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Percy Shelley’s Prose Fiction: Zastrozzi, St. Irvyne, The Assassins, The Coliseum

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CHAPTER 12

PROSE FICTION

Zastrozzi, St. Irvyne, The Assassins, The Coliseum

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PERCY Shelley was once described by his wife Mary as 'more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of beautiful imagery, and [...] melodious verse [...] than to invent the machinery of a story.'1 Although not generally thought of as a writer of prose fiction, Percy Shelley did write two short Gothic novels and two pieces of short prose that seem to be introductions to tales or romances he soon decided to abandon. This chapter will focus on the themes and structures, literary sources and devices, and ideological agendas of these works, particularly his two Gothic romances, Zastrozzi, A Romance (composed in the spring of 1809; published 1810) and St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian: A Romance (composed 1810; published December 1810 but dated 1811), both of them written when he was between the ages of 18 and 19 and in his final year at Eton. Within two years of their composition, however, Shelley was attempting to distance himself from the two Gothic novels, claiming to William Godwin that he wrote them in the state of intellectual sickness and lethargy into which I was plunged two years ago, and of which St. Irvyne and Zastrozzi are the distempered although unoriginal visions.2 It is fair to say at the outset that these works were not particularly well received by contemporary reviewers upon their publication, nor generally have they been viewed with favour by Shelley critics in more recent years (although Zastrozzi has rather improbably been adapted twice in recent years, as both a play and a television series).3 A writer for the Critical Review denounced the character of Zastrozzi, for instance, as 'one of the

2 Julian, VIII, 287. All quotations from Zastrozzi, St. Irvyne, Assassins, and The Coliseum will be taken from the Broadview text edited by Stephen Behrendt (2002), cited as Behrendt, with page numbers provided.
3 In 1977 the Toronto Free Theatre produced George F. Walker's Zastrozzi: The Master of Discipline and Channel Four Films (Britain) presented its own adaptation in 1986, a four-part mini-series written and directed by David G. Hopkins, with music by Martin Kiszko.
most savage and improbable demons that ever issued from a diseased brain;\(^4\) while the reviewer for *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* speculated that the author of *St. Irvyne* was most likely 'some “Miss” in her teens', indulging in 'description run mad' with 'uncouth epithet' and 'wild expression'.\(^5\)

Similarly, the majority of literary critics of our own era have not been particularly sympathetic to these two novels, frequently dismissing them as either juvenilia or self-conscious and flat attempts to spoof the outlandish characters and plots of the popular Gothic potboilers and chapbooks that Shelley had read as an adolescent. For instance, Kenneth Neill Cameron has seen Shelley's Gothic interests as no more than a 'dreary spectacle' that causes us to 'heave a sigh of relief that he finally (via Godwin or anyone else) found that he had social “duties to perform”' and therefore no time for such silliness.\(^6\) Dismissed as ‘mere juvenilia’ by E. B. Murray, these two works were not included in his definitive modern edition of Shelley's prose up to 1818.\(^7\) As Stephen Behrendt, their best modern editor, states, such a decision ‘devalues’ and ‘marginalizes’ the texts, while at the same time it reveals how consistently Shelley scholars have been ‘embarrassed’ by these works, not simply for their awkward style and language, but for their ‘derivative’ nature.\(^8\) Most recently, Tilottama Rajan has attempted to make a case for their importance as textual practices and spaces where Shelley played with some of the hyperbolic characters, metaphysical issues, and poetic devices (such as anamorphosis) that eventually emerged in full-blown maturity in *Prometheus Unbound* (see Select Bibliography). Whether such claims are justified or not, it seems only fair to examine the works on their own terms, as novelistic practices by a writer who would soon find his more authentic voice as a philosophical poet.

Because the two Gothic romances are so little known or studied today, this chapter will provide a summary of their plots before examining their structures, sources, and techniques. *Zastrozzi* is a Gothic revenge fantasy predicated on a son's consuming need to avenge his mother's sexual honour. The novel presents its eponymous character as a mysterious and ominous embodiment of fate, so consumed with hatred for Verezzi (II Conte Verezzi) that he plots Verezzi's 'destruction' 'urged by fiercest revenge' (61). Zastrozzi's intention is nothing less than to force Verezzi's suicide so that his eternal soul will be damned. After drugging and kidnapping Verezzi, Zastrozzi has him chained for weeks to the wall of an underground cavern where lizards and 'large earth-worms, which twined themselves in his long and matted hair, almost ceased to excite sensations of horror' (63). When lightning strikes the cavern, shattering it, Verezzi is moved to a deserted cottage where he finally has the opportunity to confront his tormentor, Zastrozzi, and declares: "I fear nothing [...] from your vain threats and empty

\(^4\) S3, V. 21 (November 1810), 329; cited in Behrendt, 279.
\(^5\) 41; (January 1812), 6972; cited in Behrendt, 286.
\(^7\) Murray: Prose, p. xxiii.
denunciations of vengeance: justice, Heaven! is on my side, and I must eventually triumph.” What can be a greater proof of the superiority of virtue than that the terrible, the dauntless Zastrozzi trembled’ (68). One could claim to hear in this overwrought dialogue early echoes of the Prometheus/Jupiter dispute that is so central in Shelley’s later major work *Prometheus Unbound*, and certainly there is, as Rajan has claimed, a hyperbolic quality to the latter work that may very well have had its origins in the experiments of this early Gothic novel.

