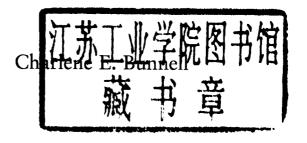BUNNELL

"ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE"
Dramatic Sensibility in Mary Shelley's Novels

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Mary Shelley's Novels

Charlene E. Bunnell

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Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK & LONDON

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

There are many people whom I wish to acknowledge, but space allows mention of only a few. First, I would like to thank Charles E. Robinson, for his wisdom, expertise, patience, humor, and friendship. I have learned much under his tutelage, not the least of which has been his example of excellence in both scholarship and the classroom. I also thank Barbara T. Gates and Jerry C. Beasley for their unselfish giving of time, knowledge, and goodwill. A special gratitude for Donald H. Reiman: he has been a veritable gold mine of information and an exemplar of an established scholar's generosity and support.

To my students at University College of Widener University — thank you. You have made walking into a classroom a stimulating, challenging, and vibrant experience. I learn much from you and our discussions, and each class reminds me why I love to teach literature.

I cannot thank enough all my family and friends for their encouragement and understanding. A special acknowledgment to my husband, Timothy Detwiler, who took on more than his share and maintained his sense of humor. To our daughters, Abbey and Emma: you have patiently tolerated my absence from many a dinner table and outing, and, more importantly, you never fail to keep me grounded in reality.

A heartfelt thank you to the editing staff at Routledge for their patience and attention to this work, especially to Damian Treffs and Erin Herlihy. Thanks as well to the series editor, William E. Cain, for his encouragement.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge three people to whose memories this work is dedicated. First, my maternal grandmother, Elizabeth James Bray, from whom I inherited my love for reading: she would have been pleased to see her first granddaughter attain the education she wanted but was denied. Second, a dear friend, K. B. Brannon: she always played her role with dignity, compassion, and humor. Her presence on life's stage was too brief; nonetheless, she made this world a more humane and gracious

place in which to live. Finally, for my father, Gershom Bunnell — as a fifth-generation dairy farmer, he embraced the "drama" of life that nature brings with every sunrise and every season and instilled that love in me. We all miss him greatly.

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Introduction

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages.
> — Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

In many respects, Mary Shelley is a representative figure of the Romantic period. As the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and later as the wife of Percy Shelley, she generally embraced the principles that we associate with Romantic philosophy: political radicalism, social idealism, individualism, primacy of the imagination, and love of nature. Like many of this period's writers, she supported democratic revolutions, questioned institutional systems that oppressed individual rights, and condemned social conventions that favored the privileged and censured the disenfranchised.

However, we can also find in Shelley's writing a pragmatic view of life and a skepticism about ambition and the Romantic quest for knowledge and perfectibility. Like Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Percy Shelley's "Alastor," her works suggest that such a quest often values the unattainable ideal more than the existing reality. Shelley also criticizes the subjective sensibility that centered the self and elevated the personal quest above the needs of family or society as a collective whole. No isolationist or anarchist, she asserted that personal rights and desires must co-exist with those of a larger community, and she recognized that the individual's vision, well-intentioned and just as it might be, must often be postponed or abandoned for the welfare of others.

To illustrate the dangerous effects of an egocentric sensibility, Shelley refigured the Renaissance *theatrum mundi* metaphor, so aptly illustrated in the lines of Shakespeare's doleful philosopher Jaques in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players."[1] In her novels, characters frequently perceive their quests, and often their lives, as dramas and themselves as actors on the world's stage. They transform the metaphor of *theatrum mundi* into a literal perception of life as theater, eliminating the metaphoric relationship between world and stage. What happens, Shelley asks, when one assumes a theatrical role in a

non-theatrical world? When life becomes a personal dramatic perform-
ance? When obsession with one role hinders recognition that "man in his
time plays many parts"? What happens, Mary Shelley asserts, is an intense
confusion of boundaries between the dichotomous spheres of illusion/real-
ity, self/other, and public/private, a confusion that often results in a skewed
vision of reality, an oppression of others, and a destruction of domestic life.

