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Article for *European Romantic Review*

The Shelleys and the Idea of “Europe”

by Paul Stock

Introduction

This article explores how the Shelleys and their circle configure ideas of “Europe” between January 1817 and March 1818. In this period, Mary was finishing *Frankenstein* and Percy wrote, planned and published *Laon and Cythna*, two texts which, I will argue, are especially concerned with the meanings of “Europe” and “European”. More specifically, Percy Shelley constructs an idea of “Europe” upon his interests in radical politics and the possibility of utopian and revolutionary social progress. This construction, however, is not straightforward: the Shelleys’ reflections on “Europe” also reveal potential instabilities at the heart of Percy’s radical “European” vision, and I focus on how *Laon*, and to a lesser extent *Frankenstein*, foreground these complexities. The article begins with the latter text, discussing how Frankenstein’s experiment is associated with the particularly “European” problem of over-reaching – a drive for radical success leading to conflict or failure. I then turn to *Laon and Cythna*, a poem which labels itself as “revolution writing” and contemplates how the French revolution changed “Europe” and what it meant to call oneself “European”. Here Percy Shelley reflects on the possibility of radical reform, but also the disappointments and disruptions within “European” history. Set in Constantinople, a border-zone between Europe and Asia, *Laon* uses the language of collective identity both to construct “Europe” and to question that same construction. Shelley evokes “America” in a similarly double-sided manner: as a non-European “other” and as a more ideal version of “Europe” uncorrupted by post-revolutionary disappointments. Lastly, based on a remark in a letter to Percy Shelley about “European marriage”, I examine the connection between “Europeanness” and particular sexual mores. If, for Shelley, debates about “Europe” occur within specific parameters relating to revolution and radical change, “European” also has very different connotations connected to orthodox moral and sexual conventions. In this

respect therefore, debates about “Europe” in the period encompass wider complexities beyond the immediate political concerns of the Shelley circle.

Frankenstein and the “European” Anxiety

“European” is the first adjective used to describe Frankenstein when he appears in Mary Shelley’s novel. Chancing upon Frankenstein and his creation in the Arctic wastes, the explorer Walton frames their relationship in terms of a confrontation between European and non-European: “he was not, as the other traveller [the Creature] seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European” (*Frankenstein*, 13). Frankenstein himself emphasises this difference throughout the novel, insisting that the Creature “quit Europe forever, and every other place in the neighbourhood of man” (122), as if he has no right to live alongside Europeans. Frankenstein’s fear of the non-European outsider is all-consuming; he worries that if the Creature and his bride “were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world [...] a race of devils [would] be propagated upon the earth” (138). And yet, as his obsession grows, he becomes an outsider himself, “banished from my native country”, “a friendless outcast over the earth” (161). Walton defines him as a European, but Frankenstein becomes increasingly estranged and isolated, wandering in the border regions of “Tartary and Russia”, at the very edges of European society.

But what is specifically “European” about Frankenstein? According to his own testimony in chapter one, he hails from a multi-national family, he speaks many languages and is very well travelled, building precise (and rather exacting) criteria for who a “European” might be. More importantly, he is associated with radical causes, choosing to conduct his experiment at Ingolstadt university. Revolution-era works like John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (1797) and Augustin Barruel’s *History of Jacobinism* (1797), traced the founding of the Illuminati order to Ingolstadt, and purported to demonstrate how that shadowy society had masterminded the French Revolution (St Clair, 437). Frankenstein’s experimentation is therefore associated with the unorthodoxy and social radicalism of Revolutionary ideas, just as “the raising of ghosts or devils” was thought to be the province of “revolutionary sympathisers” (*Frankenstein*, 254-5n.). Introduced as a “European”, Frankenstein’s activities are ideologically connected with radical attempts to re-shape European society, and with

the controversial trajectory of recent history. This has inspired some interesting Marxist analyses of the novel's import. Frankenstein's relationship with the Creature, says Franco Moretti, resembles that between the bourgeoisie and "wage-labour": the created subordinate who desires equal participation in society, but who is denied by his self-appointed superiors (Moretti, 84-6). This argument underestimates, however, the extent to which Frankenstein's own actions have Revolutionary implications – how his experimentation is connected to the wider upheavals of European society, and how his original and daring triumphs rapidly disintegrate into disappointment and self-destructive violence. To this extent, Frankenstein's career is an allusion to the degeneration of other radical ideas, similarly identified in the public mind with the unorthodox thinkers of Ingolstadt university.

Like Prometheus, Frankenstein is an over-reacher whose glorious successes precipitate disastrous failure. He becomes aware of the destructive potential in his ambition early in the novel, observing that "the pursuit of knowledge" "has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste. [...] Study [can be] unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind" (*Frankenstein*, 37). However, he concludes, this drive for potentially destructive knowledge has fuelled the course of civilisation's progress as well as its mistakes:

If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would not have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed (37-8)

In other words, this notion of "over-reaching", of the drive for knowledge and power leading to conflict or disaster, characterises Europe's development, and particularly its relations with the non-European world. "Over-reaching" is thus particularly associated with *European* history: through Frankenstein the European, the novel explores radicalism that both redefines "European" progress, and creates a terrifying non-European "other". *Frankenstein* has sustained many fruitful postcolonial readings, which show how the novel is complicit with, but also interrogates, the assumptions of imperialist identity politics¹. Yet nobody so far has noted how the text constructs similarly complex ideas of "Europe" – especially how it associates "European" with potentially dangerous radical thought and the concept of "progress".

