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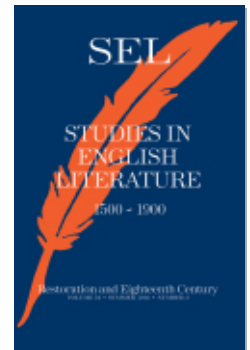
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## The Problem of Immunity in *The Last Man*

PETER MELVILLE

When a “last man” narrative presents itself from a first person point of view, the question invariably arises: how does the narrator survive the catastrophe that precipitates the death of all other humans? In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), a novel published in the wake of an explosion of “last man” texts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the answer to this question is left deliberately vague.<sup>1</sup> Shelley’s narrator, Lionel Verney, shows no signs of understanding his inexplicable recovery from a plague that decimates the rest of humanity in the twilight of the twenty-first century. Having produced our culture’s most famous freak of science in *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Shelley envisions for her third published novel a *bona fide* freak of nature, a man whose immunology is monstrously disproportionate to all those around him. Robert Lance Snyder has argued that “there is no logically adequate way of construing the plague” in *The Last Man*; it represents “an irreducible phenomenon that both challenges and defines the limits of rational understanding.”<sup>2</sup> I maintain that the same can be said of Lionel’s singular capacity to withstand that plague: aside from being a structural necessity of the novel, there appears to be no rhyme or reason to the last man’s enduring fortitude.

This unresolved detail of the novel has only piqued the curiosity of Shelley’s critics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, prompting speculation about both the source and the meaning of Lionel’s resilience. In a recent book chapter, for instance, Jan Plug suggests that if the plague’s devastation represents a complex

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critique of Romantic ideology, politics, and gender (as Snyder, Lee Sterrenburg, and Jane Aaron have argued), then Lionel's survival story "offers itself as the narrative of what it might mean to pass beyond . . . that ideology."<sup>3</sup> When Plug attributes Lionel's unique significance in this regard to the simple fact that Lionel "is the only character to contract the plague and survive it," he repeats an idea that has become a commonplace in Shelley criticism: Lionel's acquired immunity has something to do with the plague-devastated black man, "a negro half clad," whom Lionel encounters in an early episode of the novel's third volume.<sup>4</sup> Lionel "survives this literalized black death," writes Plug, "after having a black man, in his dying moments, breath [sic] the plague on, or perhaps better, into him." Lionel's recovery from this encounter thus "takes place as a kind of immunoreaction in which he inhales and integrates the antibody that the plague has perhaps always been."<sup>5</sup>

Snyder is the first critic in recent memory to make this connection between Lionel's immunity and what he calls Shelley's "plague-stricken and dying black."<sup>6</sup> Although Snyder rarely is cited for making the connection, his gesture is rehearsed by many of the novel's most influential readers, including Anne K. Mellor, Alan Richardson, Alan Bewell, and, more recently, Kari E. Lokke and Kevin Hutchings. None of these readers makes anything but the most casual reference to an important paradox that Snyder's observation brings to light: in order to read Lionel's encounter with the black man as a miraculous moment of immunization, or "inoculation" as Bewell calls it, one must acknowledge Lionel's contraction of the disease as being distinctly inconsistent with the plague's epidemiology.<sup>7</sup> The novel's plague, as Lionel himself admits, is not communicable through human contact but "depend[s] upon the air" to spread across the globe (p. 182). It is an airborne infection that "was not what is commonly called contagious, like the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox" (p. 182). Lionel's encounter with the black man is strange in many ways but not least because, purportedly, it yields "the sole instance of direct infection in the novel."<sup>8</sup> Read as a figure of immunization, the encounter produces a number of unresolved questions: Why is Lionel uniquely exposed to the plague in this manner? How could others not have been immunized similarly? And, perhaps more significantly, how are we to read Shelley's characterization of the alleged agent of Lionel's inoculation, a man whose racial profile aligns him dangerously close to "the Black Spectre" that indiscriminately devours mankind (p. 321)?<sup>9</sup> Revisiting the site of Lionel's encounter with the black man as well as the various

interpretations of that scene, this essay contends that by privileging the encounter as the most likely source of Lionel's lastness critics read *The Last Man* as being itself consummately dis-eased, anxiously torn by wanting to have its plague both ways, as both contagious and noncontagious. There may be no logical way to construe the plague, as Snyder insists, but positing Lionel's encounter with the black man as an exceptional instance in which the plague alters its habitual mode of transmission renders the scene intelligible only in a contradiction. As Jacques Derrida points out, "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire."<sup>10</sup> Unable to produce a coherent reason for Lionel's resilience, critics comprehend Shelley's novel as deliberately forcing the "negro half clad" on its narrator, who in turn gains immunity through his rejection of this man's body. The dual purpose of this essay is, first, to call this critical commonplace into question by pointing to evidence in the novel that challenges it and, second, to propose an alternate explanation for Lionel's resistance to the plague.

#### PRESCRIBING SOLUTIONS: LIONEL'S CASE HISTORY

By the time Lionel meets the "negro half clad," the plague has run its course through most of Europe and the Western world. Despite assurances from England's political leaders, who naively insist that the threat of plague is as foreign to London as a "lunar territory," pestilence permeates the city's borders, forcing many of its citizens either to flee to the country or to "die on the threshold of poverty" (pp. 173, 253). Inspired by a newfound "spirit of emigration," surviving Londoners agree "[t]o leave England for ever" and journey southward *en masse* toward more tropical climates in search of what Lionel's good friend, Adrian, calls "some natural Paradise, some garden of the earth" (pp. 256, 257, 244). Preparing for the coming exodus, Lionel returns to his London home during a terrible storm and finds an "assemblage of persons under the portico of [his] house"—gathered, as he soon learns, because of the rapid decline in health of his "eldest darling," Alfred (pp. 265, 264). Lionel recalls with some trepidation that day's events when he made his way through the crowd:

I snatched a light, and rushing up stairs, and hearing a groan, without reflection I threw open the door of the first room that presented itself. It was quite dark; but, as I stepped within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing

sickening qualms, which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family.

