

Flowers in Decay:  
Botanical Women in Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*

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## **Abstract for Masters**

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In the study that follows, I argue that Mary Shelley enters into the lively debates on botany and female sexuality which were prominent in her literary and cultural milieu through her engagement with what I call the 'botanical woman' figure in her novels *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*. Following suit from the botanical texts of authors such as Carl Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin, and especially Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley interrogates questions about female sexuality, the role and education of women in society, and marriage through the depiction of women as sexualized plants and their relationships with men. Through these botanical women, I suggest that Mary Shelley shows how women, when rendered flowers subject to male desire, fail to cultivate their rational minds or to reach their full potential. While men are educated and cultivated to grow their minds, write books, lead leagues of men in politics, women are reared to be decorative or ornamental to men's lives, playing the role of wife or mother. *Mathilda* dies purposeless, a failed wife, mother, and author, her rational potential wasted. Shelley shows that even for those exceptional few, like *Perdita*, whose minds and political talents find a way to grow despite all obstacle, the patriarchal system would find a way to diminish them to the same fates as women like *Idris* whose only ambitions are to be wives or mothers; to die, like flowers in decay.

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## **Dedication**

To the flowers that grow from concrete.

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## Introduction

In Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*, Perdita is described as being like a "fruitful soil ... new sown with unseen seed" (13) and as a "violet" (40). Describing her through botanical language, or as a "fruitful soil" ripe for 'new seed', calls to her femininity or sexuality as being intrinsically linked to her aesthetic value (the idea that she is beautiful like a flower) and her fertility and potential to reproduce. Later in the novel, Perdita discovers that her husband Raymond is courting another woman, and in her melancholy over this situation, Perdita addresses a speech to her vase of flowers. Shelley writes that Perdita "gazed on some flowers that stood near in a carved vase" and "she exclaimed: 'Ye droop not, neither do ye mourn; the despair that clasps my heart, has not spread contagion over you! – Why am I not a partner of your insensibility, a sharer in your calm!'" (102). Perdita recognizes that she is not in fact like a flower, as the flower and her do not share the same sensibility. Shelley seems to comment, through Perdita, on how women are often rendered flowers such that they may be eroticized objects of beauty subject to male desire. Idris, an idealized mother figure, is similarly rendered in botanical language, as she is described as a "lily" (257) whose children are "young and blooming" (252). Shelley's earlier and understudied novel *Mathilda* is also ripe with botanical imagery, as Mathilda refers to herself as a "decaying flower" (58) and a "bad seed" (90). In both novels, these female characters are often referred to as flowers, or other botanical language is used to describe their bodies, sexualities, and fertilities.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, women writers participated in ongoing debates about female sexuality which stemmed largely from the feminization of botany and male writers representing women as botanical plants. Anahid Nersessian, for example, notes the growing attention to botany in Romantic ecocritical studies, and cites the importance of Theresa

Kelley's book *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture*. Kelley's text, as well as Sam George's *Botany, Sexuality, & Women's Writing 1760-1830: From Modest Shoot to Forward Plant*, are the main book projects which consider the intersections of botany and female sexuality in the literature of the period. Alan Bewell's *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History* also takes botany as one of its core subjects, and while the main focus of his argument is how exchanges of botanical objects coincided with colonial trade networks, he offers some attention to how gendered power dynamics figure in these systems. Bewell argues that the colonial period saw a mobilization of not just peoples and cultures, but their natures as well. He says that "[n]atures were not only being renamed but also being remade, transformed, and translated into something else" (16). Bewell claims that "[n]atural history was decidedly a textual activity" (35), as natures were being translated into print in the Romantic period. Sam George similarly traces how Carl Linnaeus' discovery of plant sexuality was taken up in English print culture in the period. Botany was traditionally a male science, but Rousseau's botanical writings were being translated and published for an English reading audience, a project largely addressed to female readers. This contributed significantly to the feminization of botany. Women gained access to botanical knowledge, and women increasingly engaged in botanical and horticultural activity, as a growing number of botanical literatures were read, written, and published by women (George 1-15). George claims that "botany becomes a discourse of female sexuality" (George 2) in the literature of this period. Linnaeus' botanical system of classification, termed the 'Sexual System', was "based on the male and female parts of the flower" (George 1), and "focused attention on the organs of generation" (George 1). George emphasizes that "Linnaeus famously made use of human-plant analogies" (George 1) and that "his nomenclature was inspired by traditional wedding imagery and marriage metaphors permeate his botanical taxonomy in *Systema*



Naturae” (George 1). The male and female parts of the flower, the stamens and the pistils, were described as ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’ (George 2). George claims that “It is this imagery of nuptials, spouses, and marriages which captured the public imagination in the mid to late eighteenth century and caused botany to be caught up in debates about sexuality and propriety” (2). George argues that Mary Wollstonecraft, a crucial figure in these debates, uses botanical imagery ironically in her writings to critique the way in which women, when described as or cultivated to be like beautiful flowers, valued for their aesthetic rather than their intellect, fail to cultivate their rational minds, and as such eventually ‘decay’ as they are rendered useless should they not fulfill the roles of wife or mother (George 22-35).

Women writers in the Romantic period who entered into this discourse on botany and female sexuality were often responding to male writers, especially Erasmus Darwin’s, representations of “women as botanical subjects” (Kelley 90), or ‘botanical women’. The sexual politics of botany in Erasmus Darwin’s popular poem *The Loves of the Plants*, a poem inspired by the Linnaean system, has been the subject of much critical attention. Janet Browne, Tim Fulford, Frederika J. Teute, Alan Bewell, Tristanne Connolly and others have considered the gendered power dynamics of male and female plants in the poem. Connolly’s recent article, for example, offers a particularly nuanced account of how gender roles are operating in the text, as she claims that while there are passive eroticized female plants subject to male desire, and “cruel vegetable husbands and vulnerable wives” (15), there are also “powerful masculine ladies and subservient males” (15) that appear in the *Loves*. She says that “Darwin was well aware of the erotic charge of power dynamics, and certainly the seductive force of the submissive” (15). She notes too that Darwin’s poem appealed to women, as the poem was addressed to a female reading audience as he asks the reader to “‘contemplate’ the verses ‘as diverse little pictures suspended over the

chimney of a Lady's dressing room" (Darwin x, qt. Connolly 2).<sup>1</sup> Kelley and George's recent works enter into these conversations by suggesting that Erasmus Darwin's poem *The Loves* was central to debates about botany and female sexuality, as his erotic poem represented women (and men) as botanical plants in the garden (George 2, 81-138; Kelley 52-89). They examine how several female authors in the period were fascinated by Darwin's poetic representation of female plant sexuality, and responded to Darwin's poem and its gender and sexual politics in their own work (George 81-138; Kelley 52-89).