Betty T. Bennett has noted that a major Romantic theme is "the ability
of the imagination to restructure experience."[2] Mary Shelley, skeptical
about the Romantic imagination's privileging of the interpreting self, sug-
gests that restructured experience can become a dangerous illusion leading
to an irrecoverable loss both of self and of a sense of reality, reality being
what Anthony Abbot describes as "that set of social, political, and
economic structures . . . of everyday living" (4).[3] For many of Shelley's
characters, the metaphor of life as theater and of people as actors loses its
analogic function, and they become immersed in a dramatic, egocentric
illusion that governs their perception of their lives and the physical world.
The result is often disastrous for them and those around them: Victor
Frankenstein, Mathilda, and Lionel Verney structure their narratives as
dramatic tragedies that center entirely on themselves as tragic figures; Lord
Raymond, Castruccio, and Perkin Warbeck ignore the destruction their
egocentric visions wreak on domestic life; Cornelia Lodore recognizes
nearly too late the cost of social ambition; and John Falkner discovers that
the chivalric, heroic role he plays results in the death of the woman he
loves. Giving free rein to a subjective sensibility, these characters become
so caught up in the roles of their personal drama that instead of achieving
a sense of self and of place on the world's stage, they become isolated
and disconnected. Their quest or vision has failed them — or they have
failed it.

To depict her characters' egocentric visions and dramatic sensibility,
Mary Shelley incorporated literary conventions from both drama and fic-
tion. Chapter Two of this study examines the *theatrum mundi*'s presence in
the literary traditions with which Shelley was quite familiar and the ways
in which she refigured various devices for her purpose. From Renaissance
drama, she adapted the world-as-stage metaphor and the play-within-the-
play convention as both thematic and structuring devices. The dramatic
tendency of her characters also has a direct link to eighteenth-century
novels, especially Gothic ones. The Gothic genre, with roots in both
Richardsonian sensibility and Romantic subjectivity, encouraged explo-
ration of the human psyche and challenged the boundaries of illusion/real-
ity and private/public. Contemporary drama, especially the melodrama,
contributed theatrical devices, such as stylized language, soliloquies,
tableaux, and elaborate settings — all of which intensify the dramatic per-
ception of Shelley's characters. Furthermore, Shelley's own predilection for
seeing the world as a stage and life as a drama reveals her sympathetic

though critical depiction of such characters. Her journals, letters, and other writings demonstrate this tendency and explain why Shelley understood her characters' excessive sensibilities and dramatic perceptions. Although biographical material is germane at times to my thesis, this study does not rely on the biographical or psychoanalytical approaches so frequently employed for Shelley's works. I am more interested in how Shelley critiques Romantic individualism by reworking literary conventions, especially that of the world-as-stage motif.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five focus on *Frankenstein, Mathilda*, and *The Last Man*, respectively. As first-person narratives, these novels exhibit Shelley's most explicit use of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor. Perceiving themselves as tragic heroes and heroines, characters in these works dramatically narrate or rewrite the events of their lives to reflect their subjective illusions. Chapter Three explores the motif in Shelley's first and most famous novel, *Frankenstein* (1818), whose intricate narrative structure complicates the already subjective first-person point of view. In this work, Shelley criticizes the marginalization of domesticity and the violation of natural and social order to achieve a personal ambition. She also depicts a tension between characters who are actors on the stage of life and those who are relegated to observing the action. The dramatic metaphor is less explicit in *Frankenstein* than in *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*; however, the characters' perception of life as a literary construct demonstrates that Shelley was clearly developing the metaphor that dominates the other two first-person works. Chapter Four examines *Mathilda*, a novella written in 1819 but not published until 1959. *Mathilda* offers Shelley's most accommodating example of the *theatrum mundi* motif. Perceiving herself as a tragic actress, the eponymous heroine structures her memoirs into a dramatic narrative rich in theatrical subjectivity. The work solidly reflects Shelley's affinity for the dramatic form. As we see in Chapter Five, the approach to her fourth novel, *The Last Man* (1826), echoes *Frankenstein*'s concerns with the tension between actors and spectators. Lionel Verney's dramatic account of his life and the last days of humanity exhibits a theatricality that rivals most melodramas of Shelley's time.

Chapters Six and Seven examine Mary Shelley's two historical romances, *Valperga; or the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823) and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830). *Valperga* chronicles the rise of Castruccio, a Luccan prince and Ghibelline and explores his relationship with Euthanasia, a Tuscan noblewoman and rival Guelph, and Beatrice, a prophetess. *Perkin Warbeck* features a similar triangle of characters: Perkin, who claims to be Richard IV of England; Lady Katherine Gordon, his wife; and Monina de Faro, his confidant and unofficial "general" in his attempt to regain the throne. Because of the third-person point of view, the *theatrum mundi* motif in these two novels is less explicit than in *Mathilda, Frankenstein*, and *The Last Man*. However, the

motif pervades both texts and is employed by narrators and characters alike. These novels featuring historical public figures present Shelley's strongest argument about the dangers of casting oneself into a role of public greatness according to a self-defined perception of the heroic. The characters in *Valperga* and *Perkin Warbeck* experience a disillusionment with their self-created drama and come to regret the destruction those public roles have on the private sphere.

