

> 'Look into the mind of man, where wisdom reigns enthroned; where imagination, the painter, sits, with his pencil dipt in hues lovelier than those of sunset, adorning familiar life with glowing tints. What a noble boon, worthy the giver, is the imagination! it takes from reality its leaden hue: it envelopes all thought and sensation in a radiant veil, and with an hand of beauty beckons us from the sterile seas of life, to her gardens, and bowers, and glades of bliss.' (p. 53)

However, one need only compare the idea of imagination in *A Defence of Poetry* to see the difference. For example, in discussing the heroic aspect of ancient Rome, Shelley says: 'The imagination beholding the beauty of this order, created it out of itself according to its own idea: the consequence was empire, and the reward ever-living fame' (p. 494). For Shelley, the imagination moves from the individual to society; Adrian's conception is in contrast solipsistic, offering only an escape from a grim reality.

Other characters either exemplify Adrian's limited view of imagination or, worse, find imagination a torment. Raymond is 'one who seemed to govern the whole earth in his grasping imagination, and who only quailed when he attempted to rule himself' (p. 40). Lionel, searching for Raymond's body in the ruins of Constantinople, says, 'For a moment I could yield to the creative power of the imagination, and for a moment was soothed by the sublime fictions it presented to me.' Perdita, who is characterized by 'active fancy', 'visionary moods', and 'creative imagination' (pp. 10, 92), finds no constructive outlet for her powers (unless it be in copying Old Master paintings); but after the death of Raymond, Lionel finds her to be 'influenced by passionate grief and a disturbed imagination' (p. 152) and says, 'Nor do I wonder that a feeling akin to insanity should drive you to bitter and unreasonable imaginings' (p. 153). Terrified in plague-stricken London, Idris (Lionel's wife and