(p. 265)

Not long after this encounter, Lionel succumbs to a debilitating illness during which he hovers near death for three full days before making a complete and unprecedented recovery. It is primarily the close proximity between this encounter and Lionel's illness that has persuaded critics such as Snyder to diagnose Lionel's struggle with the black man as the "sole instance of direct infection" in the novel. Lionel, of course, will not make the connection himself. He records nothing beyond his immediate and physical revulsion at the black man's sickly state before proceeding to describe his visit to the deathbed of his beloved son. Snyder nevertheless insists that through this singular act of contagion Lionel achieves an archetypal rebirth that not only renders him immune to the plague but also endows him with "redoubled health and keener powers of perception."<sup>11</sup> From this black man harboring a plague of distinctly Eastern or "dark" origins, Lionel receives what Snyder calls "a new faculty of vision, a heightened spiritual awareness" through which he "alone is able to glimpse the portentous forces at work in the drama being enacted before him."<sup>12</sup>

If Snyder is the first to associate Shelley's black man with Lionel's contraction of and recovery "from the malady which promiscuously slays all others," then his argument—grounded as it is on an orientalist assumption that a dying man of dark skin could bequeath to another man mystically enhanced powers of premonition and insight—could also be said to bear the dubious distinction of being the least troubled by the novel's representation of race.<sup>13</sup> Since Snyder, critics have viewed "in diametrically opposed ways" the racial aspects of what Lokke calls the "disturbing sequence of events" surrounding the "negro half clad."<sup>14</sup> On the

one hand, there are those who find in the novel's portrait of the black man evidence of Shelley's complicity with Lionel's racism. Richardson, for instance, admits that "it would be tempting" to read Shelley's plague, with its "Afro-Asiatic roots," as an instrument of the novel's critique of imperialism insofar as it potentially represents "the colonies' collective revenge on the metropolitan center." He nevertheless fears that Shelley's novel does not warrant such a progressive reading, that her "plague seems, in large measure, a reflex of English disgust at the colonial other, a disgust inextricable from commercial domination." Lionel's depiction of the black man represents for Richardson "[t]he most striking, and painful, image of this disgust." He compares this image to similar images that Shelley uses to portray the monster in *Frankenstein*, arguing that Lionel's "'negro,' unlike [Frankenstein's] creature, never gets to tell his half of the story."<sup>15</sup> Lionel's encounter with the black man, in other words, essentially is presented without irony. Rather than characterizing and thus critiquing English attitudes toward colonial otherness, the encounter is symptomatic of those attitudes.

The more popular way to read Lionel's encounter with the black man is to give Shelley and her text the benefit of the doubt. Contrary to Richardson, Hutchings contends that the one temptation worth avoiding is precisely the conclusion "that Shelley has herself succumbed to the racism so common in her era by representing the novel's only African as an object of physical horror."<sup>16</sup> On this point, Hutchings defers to Mellor, whose introduction to the 1993 Nebraska edition of *The Last Man* continues to hold the most currency in Shelley criticism with respect to the novel's portrayal of the "negro half clad." Demarcating the scenography of what she will elsewhere call "the most troubling moment in the text as a whole," Mellor observes that it is from Lionel's "unwilling but powerful embrace of the racial other" that he "both contracts and, recovering, becomes immune to the plague."<sup>17</sup> The encounter, she argues, thus produces a kind of deconstructive spark of optimism insofar as it encodes "a possible alternative to the tale of universal destruction the novel otherwise represents." What this spark illuminates, however briefly, is what we might call the ethics of Shelley's novel: "if one were forced to embrace the Other rather than permitted to define it exclusively as 'foreign' and 'diseased,' one might escape this socially constructed plague."<sup>18</sup>

Mellor's reading of the encounter is corroborated most notably by Bewell. He distinguishes the sociohistorical line of his own reading from Mellor's "essentially moralistic" argument but

likewise suggests that Shelley may have “wanted this embrace, which functions as inoculation rather than contagion, to serve as an allegory of the fearful embrace of colonial encounters.”<sup>19</sup> If Mellor sees Lionel’s embrace of the black man as opening the possibility of a more genuine reception of the other, then Bewell holds before us a similar sentiment (an “implicit lesson,” he calls it) housed in an immunological metaphor: “the different biological immunities that populations have developed over time in different disease ecologies, may ultimately hold the key to our survival.”<sup>20</sup> Like Mellor, Bewell recognizes a certain hopefulness in Lionel’s embrace of the black man. After all, Lionel miraculously survives the plague. He hardly can believe that fate has left him alone in the world. As critics are quick to observe, Lionel is unable finally to forsake the idea of other survivors, people who might actually read the text he writes.<sup>21</sup> If the last man occasionally is uncertain about his lastness, then Bewell is one reader who remains stubbornly skeptical of that man’s apocalyptic tone: “the biological diversity,” he insists, “that caused so much pain and suffering in the colonial world might also hold within it something that will preserve at least some of us somewhere from the coming plague that Shelley prophesies.”<sup>22</sup>

Both Mellor’s and Bewell’s accounts of Lionel’s embrace of the “negro half clad” provide much food for thought; indeed, together they form a kind of preferred understanding of the only black character in *The Last Man*. But the question remains: does Lionel in fact contract the plague from this man? I contend that Shelley’s text does not support such a reading—at least, not without a great deal of interpretive work, which (perhaps owing to its occasion as a critical introduction) Mellor’s essay, for one, does not pursue. The “most troubling moment in the text as a whole” receives only momentary attention in Mellor’s introduction. She quickly folds her comments on the encounter into her larger and quite compelling argument about the dissemination of “possible vision[s]” and multiple timescapes in the novel.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, Bewell treats the appearance of Shelley’s black man in a similarly brief fashion, leaving his thoughts on the matter to punctuate the final paragraph of his otherwise scrupulously patient book chapter on *The Last Man*. Neither he nor Mellor gives sufficient consideration to the contexts of Lionel’s encounter, especially as they concern Lionel’s son, Alfred—a vastly under-read character whose specter looms significantly over Lionel’s experience on the threshold of his family home. Accordingly, I want to take a closer look at some of these contexts while pursuing alternative understandings en-



coded within Lionel's embrace—and rejection—of the black man's body. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to consider the plague's epidemiology in greater detail. For I am not convinced that Lionel's failure to connect the "negro half clad" with his own lapse in health represents anything more than the impossibility of direct infection in the novel's medical imaginary.