Importantly, however, it also reflects on the problems inherent in those constructions, particularly the fractious interaction of Europeans and non-Europeans, and the questionable directions of “European” social progress theory. Mary therefore offers an uneasy analysis of what defines and shapes “the European”, and for the rest of this article I wish to show how Percy’s *Laon and Cythna* explores similar issues and difficulties rather more extensively.

“Revolution [...] in an European nation”

Writing to a potential publisher in 1817, Percy Shelley described *Laon and Cythna* as:

a tale illustrative of such a Revolution as might be supposed to take place in an European nation, acted upon by the opinions of what has been called (erroneously as I think) the modern philosophy, & contending with antient notions & the supposed advantages derived from those who support them. It is [...] the beau ideal as it were of the French Revolution (*Letters*, I, 563-4).

Shelley thus advertises the work firstly as a kind of historical commentary on European history, exploring how writing and debate causes revolution, and secondly as an idealised version of those events, a vision of what “Europe” *should* be like.

The preface to *Laon and Cythna* continues this double purpose: the poem “is an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live” (*Laon*, preface, lines 3-6)². The poem thus engages with the effects of history, but also attempts to *change* that history by “kindling within the bosom of my readers, a virtuous enthusiasm for the doctrines of liberty and justice” (preface, lines 10-13). In other words, the poem has a determined *project*: it creates a meta-historical European narrative based on the interpretation of the past, and then projects that narrative into an idealised vision of Europe’s potential future. This is not to imply a blinkered optimism: the preface notes how the historical revolution was not “in every respect prosperous”, since “successive tyrannies” established themselves afterwards (preface, lines 78-82). Instead, the poem reconfigures recent European history, emphasising both its fictionalised “beau ideal” and its grounding in historical reality. The first canto, for example, portrays an allegorical conflict between the “great Spirit of Good” and its Manichean opposite, “King, and Lord and God”, or “Fear, Hatred, Faith and

Tyranny” (lines 378, 386). The narrative interprets history in the light of this conflict: in the Revolution “thrones then first shook, / And earth’s immense and trampled multitude, / In hope on their own powers began to look” (402-4). Subsequently however, the “oppressors” have struck back by re-establishing convention: “Justice and truth, with custom’s hydra bond, / Wage silent war” (419-20). The plot converts recent historical events into an allegory, relating first the joy of revolutionary success, when disparate factions are “reconciled” by the “love of freedom’s equal law” (1865-72), and then the crushing disappointments of the restoration, facilitated by “the armies of the leaguéd kings” (3825). In narrating this transition, the poem alludes to how ideas of “Europe” have been in dispute, vacillating between a new vision of “nations [...free] of bondage” (2118-20) and a “Europe” defined by “despots” and “banded slaves” (3824-8).

This engagement with the Revolution has two important implications. Firstly, it revives the political language and concerns of the 1790s: William St Clair has identified numerous verbal parallels between the preface to *Laon and Cythna* and the preface to the first edition of William Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) (St Clair, 431). *Laon and Cythna* reinvests late eighteenth-century debates about “monarchy”, “freedom” and the state of “Europe” with a new immediacy, hoping that poetry can both diagnose oppression and offer hope for “Man’s free-born soul” (3258). In doing so, Shelley evokes the forthright style of Wollstonecraft’s *History [...] of the French Revolution* (1794), which he and Mary Shelley read in 1814 (M. Shelley, *Journals*, I, 87). Here Wollstonecraft identifies historical episodes that definitively reshaped society, from the crusades to the recent Revolution, searching for a means of historical analysis that moves beyond individual states to talk about “Europe” as a totality. She establishes a progressive history for the sub-continent, arguing that “all Europe” was enslaved by feudalism, but “the discovery of useful truths” has rapidly spread – especially from Paris, “a thoroughfare to all the kingdoms on the continent” (Wollstonecraft, 220-1, 231, 502). Speaking of 1789 itself, she says “revolution did not interest frenchmen alone, for it’s [sic] influence extending throughout the continent, all the passions and prejudices of Europe were instantly set afloat. That most favoured part of the globe had risen to an astonishing pre-eminence” (305). As Shelley does, Wollstonecraft presents this process as “the natural consequence of intellectual improvement”, foregrounding the influence of

writers and thinkers (“the confederacy of philosophers”) in directly reshaping “Europe” (Wollstonecraft, vii and 498).

However, *Laon and Cythna* was not alone in revitalising this thirty year old debate, since the language of the French Revolution was used to justify contemporary policy initiatives. According to Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner*, the British government justified its programme of repressive legislation in 1817 by comparing the recent stoning of the Prince Regent’s coach to the dangers “of 1795, [...] when the pretence was a dread of France and of Revolution” (*Examiner* [9 Feb 1817] 81). Later in the same month, the newspaper couches its own reformist agenda in revolutionary language, titling an anti-taxation article “Friends of Revolution” and complaining about the post-Napoleonic “Settlement of Europe” (*Examiner* [23 Feb 1817] 113). And in April it mounts an extended satirical attack on those who believe that “all crimes and sufferings begin with the French Revolution”, offering instead a history of monarchical deviance (*Examiner* [6 Apr 1817] 209). Like those it criticises, the *Examiner* uses its own interpretation of revolution to diagnose present political problems, and to project hopes for society’s future.