While Sam George and Theresa Kelley consider how important women authors such as Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Mary Wollstonecraft enter into the botanical discourses of their day, neither consider Mary Shelley's engagement with botany in her work. Some critical attention has been given elsewhere to Mary Shelley's engagement with botany in *Frankenstein*. Carlos Seligo, for example, considers how the creature in Shelley's *Frankenstein* represents 'botanical monsters', or a critique of the Linnaean concept of plant reproduction without the presence of a female. Alan Bewell too argues that Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein* represents a "biological monster" (337), a new and alien species which has been introduced by Victor. Bewell claims that Mary Shelley both draws on Erasmus Darwin's theory of "sexual reproduction" (332) in nature and anticipates aspects of Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory on the "origin and extinction of a species" (327).<sup>2</sup> Bewell also briefly addresses *The Last Man* as he claims that Shelley in a sense re-writes *Frankenstein* to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> Bewell adds that "Since Linnaean botanical classification was organized around the study of a plant's reproductive parts, Darwin's emphasis on the gender and sexuality of these plants was in keeping with the concerns of contemporary scientists even as it allowed him to appeal to an audience interested in the sexuality of plants (and their human counterparts)" (79).

<sup>2</sup> Anne K. Mellor notes too that "Mary Shelley was introduced to Darwin's thought by her father and again by her husband, who had been heavily influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theories while writing *Queen Mab*[, and that] Percy Shelley first read the *Botanic Garden* in July 1811" (99). It is likely then that Mary Shelley was aware of and was influenced by Darwin's *Botanic Garden* poem.

further on how human beings might be extinguished by the introduction of a new nature, in this case a virus. However, there is no extensive consideration of Mary Shelley's female characters in relation to botany. By tracing how Mary Shelley engages with the 'botanical woman' figure in her novels, we can learn how she contributed to this lively discourse on botany and female sexuality present in her literary and cultural milieu, and come to understand her unique position in it.

As I use the term 'botanical woman', I draw primarily upon Kelley's attention to "women as botanical subjects" (90). Kelley focuses mainly on the image of the 'flower woman', or women as flowers, which I consider to be central to my understanding of the term 'botanical woman'. I also take this term to broadly include women being persistently represented as plants, seeds, soil, as the garden or in close association to the garden. I distinguish the term 'botanical woman' from what Kelley and George refer to as a 'botanizing woman', or a woman who participates in the science of botany, or engages in significant dialogues about botanical science, in a literary text. George too specifically traces the emergence of the figure of the 'sexually precocious female botanist' in the literature of this period. I take 'botanical woman' to include women who are depicted as engaging directly with the science of botany, but to ultimately function as a broad and inclusive term to identify women whose bodies are persistently represented as flowers, plants, seeds, soil, or objects in and associated with the garden, often as a means to emphasize their sexuality, fertility, and reproductive roles. I use the term 'botanical woman' rather than simply 'flower woman' both to more broadly include other botanical language which refers to female sexuality, but also crucially to emphasize the context of the rise of botanical science and the debates surrounding botany and female sexuality in which women are being represented as botanical subjects in literature in this particular historical moment.

In this essay, I will argue that like these other female writers in the period, Mary Shelley enters into the debate surrounding botany and female sexuality through her depictions of botanical women in her novels *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*. While ecofeminist theorists such as Karen Warren, Carolyn Merchant, and Val Plumwood have recognized women's identification with nature on the basis that both nature and women are oppressed by patriarchy, they also acknowledge that rendering women as being closer to nature than men is essentialist, and therefore problematic. Sherry B. Ortner asserts that in patriarchal society, the binary which places women closer to nature and men closer to the realm of culture oppresses women by confining them to reproductive roles, whereas men can more easily participate in politics and the creation of art. I will argue that Mary Shelley likens *Mathilda*, *Perdita*, and *Idris* to flowers, plants, seeds, or other botanical language in order to critique the way in which patriarchal structures confine women to reproductive roles and limit their ability to access those of creation by virtue of being rendered "closer" to nature than men. Women are cultivated to be like beautiful flowers, such that they can be attractive to men and fulfill a sexual and reproductive role in patriarchal society. Shelley shows how women become like flowers in decay, failing to cultivate their rational minds or reach their full potential, when they are confined to the roles of wife and mother.

### **Mathilda**

In the opening of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*, *Mathilda* is introduced as the author of the narrative, and though she desires a public audience, her authorship remains confined to the private sphere. Charlene E. Bunnell argues that *Mathilda*, establishing herself as the author of the tale, "constructs her autobiography as a dramatic tragedy that reveals an egocentric view of life as a

stage on which she, a tragic actress, performs the leading role as an incest victim” (75). However, “she [Mathilda] records for Woodville the dramatic events of her life in a letter that is essentially an autobiographical memoir” (Bunnell 77). While Mathilda constructs a dramatic tragedy, her authorship does not enter into the public sphere, as she writes her narrative in the form of a letter, the sole audience of which is Woodville. As Mathilda notes,

I do not know that any will peruse these pages except you [Woodville], my friend, who will receive them at my death. I do not address them to you alone because it will give me pleasure to dwell upon our friendship in a way that would be needless if you alone read what I shall write. I shall write my tale therefore as if I write for strangers. (Shelley 41)

Mathilda here expresses a desire for her writing to move from the private sphere, a letter read by her friend, and into the realm of culture or the public sphere, which would imply a larger audience beyond those individuals in her immediate social circle; in other words, to write for “strangers” (Ortner 11-14). Ortner argues that women’s authorship often remains relegated to the private sphere as a result of patriarchal society perceiving women as “being closer to nature than men” (12). Ortner says that women, by this model, are considered subordinate to men, thus women’s work is often confined to the natural or pro-creative sphere, while men may more easily access the superior realm of culture or the public creation of art (11-15). As I will trace in the analysis that follows, Mathilda’s writing fails to move beyond the private sphere as a result of her father rendering her a naturalized object, or botanical woman, subject to his desire, and his patriarchal destruction of her potential.

Mathilda describes her father as having been “sent to Eton and afterwards college, & allowed from childhood the free use of large sums of money; thus enjoying from his earliest youth the independence which a boy with these advantages, always acquires at public school” (Shelley 42). The father’s education, as he was a “boy”, took place in the “public” sphere, or the public

school system, rather than “the type of home learning available to women where they are reared to be good wives and mothers” (George 27). Mathilda then says that, “[u]nder the influence of these circumstances his passions found a deep soil wherein they might strike their roots and flourish either as flowers or weeds as was their nature” (Shelley 42-43). The cultivation of the father’s mind through his masculinist, public education is described here in terms which reveal how such an education works to subjugate women to man’s domination. While the quality of education available to men in the public school system was often more elevated than that available to women at home, being immersed in a system which excludes women, and which allows for men to “always [be] allowed to act for himself” (43) and where “his own desires were gratified to their fullest extent” (43), allows for men’s passions to overtake them, just as they are supposedly developing their rational minds. The father’s “circumstances” therefore influences him such that his “passions” or desires are described as “roots” which phallically “strike” and impregnate the “soil” with his seed, from which “flowers” or “weeds” will grow. The soil becomes this feminized, eroticized, and fertile space, dominated by the masculine. This image of plant sexuality recalls the erotic episodes where male plants dominate the feminine in Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants*. This passage in *Mathilda* functions to metaphorically expose how the male mind is cultivated to be superior and dominant in an education system which only they have access to, while the female mind is rendered inferior. Women in turn are subjected to men’s unbridled passions, as women are cultivated to be objects of male desire.