#### THE "BAD AIR" OF THE PLAGUE

Since the plague is "not what is commonly called contagious," but "depend[s] upon the air," there is ostensibly no possibility in the novel for direct infection (p. 182). Plug comes close to countering this impossibility by identifying the black man's breath as the vehicle by which he potentially infects Lionel.<sup>24</sup> Lionel does admit to choking on the mortal flavor of the man's breath as it enters his "vitals." If the plague travels on the wind, then could it not be argued that the air passing through the black man's lips and into his lungs becomes infectious upon exhalation? The question raises many intriguing possibilities especially as it appears more-or-less consistent with recent medical theories that account for the role of pathogen-filled droplets in the spread of airborne diseases; however, it fails to explain why this black man—the last and only one of his kind in the novel—is singularly capable of literally breathing the plague on and into his white counterpart. Why are others not similarly contagious? Adrian, we are told, routinely visits sufferers of the plague, "going near, and even touching the sick," yet he remains beyond the reach of infection throughout the novel (p. 203). More to the point, although twenty-first-century readers exhibit little hesitation in accepting Lionel's encounter with the black man as a moment of contagion and/or inoculation, it is important to remember that Shelley would not have shared our culture's understanding of disease transmission.

By all accounts, Shelley was well versed in the medical theories of her day. She would have known, for instance, about Edward Jenner's successful experiments with the smallpox vaccination in 1796 and would therefore have been familiar with practices such as variolation and inoculation. As Anne McWhir points out, however, theories of disease transmission were far from consistent during Shelley's time and remained in controversy until the late nineteenth century. Driving the controversy were debates between contagionists, who insisted that plague was spread through bodily contact, and anticontagionists, who "located the source of disease in a quality of the air itself, often a 'miasma' generated in particular

but remote places and carried on the winds."<sup>25</sup> Largely recognized today for being motivated as much by politics as by medical conjecture, anticontagionism was not only the more dominant of the two theories when Shelley composed and published her novel in the 1820s.<sup>26</sup> It also was considered the more progressive insofar as it began primarily as a reaction to contagionist practices such as quarantine, argued against the closure of trade routes in times of pestilence, and promoted sanitary reform in water and sewage management.<sup>27</sup> Since contagionism would supersede anticontagionism as the dominant theory in the late nineteenth century (due chiefly to the rise of germ theory) and since modern-day medicine recognizes as contagious many of the diseases in question in Shelley's day, it is not surprising that recent criticism finds nothing objectionable in what it supposes is an instance of direct infection in Shelley's novel. McWhir convincingly demonstrates, however, that "Shelley was no contagionist"; her novel articulates "an explicitly anti-contagionist perspective."<sup>28</sup> Evidence of such a perspective can be found not only in the novel's disquieted concern for the wind but also in the many criticisms that Lionel directs at his fellow Londoners. Dismissing his own country's xenophobia in the face of migrating sufferers—a fear that eventually does result in the closure of trade routes—Lionel remarks: "If perchance some stricken Asiatic come among us, plague dies with him, uncommunicated and innoxious" (p. 184). Later in the novel, when greeting a group of Londoners who warn him not to visit a man whom they have left in solitude for fear of contracting the plague themselves, Lionel admonishes these men: "You labour under an entire mistake as to the nature of the plague" (p. 203). For Shelley, and for many of her early-nineteenth-century readers, the novel's plague with its miasmatic etiology would have been considered the result of poor environmental conditions (such as poor sanitation and ventilation), and its modes of transmission would have been thought to resemble those of malaria, a disease whose name quite literally means "bad air."<sup>29</sup>

McWhir does not mention Lionel's encounter with the "negro half clad" in her discussion of the novel's anticontagionism. She therefore circumvents the issue of the man's breath as a vehicle for miasmatic activity. She does observe, however, that while Shelley openly links the spread of the plague in *The Last Man* with the quality of air, she occasionally does use the word "effluvia" to describe the plague's noxious vapors. According to McWhir, "effluvia" can refer to what "are, in effect, the miasma of the living body."<sup>30</sup> McWhir's nineteenth-century authority on this subject

is Alexander Philips Wilson, whose *A Treatise on Febrile Diseases* (1809) has this to say about the miasmatic effluvia of typhus: "It is evident, therefore, that the effluvia of the living body, become putrid by stagnation, are capable of producing this fever."<sup>31</sup> Read too quickly, Wilson's conclusion appears to validate the possibility of direct infection through the breath of another person. But this is not in fact what he is suggesting at all, nor is it a notion that his *Treatise* strictly supports. For Wilson, respiration is essential to the spread of pandemic or plaguelike infections but only inasmuch as a person contracts such a disease by inhaling contaminated air. Referring to the potential sources of effluvious transmission, Wilson points not to the exhaled breath of a given sufferer but specifically to the malignant stench of the sufferer's body—and not just one body but a number of diseased bodies "crowded" together in places such as "hospitals, jails, [and] transport ships."<sup>32</sup> It is, in other words, an atmosphere of stagnation in which diseased bodies are subject to putridity that eventually renders the air infectious to those who would visit the sick in such places.