Chapters Eight and Nine conclude this study with an examination of Mary Shelley's last two novels, *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837). As domestic fiction, these works echo the eighteenth-century novel of manners and sentiment, and they demonstrate how the personal quest often destroys boundaries between private and public lives. Cornelia Lodore ultimately learns that the public stage is not an adequate substitution for domestic happiness, and John Falkner watches with haunting guilt the public spectacle that results from his enacted illusion, as he tragically realizes that life is not art.

Although Mary Shelley shared William Godwin's assumption that oppressive society corrupts one's natural benevolence, she also recognized that the self is often its own worst enemy; and although she respected Godwin's and Percy Shelley's belief in the individual's quest for perfectibility, she questioned the self-centeredness that often resulted. In varying degrees of intensity, Shelley employed the *theatrum mundi* motif to caution us that egocentric individualism and ambition can become as despotic and destructive as any unjust social system and that excessive self-reflexivity can result in one's perceiving life as a theatrical production to satisfy that subjectivity. The world may indeed be a stage on which we play our parts. However, the drama of human existence features an ensemble cast, with many actors and many roles; it cannot spotlight only one player or privilege his or her personal drama over that of another.

Chapter 1 Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), II.vii.139-140.
2. Betty T. Bennett, introduction to *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, Mary Shelley (New York: Norwood, 1976), I: ix.
3. "Reality" for the characters in Shelley's fiction refers to diegesis or the fictional reality of the world depicted in the text by the narrator or persona.

Roots of Mary Shelley's Dramatic Sensibility

> All the world is a stage, thought I and few are there who do not play the part they have learned by rote. And those who do not, seem marks set up to be pelted at by fortune; or rather as signposts which point out the road to others, while forced to stand still themselves amidst the mud and the dust.
>
> — Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

Mary Wollstonecraft's letter, as quoted above, reflects the *theatrum mundi* motif that pervaded Renaissance literature. Although the "All the world's a stage" passage from *As You Like It* is perhaps the best known Renaissance illustration of *theatrum mundi*, Shakespeare refers to the world as a stage in several of his other plays, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV*, and *Macbeth*, all of which Mary Shelley had probably read in the years 1814 to 1820.[1] Nor was he the only dramatist to employ this motif; Thomas Heywood, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Jonson were others. In his introductory poem to *An Apology for Actors* (1612), Heywood writes, "The world's a theater, the earth a stage, / Which God and Nature do with actors fill."[2] Several years later, Thomas Middleton in *A Game at Chess* (1624) repeated that "The world's a stage on which all the parts are played."[3] The Host in Ben Jonson's *The New Inn* (1629) says, "I imagine all the world's a play: / The state, and all men's affairs, all passages / Of life, to spring new scenes; come in, go out, / And shift, and vanish."[4] These few examples support Thomas B. Stroup's contention that this motif was so familiar to the Elizabethans that it "had become a part of their thinking."[5]

For the Renaissance character, playwright, and audience, the *theatrum mundi* metaphor assumed God, Fate, or Fortune as the ultimate director and creator of the cosmic drama; in fact, the "actors in the play, no more than the audience, know the end. They too must trust the director and the author. If they could all see and know the end, they would not only understand divine justice but be able to observe clearly the divine plan" (Stroup, 11). In her fiction, Shelley inverts this characteristic of the Renaissance motif. Her characters not only perceive themselves as actors in the drama of life, but also, as in the case of Victor Frankenstein and Mathilda, often assume the "role" of director of that drama, usurping God's or Nature's controlling and primary position. According to Henry Lok's sonnet, which

plays off the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, "All creatures of the ayre, the sea
and land, / Are players at his appointment of some thing, / Which to the
world a proper use may bring, / And may not breake assigned bownds or
band" (qtd. in Stroup, 18). From the classical to the Renaissance period,
the motif illustrates that "God the artist, stage-builder, and producer, puts
on his cosmic drama and tests his creature, man. In this way [people]
explain the presence of evil in the world and the suffering of the innocent"
(Stroup, 22).