As was typical of female education, Mathilda is educated at home, as a tutor “gave [her] lessons in reading, writing, and French” (Shelley 49). In Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a key text for thinking about the education of women in the period, she is critical of “feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education” (330). She considers

the weakness of this education to be that it is composed mostly of novel-reading, as she says, “[t]hese are the women who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who [know] little of human nature” (Wollstonecraft 330). Mathilda, describing her own education, says: “[a]s I grew older, books in some degree supplied the place of human intercourse” (Shelley 50). While Mathilda’s education in some ways goes beyond what Wollstonecraft would consider the “sentimental” (George 30) education of women in novels, as Mathilda reads such authors as Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, and Cowper (Shelley 50), Mathilda’s education nonetheless remains “confined” (Wollstonecraft 330) to the private sphere, as she is tutored at home, and then as she grows older, mainly educates herself through her access to her aunt’s “small” (Shelley 50) library (50). Further, Mathilda is presented as having a close relationship with nature. As she details her education, Mathilda includes in this the time which she spent in nature in her childhood, as she says “[she] rambled amidst the wild scenery of this lovely country and became a complete mountaineer” (Shelley 50), and “wandered for ever about these lovely solitudes, gathering flower after flower” (50). So, while Mathilda shows potential in her abilities to be educated in the public sphere and develop her rational mind as she has a passion for book learning, she is nevertheless introduced as being primarily associated with the private, feminine, natural sphere.

Moreover, the father, as he first describes his desire for Mathilda, conflates her image with that of nature. The father, having been devastated by the death of the mother following Mathilda’s birth, left Mathilda to grow up in the care of her aunt. Upon his return years later, he describes his feelings for Mathilda while absent:

I could not bear to think of my poor little girl; but afterwards as grief wore off and hope again revisited me I could only turn to her, and amidst cities and deserts her little fairy form, such as I imagined it, for ever flitted before me. The northern breeze as it refreshed me was sweeter and more balmy for it seemed to carry some of your spirit along with it. I often thought that I would instantly return and take you along with me to some fertile island

where we should live at peace for ever. ... I have my Mathilda, my consolation, and my hope. (53-54)

The father describes “[t]he northern breeze” as being “sweeter” as it “seemed to carry” some of Mathilda’s “spirit along with it”; he describes the wind, or nature, as carrying Mathilda’s essence or image along with it, and this conflation of her and nature renders it “sweet”, or fuels his sexual desire for Mathilda. He wishes to take her away to a “fertile island”, such that they can be alone together. The reference to ‘fertility’ here both further feminizes nature, and implies his sexual desire for Mathilda, as, having conflated Mathilda with nature, this becomes a reference to her own fertility, and their potential to procreate alone on the island. Later, when the father confesses his incestuous desire for Mathilda to her in a letter, he describes her as “a nymph of the woods” (75), and says that he “saw [her]” (74) in “[a]ll delightful things [such as the] sublime scenery” (74) and the “soft breezes” (74). The father renders Mathilda a ‘natural feminine’ figure as her image becomes conflated with nature, and as such she becomes a site of his desire.

To return, then, to the initial description of the father’s passions as having “found a deep soil wherein they might strike their roots and flourish either as flowers or weeds as was their nature” (42-43), we can think of this image of plant sexuality as foreshadowing of the father’s desire for Mathilda as a naturalized, botanical object. It is also a subtle gesture towards how mothers and daughters are equally rendered objects of male desire in patriarchy. The father’s “roots” strike the soil phallically; the feminized soil functions as a figure for Mathilda. The soil, though, also functions as a figure for her mother, who, also having been an object of the father’s desire, birthed Mathilda. The image then becomes both the birth story of Mathilda, rendering her one of the “flowers” or offspring of the father’s desire, and a foreshadowing of her and her father’s incestuous desire. Anne K. Mellor remarks that,



Influenced by her mother's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to take a critical view of the role and education of women in her society, Mary Shelley in *Mathilda* attacks the underlying psycho-sexual structure of the bourgeois family. In a society where the father or male is the dominant authority and wielder of power and the female is taught to love and obey, the father-daughter relationship becomes a paradigm for all male-female relationships. .... Mary Shelley shows us that a culture in which women can play no role but that of daughter, even in their marriages, denies females the capacity for meaningful growth, since a woman's future self – even her daughter – can only replicate her present self. (198-200)

Mellor's apt feminist reading of *Mathilda* as a critique of how mothers and daughters become interchangeable in patriarchy can be understood as central to how Mary Shelley engages botanical imagery in this novel. The father's sexual domination of the soil, a soil which is metaphorically both mother and daughter, produces an offspring which is only a copy of its mother. *Mathilda* is the "flower", or botanical woman, the offspring and object of desire of the father.

The scene where *Mathilda* and her father re-unite after years apart can thus be read as a kind of symbolic marriage in nature. *Mathilda*, describing their union, says that she, finding herself "close to the lake near a cove where a little skiff was moored" (53) and "dressed in white" (53) jumped into a boat and rowed towards her father, reaching the shore and leaping out of the boat and "in[t]o his [her father's] arms" (53). Diana Edelman-Young remarks that "[w]hen *Mathilda* alights from the boat, they immediately embrace like long-lost lovers" (139). Similarly tracing themes of incest in the novel, critics such as Tilottama Rajan give attention to the scene near the end of the novel where *Mathilda*, approaching the moment of her death, describes herself as wearing a shroud that is her "marriage dress" (Shelley 113), and describes her longing for "[her and her father's] union" (Shelley 109) (as she would again re-unite with her father in death). Rajan argues that this scene functions to symbolize that *Mathilda* and her father will be married in death (51). Critics overlook, however, how *Mathilda* being "dressed in white", like a marriage dress, in this initial scene of union functions as a symbolic marriage while they are still alive. As this scene

of symbolic marital union takes place in a natural setting, I argue these marital unions call to Mary Shelley's subtle engagement with the marriage imagery in Linnaeus' botanical taxonomy. This imagery of nuptials and sexualized unions in nature, combined with the representations of Mathilda and the father as sexualized plants, recalls the Linnaean imagery of 'pistils' and 'stamens', the sexual organs of plants, being 'wed' as 'husbands' and 'wives'.