After escaping his hapless captors, Verezzi lives incognito in a Bavarian cottage while the focus of the action shifts back to the diabolical schemes of Zastrozzi. It is at this point in the narrative that we are introduced to Zastrozzi’s double, the villainous femme fatale Matilda (La Contessa di Laurentini), who demands to know if Zastrozzi has accomplished her stated command: “Are we revenged on Julia? am I happy?” (76). The text does not provide the background information to allow the reader to understand what Julia has done to merit Matilda’s rage, but at this point the reader of Gothic texts knows enough to fill in the blanks: Julia (La Marchesa de Strobazzo) is Verezzi’s true love, and Matilda is a passionate aristocratic nymphomaniac who has fixated her obsessive lust on him. Julia deserves death, according to Matilda, because she has stood in Matilda’s way as a competitor for Verezzi’s love and sexual favours. Just to show the reader how serious they are, Zastrozzi in collusion with Matilda kidnaps Julia’s servant and protector, the loyal Paulo, and after he begs for his life, they poison him so that he will not stand in the way of yet another assassination attempt on the life of Julia (78).

After futilely searching for Verezzi in the grip of a frustrated sexual frenzy, Matilda finally decides on suicide and leaps off a bridge in Bavaria only to be rescued from the water by the passing Verezzi. His initial words to her suggest that she has been stalking him for quite some time: “did I not leave you at your Italian castellan? I had hoped you would have ceased to persecute me, when I told you that I was irrevocably another’s” (82). But Matilda is not one to moderate her declarations: “I adore you to madness—I love you to distraction. If you have one spark of compassion, let me not sue in vain—reject not one who feels it impossible to overcome the fatal, resistless passion which consumes her” (83). Described twice in the text as ‘wily,’ Matilda is likened to the serpent in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as well as the temptress Circe, and she now begins in earnest her campaign to seduce and then marry Verezzi. Believing that Julia is dead, Verezzi dashes his head against a wall and develops a life-threatening brain fever, eventually recovering only to live in the deepest mourning for Julia. Only after Verezzi is attacked by Zastrozzi in disguise and Matilda steps in to take the blow herself (a plot that they arranged together) does Verezzi begin to soften toward Matilda and propose marriage. Warned by Zastrozzi, who claims to have killed Julia, not to move to Venice, Matilda and Verezzi promptly move there, and within days Matilda receives a summons to appear before the ‘il consiglio de dieci’, the Council of Ten, the Venetian Republic secret service (132–3), perhaps for

10 See Behrendt’s edition, 84 n., 113.
the crime of killing Paulo or perhaps, as Matilda herself suggests, for 'heresy' (135), although neither of these charges is ever made clear in the text. Complications multiply quickly when Zastrozzi arranges for Verezzi to see the very much alive Julia with his own eyes and then realizes that he has been duped into marriage by the machinations of his new wife. Confronted by Julia in the palazzo he shares with Matilda, Verezzi kills himself after a passionate denunciation of his evil wife. Matilda, using the same knife, then stabs Julia in a manic fury, only to sink into a spiritual despair: 'her soul had caught a glimpse of the misery which awaits the wicked hereafter, and, spite of her contempt of religion—spite of her, till now, too firm dependence on the doctrines of atheism, she trembled at futurity; and a voice from within, which whispers, “thou shalt never die!” spoke daggers to Matilda's soul' (143).

Arrested along with Zastrozzi by the secret police, Matilda confesses her sins and seeks and receives forgiveness, while Zastrozzi is defiant to the end: “Am I not convinced of the non-existence of a Deity? Am I not convinced that death will but render this soul more free, more unfettered? Why need I then shudder at death? Why need any one, whose mind has risen above the shackles of prejudice, the errors of a false and injurious superstition” (153). Zastrozzi admits to the court that he has been motivated to destroy Verezzi because Verezzi's father had seduced and then abandoned Zastrozzi's mother. Zastrozzi killed his own father, the seducer, and then sought to kill his half-brother, Verezzi, because his mother on her deathbed had asked him to revenge her honour. Sent to the rack, Zastrozzi declares his defiance and actually brags that he has accomplished his life's work: “I know my doom; and instead of horror, [I] experience some degree of satisfaction at the arrival of death, since all I have to do on earth is completed” (156).