Lionel's entire home, for instance, arguably could be contaminated by the stagnant air of the plague. To be certain, the black man is not the only plague victim in the home, and he is not the only sufferer with whom Lionel has contact while he is there. Lionel's son also contracts and perishes from the disease, just as Lionel himself falls ill after visiting the building. The presence of multiple victims in the home suggests that it is not the case that a single sufferer is breathing immediately toxic exhalations onto and thus infecting people—an idea, incidentally, that Lionel himself dismisses as being based purely in "vulgar superstition" (p. 204). More likely, it is the case that plague is in the air, that the home (not unlike the many other homes throughout an "unpeopled London" already visited by the plague) accommodates the stagnant conditions conducive to the spread of disease (p. 266). The individual sufferer may indeed contribute to the increasing presence of stagnating effluvia in the air, but he or she is not the singular cause of contagion.<sup>33</sup> Lionel already shows discernible signs of disorderliness before stumbling upon and wrestling with the black man. He first suspects the possibility of being infected much earlier in the novel when leaving the hut of a man already killed by pestilence (p. 204). How else to explain why a man, desperate to reach the chamber "usually inhabited" by his own family, would throw open "the door of the first room that presented itself"? Unsettled by the news of his son's failing

health, Lionel is already dis-eased—acting and reacting, as he says, “without reflection.”

The fact remains that Lionel will never know how he becomes ill—or whether his illness is strictly plague related or not. For the plague ultimately remains a mystery to him. As one critic writes, Lionel “can only iterate *that* it [the plague] was, not expound why it was.”<sup>34</sup> Still, to dismiss entirely Lionel’s many testimonies to the plague’s noncommunicative epidemiology is to overlook the novel’s indebtedness to Shelley’s anticontagionism, perhaps the one body of knowledge that enabled her to recognize the apocalyptic potential of a noncontagious disease. In order to invent a pestilence powerful enough to annihilate the human race, Shelley had to ensure that her plague remained as invincible as it would be indiscriminant of its victims, a prerequisite that may well exclude all diseases thought to be contagious. Contagious diseases can be treated, contained, and controlled through various preventative measures such as quarantine and self-insulation. This explains why Shelley differentiates the plague’s mode of transmission from diseases such as smallpox and scarlet fever—diseases for which inoculation and containment were distinct possibilities (p. 182).<sup>35</sup> A noncontagious disease, however, especially one that visits all parts of the globe and for which there exists no cure, is devastatingly democratic in its destruction. Everyone (our robust narrator notwithstanding) is subject to the same fate. Ryland is one character in *The Last Man* who knows this only too well. Believing that the plague’s presence in London leaves “[e]very man for himself,” he attempts to isolate himself from the plague and its sufferers but succeeds only in securing for himself a lonely death (p. 192). The invention of an anticontagionist narrative, Shelley’s plague is inescapable.

#### FAMILY TIES: THE “RELATIVE” CONTEXT OF LIONEL’S TROUBLING EMBRACE

While the anticontagionist reading of *The Last Man* challenges the idea that Lionel is directly infected by the “negro half clad,” it cannot deny the racial significance of Lionel’s recollection of this man. Lionel clearly is unsettled by his encounter with the man who lies dying before him and perhaps more so by his treatment of this man. Repudiation and abject abandonment are, after all, actions of which a person is rarely proud. According to Lokke, Lionel’s discomfort in the arms of a dying black man is symptomatic of “the power struggles between Europe and its non-European Others.”<sup>36</sup>

I would argue, however, that it is less productive to couch these cross-cultural struggles within a metaphor of inoculation that is inconsistent with the plague's epidemiology than it is to plot them along an axis of what we might call relative compassion. Most readers who comment on Lionel's encounter with the black man simply ignore the familial drama that provides the larger context of the scene. Lionel rejects the black man's embrace primarily to resume his impassioned search for his "eldest darling," Alfred. Concern for the well-being of the son—the paradigmatic symbol of racial and national futurity and prosperity—renders Lionel incapable of compassion for the other. He experiences a lapse in precisely the kind of sympathy toward sufferers of which he routinely preaches to others in his community. If the plague tears down social hierarchies, forcing English society to reemerge as "a community of shared risk," then Lionel's encounter with the black man illustrates how an allegiance to blood relations ultimately survives this otherwise deconstructive gesture of the plague.<sup>37</sup> A figural manifestation of the plague's all-encompassing reach, the black man's embrace on the threshold of the Verney family home impedes Lionel's desire to attend to his son and thus represents a threat to family unity. Indeed, Lionel believes that had he been able to nurse his child—the way his wife Idris, whom he calls "the talisman of [his] existence," nurses him when he himself falls ill—Alfred may have recovered after all (p. 48). Existing in opposition to the family circle (obstructing Lionel's access to it), the black man is therefore cast aside and left to die. It is for this reason that I object to Mellor's and Bewell's celebration of the hope inspired by Lionel's "unwilling but powerful embrace of the racial other"—an embrace, lest we forget, that ends not with understanding but with an aggressive and brutal rejection of the black man's body: "I . . . threw the wretch from me," writes Lionel. The scene attests to the limits of Lionel's compassion. The black man is simply too foreign for Lionel to return the embrace. He will not even return to the man's aid after learning of his son's demise. If men are to walk "unarmed and hand in hand" as they greet the onslaughts of the plague, then Lionel's rejection of the black man challenges the hypocrisy of this newfound postapocalyptic ideology (p. 236). Compassion for others ultimately remains relative—conditioned, at least in part, by familial and racial identification.

Lionel is so unsettled by his memory of the encounter that his narrative wastes no time in immediately repressing the event. He will not return to, reflect on, or recollect the incident at any other moment either before or after its brief appearance in the text. The