Within the confines of their relationship, or symbolic marriage, while Mathilda is able to access new forms of learning, her sexual purity becomes corrupted. Mathilda says,

How dear to me were the waters, and mountains, and woods of Loch Lomond now that I had so beloved a companion for my rambles. I visited with my father every delighted spot, either on the islands, or by the side of the tree-sheltered waterfalls; every shady path, or dingle entangled with underwood and fern. My ideas were enlarged by his conversation. I felt as if I were recreated and had about me all the freshness and life of a new being. I was, as it were, transported since his arrival from a narrow spot of earth into a universe boundless to the imagination and understanding. My life had been before as a pleasing country rill, never destined to leave its native fields, but when its task was fulfilled quietly to be absorbed, and leave no trace. Now it seemed to me to be as a various river flowing through a fertile and lovely landscape, ever changing and ever beautiful. Alas! I knew not the desert it was about to reach, the rocks that would tear its waters, and the hideous scene that would be reflected in a more distorted manner in its waves. Life was brilliant then; I began to learn to hope and what brings a more bitter despair to the heart than hope destroyed? (Shelley 55).

Her relationship with her father gives her access to new forms of knowledge which she could not access before as a young woman. Her "ideas were enlarged by his conversation", and as she describes being transported from a "narrow spot of earth into a universe boundless to the imagination and understanding" she metaphorically describes how, in her relationship with the patriarch, she is able to tangentially access the kind of superior education which only men can access through the public school system. She says too that upon his return, "I was led to attend to deeper studies than before occupied me. My improvement was his delight; he was with me during all my studies and assisted or joined with me in every lesson" (56). He helps to cultivate her

rational mind, but it is only in the context of his desire for her which he returns to offer her this kind of education. Of the father's desire for her mother, Mathilda said that "[h]e loved her [Diana] for her beauty and for her amiable disposition but he seemed to love her more for what he considered to be her superior wisdom" (46). The mother, having lost her own mother at a young age, was educated by her own father (45). Mathilda's father, then, cultivates Mathilda's mind only to make her a more ideal replacement of her mother, to make her a more attractive 'wife'. More, Mathilda says that as she spends time with her father in nature, she feels as though "[her] life" has become like a "river flowing through" the "landscape," which is described in feminized terms such as "fertile", "lovely", and "beautiful." Mathilda is like the feminized landscape, as she metaphorically becomes the site for her father's "river" to phallically 'flow through' or penetrate her body. Where she had previously felt that "no trace" had touched her 'life', she now feels fundamentally "recreated" or altered, like a "new being", as her father symbolically sexually dominates her (a metaphor for the threat which his desire poses to her purity and virginity). From this moment onward, she is fundamentally changed, as her romantic and sexualized bond with her father is solidified. Her allusions to her future "bitter despair" and "hope destroyed" foreshadow how this will ultimately be her downfall.

As the father begins to suffer guilt for his incestuous desire for Mathilda and pulls away from her, Mathilda becomes acutely aware of her tenuous position, and says, "for what should I do here, like a decaying flower, still withering under his bitter words, whose kindly heat should give my poor heart life?" (Shelley 58). George, in her analysis of Wollstonecraft's use of botanical and horticultural language in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* says:

Wollstonecraft confronted the contradictions implicit in Enlightenment ideas of gender by drawing attention to the ill effects suffered by women through inadequate education. Woman who are denied the opportunity to develop rationally become bound to stasis and sensuality, becoming 'insignificant objects of desire' who 'are made ridiculous and useless

when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over' (11). According to Wollstonecraft's theory, society has cultivated women, rearing them as if they were exotic flowering plants or 'luxuriants' where 'strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty'. [As such, women are subject to] sterility and decay [rather than] growth and maturity. (George 28)

Like the botanical women in decay described by Wollstonecraft, Mathilda recognizes that without her father upon whom she depends for her rational development, unable to receive this kind of education in the public school system which excludes her on the basis of her gender, she will become "like a decaying flower" and "wither". Her rational potential, and her future development in society as a young woman, depends entirely on her father or a husband. The father, now tenuously occupying both roles for Mathilda, can momentarily offer her growth, but this is not a meaningful or sustainable option for her as, while she might be able to gain new insight from him, she can not reproduce with him – she might be a 'wife' to him but she cannot be a mother. For a woman in nineteenth century patriarchal society with limited access to producing cultural artifacts which persist beyond her lifespan, or entering into the public sphere of culture, politics, and historical memory, reproduction is essentially the only way for her to have any kind of future (Ortner 11-15). She asks who will 'warm her poor heart' if he is gone, on some level knowing that he has now ruined her to love anyone else and be a proper wife to a husband who is not him. She later expresses that she "will never love ought but thee [her father]" (Shelley 71), and so, without her father to act as husband and allow her to fulfill the role as 'wife', she is left alone, as she will not be able to love another or be with a proper husband happily again. She realizes, then, that if he leaves, she will be left alone to "wither", and have all of her potential destroyed – her rational and reproductive futures ended.

The father, though, does finally decide to leave her out of his guilt for his feelings for her, and ultimately ends his life. Before committing suicide, he tells Mathilda in his farewell letter:

“Cast off the only gift that I have bestowed upon you, your grief, and rise from under my blighting influence as no flower so sweet ever did rise from beneath so much evil” (Shelley 78). Mathilda being described as a ‘sweet flower’ calls to Wollstonecraft’s ironic floral epithet: “the sweet flowers that smile in the walk of man” (Wollstonecraft 62, qt. George 30). George argues that Wollstonecraft’s epithet implies that women in Wollstonecraft’s society are educated and reared to be ‘happily’ dominated by men (George 30). The father cultivated Mathilda only to be a good wife to him. Her intellect was valued only such that she could be all the more desirable. The father represents how patriarchal education confines women such that they are only cultivated to function in roles which serve men. The father describes his oppressive influence over Mathilda as “blighting”. “Blighting” is defined as “to wither”, “to destroy the brightness, beauty, or promise of”, or, when “said of flowers or blossoms,” to cause one to “shed” (OED). The father thus becomes the agent which renders Mathilda a ‘decaying flower’, as he describes himself as causing her to ‘wither’ and destroying her potential. While he destroys himself in an effort to allow her to rise from his “evil” or oppressive influence, however, Mathilda fails to recover. While he asks for her to recover, he knows that “no flower so sweet ever did rise from beneath so much evil”, that no woman in patriarchy can truly be free of its constraints. Mathilda’s inability to recover effectively functions as a critique of the way in which women ‘fail to rise’ or develop rationally independent of fathers, husbands, or men, and instead decay or are rendered useless in patriarchal society.

Abandoned by her father, unable to love another, and unable to exist self-sufficiently in patriarchy, Mathilda becomes a ‘bad seed’, her life rendered effectively useless if she cannot fulfill the roles of wife or mother. Mathilda, in contemplating why not even the male companionship of

Woodville could save her life now, engages in a long, botanical speech, worth quoting in full, as a metaphor for her predicament:

[F]or I was as tender as the sensitive plant, all nerve. I did not desire sympathy and aid in ambition or wisdom, but sweet and mutual affection; smiles to cheer me and gentle words of comfort. I wished for one heart in which I could pour unrestrained my complaints, and by the heavenly nature of the soil blessed fruit might spring from such bad seed. Yet how could I find this? The love that is the soul of friendship is a soft spirit seldom found except when two amiable creatures are knit from early youth, or when bound by mutual suffering and pursuits; it comes to some of the elect unsought and unaware; it descends as gentle dew on chosen spots which however barren they were before become under its benign influence fertile in all sweet plants; but when desired it flies; it scoffs at the prayers of its votaries; it will bestow, but not be sought.