Nicola Trott has described Zastrozzi as 'a mock Minerva novel, with stock Gothic names and characters'. For her, 'Shelley's manipulation of the Gothic ranges all the way from pranking and pastiche to the profoundest speculation. 11 Other critics, in particular Stephen Behrendt, have read it as an early but serious attempt to confront the question of character and destiny, the dangers of pride and revenge, and the follies of sexual passion and infatuation. For Behrendt, it is important to 'take the prose romances seriously and on their own terms, bearing in mind that the elements of playfulness and calculated excess that enter into them with some frequency foreshadow—even if occasionally crudely—many of the transgressive and destabilizing elements we associate with the poetry (especially) that would follow' (32–3, 14). Rajan's recent reading of the work takes it quite seriously, reading the villain Zastrozzi as a 'Symbolic, adolescent mask for the Promethean transgression whose incoherences [he] masks.'

The second and slightly later novel, St. Irvyne, is structured so that we seem to be reading two separate and parallel narratives, first the robber/Faust/Wandering Jew/ghost-seer tale of Wolfstein and his doppelgänger Ginotti, and secondly, the sentimental romance of Eloise, a beautiful orphan, seduced and sold in a gambling wager by the libertine Frederic de Nempere. The dual structure of the novel has received the most

12 Rajan, 'Shelley's Promethean Narratives', 54.
critical attention, with critics arguing that the two narratives parallel and illuminate each other or that the use of both genres within the master-text collapses these two discrete discourse forms, the Gothic and the sentimental, and suggests the exhaustion and limitations of both genres. The novel begins with 'the high-souled and noble' (164) Wolfstein fleeing from his native land because of some horrific crime he has committed. Very quickly he is captured by a group of banditti led by the ruthless Cavigni, who forces Wolfstein into full participation with their activities (these early scenes strongly recall Friederich von Schiller's popular drama Die Räuber (1781), which had been translated into English by 1792 and later adapted by George Cruikshank as the popular Gothic chapbook Feudal Days; or, The Noble Outlaw). So desperate about his capture and forced banditry that he begins to contemplate suicide, Wolfstein decides that he would rather take up his pen and write poetry that is, in fact, the same poem that Shelley used in Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire, itself a plagiarism of a ballad from the anonymous Tales of Terror (1801), 'The Black Canon of Elmham; or St. Edmond's Eve'.

Almost immediately the beautiful Megalena de Metastasio is captured and also held in the same underground cavern, and the action escalates. Within a day she is told that she will be forced to marry Cavigni, so Wolfstein decides to murder Cavigni and escape with the beautiful Megalena with whom he has fallen instantly in love. Like Wolfstein, Megalena is also prone to writing poetry as an act of cathartic therapy. In her case, however, Megalena plagiarizes her poetic offering from Byron's 1807 edition of Hours of Idleness (174), an act that is repeated by Eloise St. Irvyne when she is asked to sing a song of her own composition (211-12). Also inhabiting the banditti cave and seemingly possessed of preternatural powers of foreknowledge, Ginotti ('some superior and preter-human being,' 183) becomes a shadowy force who haunts the footsteps of Wolfstein, always turning up to help him at a crucial moment and then demanding that Wolfstein swear an oath of allegiance to him should he, Ginotti, ever request assistance himself. The Wolfstein/Ginotti doubling recalls the action of Schiller's Ghost-Seer (1789), while the pact with the devil is similar to the one that occurs in both Marlowe's Dr Faustus (1604), and Goethe's version of the Faust tale (Part One; 1808), which we know Shelley read and admired. There are also echoes here of the legend of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, doomed to wander the earth for all eternity because he mocked Christ on his way to the cross, a subject that the young Shelley had also been exploring in his 'The wandering Jew's soliloquy' (1811?), excerpts from which form the epigraphs to chapters II, VIII, and X of St. Irvyne.

14 See Douglass H. Thomson, 'Introduction' to Tales of Wonder by Matthew Gregory Lewis (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2009), 35.
After moving to Genoa with Megalena, Wolfstein succumbs to a dangerous gambling addiction (a stock vice in anti-aristocratic Gothic texts), and begins to be stalked by Ginotti, who appears only to mutter ominously, "Attend to these my directions, but try, if possible, to forget me. I am not what I seem. The time may come, will most probably arrive, when I shall appear in my real character to you. You, Wolfstein, have I singled out from the whole world to make the depositary—" (195), and then the sentence abruptly stops. Clearly, Ginotti lures and seduces Wolfstein with tantalizing hints about his knowledge of the secret of immortality, but the reader is as confused as Wolfstein about the nature and identity of Ginotti, who is sometimes depicted as a villain and sometimes as a powerful Promethean avenger. At the climax of the Wolfstein/Megalena tale, her double, the nymphomaniac Olympia della Anzasca, attempts to seduce Wolfstein and is discovered by the jealous Megalena in a compromising position with him. Demanding revenge, Megalena insists that Wolfstein murder Olympia, who then commits suicide when she realizes that she has been irrevocably rejected by Wolfstein. Fleeing to Bohemia, Wolfstein and Megalena are not safe for long because Ginotti suddenly appears and demands fulfillment of his sworn oath. At this same meeting Ginotti also gives Wolfstein the secret of immortality, an elixir that he says he has purchased from the devil at the cost of his everlasting soul. Instructed by Ginotti to go to the abbey of St. Irvyne in France on a certain evening, Wolfstein arrives at midnight to discover the dead Megalena and the emaciated Ginotti, who again seeks in Wolfstein a substitute for his own pact with the devil. When Wolfstein refuses to renounce his belief in God, the devil appears and transforms Ginotti into an enormous skeleton.

