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EXHIBITION REVIEW

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The Shelleys on Display: Exhibiting Lives and Letters

Shelley's Ghost: Reshaping the Image of a Literary Family. An exhibition held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 3 December 2010–27 March 2011; Dove Cottage, Grasmere, 7 July–31 October 2011; New York Public Library, 17 February–24 June 2012. Accompanying book by Stephen Hebron and Elizabeth C. Denlinger (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010). Pp. 192. \$35.00. Accompanying Web site: <http://shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

Shelley's Ghost, an exhibition at the Bodleian Library, Dove Cottage, and the New York Public Library, is explicitly concerned with the forms and processes of literary and biographical memorialization. It concentrates on the family papers of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, their daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley. As Stephen Hebron, the curator, explains in his accompanying volume, the exhibition is not “a biography of these great literary figures, nor a critical appraisal of their work.” Instead, it displays “the manuscripts on which so many biographies and critical appreciations have been based, and explores how these manuscripts were either published or withheld by their owners in an attempt to shape the family’s reputation” (13). The exhibition begins with papers relating to Wollstonecraft’s marriage and death, especially Godwin’s notoriously candid *Memoir* of her life and work. The outrage that greeted this memoir leads the viewer to another publishing scandal thirteen years later, Percy Shelley’s expulsion from Oxford for writing *The Necessity of Atheism*. The exhibition’s focus then turns to the complex and enthralling personal lives of the Godwin-Shelley circle: interwoven and sensational tales of elopements, suicides, illegitimate children, fatal accidents, financial hardship, and—lest we forget—exceptional literary productivity. Alongside letters and relics documenting these events are manuscripts and notebooks containing drafts, sketches, and col-

laborations by the Shelleys and their associates. The rest of the exhibition details subsequent attempts to honor and control the Shelleys' posthumous images, first by Mary herself following her husband's death, and later by her daughter-in-law Lady Jane Shelley, who worked tirelessly to craft a family history and image fit for the Victorians and later posterity.

Shelley's Ghost therefore engages with the central practices of exhibiting: how the politics of choosing, displaying, preserving, and even destroying texts and other materials can service particular interpretations of people and their histories. Evidently, there are important questions here for historical, literary, and biographical studies, specifically how the deployment and presentation of certain kinds of evidence can affect not simply the assessment of literary import or the construction of an individual life story but also the comprehension of "the past" in broader terms. When gazing at relics from Lady Shelley's "Shelley Sanctum"—locks of hair, jewelry, cutlery—one wonders what exactly is being memorialized by these objects? The lives of famous literary figures, elevated to pseudo-sainthood by the very preservation of their inconsequential trinkets? The sensibilities of Lady Shelley herself, determined to celebrate, crystallize, and disseminate her personal reverence and familial pride? Or do the objects reveal wider late-nineteenth-century presumptions about the proper interpretation of the past and its actors: attention to personal material possessions, legitimate genealogy and aristocratic descent, and sanctioned histories authorized and framed by the guardians of the necessary evidence? *Shelley's Ghost* invites us to contemplate the overlapping complexities of these issues, not least because it requires a certain self-consciousness about the nature of exhibition-going. It encourages us to see the objects viewed and the practices of viewing them as dually implicated in interpretative processes. When we see the Sanctum relics, we are looking at a Victorian individual's understanding of a more distant past, but we do so through the additional filter of our own twenty-first-century predilections and perspectives, especially the trappings of a modern celebrity culture that values biographical exposure (34). Throughout *Shelley's Ghost*, understanding lives and letters is never a straightforward matter.

One of the exhibition's key themes is that members of the Godwin-Shelley circle consciously conducted and constructed their lives through both writing itself and the collection and presentation of documents. This point is first evident in Godwin's relationship with Wollstonecraft. The couple "preferred to live independently and communicated, to an unusual extent, by correspondence," sending each other letters on a daily basis and sometimes delivering them personally (29). Their relationship was a textual one, and the exhibition and book contain many examples, from long letters of intimacy, sympathy, and disagreement, to dashed-off notes on the writer's health and frame of mind. After Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin both preserved and managed her legacy by editing her texts, as well as through his remarkably revealing *Memoir* of her earlier life and loves. The fact that this volume attracted such heavy criticism and disgust—Robert Southey accused Godwin of "stripping his dead wife naked" (34)—highlights contemporary controversy, not just about Wollstonecraft herself but also about the correct way to memorialize the dead, understand the past, and deploy textual evidence. Godwin believed that written texts are the foundations of one's reputation and self-presentation: he scrupulously preserved his own papers, and in one autobiographical fragment—presumably intended for posterity—he asked to be judged "by his writing, not his life" (126). For the same reason, he was unafraid to winnow the archival records: he destroyed, for example, an unpublished comic play by Wollstonecraft, considering it "most respectful to her memory to commit it to the flames" (35).