In depicting the disastrous effects of characters who cast themselves as
directors of their lives, Mary Shelley reiterates Lok's belief that one has a
proper place in the world and that deviation from it through egocentric
role-playing in a self-created drama can violate a natural order that Shelley
believed existed. Although she was not a practicing Anglican in a formal
sense, her letters and journals indicate that she assumed a hierarchy of
authority and existence beyond the human realm: "I trust in a hereafter —
I have ever done so," she notes in 1822;⁶ and in the 5 October 1839 entry
to her journal, she writes: "The God that made this beautiful world . . .
made that into which I go — As there is beauty & love here — such is there
— & I felt as if my spirit would when it left my frame be received & sus-
tained by a beneficient & gentle power" (*Journals*, 2: 562). Months later,
another journal entry (1 June 1840) indicates Shelley's belief that we are
part of a great design or drama: "God & good Angels guard us! Surely this
world, stored outwardly with shapes & influences of beauty & good is
peopled in its intellectual life by myriads of loving spirits that mould our
thought to good — influence beneficially the course of events & minister
to the destiny of Man — Whether the beloved dead make a portion of this
company I dare not guess — but that such exist — I feel — far off when
we are worldly — evil — selfish— drawing near & imparting joy & sym-
pathy when we rise to noble thoughts & disinterested action (*Journals*, 2:
565). Shelley's characters who desire to be heroes of their own dramas are
far from disinterested. Instead, their egocentricity insists that all the world's
action revolve around them. Furthermore, they rebel against the authority
of a higher power, be it God or Fate, to assign roles and to direct the
drama.

The Renaissance dramatists used the *theatrum mundi* motif to represent
a synthesized harmony among the individual, the state, and the universe;
Shelley, however, employed it to criticize a Romantic individualism that
distorts her characters' perceptions of the world and creates disorder in
both the public and private spheres of their existence. Her characters
explicitly and consciously use theater as an analogy for life, but they extend
the comparison when they perceive and perform their lives as a series of
dramatic events played out on the world's stage. As playwrights of and
actors in the dramatic narration or re-enactment of their lives, they are
unable to attain order or a sense of self within the larger spheres because

they deny the metaphoric relationship between the world and stage. For them, the world is literally a stage: as a battlefield for Castruccio's and Richard/Perkin Warbeck's political quests as heroic conquerors; as a laboratory for Victor Frankenstein to create a new species that would honor him and bring him fame; as a Romantic landscape for Falkner to play the dashing hero whose actions lead to tragedy. The world-as-stage perception results in disorder; regarding their actions as theatrical performances, the characters ultimately glorify their egos or impose masks that prevent self-knowledge. Shelley herself understood the disabling power of invention if "the mind is no longer a mirror in which outward events may reflect themselves, but becomes itself the painter & creator" (*Journals*, 2: 438). When the boundary between the illusory world and the actual physical one is blurred or erased, the effects, as her characters ruefully discover, can be devastating.

A common convention of Elizabethan drama that Mary Shelley modified to intensify the world-as-stage motif in her fiction is the play-within-the-play, credited to Thomas Kyd, who employed it in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) to create an intricate framework of players and observers.[7] Mary Shelley did not specifically record having read Kyd, but she would have been aware of the convention via Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, and the Spanish playwright, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, all of whom she did read. Especially popular in revenge tragedies, the convention offers another perspective on the world as stage — that of the revenger-hero/protagonist. If the dramatist's play is a representation of his or her view of the world, then the play-within-the-play becomes what Charles and Elaine Hallett term a "self-created illusory world" to allow the hero/protagonist to present his view of the world as he feels it should be or to enable him to effect revenge.[8] For Hamlet, unsure of the validity of the Ghost's story, drama becomes the means by which appropriate action can be taken; as he says, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."[9] Mary Shelley refigured the convention in her fiction for a similar effect. Victor Frankenstein's tale as recorded by Robert Walton, Mathilda's and Falkner's epistles, and Lionel Verney's chronicle exemplify Shelley's adaptation of this dramatic convention to warn about the dangers of subjectivity and obsessive individualism. Her characters echo the sentiments of William Godwin's Caleb Williams, who rhetorically asks, "Why should my reflections perpetually centre upon myself? Self, an overweening regard to which has been the source of my errors."[10] As variations on the play-within-the-play, these tales, letters, histories, or performances reveal how the characters position themselves as directors, playwrights, and actors, and how, fully conscious of their own theatricality, they present dramatic reconstructions of their lives and of the world according to their perceptions.