Central to all these conjectures is the idea that the Revolution *changed* “Europe”. In her work *France*, published in 1817 and read by the Shelleys in the same year, Lady Morgan concludes that the Revolution re-defined Europe: “the bond of society was rent asunder [...] consecrated by the vows of all that was enlightened and liberal in Europe” (Morgan, 89; M. Shelley, *Journals*, I, 100). Like Shelley and Hunt therefore, Morgan bases her understanding of “Europe” on specifically *French* politics and the consequences of Revolution. When analysing the “State of Europe”, however, the *Examiner* alternates between emphasising the great changes undergone since 1789, and complaining that, after the restoration, the ancien régime remains in place. An editorial entitled “Impossibility of the Continuance of the Present State of Things in Europe”, rails against the apparent intractability of “Bourbonite” regimes, but simultaneously asserts that Europe has irreversibly altered and “would not bear any sort of dictation” (*Examiner* [12 Jan 1817] 17). The paper’s consistent editorial position is that the Allies betrayed a promise to “secure the independence of the State of Europe”, replacing Napoleonic rule with monarchical despotism, and refusing to countenance constitutional reform (*Examiner* [21 Sep and 26 Oct 1817] 611 and 679).

It even uses the word “Europe” to refer specifically to monarchical government: “[Napoleon] pushed Europe to arms in defence of her existence”; “the Sovereigns of Europe hate him” (*Examiner*, [27 Apr 1817], 275).

What should be clear from this is that discussions about the “State of Europe” and the conduct and legacy of the French Revolution, are part of the *same* debate: writings about the Revolution, from policy documents to mythologised histories like *Laon and Cythna*, are deeply engaged with creating and shaping ideas of “Europe”. Indeed, *Laon*’s participation in this process is acknowledged by contemporaries. The *Monthly Review* locates the poem as a Revolutionary document, announcing that “the wild burst of the French Revolution called out ten thousand fancies and furies [...] not only were politics rhapsodised in the cause of that tremendous occurrence, but rhapsodies became political” (*The Monthly Review* [Mar 1819] 323-4). And although John Gibson Lockhart at first attempts to depoliticise the poem (“a great part of it has no necessary connexion with politics”), he later acknowledges the radical theme, mentioning the “Revolutionised city” and the “men weary of political, and women sick of domestic slavery”, mischievously choosing to praise Shelley’s work using monarchical language (“the noble and majestic footsteps of his genius”) (*Blackwood’s* [Jan 1819] 475-82).

By far the most strident assertion of the poem’s Revolutionary *social* message occurs in Hunt’s *Examiner* review. He identifies a utopian purpose to the poem: “Mr. Shelley is of opinion [...] that the world is a very beautiful one externally, but wants a good deal of mending with respect to it’s [sic] mind and habits”. Hunt thus turns *Laon and Cythna* into a kind of manifesto and he explains how writing and printing can affect the future of Europe – “the Press, which has got hold of Superstition and given it some irrecoverable wounds already, will, we hope and believe, finally [...] crush it as a steam-engine would a great serpent” (*Examiner* [22 Feb and 1 Mar 1818] 121-2, 139-41). In seeking publicity for *Laon*, Shelley sought out individuals linked to earlier publishing and political controversies, emphasising the close relationship between radical words and Revolutionary events. He engaged as co-publishers Sherwood, Neely and Jones. Sherwood particularly had longstanding connections with the radical publishers of the 1790s, working at one point for H. D. Symonds, who was imprisoned and fined for publishing Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791) (*Shelley*

and His Circle, V, 155). Shelley also sought to create a coterie of people convinced of their authority, *as poets and writers*, to comment on and influence the world of politics. Reassuring Ollier about the blasphemous and incestuous content of *Laon*, Shelley suggested that the Government “would hesitate before they invaded a member of the higher circles of the republic of letters” – implying that he and other writers occupy a political space “beyond” or outside the proper reach of national governments (P. Shelley, *Letters*, I, 579). He makes a similar point when anonymously reviewing Godwin’s *Mandeville* (1817) in the *Examiner*, investing the author (along with Wollstonecraft) as part of a European community of radicals: “the other nations of Europe [...] have anticipated the judgement of posterity [...] their writings] have been translated and universally read in France and Germany, long after the bigotry of faction had stifled them in our own country” (*Examiner* [28 Dec 1817], 827). In this sense, Shelley projects radical writing *itself* as a revitalisation of “Europe”: offering as the *Laon* subtitle claims, “A Vision of The Nineteenth Century”.

The “Beau Ideal” of Europe

What, however, is the nature of this European “beau ideal”? At times, the *Examiner* uses “Europe” to refer to a *particular* group of states. A review of James Mill’s *The History of British India* (1818), for example, identifies a “European” “nation”; it observes “the character of the Hindoos”, and makes comparisons with the Europeans, collectivising the members of particular states as sharing certain “characteristics”. Mill’s work, says the review, “affords much food for national pride” – but “national” does not refer to a specific state like Britain, but rather to collected “European” successes, such as victories “against large eastern armies” (*Examiner* [8 Mar 1818] 157). A collective idea of “Europe” is constructed through comparison with non-European “others”. Elsewhere, however, the present condition of “Europe” and “the world” are collated, as if the “beau ideal” for that sub-continent were also the ideal state for the whole world. After Waterloo, Hunt says in an editorial, “the world would not bear any sort of dictation”, assuming that his understanding of European history is universally applicable (*Examiner* [12 Jan 1817] 17). Later, an article entitled “Modern Virtue” draws various reformist ideas from the lessons of European history, and then universalises them into moral precepts about “fealty to the laws” (not the will of tyrants) and “benevolence to all mankind” (*Examiner* [13 Jul 1817], 433).