An adjacent display reveals Percy Shelley's comparable propensity for defining one's self (or selves) through the written word. The documents of his early career alternate between insistent self-mythologization and a retreat from straightforward biographical emphasis through anonymous and pseudonymous publication. These variant attitudes to authorship are often concurrent, which suggests some degree of experimentation in self-presentation across different genres and contexts. Like his early gothic novels and political pamphlets, *The Necessity of Atheism* was published anonymously, though in a post-expulsion letter to his father Shelley adopts what would become a familiar mode, casting himself as the protagonist in a heroic drama, beset by "tyrannical violent proceedings." Later documents in the exhibition reveal the pressures and tribulations of living a life through letters. Mary Shelley's preface to *Frankenstein* exposes her and her husband's anxiety that "I should prove myself worthy of my parentage and enrol myself on the page of fame" (89). And the Shelleys also suffered from rumor-mongering and public attacks, in both the press and private correspondence: witness the reviewers who dismissed Percy's work on the grounds of his "disgusting" and "unmanly" private life (44). In the light of this reception, Lady Shelley's stringent attempts to sculpt a more positive image for the family, most obviously her determination to exonerate Percy's abandonment of his first wife Harriet, need not be understood simply as a campaign to distill the Shelleys' radicalism and unconventionality into acceptable Victorian wholesomeness. Instead it can be seen partly as a continuation of earlier interests in how the presentation and reception of texts can shape public image and self-understanding. Lady Shelley's close guardianship of the family papers might seem excessively cautious and controlling: her privately printed *Shelley and Mary* (1882) was subject to a forty-year embargo at the Bodleian notwithstanding its heavily bowdlerized contents. But this has important—if less insistent—precedents, not only in Godwin's conduct but also in the way Mary Shelley elided Percy's politics in her own editions of his work, a measure adopted to placate her conservatively minded father-in-law.

As all this implies, a closely related theme of *Shelley's Ghost* is competition over legacy and memory. The exhibition explores several key instances, from Mary Shelley's role as executor for her husband's and father's papers in the face of private hostility, to Lady Shelley's travails in finding a family biographer willing to publish in harmony with her views. Indeed, many of Percy and Mary's associates—Thomas Hogg, Thomas Peacock, and Edward Trelawny—fell from favor precisely because they declined to conform with those requirements and insisted upon publishing rival accounts. These disputes led Lady Shelley into some curious arguments, such as her counterintuitive belief that only family members could fully and impartially assess the extant evidence. There was even recourse to spiritualism: the exhibition contains samples of Lady Shelley's automatic writing, in which Mary's spirit allegedly vindicates her daughter-in-law's methods and conclusions. It would be easy to dismiss this as desperately self-serving, but there are nonetheless important questions about how one's perspective can affect the comprehension—and even the definition—of evidence in different periods and contexts. The exhibition also reminds us that literary and biographical legacies can be weapons in wider ideological disputes. From Godwin and Wollstonecraft onwards, the Shelley family members were enveloped in debates about morality and social convention, becoming protagonists and proxies in the tense politics of post-French Revolutionary Britain. Later, in the 1890s, the Shelley Memorial at University College Oxford was designed as a tableau of redemption; by recasting Percy as an angelic victim, it tried to embody changing moral and literary ideas and reject the value judgments of the past.

The above remarks might imply that *Shelley's Ghost* focuses predominantly on familial affairs. To some extent this is indeed the case, though the effect may be explained and amplified by our own attitudes to fame and celebrity, which tend to focus disproportionately on the intrigues of personal affairs, and which perhaps originated in the early-nineteenth-century cults of Lord Byron and Napoleon Bonaparte. Nonetheless, there are two potential problems here: first, that the literary and intellectual achievements of the circle are obscured behind accounts of family sensation and tragedy; and second, that our contemporary perspectives might blur with those of the Shelleys and their memorialists. The exhibition records various reshaping of the Shelley image, but to what extent does it reshape and reorientate in its own right? Are we looking through a mirror to our own celebrity culture as much as connecting with the aesthetic and biographical concerns of the past? These are not easy questions to answer because they require us to step outside the perceptions that frame our own ways of seeing. At times the exhibition and the book place almost too great an emphasis on biography by seeing the work as an index to the life. Percy's poem *Epipsychidion*, for example, is interpreted as an autobiographical allegory, and lines from *Frankenstein* are used to illuminate Mary Shelley's own mental state (73–74, 111). There is a double interpretative trap here: too much biographical context and one simply sees literature as an authorial diary; too little and one risks ignoring the circle's own preoccupation with self-presentation and legacies. But the exhibition's overall purpose hints at a solution: to reinvigorate self-reflexive understanding of biography without succumbing to the personality-cult clichés of the Romantic hero.

One of *Shelley's Ghost's* great triumphs is its presentation of the manuscripts, especially Percy Shelley's complex and at times near-illegible notebooks. Sensitively lit and with adjacent transcriptions, it allows the viewer to appreciate the texture of the documents, as well as the stages and procedures of their composition. These advantages are reproduced as far as possible in the book, which contains a great many color photographs, and on the extensive interactive Web site. In the Web site's introductory video, Hebron talks about Percy Shelley as a "craftsman," and the manuscripts certainly foreground the physical and mental efforts of writing, complete with revisions, sketches, and side-notes far removed from the deceptive purity of a printed page in a modern edition. The exhibition is thus immensely valuable for foregrounding the material culture of literary texts, in both their production and their collection and (non-)dissemination. Moreover, it leaves one with renewed admiration for the textual scholars who transcribed the Shelleys' awesomely complex notebooks (see, for instance, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*, 23 volumes, 1986–2001). Readers and viewers with a very deep knowledge of the Godwin-Shelley circle will gain from either the book or the exhibition little information that is not available elsewhere. But those interested in how biographical and literary reputations are developed, fought over, and sustained will find *Shelley's Ghost* extremely rich grounds for reflection.