most detailed account of the plague's ravages of the body passes utterly devoid of commentary. Instead of measuring the potential psychical impact of the encounter, Lionel hastily transfers his narrative focus from the dying black man to the failing health of his son—thus, in a sense, rejecting the black man once more. As if to make emphatic the speed with which he rejects the black man's convulsive grasp, Lionel will not even pause to open a new paragraph before shifting scenes: "A dim light shewed me Alfred on a couch; Clara trembling, and paler than whitest snow, had raised him on her arm, holding a cup of water to his lips. I saw full well that no spark of life existed in that ruined form, his features were rigid, his eyes glazed, his head had fallen back. I took him from her, I laid him softly down, kissed his cold little mouth, and turned to speak in a vain whisper, when loudest sound of thunderlike cannon could not have reached him in his immaterial abode" (pp. 265–6). Apart from its immediate proximity to the passage concerning Lionel's suffering black man, the most striking aspect of this passage is that it exhibits an intense physicality of its own. Not unlike his description of the "negro half clad," Lionel's account of his son's corpse slides along a kind of bodily metonymy, a catalog of trembling limbs and sickly features that culminates in a vital encounter with the sufferer's oral cavity. If the black man pollutes Lionel's "vitals" with his "death-laden" breath, then Lionel would no doubt have liked to breathe vitality back into Alfred's lifeless body as he kissed "his cold little mouth." Were we stubbornly to insist that Lionel is directly infected with the plague somewhere within this single, highly condensed paragraph, then who can say for sure whether the infection passes from the mouth of the black man writhing at the doorstep of the Verney family abode or from the cold and lifeless lips of the familial cadaver? Lionel does not simply wrestle with the black man, become sick, and then recover, as most readings of the scene insinuate. This moment in which Lionel confronts the first death in the family disrupts this sequence in a significant and tragic way.

Preventing Lionel from attending to this family crisis, the black man is putatively unfamiliar, a stranger in another man's land. To borrow a frame from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he plays Mariner to Lionel's Wedding Guest—only, unlike the Mariner, Shelley's "negro" is denied the chance to unburden himself of his miserable tale of suffering.<sup>38</sup> Choosing familial duty over an obligation to address the other's suffering, Lionel essentially reverses the Wedding Guest's act of kindness. He recognizes the plague for what it perhaps always has represented, a family crisis. To para-

phrase Mellor's earlier, autobiographical analysis of *The Last Man*, Shelley's third published novel is essentially a family drama and as such dramatizes the forcible exclusion of all those outside the family circle. Lionel is the first to admit that the more pestilence spreads the more his thoughts turn to "secur[ing] the health of [his] own family" (p. 204). Is it any wonder that the final three survivors in *The Last Man*—whom Lionel affectionately refers to as "a simple triad on empty earth"—are himself, his daughter Clara, and his wife's brother Adrian (p. 342)? The novel's final image of society is a family portrait in which the family braces itself against the all-embracing otherness that is the plague. Amounting to a betrayal of the ideals of his mentor Adrian, who zealously urges his fellow countrymen to "remain; and do our best to help our suffering fellow-creatures," Lionel's rejection of the black man's body marks in a deconstructive way the ideological limits and defensive strictures of a family survival story in which foreign bodies and foreign infections increasingly merge to form a single image of abject terror (p. 191).

DREAMING OF CONSTANTINOPLE;  
OR, HOW LIONEL SHOULD HAVE BEEN INFECTED

I have said that there appears to be no rhyme or reason to Lionel's enduring fortitude. For the remainder of this paper, I would like briefly to suspend this assertion in order to offer an alternate (albeit equally speculative) explanation of Lionel's resilience that is more or less consistent with the novel's own account of the plague as a noncommunicative contagion. By the time Lionel encounters the "negro half clad," he has already at least once come into close contact with the plague and survived. I refer to his visit to the diseased and flame-scorched city of Constantinople (or Stamboul, as he alternatively calls it), during which he suffers and recovers from a considerable lapse in health. Lionel's recollection of this experience does more than initiate a kind of pattern of recovery with respect to his physical health: it also marks, for the first time, the curious relationship between disease and despair in the novel. Dispirited by the Greek army's refusal to follow Raymond into the defeated city of Stamboul for fear of "some Mighty Phantom," Lionel marches through the city's gates, "hurried on by an irresistible impulse" to find his friend (pp. 156, 157). Scanning the city's "defaced human forms" for signs of Raymond's whereabouts, Lionel feels his "heart sicken within" him (p. 157). The city's "pestilential air" hangs oppres-

sively upon him as he struggles to remain lucid and conscious (p. 151). Distorted and malformed visions plague his comprehension: “the piles around me took gigantic proportions and weird shapes” (p. 157). Like the encircling arms of the “negro half-clad,” these visions engulf Lionel as he “yield[s] to the creative power of the imagination . . . soothed by the sublime fictions it present[s] to [him]” (p. 157). For a brief moment, the vigorous “beatings” of his “human heart” bring him “back to blank reality,” but he is once more subdued by a “solitude” that “despress[es] [his] spirits” (pp. 157, 158). “Over-wearied” and “deserted” by “hope,” his “strength fail[s],” leaving him with “palsied . . . limbs” (p. 158). He loses consciousness and is again plagued by “disturbed dreams” as he slumbers through a “night of despair” (p. 158). The one dream he does remember is of particular interest:

Methought I had been invited to Timon’s last feast; I came with keen appetite, the covers were removed, the hot water sent up its unsatisfying steams, while I fled before the anger of the host, who assumed the form of Raymond; while to my diseased fancy, the vessels hurled by him after me, were surcharged with fetid vapour, and my friend’s shape, altered by a thousand distortions, expanded into a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence. The growing shadow rose and rose, filling, and then seeming to endeavour to burst beyond, the adamant vault that bent over, sustaining and enclosing the world. The nightmare became torture; with a strong effort I threw off sleep, and recalled reason to her wonted functions.

(p. 158)

Commander of the Greek uprising for independence and conqueror of Constantinople, Raymond assumes a monstrous form in Lionel’s dream, hurling upon the dreamer the spoils of victory and conquest, the fetid vapors of which rise like an insatiable spirit of destruction, polluting the entire atmospheric vault of the world. This nightmarish image of global contamination recalls not only Sterrenburg’s suspicion that the plague represents Shelley’s powerful critique of the destructive consequences of the revolutionary politics of her parents’ generation but also Paul A. Cantor’s argument that the plague’s westward advance toward England resembles a kind of reverse colonialism.<sup>39</sup>