The internal play also intensifies the artificiality of the dramatic form by adding another layer of theatricality, creating a metadrama, or a "drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (Hornby, 31). Lionel Abel, in his collection of essays, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form,* examines the relationship between metadrama and character:

> The plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves. They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own; on the other hand, unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality.[11]

A character's awareness of his or her theatricality: Mathilda constructs her memoirs into a drama, re-enacting events as she writes them; Lionel Verney cannot look at the world around him without perceiving it as a stage on which he wishes to play the hero; Monina de Faro (*Perkin Warbeck*) assumes disguise after disguise to redirect Perkin's "drama" according to the Yorkists' dream. Not only are Shelley's characters aware of their own theatricality, but they also succeed in magnifying it to shape their stories and actions into dramatic form.

During a period of instability or reform, the play-within-the-play convention is "reflective and expressive of its society's deep cynicism about life. When the prevalent view is that the world is in some way illusory or false, then the play-within-the-play becomes a metaphor for life itself" (Hornby, 45-46). In Elizabethan drama, this convention and the *theatrum mundi* motif function as an analogy to provide the characters and audience a means by which to order their respective worlds and thus make sense of their individual roles in a cosmic drama. Indeed, the Renaissance world rapidly changed as it distinguished itself from the medieval one. Humanism and the Reformation profoundly affected people's perception of both secular and religious hierarchy. The heliocentric theory of the solar system in Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus* (1543) debunked Ptolemy's geocentric one, and the notion that the earth, and by extension humanity, was not the center of the universe was indeed unsettling to even the most enlightened thinkers. Kepler's time and motion studies displaced medieval ones; alchemy gave way to chemistry; and the four humours succumbed to biology. By 1662, with the founding of the Royal Society and its promotion of Baconian empiricism, the medieval view of the world and nature had been not only demystified, but also soundly rejected.

Like the Renaissance, the Romantic period experienced a significant reorientation of religious, social, political, and scientific attitudes. The American and French Revolutions, the Reign of Terror, Britain's war with France, expanding industrialism, reform movements, and challenges to traditional class structure — all of these events created doubt, skepticism, uncertainty, and even an *angst* that the Romantics experienced and articulated in their literature. Attuned to these political and social changes, Mary Shelley found the *theatrum mundi* motif and the play-within-a-play convention effectual thematic and structuring devices to depict characters who also struggle to find their place in the drama of life. Because of external or internal upheaval, her characters attempt to understand their relationship to the world and their self-assigned parts within it through role-playing and theatrics.

Thus, not only did the *theatrum mundi* motif furnish the Renaissance playwrights with a structure for their plays, as Stroup has demonstrated, but it also, notes Wendy Sanford, provided the people as a whole with "effective metaphors for man trying to meet and to order the forces that challenged him on earth and in the cosmos."[12] Indeed, perceiving the world as a stage and adopting roles are part of human nature. If kept within boundaries, such invention can indeed be beneficial, as it was for the Renaissance character. Creating an imaginary world is productive as a "special strategy — a dream, ideal, fantasy, a created vision — which the individual devises to give life meaning."[13] These illusions allow one to escape the mundane, to indulge a fantasy, and to construct an ideal world: "In life we long for order and to know the purpose of our existence, which somehow we are not able to identify. In moments of despair we accuse reality of being as chaotic and incoherent as only a madman's dream can be: yet in spite of this we keep turning out individual scenarios for our lives. Often these are convoluted, altered, and modified, yet we never give up on them. A day without even a tiny, most trivial, and carelessly drawn up scenario is not worth living."[14]

Imaginary worlds for a temporary escape or to order one's life can be enabling indeed. However, if coupled with intense subjectivity and individualism, the dramatic illusion often supplants the reality of everyday life. Such a reality begins where the illusion or stage leaves off, and one must be conscious of the boundary. Shelley was acutely aware of this distinction between illusion and life. As she wrote in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, when her "life became busier . . . reality stood in place of fiction"[15]; that is, "reality" and "fiction" (or drama) were perceived by Shelley as distinct. The characters in her novels, however, find themselves unable or unwilling to distinguish art from life and to separate the dramatic illusion from their reality.

Mary Shelley was not the only Romantic writer to incorporate characteristics of drama into a non-dramatic genre. Although the Romantic