It is precisely this reasoning “from a particular to a universal” that J. T. Coleridge objects to in his review of *Laon and Cythna*: for him Shelley had formulated erroneous universal laws from irrelevant observations about oriental tyranny (*Quarterly Review* [April 1819] 460-71). Certainly, in his letters about the poem, Shelley details its universal relevance: “I have attempted [...] to speak to the common & elementary emotions of the human heart” (*Letters*, I, 563). Comments like this lead Nigel Leask to suggest that Shelley creates “a fantasy of the universalism of revolutionary reason”, desiring “a state of universal Sameness” in which other cultures can be “alchemized” into resembling the European revolutionary ideal (Leask, 128 and 89)³. However, as we have seen, Shelley also evokes membership of a smaller, more exclusive coterie (the “higher circle of the republic of letters” [*Letters*, I, 579]), as well as an international “community of feeling”, where people “maintain that connexion between one man and another” by mourning “any public calamity which has befallen their country or the world” (P. Shelley, *Prose Works*, 232)⁴.

This same problem recurs throughout *Laon and Cythna* when Shelley relates the disappointments of European history and his hopes for reconciliation. In canto V the narrator mentions how, in the course of revolution, disparate “patriots”, defined by their enthusiasm for parochial identity, gradually form a wider community: “they, and all, in one loud symphony / My [Laon’s] name with Liberty commingling” (lines 1873-4). In terms of Shelley’s European myth-history, he here imagines the reconciliation of post-revolutionary “Europe”, when different states had the chance to rally around one governmental ideal and the concept of “Liberty”. The delineation of various groups or collective identities thus articulates the competing visions of “Europe” presented in the poem. Canto V imagines a “Europe” riven by tribal conflict: “our tribes were gathered far”, in the “patriot hosts” “murderers fled / like insect tribes” (1770-84), before eventually allying as a “mighty brotherhood / Linked by a jealous interchange of good” (1839-41). Elsewhere, however, the poem evokes universal ideas of Liberty and Equality, imagining “Europe” as a unified assembly of “free spirits” rather than competing rivals. Laone’s ode celebrates this commonality: “a hundred nations swear that there shall be / Pity and Peace and Love, among the good and free” (2210-1). This introduces an important uncertainty. Is the revolution of the Golden City a nationalist uprising of “patriots” struggling for independence

against a ruler which has “dispossessed / All native power” (977-8)? Or is it the unification of many peoples in a common cause? Is it a *particularist* rebellion for the reclamation of “native power”, or a *universal* act, whereby disparate factions act as one? This uncertainty is visible from the poem’s preface, when Shelley explains how he intends to inspire “a virtuous enthusiasm for those doctrines of liberty and justice, that faith and hope in something good, which neither violence, nor misrepresentation, nor prejudice, can ever totally extinguish among mankind” (preface, 10-13). But what kind of project is this? Does Shelley present the “beau ideal” of a rebellious individual nation, of an international community, or a universal vision for the world? And the question matters because it resembles precisely the challenge of understanding “Europe” as a space for competing nationalisms, as a transnational collective, or as a universal ideal (in that “Europe” represents the premier social state for all humanity).

This interest in the potential universality of European society is, of course, hardly unique to Shelley. Volney also suggested that “the communication of knowledge will extend from society to society till it comprehends the whole earth. By the law of imitation the example of one people will be followed by others, who will adopt its spirit and its laws [...Despots will relent] and civilisation will be universal” (Volney, 115-6). But Shelley is not quite this explicit: by investigating various notions of group identity, and by doubting the extent to which “European” government or ideas might have universal or particular applicability, *Laon and Cythna* questions what “European” might mean, or to whom it might apply. Unfortunately, Shelley does not offer a solution to these complexities. By contrast, Hazlitt’s fragmentary “On Patriotism” (published in the same year as *Laon*) understands universal collectivity *through* patriotism. Love of country, he says, “is little more than another name for the love of liberty, of independence, of peace, and social happiness” (Hazlitt, I, 238)⁵. In other words, patriotism inspires not merely a devotion to the particular, but also a universalist social vision, an ideal for *all* societies. Hazlitt insists that patriotism is “not a natural but an artificial idea”; despite its apparent parochialism, it has much wider application beyond the “local”.

Constantinople

The setting of *Laon and Cythna* provides an important context for understanding the “European”. The action is “supposed to be laid in Constantinople and modern Greece, but without much attempt at minute delineation of Mahometan manners” (P. Shelley, *Letters*, I, 563). Although the poem deals with events “as might be supposed to take place in an European nation”, it is thus set at the very edges of “Europe”. Throughout 1817 and early 1818, the Shelleys read Edward Daniel Clarke’s massive *Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa* (1810-23) (M. Shelley, *Journals*, II, 642), which talks of Constantinople as the location where Asia and Europe meet, both a dividing border and a fusion of different cultures and historical periods: harems co-exist with Greek language booksellers, and the city’s inhabitants are “ages behind the rest of the world”. In this way, Constantinople reveals the “otherness” of the non-European, but also represents the historical *origins* of Europe since “Athens itself was not very unlike Constantinople in its present state”. It is both an “other” and an exemplar of Europe (Clarke, I, 669; II, 4-8, 20-1, 49). For some contemporary reviews, this setting renders *Laon*’s politics inadmissible. John Taylor Coleridge complains that “the laws and government on which Mr Shelley’s reasoning proceeds, are the Turkish, administered by a lawless despot[...] We are Englishmen, Christians, free and independent; we ask Mr Shelley how his case applies to *us*?”. Coleridge suggests that the poem is irrelevant to the concerns of a European audience, except that Greece, “the land full beyond all others of recollections of former glory and independence [is] now covered with shame and sunk in slavery” (*Quarterly Review* [Apr 1819], 466). Responding to this accusation, Hunt upholds Shelley as an exemplary “citizen of the world” whose words break down borders and have universal relevance (*Examiner* [10 Oct 1819] 653). William St Clair argues that Shelley might have used imagery of “the East” to disguise the European pretensions of his politics: philosophical writers “wrote Constantinople when they meant London and Mahometanism when they meant Christianity” to avoid censorship laws – “as Godwin had been taught in theology class, a war to drive the Turks out of Europe was a universally accepted paradigm of a just revolution” (St Clair, 234, 432). By setting *Laon and Cythna* in Constantinople, and eventually re-titling the poem *The Revolt of Islam*, Shelley could attack organised religion and tyrannous government, and advocate revolution more easily. Montesquieu had used a similar tactic in the *Persian Letters* (1721), ensuring greater freedom to critique French society by employing Persian narrators who he ironically denounces as “full of ignorance and prejudice”