I knew all this and did not go to seek sympathy; but there on my solitary heath, it came to me as a sun beam in winter to dorm while it helps to dissolve the drifted snow. – alas the sun shone on blighted fruit; I did not revive under its radiance for I was too utterly undone to feel its kindly power. My father had been and his memory was the life of my life. I might feel gratitude to another but I never more could love or hope as I had done; it was all suffering; even my pleasures were endured, not enjoyed I was as a solitary spot among mountains shut in on all sides by steep black precipices; where no ray of heat could penetrate; and from which there was no outlet to sunnier fields. And thus it was that although the spirit of friendship soothed me for a while it could not restore me. (89-90)

In this passage, wholly overlooked by critics, Mathilda metaphorically describes how she has become a “bad seed”, and “barren”, and describes how even the ray of sunshine that is the love of friendship (a reference to Woodville) could not restore her to fertility. Unable to love or connect with any man but her father, she has become effectively ‘barren’, a bad seed which cannot reproduce. Her father has ruined her such that no man could restore her to being a functional member of society as a woman. So, with the loss of her father who ruined her for any other man, Mathilda has been stripped of her ability to develop rationally, or to function in roles expected for women in society, that of wife or mother. She says: “[m]ine was an idle, useless life; it was so; but say not to the lily laid prostrate by the storm arise and bloom as before” (88). Mathilda clearly shows that, despite her father’s call to rise from under his harmful oppression of her, she cannot

do so. She is left a “lily” destroyed by the storm that was her father, unable to “bloom” or reach any kind of potential, and he leaves her useless and idle, waiting to die.

As such, from this point onward, Mathilda grows sick, until she is eventually on her deathbed, writing her narrative to Woodville alone. On her deathbed, she says that she is “in the final decay of nature” (Shelley 113). She says to Woodville, “if you ever visit my grave, pluck from thence a flower” (114), as “violets will bloom on it” (115). Rather than being able to develop rationally, and become an author in her own right, writing for a public audience as a male education might have offered her the ability to do, she becomes like a decaying flower, useless and without purpose, dying with only the potential to write a private letter to Woodville as her final farewell. She is reduced to a “flower” or “violet” which might bloom on her grave and which a man might pluck and admire. Her father’s domination of her ultimately renders her a flower, or an object of male desire, whose potential for rational thinking or a productive life in the public sphere was wasted.

### **Perdita**

In Shelley’s later novel *The Last Man*, she continues to develop her thinking on these issues through the figures of Perdita and Idris, as they are depicted as ‘botanical women’. Lionel Verney, the male author of the manuscript which we read as the novel, introduces his sister Perdita by describing her as “pale and fair” (Shelley 11) with “heaven in her heart and in her look” (11), but also as having an “intellectual glance” (11) which “comprehended an universe of thought” (11). She is beautiful, yet distinguished by her intellect. Lionel writes too that Perdita spent much time in nature in childhood (12), as she “[o]ften passed whole hours walking up and down the paths of the woods” (12), “wove garlands of flowers and ivy, or watched the flickering of the shadows and glancing of the leaves,” (12) and “sometimes she sat beside a stream, and as her thoughts paused,

threw flowers or pebbles into the waters” (12). He further describes her in botanical terms, as he says:

A sensation with her became a sentiment, and she never spoke until she mingled her perceptions of outward objects with others which were the native growth of her own mind. She was like a fruitful soil that imbibed the airs and dews of heaven, and gave them forth again to light in loveliest forms of fruit and flowers; but then she was often dark and rugged as that soil, raked up, and new sown with unseen seed. (13)

As Lionel emphasizes the “growth” of Perdita’s “mind”, and refers to her as a “fruitful soil” giving forth “fruit and flowers”, or as a “soil ... new sown with unseen seed”, he metaphorically calls attention to the fertility of her mind and its ability to put forward intellectual ideas, but also the fertility of her body and its ability to reproduce. Perdita’s beauty, closeness to nature, and her expected reproductive or domestic roles in society as a woman are at issue with her intellectual capacity and her potential to have a productive life in the public sphere (Ortner 12-15).

As Perdita is naturally intellectually gifted, she resists the kind of education which Lionel receives. Adrian educates Lionel in books, which Lionel describes as allowing him to “participate in the cultivation which graced his own intellect” (Shelley 23). Lionel says that with this cultivation of his mind, “the curtain, which had been drawn before the intellectual world, was withdrawn, [and he] saw the universe, not only as it presented itself to [his] outward senses, but as it had appeared to the wisest among men” (23). Lionel genders his newfound understanding as being shared with ‘the wisest of men’, not women. However, Lionel wishes to include Perdita in this tradition, despite the education system historically excluding her on the basis of her gender, as he recognizes her capacity for intellectual thinking. Though, he says that “[t]he visionary Perdita beheld in all this only a new gloss upon an old reading, and her own was sufficiently inexhaustible to content her” (24). Unlike Mathilda, Perdita does not wish to cultivate her rational mind through the study of books, as Perdita seems to be exceptional in that her mind is already adequately developed for her



liking. Perdita, as a “visionary”, turns her ambitions and intellectual capacities towards the realm of politics.

Further, Perdita’s independent nature is emphasized, yet it is made clear that patriarchal society’s constraints limit her ability to be truly self-sufficient. Lionel says that “Perdita was all sufficient to herself” (Shelley 13) and that “all the time she could command she spent in solitude” (12). What Lionel means is that Perdita enjoys being alone, that she is sufficient company for herself (at least, until she meets Raymond). Lionel emphasizes, however, how she is left “to [his] fraternal guardianship” (11) after their father died, that in fact she is never really ‘alone’ in the self-sufficient, independent sense – nineteenth century patriarchal society makes it so that she must always exist in relation to men, that she depends on her brother’s (or later, a husband’s) guardianship (Chatterjee 1). Shoshannah Byrn Jones Square notes too that “[w]hen Shelley first introduces Perdita, she is careful to emphasize her capacities and creative faculties as well as her self-reliance and ability to live contentedly in her own thoughts to impress upon the reader how completely she loses herself in her love for Raymond; once she dedicates herself entirely to him, her ability to live in and for herself comes to a devastating end” (67). When Perdita marries Raymond, her identity, selfhood, and ambitions become subsumed into his.