But more than just a sign of Shelley’s dissatisfaction over political and national ideologies, the plague is also an invention



of despair. Critics often remind us that Shelley thought of herself as a last man of sorts, having experienced in the years prior to the publication of *The Last Man* the abandonment of her father, the death of three of her children, and the drowning death of her husband.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, despair is encoded in both the cause and the effects of infection in *The Last Man*: it is the plague's most effective vehicle of transmission and among its most telling symptoms. This pathogenic infusion of the psychospiritual and the physical has both merit and precedence in early-nineteenth-century medical theory. As McWhir observes, many anticontagionists believed that, in addition to poor "atmospheric conditions," "a certain susceptibility in the victim" was often necessary for infection.<sup>41</sup> For McWhir, this hypothesis explains Raymond's psychosomatic contraction of the plague: "cursed by his former lover, Evadne, [Raymond] believes that he is already infected."<sup>42</sup> I would amend McWhir's diagnosis only slightly. Raymond does not think he is already infected so much as he believes in the inevitable realization of Evadne's curse: "She has said nothing but what I knew before," he tells Lionel, "Fire, the sword, and plague! They may all be found in yonder city; on my head alone may they fall!" (p. 145). In other words, what Raymond contracts upon hearing the news of Evadne's death is not the plague but an incurable sadness that regrettably steers him toward the self-fulfillment of Evadne's prophecy-curse. "From this day," Lionel writes, "Raymond's melancholy increased. He secluded himself as much as the duties of his station permitted . . . and he sat absent and mute among the busy crowd that thronged about him" (p. 145). The effect of a diseased psyche, Raymond's growing melancholia not only consumes his vivacity and liveliness of spirit but also prepares him for the plague insofar as he becomes increasingly determined to die in Constantinople. Entering the city "[w]ith an air of absence," "gloomy and perturbed," Raymond resigns himself—becomes susceptible—to his diseased fate (pp. 155, 152).

Although Lionel initially surrenders to a "night of despair" after following Raymond into the city, unlike his friend, he is able to overcome his melancholia. Throwing off sleep with "strong effort," Lionel recovers from his "diseased fancy," his "disturbed dreams," only to recall reason "to her wonted functions." Owing perhaps to the "humaniz[ing]" influence of Adrian, who teaches Lionel at an early age to "subdue" his "reckless and uncultured spirit" by way of a rational-moral intellectualism, Lionel effectively resists the toxic vapors of both his waking and his dreaming lives and

in the process becomes Shelley's champion of hope in the face of immanent disaster (p. 24). In this regard, Lionel is equally indebted to another of Shelley's unfortunate yet remarkably resilient characters, Euthanasia of *Valperga* (1823), who not only shares Lionel's fate of dying alone but also develops what William D. Brewer calls a "psychological strategy for dealing with tragic reality."<sup>43</sup> When the "wildness of grief" leaves her feeling "as if she had sunk into the bowels of the earth," Euthanasia likewise turns from hopelessness to reason: "her imagination furled its wings, and the owlet, reason, was the only dweller that found sustenance and being in her benighted soul."<sup>44</sup> If Lionel's experience in Constantinople does not cure him entirely of disease, then it will at least equip him with the physical and psychical fortitude on which he will draw when later recovering from the plague. It is hardly coincidental that when Lionel finally does contract the disease, the first signs of infection emerge only moments after he leaves the lifeless body of his son and anxiously turns his thoughts to the uncertain whereabouts of his wife: "My child lay dead at home; the seeds of mortal disease had taken root in my bosom; I went to seek Idris" (p. 266). The tragic loss of a son, the dreadful knowledge that Idris last was heard to be wandering desperately through the plague-stricken streets of London, are misfortunes distressing enough to weaken Lionel's immune system long enough for the plague to launch its brutal assault on his body.

Indeed, contracting the plague only aggravates Lionel's despair. Riding through the dark and rainy streets of London in search of his wife, Lionel laments, "Idris must die, for her heart was broken: I must die, for I had caught *the plague*; earth was a scene of desolation; hope was madness; life had married death" (p. 266). But even as he grows increasingly delirious under the plague's powerful spell, Lionel's body and mind will not forget the lessons of Constantinople. Hope is restored to him as Idris, the "talisman of [his] existence," returns from the storm. Despite his premonition concerning her eventual demise, Lionel attempts to immunize their future from despair: "no future misery can deprive us of the past," he assures her, "[in which] we have been happy together" (p. 267). Faced with the prospect of further devastation and loss, in other words, Lionel clings stubbornly to a belief that Shelley will likewise preserve in *Falkner: A Novel* (1837), her last full-length fictional text: "It is a singular law of human life, that the past, which apparently no longer forms a portion of our existence, never dies."<sup>45</sup> Recognizing in Idris's "society" his "only

medicine,” Lionel overcomes his despondency and returns to health as the first and only person to survive the plague (p. 269). Upon recovery, Lionel takes stock of his senses only to find that “the cheerful current of [his] blood” and “the newborn elasticity of [his] limbs, influence[d] [his] mind to cheerful endurance and pleasurable thoughts” (p. 271). “Hope, among my other blessings,” he continues, “was not denied to me” (p. 271). For Lionel, a return to health and a victory over despair occur simultaneously, even interdependently. With renewed hope comes renewed vigor: “I was therefore eager to forward our preparations,” he writes, explaining how convalescence has restored his faith in Adrian’s original plan to quit London and seek paradise on earth (p. 271).

Needless to say, paradise will not be regained in *The Last Man*, and Lionel will continue to struggle with feelings of dejection long after his recovery from the plague. For his despair never leaves him entirely. Rather, Lionel incorporates his despair, transforming it from a dis-ease of the mind into a kind of antibody that allows him to live with and confront the devastation and loneliness of his tragic fate. Unlike many characters in the novel, Lionel learns to process and manage his despair without falling victim to its debilitating effects.<sup>46</sup> He discovers how “renewed hopes medicined the anguish” (p. 257). At the end of human history, Lionel is not simply the last man standing; he stands also as a paragon of Romantic well-being, a figure whose psychical fortitude sustains and produces an enduring synthesis between contrary mental states—between hope and despair—which in turn embodies for the subject the spectral image of good health. Such is the complexity of Lionel’s concluding remarks with respect to his unnarrated sea voyage along “the beauteous shores and sunny promontories of the blue Mediterranean” (p. 366). On the one hand, he anticipates for this journey the bleakest of prospects: “I form no expectation of alteration for the better; but the monotonous present is intolerable to me. Neither hope nor joy are my pilots—restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on” (p. 367). On the other hand, Lionel holds firmly to what he calls “wild dreams” that “have ruled my imagination” since “they came on me,” dreams that despite all evidence to the contrary, he may find what he desires most of all, “a companion” (pp. 367, 361). Lionel leaves us, in other words, with a patently conflicted Romantic symbol of a world yet to come, the possibility of which he senses throughout his narrative, particularly when he envisions the existence of readers in a world without other humans. “[O]h reader,” he occasionally laments, “whoever