(Montesquieu, 284). In the 1790s this strategy gains a new immediacy. Volney, for example, connects Turkey and Revolutionary France through the language of liberty: “a great nation [...] contracted a fondness for a nation the enemy of liberty [...] The French were smitten with a passion for the Turks: they were delirious of engaging in a war for them, and that at a time when a revolution in their own country was just at its commencement” (Volney, 103). This kind of association makes it ideologically possible to allude to European revolution whilst overtly discussing Turkey or “the East”.

At some points in *Laon*, however, this dual interest in “Europe” and the “East” manifests itself as an apparent hostility between the two. In the preface, Shelley blames the Roman Empire’s fall on the infiltration of “Eastern” attitudes and practices: “contempt for virtue [...] arising from the enslaved communities of the East, then first began to overwhelm the western nations in its stream” (lines 226-9). And the poem itself hints obliquely at threats from the east: in canto I an easterly mist shrouds the “orient sun in shadow” and in canto III, the “azure East darkness again was piled” (1404). Later, the Tyrant himself is presented as an oriental despot: Cythna is captured by his Tartar troops (2558) and held captive by an “Ethiop” at “Oman’s Sea” (the Persian Gulf). In canto IX his followers are explicitly described as Muslims (3532-4). Nigel Leask glosses the ambiguous second title of the poem as meaning “revolt *against* Islam”; that is, the poem presents revolution by civilised progressives against Islamic despotism and oppression. This, says Leask, involves the imposition of Eurocentric ideas of “universal” liberty: “for Shelley, [the East] beckoned as an uncluttered site for the fulfilment of frustrated dreams of liberty, but in practice revealed itself to be treacherous and obstacle-ridden, the nemesis of revolutionary narcissism” (Leask, 73 and 10).

However, Shelley’s presentation of Constantinople is more complex than this might suggest: the Golden City is neither simply a disguised European city in the throes of revolution, nor an example of authoritarian Oriental rule; rather, it is a combination of *both*. In her work on the interaction of cultures, Mary Louise Pratt speaks of “contact zones”, or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet and clash”, places where peoples encounter and represent “others”, and then reconfigure *themselves* in terms of that encounter (Pratt, 4). Shelley, I think, presents Constantinople / the Golden City

as such a contact zone – a space where different ideas of “the European” and the “non-European” co-exist simultaneously. The city is on the borders of “Europe”, acting both as an exemplar of European history (presenting an ideal of past, and the possibility of future, revolutions) *and* as a non-European “other” – an unenlightened oppressive state, opposed to liberty and revolution. Put briefly, the Golden City simultaneously represents “Europe” and its “other” – Shelley’s ideal of revolution and its reactionary opposite.

Shelley is not alone in this complex use of Constantinople as a literal and ideological border between “Europe” and “non-Europe”. The broad idea of seeing the East (and especially Constantinople) as a battleground between European freedom and Islamic tyranny seems to have been popular in the period. In *Lalla Rookh* Thomas Moore says that “liberty” *cannot* exist in an Islamic government (Moore, 378-9) and the *Examiner* worries that the oppressive governance of the East could spread to Europe: “such is the state of the Eastern world, where [...] the tendency [...] to tyrannise and to be tyrannised over, has had full time to develop itself. [...] Our turn seems next” (*Examiner* [12 Jan 1817] 26). In Thomas Jefferson Hogg’s fictional *Memoirs of Prince Alexey* (1813), the title character visits the city and observes the “tyranny of the Turks” as well as cultivating an “excessive love of perfect liberty”.

Constantinople is a scene of strange and backward otherness, a place to think radical thoughts about the future – especially regarding rebellion in Greece (Hogg, *Alexey*, 75-6). Henry Weber’s *Tales of the East* (1812), read by the Shelleys in 1815 (M. Shelley, *Journals* I, 92), praises the city for offering a romantic escape into the fictions of the “Arabian Nights’ Entertainments”, *and* a true insight into “authentic portraits of oriental manners” (Weber, I, iii)⁶. But Weber’s image of east-west relations is different from Shelley’s, for *Laon* uses the same image to construct an idea of “Europe” and its other – a scene of European revolution and an oriental despotism. In formulating what “Europe” should be like, the City is both an exemplar and a warning.

“America”: The New “Europe”?

In contrast to such complex understandings of “Europe”, the Shelley circle presents America as a living paradise. The conclusion of *Laon and Cythna* eulogises America as: “A land beyond the Oceans of the West / Where [...] Freedom and Truth / Are

