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# CHANGING REALITY THROUGH NARRATIVE IDENTITY: MARY SHELLEY'S ANGELINA IN "THE TRIAL OF LOVE"

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***Abstract:*** *In this article I will attempt to explain Mary Shelley's process to rewrite her personal experiences in the short story "The Trial of Love"* (1834) *turning it into a discourse of identity. By using what Paul John Eakin defines as a 'narrative identity', Mary Shelley manages to modify specific events in her life so that they leave a permanent imprint in history. In this specific short story she adapts her reality to the social conventions of her times so as to suit the audience's taste and, consequently, be a successful writer in terms of publication. This practical attitude is what distinguishes her from the rest of Romantic authors.*

***Key words:*** *narrative identity, Mary Shelley, rewriting, short story Romanticism.*

Both from historicist and psychoanalytic perspectives Mary Shelley's writings offer an interesting field of analysis. Born in 1797 she lived through the great changes that were taking place in Europe after the French Revolution, including the beginning of a new industrial society. Her personal life was not easy either; death seemed to surround her, although she lived until 1851, which was quite a long life for a woman at the time. These events permeated her narrative works, thus creating a complex and highly autobiographical encyclopedia of her own experiences[i], with *The Last Man* (1826) being the most representative novel. In it the author uses the main characters to portray her social and familiar circle and to represent the end of the Romantic period. Although her novels have received more attention than the rest of her writings, they are not the only works in which she poured her memories: even in the "wordy and pedestrian" (Seymour 338) short stories she wrote for the *Keepsake*, an annual that intended to be "the most extravagant, fashionable and elegant" (*The Keepsake*) of all the literary recollections when it appeared in 1827, Shelley chose to reflect on her own life. However, the 1830s were not such liberal times as the previous decades had been: in England conservatism returned and some events in the author's life could be deemed as controversial. In this article I will use "The Trial of Love", a short story written in 1834 for the *Keepsake*, as an example of her strategies to disguise her reality so as to suit the audience's taste. The aim is to prove that Mary Shelley was a real

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survivor, both in her life and literally, and that she was able to adapt her life and her writings to the conventional society of pre-Victorian England in order to achieve specific goals. In this short story the author looks retrospectively at her relationship with her husband and her stepsister, and at their suspected love triangle during their stay in Este, Italy, in 1818 (Seymour). Rewriting history in 1834 and striving to reach a female middle-class readership, Shelley creates a narrative identity (Eakin 1999) to tell a slightly different story, thus modifying the details that might be unpleasant, such as infidelity, turning the story into an austenesque tale of passions, fraternal love and forgiveness.

A narrative identity, as Eakin sees it, is a construct used to articulate a discourse of identity, that is, to define ourselves according to our own perception (1999). It derives from Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune's theories on autobiography, a genre which they consider a valid literary form, and it assumes that autobiographies and, by extension, narrative identities, will tell the truth. In "The Trial of Love" Mary Shelley consciously decides not to tell the truth, but to alter the parts of it that could hurt the potential readers' sensitivity. However, using a narrative identity has its limitations: in "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self Narration" (2001) Eakin identifies what he calls the 'three primary transgressions" of self-narrators.

The first one would be the "misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth", the second transgression refers to the "infringement of the right of privacy" and finally, the last transgression Eakin identifies is a "failure to display normative models of personhood". Mary Shelley's short story only respects the third transgression, the first and second transgressions are ignored in the author's quest for acceptance. As for changing the truth, Mary Shelley's short story is precisely a rewriting of the truth, and it is not only out of pity or love for her late husband, but also for personal gain. Another aspect that Mary Shelley does not seem to consider is the right of privacy: as Percy Shelley's widow, and mother to their only surviving son, she considered herself responsible for Percy Shelley's literary and artistic legacy. If she respects the third transgression, it is only for personal benefit: describing normative characters is what will help publish and sell her writings. Therefore, what initially appears to be a simple short story becomes a complex exercise of self-evaluation and re-invention, showing a brilliant mind behind the process.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, born Mary Godwin, returned to England in 1823 after living on the continent for five years, a period in which she lost her husband and two of their children. Hers was not a grand re-entrance into England's social and literary circles, which had already acquired Victorian values, but rather the opposite. Daughter of two brilliant minds and acknowledged author of the acclaimed *Frankenstein*[ii], Mrs. Shelley was now not only a poor widow burdened with an infant; socially she was an outcast. Her elopement with a married man and his former wife's suicide had caused a great damage to the author's reputation. Instability was a constant in her life: although she did not want to marry again, she was deceived by the lack of proposals[iii]. Probably it was this emotional instability that caused her to idealise past times with her late husband and while working in *Lodore* (1835), one of her last novels, she put a special emphasis on the happiness of the Villiers couple, literary equivalents to Mr. and Mrs. Shelley.