thou art, wherever thou dwellest, whether of race spiritual, or, sprung from some surviving pair, thy nature will be human, thy habitation the earth" (p. 312). The conflicted nature of this lament (imagining the reader as possibly ethereal and elsewhere but nevertheless humanly grounded on *terra firma*) reveals what I would call a kind of hopeful despair—an ability to live with the unsettling knowledge that life, in whichever forms it may take, will inherit the earth and continue to flourish in spite of humanity's untimely demise.

Perhaps this is how Shelley, believing herself to be the last of her kind, viewed her own future. As she writes in a frequently cited journal entry, "The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me."<sup>47</sup> As a *roman à clef*, at least in part, *The Last Man* may well have had a therapeutic value for its author, enabling her, like some kind of Freudian talking cure, to work through her own despair, to understand her own feelings of loss and abandonment in the years immediately preceding her composition of the novel.<sup>48</sup> In this light, Shelley's attempt to narrativize her tragic past finds its literary expression in the fictional introduction to *The Last Man*, in which the narrator explains how she reassembles, translates, and edits Lionel's catastrophic tale from the "[s]cattered and unconnected" leaves that she and her companion discover while visiting the cave of the Sibyl in the winter of 1818 (p. 4).<sup>49</sup> But Shelley is not alone in her resemblance to the text's fictional introductory narrator. That narrator's account of her own editorial influence over Lionel's narrative likewise dramatizes Shelley's readership's need to decipher unexplained and/or inconsistent aspects of Lionel's tale—the need, for instance, to piece together (or to diagnose) the meanings and conditions that surround not only the mystery of Lionel's immunity but also his unsettling encounter with the "negro half clad." Mellor reminds us that *The Last Man* is not about certainties but about possibilities, and in her own humble way, Shelley's introductory narrator confirms this sentiment as she apologizes for the "imperfect powers" by which she has reassembled the text and which have left Lionel's tale only partial and incomplete (p. 5).<sup>50</sup> In the spirit of such modesty, then, we should resist a certain interpretive hastiness with respect to the epidemiological relationship between Lionel and the "negro half clad" and instead continue to reopen the scene of their encounter and explore new possibilities encoded in the exchange. It is my hope that this paper has contributed to that enterprise by chal-

lenging a preferred reading of the novel's only black character and by offering an alternative explanation for Lionel's capacity to withstand the plague.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the abounding proliferation of "last man" texts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Morton D. Paley maintains that by the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's contribution in 1826 "the subject of the Last Man had come to seem not apocalyptic but ridiculous" ("*The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millennium*," in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor [New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993], pp. 107–23, 107). Given the threat of the cholera outbreak in the early nineteenth century, however, one wonders just how "ridiculous" the theme of lastness would have appeared to the bulk of Shelley's readers.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Lance Snyder, "Apocalypse and Indeterminacy in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," *SIR* 17, 4 (Fall 1978): 435–52, 436–7.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Plug, *Borders of a Lip: Romanticism, Language, History, Politics* (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 2003), p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> Plug, p. 160; Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Anne McWhir (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 265. All subsequent citations to *The Last Man* are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text and notes by page number.

<sup>5</sup> Plug, p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Snyder, p. 444.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), p. 313.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, p. 444.

<sup>9</sup> As Paul A. Cantor points out, there is clearly a "racial dimension" to Shelley's characterization of the plague ("The Apocalypse of Empire: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," in *Iconoclastic Departures: Mary Shelley after Frankenstein: Essays in Honor of the Bicentenary of Mary Shelley's Birth*, ed. Syndy M. Conger, Frederick S. Frank, and Gregory O'Dea [Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press; London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1997], pp. 193–211, 197). Cantor bases this assertion on Lionel's description of the plague as "a native of the East" that "drinks the dark blood of the inhabitant of the south, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt" (p. 184).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Criticism: Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan and William Anderson, 3d edn. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 515–34, 518.

<sup>11</sup> Snyder, p. 444.

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, pp. 444, 445.

<sup>13</sup> Snyder, p. 444.

<sup>14</sup> Kari E. Lokke, "*The Last Man*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther H. Schor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 116–34, 125.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Richardson, "The Last Man and the Plague of Empire," *Romantic Circles MOO Conference: September 13, 1997*, ed. Neil Fraistat, Steven E. Jones, and Carl Stahmer, par. 4, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/villa/vc97/richardson.html> (17 July 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Hutchings, "'A Dark Image in a Phantasmagoria': Pastoral Idealism, Prophecy, and Materiality in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," *Romanticism* 10, 2 (2004): 228–44, 239.

<sup>17</sup> Anne K. Mellor, "Response to 'The Last Man and the New History' (Greg Kucich)," *Romantic Circles MOO Conference: September 13, 1997*, ed. Fraistat, Jones, and Stahmer, par. 2 (17 July 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Mellor, "Introduction," in *The Last Man*, by Shelley, ed. Hugh J. Luke (Lincoln NE and London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. vii–xxiv, xxiv.

<sup>19</sup> Bewell, pp. 333n4, 313.

<sup>20</sup> Bewell, p. 314.

<sup>21</sup> For discussions on the role of the absent reader in *The Last Man*, see especially Lee Sterrenburg, "The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions," *NCF* 33, 3 (December 1978): 324–47, 342; O'Dea, "Prophetic History and Textuality in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," *PLL* 28, 3 (Summer 1992): 283–304, 301; and Plug, pp. 164–8.