worshipped” (lines 4415-7). England, the former inheritor of Athenian democracy, has become oppressed “by inbred monsters”, and now “her chainless child” America embodies the Greek legacy (4420-1). In preserving this tradition, the United States provides “an epitaph of glory for the tombs / Of murdered Europe” (4427-8) – it has taken up the mantle of European history and now defines what it means to be “European” more fully than post-restoration “Europe” itself. This is a complex assertion, for it identifies a “European” tradition (extending from Greece to Britain), but then strips that tradition of its specific “Europeanness” by suggesting that America exemplifies its characteristics. Put differently, the idea of “Europe” becomes the idea of “America”. Thirty years earlier, Richard Price had proclaimed America the heir of a “glorious” liberal-revolutionary tradition initiated in Britain (Price, 49-50). By 1817, however, the *Examiner* sees America as the *vanguard* of progress, and Europe the slothful follower. In an article praising Congress’s decision to commission historical paintings of Independence, the writer says “America, with a foresight and energy worthy of Greece, has set *them* [the British government] an example it should have been their glory to set *her*” (*Examiner* [13 Apr 1817] 230). The *Examiner* pays particularly close attention to South American revolutions too, claiming that “the actual work of freedom” is going on there despite the recent failures in Europe. The revolution in Brazil, the paper claims, is “connected with the subject of reform all over the world”, since it attacks “the incorrigible pretensions of ‘Legitimacy’” by engaging in a “struggle for independence”. It draws an explicit comparison with “Europe” under the Allies, noting their hypocritical warnings to Portugal to refrain from “acting in the New World to the provinces of Spain as they have done in the old to Norway, Saxony and Italy” (*Examiner* [12 Jan and 1 Jun 1817] 18, 337-8). America has become the new bastion of Reform: in the *Examiner*, as in *Laon*, the “beau ideal” for “Europe” has been magnified into a universal (applicable to *all* countries everywhere), and displaced into the precise locales of north and south America.

This adulation of American revolutionary potential once again demonstrates the 1817 Shelley circle’s deep engagement with the political work of the 1790s.

Wollstonecraft, for example, describes the American Revolution as “an experiment in political science” – an opportunity to lay the “first stones” of government without repeating the mistakes of absolute monarchy. “Anglo-americans”, she says,

“appeared to be another race of beings, men framed to enjoy the advantages of society, and not merely to benefit those who governed” (Wollstonecraft, 13-14). The use of “race” highlights the “otherness” of American society when compared to European practices, but also implies that Americans are “naturally” or intrinsically more advanced, as well as the products of a superior culture. In *The Ruins*, Volney traces the universal development of human society, looking forward to the time when disconnected states will band together, ending the “period of faction”. America, he proclaims, will help institute this transnational idyll by instigating “a new age” “of surprise and dread to tyrants, of emancipation to a great people, and of hope to the whole world” (Volney, 117-8). Volney and Wollstonecraft see the New World as a more perfect version of their hopes for “Europe” and the Shelley circle replicated their views twenty years later, the disappointments surrounding European revolution only amplifying their expectations.

Of Shelley’s Marlow circle in 1817-18 only Hogg expresses reservations about America. “In heart I am more a Grecian than ever”, he writes to Peacock. “The vulgarity of America as depicted in Ashe’s *Travels* & shewn by all other communications from that country, &, which in a great measure arises from ignorance of Classical Literature, is so disgusting, that we shrink from it in horror & take refuge in the ruins of antient taste & elegance” (Hogg, *Athenians*, 38). Unlike Shelley and Hunt, who identify the most recent incarnations of ancient Greek culture in contemporary states, Hogg, and to a lesser extent Peacock, assert the complete separateness of the modern world and its Grecian past. Peacock’s *Rhododaphne* (1818) invokes Greece as a means of *withdrawing* from the world through study: “Among those gifted bards and sages old / Shunning the living world, I dwell and hear” (*Rhododaphne*, 3). Whereas for Shelley Greece is a living concept visible in the world, for Hogg and Peacock it is a vanished ideal, and modern pretenders are poor imitators of its splendour. As Hogg admits, his comments on America’s neglect of classical tradition derive from Thomas Ashe’s *Travels in America* (1808). This work revels in a scathing critique of the United States, attacking “sordid speculators”, “shameful degeneracy” and the “bigotry, pride and malignant hatred” which infects the country. Significantly though, like admirers of America, Ashe associates the country with support for the French Revolution, including a bogus account of a Sussex farmer who, infused with enthusiasm for revolution, “fixed on America as his

destination” as it seemed to realise his dreams of reform (Ashe, I, 2-4 and 56-66). Ashe uses this thinly disguised fiction to assail both the U.S. and the concept of revolution, but, like Shelley, he assumes that America embodies a reformed “Europe”. For detractors and supporters alike, America is understood in terms of ideas about “Europe” – according to their conceptions of what “Europe” *should* be like, and whether the United States has emulated or destroyed that ideal.

“Europe” and Sexual Morality

Thus far, I have written about “Europe” as a historical or political concept. But what did it mean to the Shelley circle to be “Europeans”? How should a “European” behave? In this section, I explore how being “European” meant adhering to certain codes of sexual morality. Shelley and his friends were often accused of disrespecting marriage, of conducting unorthodox (i.e. extra-marital) sexual relations, and therefore of not being “European”. This shows the term “Europe” being used in a very different way: to bolster conventional forms of social behaviour, rather than to explore the complexities of radical politics.

In December 1817, William Baxter, a member of Godwin’s circle and father of Mary’s childhood friend Isabel, wrote to Shelley, defending his decision to break contact between their families:

The station your rank and fortune gives you in society, the sphere which it entitles you to move in are such as I cannot in good conscience introduce my family into [...]. This independence of fortune, too, has given you a freedom of thought and action entirely inconsistent with the customs, manners and prejudices of European society with which I have been at pains to imbue their minds, and which I wish not to see eradicated. (P. Shelley, *Letters*, I, 586)

What did Baxter mean by defining Shelley’s conduct as “uneuropean”? As the editors of *Shelley and His Circle* suggest, Baxter’s letter was probably written at the instigation of his son-in-law (and Isabel’s husband) David Booth, who explained his reservations about the Shelleys in a letter to his wife early in 1818: Percy Shelley is “certainly insane”, partly because he associates with the scandalous Byron, but mainly because, according to Booth, he lives alternately with Mary and Claire Clairmont. As a result, he “tramples on the morality of his country”, excluding himself from British and European society (*Shelley and His Circle*, V, 391-2). Shelley’s perceived lack of

“Europeanness” therefore derives from his alleged sexual immorality: Booth and Baxter imply that “Europe” is defined by particular social codes, notably marriage.