Juxtaposed with the robber/Faust/Wandering Jew/ghost-seer story operating fairly crudely in the Wolfstein/Ginotti plot is the sentimental story of the beautiful French orphan Eloise de St. Irvyne (whose ancestral home had been the setting for the ill-fated Wolfstein–Ginotti climax). Seduced by a mysterious dark stranger who goes by the name of Nempere (name of the father?; not a father?), Eloise is pregnant by him when she is sold to an Englishman, the Chevalier Mountfort, in order to settle a gambling debt that Nempere incurred. She is then passed by the Englishman to an Irish idealist named Fitzeustace, who accepts her baby as his own, marries her, and proposes to take her to England to escape the evils of continental life (this plot is similar to any number of sentimental seduction tales, notably Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798) or Charlotte Dacre's *Confessions of the Nun of St. Orner* (1805)). In a denouement that quickly and awkwardly attempts to connect the two narratives, the text baldly states: 'Ginotti is Nempere' and 'Eloise is the sister of Wolfstein'. Suffice to say that this conclusion did not satisfy Shelley's publisher, who wrote to complain to him about its abruptness. Contemporary critics have tended to read the two narrative lines more positively, claiming, in fact, that they detect a greater level of narrative sophistication in the second novel. For example, Peter Finch has asserted that *St. Irvyne*, with its overlapping Gothic and sentimental storylines, is the 'much more accomplished and intriguing textual performance', while Rajan sees the novel as 'Shelley's first metadiscursive text, in that it is about the functioning of

16 Behrendt, 'Introduction', 25.
the signifier. In that sense it is also a commentary on the form of Zastrozzi, on the problems in signification and emplotment that complicate the writing and reading of the texts we shape out of the political unconscious.\textsuperscript{17}

As far as tracing literary influences on these two novels, we know that Shelley was an enthusiastic reader of Gothic chapbooks as a child and was later a purchaser of the Gothic Minerva Press titles while he was a student at Eton (1804–10). We also know that he read Ann Radcliffe’s \textit{The Italian} (1794), but his first attempt at a Gothic novel was very clearly inspired by what, according to Thomas Medwin, was an ‘enraptured’ reading of Charlotte Dacre’s \textit{Zofloya; or the Moor} (1806), a fact that was elaborated on by Peck close to 100 years ago.\textsuperscript{18} While it has been customary to cite \textit{Zofloya} as the primary source for the names, plot, and themes of \textit{Zastrozzi} and, in fact, to accuse Shelley of something like a virtual plagiarism of that work, it is also necessary to point out that \textit{Zofloya} itself is close to a plagiarism of a number of other earlier Gothic novels, George Moore’s \textit{Theodosius de Zulvin, the Monk of Madrid} (1802) being its primary and overlooked source apart from Matthew Lewis’s \textit{The Monk} (1796). The popularity of \textit{Zofloya} in turn led to a number of other imitations of it in chapbook and novel form, ones that Shelley most certainly would have had access to: Lucy Watkins’s Gothic romance \textit{Cavigni of Tuscany. A Terrific Romance} (1814?), from which numerous characters, situations, and themes are borrowed (or, in fact, virtually stolen); the anonymous \textit{The Avenger; or The Sicilian vespers} (1810); and Isaac Crookenden’s \textit{Horrible Revenge; or The Monster of Italy!!} (1808). And \textit{St. Irvyne} itself, somewhat ironically, was plagiarized as an anonymously published chapbook sometime between 1815 and 1818 entitled \textit{Wolfstein; or The Mysterious Bandit.}\textsuperscript{19}

There are echoes of numerous other Gothic novels in \textit{Zastrozzi}, and, as Edith Birkhead has pointed out, names such as ‘Julia’ and ‘Matilda’ are most likely borrowed from Radcliffe’s \textit{A Sicilian Romance} (1791), and Lewis’s \textit{The Monk}, while ‘Verezzi’ is also a character in Radcliffe’s \textit{Mysteries of Udolpho} (1794).\textsuperscript{20} Names, however, are the least of the borrowings. The murder and suicide scenes are Gothic staples, as are the Inquisition trials, the revenge theme, and the detailed depictions of sexual dysfunction. \textit{St. Irvyne} is also obviously indebted to the legend of the Wandering Jew, which so intrigued Shelley that he wrote about the figure as challenging God, or, in Shelley’s words, the ‘Tyrant of Earth,’ to explain the sufferings that this God has in fact caused: ‘Or the Angel’s two-edged sword of fire that urged | Our primal parents from their bower of bliss | (Reared by thine hand) for errors not their own, | By thine omniscient mind foredoomed, foreknown?’ (150).