While feminist critics such as Shoshannah Byrn Jones Square, Suparna Banerjee, Anne Mellor and others give attention to the gendered dynamics of Perdita and Raymond’s courtship and eventual marriage, their emphasis on establishing feminist readings of the text means that they do not attend to how Perdita and Raymond’s relationship displays Shelley’s views on the botanical debates of her day. As Perdita grows beyond childhood, and develops “[n]ew feelings” (33) (a reference to her feelings for Raymond), Lionel describes her as “st[anding] before [him] in the fresh bloom of youthful womanhood” (33). Though careful to still remark the “intelligence [which]

sat on her brow” (33), he also notes that now “[h]er person was formed in the most feminine proportions” (33). More, he describes her explicitly as a flower, as he says: “[s]uch a violet was sweet Perdita, trembling to entrust herself to the very air, cowering from observation, yet betrayed by her excellences; and repaying with a thousand graces the labour of those who sought her in her lonely bye-path” (40). Lionel calling Perdita a violet and emphasizing her being in ‘the fresh bloom of womanhood’ distinguishes her as now being in an ideal point of life for reproduction; like a flower fresh in bloom, she is at her peak of beauty, at her most ideal point to be an object of admiration and desire (Kelley 90-100). Though she ‘cowers from observation’, or resists being objectified for her beauty, she is ‘betrayed by her excellences’, betrayed by her looks and other attractive qualities (her intellect, her talents) which make her readily susceptible to the desires of men. Further, her womanly proportions (indicating her fertility) and her new passions (her capacity for sexuality, and romantic love) speak to her readiness to relinquish her solitary childhood state for a union with a man. As Lionel remarks, she will eventually ‘repay’ Raymond for his labours of trying to win her, like a flower offering itself to him after he observed her in her lonely path.

Lionel in turn describes Raymond as “emphatically a man of the world” (35). He is primarily a man of culture and engages heavily in public and political affairs. In the private sphere, as Evadne first falls for Raymond, destroying Adrian’s chances with her, Raymond is described as “the storm that laid waste at one fell blow the gardens of delight and sheltered paths which Adrian fancied that he had secured to himself” (35). Adrian is feminized against the manly conquests of Raymond, both in the public sphere of office and the private sphere of romantic love, as Evadne becomes like a ‘garden of delight’, which Raymond takes from Adrian. Like Mathilda’s father, Raymond is established as a domineering figure of destruction (as they both appear as storms

which lay waste to gardens or flowers). More, Lionel describes Raymond and Perdita's courtship in the following terms:

Raymond, the ambitious, restless Raymond, reposed midway on the great high-road of life, and was content to give up all his schemes of sovereignty and fame, to make one of us, the flowers of the field. His kingdom was the heart of Perdita, his subjects her thoughts; by her he was loved, respected as a superior being, obeyed, waited on. No office, no devotion, no watching was irksome to her, as it regarded him. She would sit apart from us and watch him; she would weep for joy to think that he was hers. She erected a temple for him in the depth of her being, and each faculty was a priestess vowed to his service. (71, emphasis mine)

Perdita becomes the 'flower of the field' which Raymond threatened to take possession of. Square remarks that despite Raymond's previous claim that he desired Perdita to "possess [his] heart and soul to all eternity" (Shelley 53), "it is Perdita who becomes possessed by Raymond [and he becomes] the singular focus of [her] thoughts" (Square 68). As his wife, Perdita becomes a flower in the vast field subject to Raymond's dominion.

When Raymond and Perdita solidify their union, Shelley writes that "the hopes of his [Raymond's] ambitions were complete, when he pressed the small fair hand of Perdita to his lips; while she, radiant with delight, looked on the pool, not truly admiring herself, but drinking in with rapture the reflection there made of the form of herself and her lover, shewn for the first time in dear conjunction" (53). While careful to avoid vanity in her heroine, as Shelley describes her 'not truly admiring herself', Perdita's beauty still becomes more apparent to her in her relation to Raymond, as she looks at her own reflection and sees her beauty in tandem with his in their new state as a couple. Lionel further remarks that in her marriage to Raymond "Perdita grew in beauty and excellence under his eye" (91). He says, "I no longer recognized my reserved abstracted sister in the fascinating open-hearted wife of Raymond. The genius that enlightened her countenance, was now united to an expression of benevolence, which gave divine perfection to her beauty" (91). While she is still characterized by her intellect, it seems that her intellect becomes the thing that

adds 'perfection to her beauty', that makes her ultimately more attractive as a wife. Theresa Kelley argues that women being compared to flowers emphasizes women's beauty in such a way that reduces them to being "ornamental" (Kelley 93); pretty like flowers, yet ultimately without practical function (effectively useless other than their ability to be decorative, beautiful objects subject to observation) (Kelley 90-100). Though not to the point of being rendered 'ornamental', as she does engage in politics, Perdita's beauty and ability to attract Raymond with her other qualities such as her intellect is ultimately what offers her the opportunity to act functionally in the political sphere. Lionel notes that "[d]uring the first months of his Protectorate, Raymond and she had been inseparable; each project was discussed with her, each plan approved by her" (Shelley 91), and that "her intelligence made her understand him [Raymond] at a word" (91), "her powers of intellect enabled her to assist and guide him" (91) and that "he [Raymond] felt her worth" (91). Lionel further says, "Perdita, in whom ambition was a covered fire until she married Raymond, which event was for a time 'the fulfillment of her hopes'" (74). Perdita's ambitions to engage in the political sphere were only able to lay dormant until she married Raymond. Suparna Banerjee elaborates as she says,

She [Perdita] enjoys the reflected glory of Raymond's social status and is his debtor for it; although she has ascended socially by marriage, she is clearly not the equal of her husband in marriage. One notes that Raymond himself attains his rank in a republican England through his political and military achievements. As a woman, Perdita has only marriage to raise herself socially or achieve a sense of self-worth. (It is noteworthy that even for a future time Shelley cannot conceive of women participating in public life independently). (524)

So, while Perdita is not reduced to being like an ornamental flower, totally useless and without purpose other than serving an aesthetic function, her beauty does become emphasized in her relationship with Raymond, and it is only Raymond's individual appreciation for Perdita's intellect that allows her to act functionally. The patriarchal system would otherwise have her be nothing

but a wife, ornamental to Raymond's achievements. Even as she is allowed to use her intellect and have some sort of function politically, she is nonetheless not truly fulfilling her own political ambitions, but merely adding to his.

Lionel further notes that Perdita says, "I took myself to task, that I might become worthy of him. I watched over my hasty temper, subdued my burning impatience of character, schooled my self-engrossing thoughts, educating myself to the best perfection I might attain that the fruit of my exertions might be his happiness" (Shelley 111). Banerjee reads this effort as "a striving after the patriarchal ideal of femininity, whereby women are schooled into a life of artificial self-denial and internalise a sense of their own inferiority" (524). Perdita diverts much of her intellectual energies towards a self-education in becoming a more ideal wife.