The 1830s were times of moderation, a big bang reaction to the liberalism of the Enlightenment. As Miranda Seymour states, the 'angel in the house', a key

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literary concept in the Victorian period, was taking shape (409), and literary heroines had to fall into that standard: another Moll Flanders would not be appreciated. Mary Shelley even revised her published works: Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor Frankenstein's fiancée and short-lived wife was redesigned to avoid any hints of incestuous relationships that might have been present in *Frankenstein*'s first edition:

> Miss Lavenza has become sister to all those Agneses, Ellens and Amelias who never lack a candle or a prayer as they hover in obliging readiness by a penitent's deathbed (Seymour 413)[iv].

Mary Shelley's motivations for this change were more than a quest for fame and acknowledgement: her future, and especially that of her son Percy, depended on Sir Timothy Shelley's benevolence. Mary's father-in-law was still resentful of Mary and his son's elopement and for this reason they only communicated through his lawyer. Moreover, it was not only Mary and Percy's future that was compromised: William Godwin, Mary's father, also depended on her financial support. Even her aunt Everina, Mary Wollstonecraft's sister, sought Mary's help now she found herself old and alone.

Short stories for ladies' annuals seemed to be a good option: writing them did not take as much time as writing a novel and they were published regularly, which meant a constant, even if small, income. Many critics consider that these short stories do not meet the quality standards present in *Frankenstein*, and that they were written merely out of economic pressure and not for pleasure. However, other literary critics differ: "Mary Shelley always wrote for money" says Charlotte Sussman (163), and it seems so since financial stability and the Shelleys were always at odds (Sunstein 307). This view can be related to the fact that annuals were never meant to be high literature: they were intended as gifts or even ornaments, a book with a nice cover on a table always helped decorate a lady's parlour[v]. "The Trial of Love" fulfilled both author's and reader's expectations: for Mary Shelley it meant money; for its readers it was a pleasant short story. Moreover, it also worked as a vehicle for her author's intentions: Shelley travels to her past and rewrites it. Her aim is not to provide the story with a happy conventional ending but to adapt certain facts to Victorian values.

"The Trial of Love" is a tale of passions, of sisterly affections and repressed emotions set in the Italian town of Este in an undetermined period. Angeline and Ippolito are in love and his father, who is not happy with his son's choice, declares that they must wait for a year and, providing that during this year there is no contact between the lovers, he will accept the engagement. When this period expires Angeline discovers that Ippolito is engaged to Faustina, her close friend and almost a younger sister. Disappointed, Angeline takes the veil in the convent in which she has been living for some years. However, Ippolito and Faustina's marriage is not a happy one: they must atone for the damage inflicted on Angeline. An analysis of Mary Shelley's biography suggests that this story has its basis in 1818, when Mary and Percy Shelley, together with Claire Clairmont, Mary's stepsister, were in Italy visiting Lord Byron. At that time Mary suspected that the relationship between Percy and Claire was not purely platonic: they spent some days together in a villa in Este, while Mary was left behind to take care of her daughter Clara, a sick baby who finally died.

Angeline -Mary Shelley's narrative identity- as her name suggests, is the personification of goodness. She is quiet, serene and constant in her affections. At

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twenty-two she is ready to marry the man she loves, but she is forced to wait for a year. Angeline is the 'angel in the house', as Elizabeth Lavenza from *Frankenstein* had become; indeed, she does hover over Ippolito's bed at some point in the story (Shelley 237). From humble origins, Angeline was raised to be like a sister to Faustina, a young girl from a wealthy family, for whom she has maternal feelings. Faustina does not possess so many good qualities as Angeline: she is beautiful, friendly and well-mannered, but she is also too self-centred and even spoilt. Five years younger than Angeline, she is eager to marry whomever her father considers suitable. A close look at the dialogues between Angeline and Faustina shows the young girl's egotism and even her awareness of the power she holds over those who love her (Shelley 233), whereas Angeline prefers to suffer in silence, only allowing her feelings to show once she is alone in her cell in the convent of Sant' Anna (Shelley 242). Sisterly relationships are not strange in Mary Shelley's fiction: in "The Sisters of Albano", written in 1828 also for the *Keepsake*, Shelley already dealt with a pair of contrasting sisters by presenting the elder in a more positive light and willing to sacrifice her life for that of her younger sister. It is not strange that she chose this particular topic: to start with, Claire Clairmont was always present in Mary's life, and Jane Austen had successfully resorted to the same topic in two of her most famous novels a decade before[vi].