David Seed claims that one of the major influences on this novel, as well as Shelley’s earliest attempts to write political prose fiction, can be found in his reading of the works


\textsuperscript{20} Edith Birkhead, \textit{The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance} (London: Constable, 1921), 111.
of William Godwin, particularly *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), which includes an Inquisition scene and a Wandering Jew character who gives the elixir of life to St Leon. Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville* are also inscribed in the action and themes of *St. Irvyne*, while Behrendt, following Peck, cites Lewis's *The Bravo of Venice* (1805) as a possible source text.²¹ As far as Gothic chapbooks with very similar scenes, characters, and plots are concerned, Shelley would have had access to such works as *The Black Forest; or, the Cavern of Horror* (1802); *The Bloody Hand, or The Fatal Cup* (1810); and *The Sorcerer; A Tale from the German of Veit Weber*, translated by Robert Huish and published in 1795.

In tracing Shelley's possible sources it is also important to recognize that, besides his readings in the canonical and pulp British tradition, he was also an admirer of the four Gothic works of the American novelist Charles Brockden Brown; according to Peacock, 'nothing so blended itself with the structure of his interior mind as the creations of Brown. But he was also an avid reader of, as Mary Shelley tells us, 'such German works as were current in those days.'²² By setting both of his novels partially in Germany, Shelley was tapping into the vogue for all things Germanic in this particular strain of British Gothic sensibility. In fact, in *St. Irvyne* Shelley introduces a character named Steindolph who is described as 'famed for his knowledge of metrical spectre tales, and the [banditti] gang were frequently wont to hang delighted on the ghostly wonders which he related' (177). Steindolph tells a gruesome Gothic ballad that he learned in Germany about a monk and his dead nun-lover Rosa, but the reader of Anne Bannerman's 'The Penitent's Confession' (1802) will find the ballad extremely familiar in tone and content.

Huish's *The Sorcerer* is itself an adaptation of the German Gothic classic Friedrich von Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* (1789), translated into English as *The Ghost-Seer or the Apparitionist* (1795), immensely popular in England, and, I think, an obvious and overlooked source for Shelley's early Gothic works. The dialogue between Enemonde and Francesco about the nature of God and the devil in Huish's *The Sorcerer* is very similar to the conversations that occur later in Lewis's *The Monk* and then in Shelley's *St. Irvyne* when Ginotti traces his education in 'Natural Philosophy' to Wolfstein (234–5). In short, disputing about the existence and nature of God and the possibility or impossibility of an afterlife were two of the most prominent themes in Germanic Gothic novels, and Shelley it would appear is simply repeating in *St. Irvyne* what would have been an extremely familiar dialogue in any number of earlier Gothic texts, and which he himself adapted and expanded on again only a few months later in his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811).

Both of Shelley's novels employ a series of veritable Gothic clichés and conventions: the motivating and mysterious vendetta, banditti roaming around dark forests, the besieged and orphaned heroine, the demonic seducer, the Venetian Inquisition, and

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²¹ David Seed, 'Shelley's "Gothick" in *St. Irvyne and after", in Miriam Allott (ed.), *Essays on Shelley* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1982), 39–70 (53–4) and Behrendt, 'Introduction', 22–3.

chance encounters of the most fantastical sort. Characters are frequently doubled (virgin/whore; redeemer/seducer) and the convention of supposedly missing chapters is used in both works, while the themes of 'apprehension, danger, resistance, struggle, sexual tension, and intense awareness of surroundings are stock in trade of the Gothic fiction'. Shelley does employ a device that, while not original, takes on an increased poetic and psychological depth in St. Irvyne: namely, the dream-vision. We can see the first of these attempts to portray a dream-like state when Matilda foresees the attack on Verrezi that she has planned with Zastrozzi in the first novel (121–2). But in St. Irvyne we see an extended dream-vision, very similar in descriptive details to the one that the Alastor poet would undergo in Shelley's later poem (1815). In this version, Wolfstein dreams that he is standing 'on the brink of a frightful precipice, at whose base, with deafening and terrific roar, the waves of the ocean dashed'. In great danger from a 'figure, more frightful than the imagination of man is capable of portraying', Wolfstein is suddenly rescued from 'the grasp of the monster' by Ginotti (191). Uncertain as to how to interpret the dream, Wolfstein decides that Megalena is his enemy and Ginotti is his hero. Eloise has a similar dream-vision in which she meets a 'fascinating, yet awful stranger' who embraces her, only to find herself suddenly standing with him over a yawning pit and an ominous landscape (213). Finally, Ginotti himself recounts to Wolfstein the most elaborate of all these dream-visions: of Satan coming amidst 'rays of brilliancy' and a 'blood-red moon' to drag him to a precipice (236–7).