More, Perdita serves a reproductive function, as she gives birth to her and Raymond's daughter. Lionel writes, "During the first year of their marriage, Perdita presented Raymond with a lovely girl. It was curious to trace in this miniature model the very traits of her father. The same half-disdainful lips and smile of triumph, the same intelligent eyes, the same brow and chestnut hair; her very hands and taper fingers resembled his" (Shelley 71-72). In a later scene, Perdita looks on her daughter and "[a]gain with a gush of pride and delight, she remarked in the features of her little girl, the same smile of beauty that often irradiated from Raymond's countenance. The sight of it soothed her. She thought of the treasure she possessed in the affections of her lord; of his accomplishments, surpassing those of his contemporaries, his genius, his devotion to her" (80). Describing Perdita's daughter as being "presented" to Raymond seems to imply that her reproductive capabilities function to serve Raymond, to offer him a child and a legacy which would succeed himself. Highlighting how the daughter's features are so like Raymond's seems to emphasize further how she is an extension of Raymond, a representation of yet another one of his

accomplishments. This is further evidenced as Perdita looks again on her daughter and thinks only of her likeness to Raymond and all that he has accomplished. So, while Perdita performs this reproductive labour and her daughter is an extension of herself and her future too, her role as mother ultimately works towards Raymond's benefit.

When Raymond turns his attentions and affection away from Perdita and towards another woman, Evadne, Perdita becomes aware of how contingent her life is; how damaging it is for her to be treated as a flower, ornamental to a man's life and accomplishments. When Perdita feels that she is losing Raymond, she is described as being "unable to support the slow withering of her hopes" (Shelley 100). She is like a flower that 'withers' or decays when the male gaze of her lover looks elsewhere. When Perdita confirms the truth of his infidelity, she becomes melancholic, and she "gazed on some flowers that stood near in a carved vase" (102). Perdita addresses a speech to her vase of flowers, as Shelley writes, "'Divine infoliations of the spirit of beauty,' she [Perdita] exclaimed: 'Ye droop not, neither do ye mourn; the despair that clasps my heart, has not spread contagion over you! – Why am I not a partner of your insensibility, a sharer in your calm!'" (102). The vase of flowers, a decorative household object serving an aesthetic function, should share in the situation of Perdita, given that patriarchal society's renderings of women as flowers would have them be aligned. However, Perdita recognizes a clear disjunction between the two. Perdita is not in fact like a flower, as the flower and her do not share the same sensibility. Shelley comments here, through Perdita, on how women are often rendered flowers such that they may be eroticized objects of beauty subject to male desire, ornamental to men's lives and achievements as they serve in household or domestic roles as wives or mothers. But as Perdita is rejected by her lover, and sees that the flowers in her vase "droop not", there is a clear disjunction between the flower and woman. Woman is harmed by these representations of woman as flower, as Raymond can move

from woman to woman whose beauty (or attractive talents) he appreciates, whereas the flower, as nature, remains indifferent to male desire. Perdita is a woman with feelings, intellectual capabilities, and potential for a productive life in the public sphere, which are reduced and effaced when she is compared incessantly to flowers, and Shelley has her here reject these comparisons as a way to emphasize their difference, and critique patriarchal renderings of women as flowers.

Perdita, while irreducible to a flower, is still treated as such as a woman in her society, and so without her husband she is bound to decay. She stands before the mirror and looks at her “beauteous arms and neck” (103), her “profuse and glossy tresses” (103), her “gorgeous frame” (103) and her elevated dress and thinks, “Vase am I! ... vase brimful of despair’s direst essence. Fairwell, Perdita! Farewell, poor girl! Never again will you see yourself thus; luxury and wealth are no longer yours ... most truly am I without a home! I live on a barren desert, which, wide and interminable, brings forth neither fruit nor flower” (103-104). She recognizes that patriarchal society would treat her as the vase, would treat her as nothing but a beautiful object subject to male desire, which leaves her filled with melancholy and “despair”. More, without her husband or without her ‘home’, she decays into barrenness. As she says that she lives on a ‘barren desert which brings forth neither fruit nor flower’, she metaphorically exposes how without a husband she is unable to grow, she is unable to reach any of her potential. She bids farewell to herself as she sees this moment of losing Raymond as the end of her potential, as the end of her life. She then “thr[ows] open her window, which looked on the palace-garden” (104) and thinks:

All things go on ... all things proceed, decay, and perish! When the noontide has passed, and the weary day has driven her team to their western stalls, the fires of heaven rise from the East, moving in their accustomed path, they ascend and cast westward an uncertain shadow; the eye-lids of the day are opened, and birds and flowers, the startled vegetation, the fresh breeze awaken; the sun at length appears, and in majestic procession climbs the capitol of heaven. All proceeds, changes, and dies, except the sense of misery in my bursting heart. ... Ay, all proceeds and changes: what wonder then, that love has journeyed on to its setting, and that the lord of my life has changed? ... Nature grows old, and shakes

in her decaying limbs, - creation has become bankrupt! What wonder then, that eclipse and death have led to destruction the light of thy life, O Perdita! (104)

Perdita describes how all things in nature “decay” and “perish”, “except the sense of misery in [her] bursting heart” (104). She laments that like all things in nature that change, decay, and die, her “love” and “lord of [her] life”, or her love with Raymond, has changed, perished and died. She sees her love with Raymond as being a “creation” of nature that has become “bankrupt”, that as nature “grows old, and shakes in her decaying limbs”, her love has too grown old and decayed. These processes in nature are what she attributes to having “led to the destruction [of] the light of [her] life”, have destroyed her love which was the ‘light’ or happiness in her life, and so the implication is that like nature she too must decay or die without that love.

As Perdita and Raymond separate, leaving Perdita devastated and melancholic, Lionel attempts to ease her suffering by turning her attention to literature. Lionel says that “It was the pleasure I took in literature, the discipline of mind I found arise from it, that made me eager to lead Perdita to the same pursuits” (Shelley 121). Square remarks that as Perdita warms to this education in books, she soon “half” forgets “her sorrows in occupation” (Shelley 121, qt. Square 70). Square reads this scene of Lionel’s soothing of Perdita’s melancholy over the loss of Raymond through an education in books as “affirm[ing] Wollstonecraft’s argument, which Shelley adopts, that if women were able ‘to share the advantages of education ... with man,’ they would ‘grow wiser and become free’” (Vindication 310, qt. Square 70). In other words, if patriarchal society did not cultivate women such that they were only educated to be better wives and mothers, or to serve in roles which served men, they would be more freely able to pursue their own intellectual growth and reach their own potential. Square further says, “had she [Perdita] been given the same opportunities as the men in her life, she could have presumably channeled her creativity and extreme sensibility into fruitful occupations like writing or public service. Instead, all of Perdita’s



passion, imagination, and feeling are devoted to her husband” (68). As Raymond can “reclaim his former identity through his military career – he goes to fight for the liberation of the Greeks – Perdita is confined to domesticity” (Square 70), and so Perdita laments: “He [Raymond] can be great and happy without me. Would that I also had a career!” (Shelley 124). Banerjee argues that “[t]hese words express her [Perdita’s] longing for a foothold in the socially significant public realm of action that men inhabit” (524). And yet, Lionel reflects as he attempts to educate Perdita and free her from her suffering, “Was she [Perdita] to cease to love? Take the colours and odors from the rose, change the sweet nutriment of mother’s milk to gale and poison, as easily as you wean Perdita from love” (Shelley 121). Perdita is stuck in her gender determined role as wife or “mother”, like a rose bound to be a particular hue. Her undying love for Raymond and her dependence on him will ultimately be her downfall.