<sup>22</sup> Bewell, p. 314.

<sup>23</sup> Mellor, "Introduction," p. xxiv.

<sup>24</sup> Plug, p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> McWhir, "Mary Shelley's Anti-Contagionism: *The Last Man* as 'Fatal Narrative,'" *Mosaic* 35, 2 (June 2002): 23–38, 23.

<sup>26</sup> E. H. Ackerknecht, "Anticontagionism between 1821 and 1867," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 22 (September–October 1948): 562–93, 567.

<sup>27</sup> See Krista Maglen, "A World Apart: Geography, Australian Quarantine, and the Mother Country," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 60, 2 (April 2005): 196–217, 202; and E. A. Heaman, "The Rise and Fall of Anticontagionism in France," *Canadian Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 12 (1995): 3–25, 4.

<sup>28</sup> McWhir, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Scientists have since proven that malaria is caused by protozoan parasites and spread by female mosquitoes; however, for Shelley and her readers, malaria was thought to be caused by breathing in the miasma or "bad air" emanating from swamps. Cholera, although now understood to be caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*, was also thought by many to result from the miasmata of similarly stagnant places and was therefore thought to be noncontagious. Many critics have argued that Shelley's plague was a response to, and was largely patterned on, the westward advance of cholera in the 1820s.

<sup>30</sup> McWhir, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Philips Wilson, *A Treatise on Febrile Diseases, Including Intermitting, Remitting, and Continued Fevers; Eruptive Fevers; Inflammations; Hemorrhagies; and the Profluvia; in which an Attempt is Made to Present, at One View, Whatever, in the Present State of Medicine, it is Requisite for the Physician to Know, Respecting the Symptoms, Causes, and Cure of those Diseases; with Experimental Essays on Certain Febrile Symptoms, on the Nature of Inflammation, and on the Manner on which Opium and Tobacco Act on the Living Animal Body*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Oliver D. Cooke, 1809), 1:175.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> This belief is corroborated by the intertext to which Shelley alludes in her description of Lionel's encounter with the "negro half clad," namely, Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: D. McKay, 1887). When Mervyn mounts a staircase and encounters the door to a room behind which he believes "those within were dead," he is abruptly "assailed" by an "infectious and deadly" vapor (1:145, 144). Mervyn is consequently infected—"[s]ome fatal influence appeared to seize upon my vitals," he writes—by the stagnant, effluvious air in the stairway even before he enters the room (1:144).

<sup>34</sup> Snyder, p. 445.

<sup>35</sup> Fisch comes close to articulating an anticontagionist perspective when she identifies the defining characteristic of a "plague" as being less a matter of specific germs than it is a matter of "a society's inability to handle those germs" ("Plaguering Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*," in *The Other Mary Shelley*, pp. 267–86, 270). For an anticontagionist such as Shelley, contagious, but nevertheless containable, diseases such as scarlet fever and smallpox would not have fallen necessarily under the category of "plague." Indeed, Lionel tells us that the plague's noncontagious nature (as opposed to "the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox") is, in large measure, why "[i]t was called an epidemic" (p. 182). As McWhir notes, even the contagious nature of diseases such as scarlet fever and smallpox "remained controversial" in Shelley's time (p. 23).

<sup>36</sup> Lokke, p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> Mark Canuel, "Acts, Rules, and *The Last Man*," *NCF* 53, 2 (September 1998): 147–70, 162.

<sup>38</sup> See Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in *Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 186–209.

<sup>39</sup> See Sterrenburg, p. 328; and Cantor, p. 198.

<sup>40</sup> For detailed analyses of *The Last Man*'s autobiographical elements, especially as they relate to the death of Shelley's husband, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 13; Lokke, p. 117; and Sterrenburg, pp. 327–8.

<sup>41</sup> McWhir, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> McWhir, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> William D. Brewer, "Mary Shelley's *Valperga*: The Triumph of Euthanasia's Mind," *ERR* 5, 2 (December 1995): 133–48, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Shelley, *Valperga: or, The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. Tilotama Rajan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1998), pp. 277, 279.

<sup>45</sup> Shelley, *Falkner: A Novel*, vol. 7 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Nora Crook and Pamela Clemit, 8 vols. (London: William Pickering and Chatto, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> A brief survey of the other major characters reveals the extent to which despair shapes their deaths: Raymond, as we have seen, resigns himself to death in the final throes of his melancholy; Perdita, unable properly to mourn the death of Raymond, throws herself off of a boat and drowns; Ryland, fearing that he will become a "plague-spotted corpse" (p. 192), dies miserable and alone in his attempt to insulate himself from the plague; and

Idris, heartbroken, contracts the plague and dies shortly after the death of her son. The only other major character whose death is not precipitated by despair is Adrian. His unrequited love for Evadne seems to have inoculated him from despair long before the plague becomes an issue for English society. The last man actually to die in the novel, Adrian falls victim not to the plague but to drowning alongside Lionel's daughter off the coast of Italy—an unfortunate but necessary side effect of playing the role of Percy in Mary's conspicuously wrought *roman à clef*.

<sup>47</sup> Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844*, 2 vols., ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 2:476–7.

<sup>48</sup> For an engaging Kristevan reading of “maternal bereavement and mourning” in *The Last Man*, see Constance Walker, “*Kindertotenlieder*: Mary Shelley and the Art of Losing,” in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 134–46, 135. Walker comes to a similar conclusion about Lionel's acquired ability to live with despair: “the novel's final chapter tells a story not simply of despair but of survival, of the art of losing: Verney's attempts to find solace and rebuild the semblance of a life . . . are analogous to what may have been Mary Shelley's own attempts at reconstructing her internal world” (p. 145).

<sup>49</sup> Shelley refrains from allotting gender to the narrator of the fictional introduction. There is nevertheless good reason to follow convention and simply refer to this narrator in the feminine; in her *Journals*, Shelley admits to having visited Naples and the shores of Baiae (now Baia) with her husband in the same year as the narrator in question (1:252).

<sup>50</sup> See Mellor, “Introduction,” p. xxiv.