Shelley's two Gothic romances present yet another interesting problem for the literary critic: what are we to make of what appear to be intensely conservative domestic, religious, and ideological agendas when we know that the author, in fact, held diametrically opposite opinions and beliefs at the time of composition? Behrendt refers to the conservative tone taken by these and other Gothic works as 'the rhetoric of moral stewardship'; and such is, indeed, an apt characterization of a sort of double-voiced quality to so much of these works. On one hand, they deal in shocking and aberrant behaviours, such as nymphomania, libertinism, and murder, all the while condemning in the name of social decency and moral middle-class standards the very acts they have so lovingly detailed. For instance, one of the dominant discourses in Zastrozzi is Promethean hedonism and self-aggrandizement, heard very clearly when Zastrozzi says to Matilda: "No—any purpose undertaken with ardour, and prosecuted with perseverance, must eventually be crowned with success. Love is worthy of any risque. […] for whatever procures pleasure is right, and consonant to the dignity of man, who was created for no other purpose but to obtain happiness, else, why were passions given us?" (102). This discourse on the justification of the passions is extremely similar to the debates that occur throughout Charlotte Dacre's novels, in particular The Passions (1811), as well as her earlier novel The Libertine (1807), both of which Shelley may have read. Debating about the control of the emotions was part and parcel of an emerging bourgeois agenda,

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and associating extreme emotions with the aristocracy was part of the 'Whiggish' Gothic ideology that characterizes the novels of Dacre in particular.25

Gothic novels frequently focused their ideological agendas on the questions that surround the climate of growing secularization and religious angst, and certainly we can hear a number of these concerns in both of Shelley's novels. Zastrozzi plays the role of existential transgressor in the first novel, while Ginotti/Nempere is the embodiment of the demonic in *St. Irvyne*. Being a devil in human form, however, means that one can seduce, tempt, and trick the protagonist into forfeiting his eternal soul, and that attempted seduction is sketched in fairly crude terms in both novels. In *Zastrozzi* the title character frequently puts forward views that the narrator characterizes as 'sophistically argued' (102), as when Zastrozzi says to Matilda, "'As for the confused hope of a future state, why should we debar ourselves of the delights of this [world], even though purchased by what the misguided multitude calls immorality?'" (102). Meant to shock the orthodox, Zastrozzi's sentiments echo those of Matilda in Lewis's *The Monk*, a demon in the guise of a woman who tempts the doomed monk Ambrosio to fall into sexual licentiousness and damnation. But for every blasphemous statement made by Zastrozzi, the narrative voice is there to denounce and chide: 'His soul, deadened by crime, could only entertain confused ideas of immortal happiness; for in proportion as human nature departs from virtue, so far are they also from being able clearly to contemplate the wonderful operations, the mysterious ways of Providence' (102-3).

So while the villain Zastrozzi quizzes Matilda about theological issues (''do you believe that the soul decays with the body, or if you do not, when this perishable form mingles with its parent earth, where goes the soul which now actuates its movements? Perhaps, it wastes its fervent energies in tasteless apathy, or lingering torments''), the narrator condemns the 'sophistical' discourse altogether and traces its influence to the destruction of Matilda's decency: 'by an artful appeal to her passions, did Zastrozzi extinguish the faint spark of religion which yet gleamed in Matilda's bosom. In proportion as her belief in an Omnipotent Power, and consequently her hopes of eternal salvation declined, her ardent and unquenchable passion for Verezzi increased, and a delirium of guilty love filled her soul' (103-4).

A similar conservative narrative voice emerges in *St. Irvyne*, particularly during the Eloise section of the novel. Here the narrator condemns Eloise's seducer, warning: 'Reflect on this, ye libertines, and, in the full career of the lasciviousness which has unfit­ted your souls for enjoying the slightest real happiness here or hereafter, tremble!' (229). The censorious sexual ethic implied throughout these texts is not far from some of the positions that Shelley would take later, particularly as they are spelled out in his *Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love* (1818), one of two Prefaces he wrote to his translation of Plato's *Symposium*. Here Shelley argues that the homosexual acts as well as pederasty that were practised by Greek men could be explained by the inferior status and intellectual inadequacies of the women during that

period. For Shelley, 'the practices and customs of modern Europe are essentially different from and comparably less pernicious than either [the Greeks and Romans]. He con­tinues, 'in modern Europe the sexual and intellectual claims of love, by the more equal cultivation of the two sexes, so far converge towards one point so as to produce, in attempt to unite them, no gross violation in the established nature of man.'