Shelley himself, of course, was much exercised by marital problems in this period, and he would often discuss these matters using the language of Revolution, complaining of his “persecution” by those who disrespect his radical opinions. And yet he constitutes those principles as important aspects of future reform, for by holding to them he provides “important benefit to mankind”. Writing to Byron about the custody battle for Charles and Ianthe, Shelley interprets the debate about his unorthodox ideals and (sexual) behaviour as an epic conflict between Reform and Reaction: his enemies intend to “expose me in the pillory, on the ground of my being a REVOLUTIONIST and an *Atheist*” (*Letters*, I, 557 and 530). In this sense, like his “enemies”, Shelley connects his personal conduct and his political ideals: his notions about marriage are an expression of the perfect, reformed “European” society.

Shelley explores this connection further in his draft declaration to the Chancery court regarding the custody case: “the allegations from which this unfitness [for paternal custody] is said to proceed, are reduced to a simple statement of my holding doctrines inimical to the institution of marriage as established in this country”. “Marriage”, he continues, “as it exists precisely in the laws and opinions of this country, [is] a mischievous and tyrannical institution”, adding that he has dared to imagine an alternative “system of social life” and that “all ages and countries have admitted in various degrees the principle of divorce” (*Prose Works*, 168-9). For him, the primary issue is one of social organisation, and he allies himself with a cosmopolitan flexibility regarding marriage and divorce, and against parochial British law. This is not specifically an idea of “Europe”, since Shelley invokes a universal ideal (“*all* ages and countries”). But nevertheless, he builds upon an important tradition which defines “Europeanness” by reference to marriage. Writing in 1797, probably with Wollstonecraft in mind, Godwin remarks “I find the prejudice of the world in arms against the woman who practically opposed herself to the European institution of marriage” (St Clair, 173). To Godwin’s dismay, being properly “European” depends upon adhering to a particular sexual code – and the concepts are so closely aligned that marriage itself is a “European institution”. By questioning marital laws in his

Chancery papers, Shelley is thus postulating an alternative vision of “European” social relations – one not so wedded to stringent marital codes.

Marriage *is* a defining feature of European society in Hunt’s *Examiner*: “the degeneracy of some nations of the East, the Egyptians and Chaldeans for instance, has been traced to the marriages that were in use between brothers and sisters”. By contrast, “Europe” has excelled through its practice of international marriage: the Goths and the Romans together produced “the early modern Italians, who led all the genius of modern Europe”, and the French have recently become pre-eminent “partly due to the great mixture of breed that has resulted from their free intercourse with all the other nations of the Continent”. The most “feeble houses” are consequently Spain and Portugal – the least internationalist and the most inbred states (*Examiner* [26 Oct 1817] 731). According to this thesis, international marriage is what *defines* “Europe”, both in terms of common adherence to the custom, and also because it facilitates inter-state communication and the sharing of ideas.

Hunt’s interest in marriage contributes to what Jeffrey Cox calls his “sexualised imagination”, epitomised in the erotic imagery of *Foliage* (1818), and *The Story of Rimini* (1816), which, like *Laon and Cythna*, deals with incestuous behaviour (Cox, 71). Reviewing these works, Hunt’s opponents also make the connection between “Europeanness” and sexual morality. Lockhart’s assessment of *Rimini* assaults Hunt’s style: “his poetry resembles that of a man who has kept company with kept-mistresses” – in other words, it indicates his sexual deviancy. And this criticism is intimately connected to Hunt’s faulty understanding of international relations and European culture. On the one hand, Lockhart attacks Hunt’s lack of languages, suggesting that he has not received a proper European and classical education. But on the other hand, Hunt’s views are a “dilution of the blasphemies of the *Encyclopédie* – his patriotism a crude, vague, ineffectual, and sour Jacobinism” (*Blackwood’s* [Oct 1817] 38-41). Lockhart thus criticises from two distinct directions, arguing firstly that Hunt is ignorant and not an internationally minded gentleman; but also that he is *excessively* international – copying the radical extremism of the philosophes and thus not correctly patriotic. This widely disseminated review therefore links dubious sexual morality with “defective” political views – just as Wollstonecraft’s political radicalism and alleged sexual licentiousness had been connected in the 1790s⁷.

J. T. Coleridge's review of *Laon and Cythna* objects using very similar terminology. "Mr. Shelley is his own Laon", Coleridge says, as if Laon's behaviour accurately mirrors Shelley's. Alluding to the controversial incest theme Coleridge writes: "Love," [Shelley] says, 'is to be but the sole law which shall govern the moral world' [...] We are loath to understand it in its lowest sense, though we believe that as to this issue this would be the correctest mode of interpreting it" (*Quarterly Review* [April 1819] 467-8). For this reason – because Shelley writes about sexual taboos – his ideas about the reformation of "Europe" are inadmissible: he wishes "to abolish all social strictures" by questioning both the ideal political state of "Europe", and its accepted sexual customs. In defending Shelley from this onslaught, Hunt reassures his readers of Shelley's conventional lifestyle, while simultaneously supporting his right to propound new theories and potentially "alter the condition of sexual intercourse". Significantly, however, he also declares that Shelley *is* a proper European – engaged with the international problems of "Europe" *despite* the original poem's apparent questioning of sexual orthodoxy. He quotes Bacon in reference to Shelley: "If a man be generous towards strangers, it shews he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins to them" (*Examiner* [10 Oct 1819] 653). The imagery here of a parochial island disconnected from the European mainland is powerful: Shelley is a world-citizen, and not a narrow-minded islander like his opponents, who attempt to exclude him from "European" society.