Ippolito, the third party in this love triangle, is described as a "fiery and impetuous" young man who "loved ardently, and could brook no opposition to the fulfilment of his wishes" (Shelley 233), a very accurate description of Mary Shelley's own husband[vii]. His love for Angeline, though strong, is not constant, which implies a volatile personality, again a characteristic of Percy Shelley. However, the author's intentions were far from destroying her deceased husband's reputation: in the story Mary Shelley tried to change the events that had damaged his late husband's image and so Ippolito's relationship with his father, the Marchese Della Toretta, is what she wished Percy and his father could have had, had it not been for their elopement. Therefore Ippolito and Angelina's one-year trial is a small sacrifice for familial harmony and, according to the morals of the 19th century, self-sacrifice was always rewarded, as it is showed in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Angeline and Faustina's relationship is described as an idyllic one: they are not real sisters and they have not seen each other for two years but their bond is still very strong. Although they are not on equal terms and the young girl's bright personality seems to outshine Angeline, she does not resent Faustina's vivacity. Mary and Claire's relationship was not so ideal; in fact it was a stressful one: Claire lived with the Shelleys for long periods and Mary could never trust her completely. Her rewriting of the sister's bond was a means of giving both Claire and herself a much-needed dignity in the eyes of society. As for Ippolito's betrayal, Angeline, reflects on the life they could have had together and concludes that, had they married, "she should have been even more dissatisfied than Faustina" (Shelley 243).

The choice of names might be casual but it could also be conscious, since the names given to the female protagonists and to the convent help emphasise their attributes: in Christian religion Saint Ann is the mother of the Virgin Mary and by giving the convent the name of Sant' Anna, it turns into a maternal place for Angelina. This is where she lives and belongs to, where she finds peace and, to an extent, happiness. This view would imply that Angeline is a virginal figure, an opinion that is later confirmed. Angeline is described as an

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Italian Madonna and her attitude both to Ippolito and Faustina after their marriage, gives her an 'angelic' –or virginal- glow. She acts as a mother figure for Faustina, who is presented as a virginal young girl:

> Faustina was the loveliest little thing in the world: unlike an Italian, she had laughing blue eyes, a brilliant complexion, and auburne hair; she had a sylph-like form, slender round, and springy; she was very pretty and vivacious (Shelley 231).

However, Faustina, acting as a female Marlowe's Faust, sees no problem in selling her beloved friend for a husband, more exactly, for her sister's choice of husband, showing neither affliction nor remorse although, as in *Faustus*, she will have to face the consequences of her actions.

As a nun, but also as a proper nineteenth-century female protagonist, Angeline believes in forgiveness, and even after Faustina has married Ippolito, Angeline loves her as a true sister and leaves her punishment to a superior force. The married couple does not have a happy ending: "[t]he couple lived the usual life of an Italian husband and wife. He was gay, inconstant, careless; she consoled herself with a cavaliere servente" (Shelley 243), and the moral of the story seems to be that affections should not be changed so easily, but they should be like Angeline's, "sacred and immutable" (Shelley 243). This conventional ending can be considered Mary Shelley's effort to adapt her writings to Victorian strict morals and values so that the short story was successful.

By using narrative identities to rewrite her life once and again Mary Shelley tried to change society's opinion about herself, but especially about Percy Shelley. Throughout the second half of her life she tried to give her husband the status she thought he deserved and rewriting became almost an obsession. This reinvention was not limited to Percy Shelley and herself: in *The Last Man* (1826) she had already rewritten the couple's European tour together with Lord Byron and Claire Clairmont, and the painful disappearance of her family and friends. The practical attitude she had towards truth is not surprising; John Keats claimed in "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (1820) that "[t]ruth is beauty, beauty is truth" but he died long before Mary Shelley, and the same can be said for Romantic ideals. Also, and most importantly, Mary Shelley was proving faithful to her family: she was mirroring her father's life and fighting against "a tide of conservatism that was always ready to pick up any traces of their past to stir up scandal" (Pérez 337). Considering the results at the time and the acknowledgement Romantic authors receive almost two centuries later, it is precisely this ability to change what makes Mary Shelley a literal and literary survivor of the Romantic period: she outlived most of the Romantic writers and she continued publishing into the Victorian era.

## Notes

[i] There are some critics (Clemit, Blumberg) who do not agree with the autobiographical theory. Their view is that the characters are mere archetypes.

[ii] In 1823 *Frankenstein* had already been adapted for the stage (Seymour 326).

[iii] In a letter to her friend Mr. Trelawny in 1831, she wrote that she wanted to be buried as Mrs. Shelley. However, by 1834, she was convinced that her friend Aubrey Beauclerk would propose to her and she was disappointed when he proposed to another woman (Seymour 425-426).

[iv] A complete study of the 'angel in the house', together with the effects it had on women in the 19th century, can be found in Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Women Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.

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[v] For a more complex analysis of annuals as mere ornaments see Hofkosh, Sonia "Disfiguring Economies: Mary Shelley's Short Stories." *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond "Frankenstein"*. Ed. Fisch, Audrey A., Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 204-220.

[vi] *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and, to a lesser extent, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), present a pair of contrasting sisters. In both cases one of them decides to sacrifice her happiness for that of her sister although, as in the rest of Jane Austen's novels, there is a happy ending waiting for them as a reward for their actions.

[vii] Even the shortest and simplest biographies of Percy Shelley include the following: he did not mind sharing his first wife with a friend; Claire and Percy were very close; Percy fell in love with an Italian heiress; and finally, during his time in Italy a baby was registered as Elena Adelaide Shelley, probably an illegitimate daughter. Drabble, Margaret. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 3rd revised ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985 and Head, Dominic *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

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