_The Assassins_ consists of only four chapters of what appears to have been intended as a 'romance' on the scale of the two earlier Gothic works. Begun during the late summer of 1814, abandoned by September of that same year, and then briefly revived about a year later, the tale focuses on the Assassins, a group of Christian Gnostics that Shelley had read about in Edward Gibbon's _Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire_ and the Abbé Augustin Barruel's _Mémoires pour servir a l'histoire du Jacobinisme_. The fact that Shelley presents these Gnostics in a sympathetic light suggests that perhaps his attitudes toward Christianity and what he considered to be the institutionalized corruptions of the religion were more complex than has generally been recognized. The fragment also serves as something of a transition between Shelley's early Gothic novels and a political prose-poem like _Queen Mab_ (1813), itself written partly as a poem and partly as prose, and his later more mature poetic work. As Richard Holmes has noted, 'with its grim and fantastic gothic imagery, and its fiery, energetic, hate-filled language, [The Assassins] brings Shelley one step further towards his best political poetry.'

Shelley begins his idealistic portrait of the Assassins by presenting them as having nothing but 'contempt for human institutions' because they are people who, like him and his circle, were able to reject 'pagan customs and the gross delusions of antiquated superstition' (254). By linking paganism and 'superstition' (a coded term for Catholicism at the time), Shelley participates in the Gothic's well-established anti-Catholic discourse, something he also does in _Epipsychidion_, with its denunciation of the treatment of a young and beautiful woman forced against her will into a convent, and _Queen Mab_, with its condemnation of 'priests [who] dare babble of a God of peace | Even whilst their hands are red with guiltless blood.' Valorizing the 'human understanding' and 'the energies of mind', the Assassins are true Christians (unlike, Shelley implies, the masses of ignorant Catholics) who are committed to 'an intrepid spirit of enquiry as to the correctest mode of acting in particular instances of conduct that occur among men' (254). Peaceful, committed to 'benevolence and justice', and 'unostentatious', the Assassins are the saving remnant who flee Jerusalem and Rome in order to settle in Lebanon in a utopian valley called 'Bethzatanai' (256). The physical landscape of Bethzatanai sounds very much like the idealized psychic/natural inscape of Shelley's _Alastor_, full of 'dark chasms like a thousand radiant rainbows; a 'grove of cypress', 'precipitous mountains', 'starry pyramids of snow', and 'overhanging rocks' (257). And the inhabitants of Bethzatanai are

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‘men who idolized nature and the God of nature, to whom love and lofty thoughts and the apprehensions of an uncorrupted spirit were sustenance and life’ (258). In other words, the Assassins share the same values and beliefs as Shelley.

While Rome falls and the rest of the civilized world falls into ‘perverseness and calamities’, the Assassins continue to live in their benevolent ‘Republic’, shielded from the sinfulness and destruction that mars the outside world (261). But the evil of the outside world threatens the sanctuary that is Bethzatanai, and at the end of the sixth century the valley is suddenly visited by a mysterious young man who is found ‘impaled on a broken branch’ with a serpent and worms eating away at his chest (264). This strange descent of a Promethean Christ-figure, with a ‘bitter smile of mingled abhorrence and scorn’ on his lips, suggests something like a composite figure or a doubled Gothic hero/villain whose message is oddly ambivalent (264–5). On one hand the man talks of suicide and death and on the other hand of human love and delight. In short, the figure demands that one of the Assassins take him home, where he states that he needs to be accepted and loved as a member of the family. The text abruptly ends as the stranger is introduced to the Assassin’s two children who are sitting on the side of a pool of water and talking to a small snake that is peacefully coiled at their sides. Shelley uses the serpent in canto I of Laon and Cynthia (1817) as a positive force of good drawn into combat with the eagle, the power of evil according to Zoroastrianism, but at this date he could have simply been reversing the meaning of the serpent of Genesis. The Assassins is too brief and truncated to present a coherent theme or ideology; however, it is obvious that Shelley is even at this date attracted to the possibilities of political and religious prose, although the ‘vehement style’ of the text itself would appear to indicate that his ideas would be more effectively expressed in the sort of epic poetry he would ultimately pen in Prometheus Unbound.30

The Coliseum was written in Rome during November 1818, in a lull between the composition of Acts I and II of Prometheus Unbound. Organized as a conversation between an elderly blind man, his daughter Helen, and a young, mysterious outsider figure named ‘Il Diavolo di Bruto’, or Brutus’ Devil, the work attempts to explore a persistent Shelleyan theme: the need to renounce self-interest and ego in favour of empathy with others and the greater good of the community. Binfield has suggested that the work may have begun as a response to Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, canto IV (January 1818), the historical cynicism of which Shelley found offensive. In Shelley’s alternative meditation on Hellenism, aesthetics, the ‘psychology of violence’, and the ‘anti-elegiac attitude to historical monuments’, Shelley advocates ‘the interconnectedness and therefore the mutual interdependence of all things and beings’, as well as ‘an awareness of the life beyond the narrow circle of self’.33 Using an ambiguously named and effeminately featured young man as his mouthpiece, Shelley introduces yet another fallen angel, this