This debate, then, is partly about the conventions of "European" behaviour, and partly about the idea of "Europe" itself – what kind of common characteristics or customs "European" societies should possess. Ronald Paulson notes how Revolutionary debate in the 1790s was filtered through the language of sexuality: Burke emphasised the dangers of insurrection by narrating the storming of the French palace as a sexual assault on Marie Antoinette, forced to "fly almost naked" from revolutionary deviants. "The act of love", Paulson says, "was an act of rebellion, or at least a scandalous act, in the context of a society of arranged marriages and closed families" (Paulson, 65 and 268). By this logic, people with unorthodox sexual lives challenged the very basis of society. In Peacock's satirical novel *Melincourt* (1817), the reactionary Mr. Vamp exclaims that "every man who talks of moral philosophy [i.e.

radical ideas] will never make any scruple of seducing his neighbour's wife", as if reform and sexual misbehaviour necessarily go together (401). And the liberal Lady Morgan remembers how the *Quarterly Review* accused her, like Wollstonecraft, of "licentiousness, profligacy, irreverence, blasphemy, libertinism, disloyalty, and atheism", conflating religious and political radicalism with sexual dissolution (Morgan, vii-viii). In this context, William Baxter's remark to his daughter that Shelley possesses "truly republican frugality" is unusual, for it associates "republicanism" with abstinence and prudence, not sexual irresponsibility, as Booth and Lockhart declare (*Shelley and His Circle*, V, 340).

These accusations about Shelley's and Hunt's personal behaviour are, therefore, contributions to a wider argument about how "European" society should be constructed, and what kind of behaviour is properly "European". I have suggested that Shelley's ideas of "Europe" reveal (as well as challenge) his interests in revolution, radical reform, and the possibility of utopian social progress. For his critics though, "European" denotes a yardstick of acceptable (sexual) conduct – and Shelley's unorthodox personal life means that he can be attacked as "uneuropean". This conservative use of "Europe" indicates the extent to which Shelley's own radical "Europe" is an attempt to reject what he considered to be pernicious social forms and structures. But the debates about his "Europeanness" reveal how, in the post-Napoleonic political climate, the construction of "Europe" had become a battleground for expressing *various* social ideologies, and not just radical ones. Thinking about "Europe" does not just involve imagining political "beau ideals": it also involves theorising and practising competing behavioural codes and notions of social responsibility. In this way, Shelley's circle themselves are employed as *subjects* when recognising and defining "Europeanness".

Notes

¹ Gayatri Spivak notes how "the dark side of imperialism understood as social mission" surfaces in *Frankenstein* – particularly in the figure of Henry Clerval, who aims to go to India, "assisting the progress of European colonization and trade". However, she suggests, it also criticises imperialist procedures because it refuses to countenance "binary oppositions" of race and gender which often "consolidate the imperialist self". Joseph Lew also observes how the Creature's physical appearance links it to the subjects of imperialist rule in British India. However, it also "exists outside [the...] categories" of male and female or Occident "self" and Oriental "other". In this way, the novel questions any absolute separation between a self and its "others", and therefore critiques "the growth and methods of the British Empire in the East". For Spivak and Lew, *Frankenstein* reflects on the

complexities inherent in identity politics – an intricacy which, I am suggesting, also informs its presentation of “Europe” and “European” (Spivak, 254-6; Lew, 273-4 and 283).

² All quotations from *Laon and Cythna* are from the text edited by Jack Donovan, which is contained within *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. Everest and Matthews. Line numbers refer to this edition.

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty observes how a “universal and secular vision of the human” is deeply associated with the idea of “Europe”. In other words, “Europe” seeks to define its values – citizenship, the state, equality before the law, scientific rationality – in terms of their “universal” relevance and potentially universal application. Chakrabarty particularly mentions progress histories, which enshrine “Europe” as the culmination of human development, and view other societies as stages leading to a “European” perfection. As Leask notes, some of these assumptions can be detected in Shelley’s writing. (Chakrabarty, 4, 29 and 39).

⁴ This “community of feeling” evokes Cohen and Alliston’s notion of “sympathy” – which enables cross-border cultural interaction to exist alongside and in tension with “conceptions of national identity”. See Alliston’s “Transnational Sympathies, Imaginary Communities” and Cohen’s “Sentimental Communities” in Cohen and Denver, eds.

⁵ Hazlitt’s argument strongly resembles Richard Price’s idea that “Liberty is the [...] object of patriotic zeal [as] an enlightened country must be a free country”. Reflecting on the French Revolution, Price also suggests that the spread of “freedom”, already crucial in the establishment of patriotic identity, is *also* instrumental in creating a new “Europe” (Price, 19 and 50).

⁶ Ros Ballaster notes how eighteenth-century “oriental tales” are typically received both as “feigned stories” and “faithful representations” of the East. See *Fables of the East*, 2; and *Fabulous Orient*s, 14-17.

⁷ Richard Polwhele, for example, suggests in 1798 that ‘female advocates of Democracy’ are inevitably sexual deviants. Wollstonecraft submits to her “heart’s lusts”, while Helen Maria Williams is “an intemperate advocate for Gallic [revolutionary] licentiousness”. For Polwhele, radical politics and sexual unorthodoxy are both direct challenges to societal order. (Polwhele, 9-10, 19 and 30).

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