30 BSM XXII, Part 2, 128.
time associated in name with both the assassin of Julius Caesar and Lucifer, as well as the earlier idealized Brutus, founder of the original Roman Republic. Set during the 'feast of the Passover' which is also 'the great feast of the Resurrection,' the text immediately situates itself between two competing religious traditions: the Jewish and the Christian. Suggesting that the two religions are actually the same and that therefore religious wars and persecutions are pointless, the text next collapses gender differences in the introduction of the 'emaciated' young man of 'exquisite grace' whose face resembled the 'impassioned tenderness of the statues of Antinous' as well as the 'timid expression of womanish tenderness and hesitation' (Behrendt, 270–1). The androgynous ideal appears throughout Shelley's poetry, and the introduction here of yet another androgynous figure is certainly consistent with Shelley's larger ideological agenda: the denial of a narrow selfhood in favour of merging and denying oppositions and all socially constructed dichotomies.34 In addition to its truncated religious theme, The Coliseum can perhaps best be understood as yet another manifestation of the enthusiasm for ruins that dominates the writings of René Chateaubriand, Germaine de Staël, and Byron. The set-piece here is the visit to the Colosseum by moonlight which was inspired by Chateaubriand's 1804 letter from Italy and printed in the Mercure: 'Rome sleeps amidst its ruins. This star of the night, this globe one imagines as finite and deserted wanders in its pale solitude over the solitude of Rome.' After reading this, Staël wrote to a friend: 'To stay in Rome, as Chateaubriand says, calms the soul. It is the dead who live in it, and each step one takes here is as eloquent as Bossuet on the vanity of life. I will write a sort of novel that will serve as framework for a trip to Italy and I think many thoughts and feelings will find their proper place in it.'35 This scene in Corinne, or Italy (1807), made the Colosseum by moonlight a locus romanticus for poets like Byron in Childe Harold and Manfred, and, it would appear, Shelley. When Brutus' Devil confronts the old man and his daughter in the Colosseum, he states: "Strangers, you are two; behold the third in this great city, to whom alone the spectacle of these mighty ruins is more delightful than the mockeries of a superstition which destroyed them" (272). Blaming the rise of Catholicism for the destruction of Rome, the young man minutely describes the ruined Colosseum to the blind man, who enunciates the great Shelleyan theme: 'The internal nature of each being is surrounded by a circle, not to be surmounted by his fellows; and it is this repulsion which constitutes the misfortune of the condition of life' (275). The ruined columns of the Colosseum represent the 'circles' that close us off from each other so that we can never fully experience what the old man calls 'Love. This is the religion of eternity, whose votaries have been exiled from among the multitude of mankind' (275).

Invoking the very masculine force of 'Power' and praying to 'Love, Author of Good, God, King, Father!', the blind man requests that the forces of 'justice', 'liberty', 'loveliness', and 'truth, which are thy footsteps' will never divide father and daughter (276). But recognizing that he will die before his beloved Helen, the old man asks that his 'hopes,
and the desires, and the delights' that he now has will 'never be extinguished in my child' (276). This conversation—very similar to the *improvvisatori* performance of Tommaso Sgricci that Shelley witnessed in Italy—cannot ultimately resolve the question of 'that mystery, death' (277), and the old man concludes by warning the two others only that all he can say is that death is 'something common to us all' (277). But in the face of the certainty of death, Shelley proposes one answer: 'communion.' The youth, who has been silent while the old man has spoken, announces that he has lived a life in which he has not been understood by his peers, all of whom have consistently rejected his values. He concludes: 'Not but that it is painful to me to live without communion with intelligent and affectionate beings. You are such, I feel' (278). The fragment ends on these words, unable to present a specific vision of a positive 'communion' that would enable individuals to resist and overcome the pessimism inherent in the ruins discourse.

Although he loved to read fiction and was married to a successful novelist, Percy Shelley's literary talents clearly did not lie in the realm of fiction. He himself disparaged the 'story' as a mere 'catalogue of detached facts' in contrast to the superior synthesis of form and meaning that could be achieved in a poem. In fact, Shelley was far less interested in character development, convincing plot, and actions than he was in the play of language, imagery, and symbolism in itself. That he continued to try to compose in prose as late as 1818 suggests that the lure of fiction continued to fascinate him, or perhaps it is fairer to say that it continued to elude him. In the final analysis, Shelley was a poet whose ideas found their clearest and most powerful expression, not in his prose exercises, but in the poetic works that grew out of these early and abortive experiments.

**Select Bibliography**


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