So, when Perdita eventually reconciles with Raymond, reclaiming him as her husband and lover, only for him to die in battle, she decides that she must die too. Perdita tells Lionel, “[L]et my orphan girl be as a child of your own in your house. Look on me as dead; and if death be a mere change of state, I am dead” (Shelley 165). Square argues that “Her [Perdita’s] sense of self contingent upon Raymond, Perdita figuratively dies with him. She is, paradoxically alive yet dead” (71). Losing Raymond, and having had her entire identity be consumed by him through marriage, Perdita can no longer function as mother either, and so she abandons her maternal duties, leaving their daughter ‘orphaned’. Perdita then finally commits suicide, making her figurative death literal. Mellor argues that Perdita’s death “embodies Mary Shelley’s recognition that the gender determined role of devoted wife within the bourgeois family is inherently suicidal” because “the wife submerges her identity into that of her husband, sacrificing her to his welfare” (154). In Perdita’s letter to Raymond telling him how she felt when he turned his affections away from her,

she wrote: “The bloom has vanished from my life ... all other men, I never considered nor felt what they were; nor did I look on you as one of them. Separated from them; exalted in my heart; sole possessor of my affections; single object of my hopes, the best half of myself” (109). In the event of his death, having forever lost the only man for her, she becomes a flower in decay, dying as her life has been left with no purpose without him.

### **Idris**

Idris functions as a kind of foil to Mathilda and Perdita in that she has no literary or political ambitions; she is an example of what happens when women’s entire ambitions are invested in being an ideal wife and mother. Idris is introduced by Lionel as such: “Idris, the most affectionate wife, sister and friend, was a tender and loving mother. The feeling was not with her as with many, a pastime; it was a passion” (Shelley 177). Anne Mellor reads Idris as being “portrayed above all as a mother. She is a showy figure, so idealized in her high-born beauty, sensitivity, and loyalty as to be almost an abstraction of female perfection” (154). Suparna Banerjee similarly reads Idris “above all as a mother” (525) as Idris emblemizes “the limitations of the relational and domestic life ... as she is destroyed by maternal anxieties” (525). Banerjee then extends Mellor’s traditional feminist reading of Idris to consider how “woman, perceived as closer to the natural, is identified with the domestic, private sphere” (547), suggesting that as Idris performs her expected domestic roles we can think of her as being closely associated with nature (527-528). When Lionel turns away from public life, he says: “Idris was well content with this resolve of mine. Her native sprightliness needed no undue excitement, and her placid heart reposed contented on my love, the well-being of her children, and the beauty of surrounding nature” (171). Idris is thereby introduced as being primarily associated with the private, domestic, natural sphere.

Critics overlook, however, how Idris is rendered more particularly as a botanical woman, as Lionel, in his desire to possess her as his wife, says: “A few more years dwell in thy native garden, sweet flower, till I by toil and time acquire a right to gather thee” (Shelley 54). The particular flower which Lionel renders her, a “lily” (257), is significant. As Sam George points out,

Linnaeus’s classification of the natural world in *Systema Naturae* (1735) was inspired by Ovidian metamorphoses between plant and human and the language of the Book of Psalms. Significantly, Linnaeus also referred to his wife as ‘my monandrian lily’. The lily symbolised her purity and monandrian, referring to the first Linnaean class Monandria, which is named for the Greek [word meaning] ‘having one husband’ [which] affirmed her chastity. These Ovidian comparisons and gendered analogies between women and flowers were taken up into Darwin’s poem through the Sexual System. ... Darwin begins by projecting an image of blissful monogamy illustrative of the class Monoecia, which has one male stamen and one female pistil, and ends with a tableaux of polygamy and sexual freedom. (106-107)

Likely inspired by the Linnaean botanical classification system which represents the lily as an idealized, chaste wife, Shelley represents Idris as a lily to further highlight how Idris is the most devoted, faithful, and near perfect female in her role as a wife. Perdita and Mathilda are referred to as several different kinds of flowers – Perdita as a violet and a rose, Mathilda as a violet and a lily. Perdita and Mathilda’s renderings as flowers therefore arguably has more to do with the idea that flowers are aesthetic objects, than to emphasize the significance of any particular kind of flower. To compare Mathilda and Perdita to flowers (whether it be violets, roses, or lilies) emphasizes their beauty as objects of male desire. For Idris, on the other hand, as she is only referred to as a lily, the significance of the lily flower in the Linnaean system becomes more pronounced, especially as Idris is set apart and idealized for her near perfect femininity in her roles as wife or mother.

Further, Lionel says that “Her [Idris’s] pride and blameless ambition was to create smiles in all around her” (Shelley 171). Idris is quite literally the ‘flower that smiles in the walk of man’,

Wollstonecraft's example of a woman who happily accepts her lot in gender determined roles which serve men. Idris functions as an example of a woman that bears a 'blameless ambition', who's ambitions are 'blameless' because she only seeks to fulfill her prescribed domestic roles as wife and mother perfectly, rather than seek roles in the public sphere which patriarchal society reserves for men.

Idris has three children with Lionel, the second born dying while Lionel was in Greece. So began Idris' maternal anxieties, as Lionel says: "Before this event [the first death of one of her children], the little beings, sprung from herself, the young heirs of her transient life, seemed to have a sure lease of existence; now she dreaded that the pitiless destroyer might snatch her remaining darlings, as it had snatched their brother" (177-178). The "dread" or maternal anxiety that stems from the deaths of her 'offspring' wears down her health, bringing her close to death. Lionel remarks of their children that, "young and blooming as they were, they would die" (252). Idris's children are 'young and blooming', as they are the offspring of her, a lily flower. Yet, as they are threatened by an untimely death, she becomes a flower in decay, drooping and eventually dying over her maternal anxieties.

The second death of her child Alfred is particularly crippling to her, arguably because Lionel and Idris call him the "child of [their] hopes" (180), placing a great deal of their investment in a future legacy in him. Alfred's education is described in detail, as Lionel writes that "At the beginning of winter our Alfred, now nine years of age, first went to school at Eton. This appeared to him the primary step towards manhood, and he was proportionably pleased" (178). Alfred's education in the public school system is a symbol of his development as a 'man'. Lionel further writes,

It was supreme happiness to Idris and myself, to find the frankness which Alfred's open brow indicated, the intelligence of his eyes, the tempered sensibility of his tones, were not

delusions, but indications of talents and virtues, which would '*grow with his growth, and strengthen with his strength.*' At this period, the termination of an animal's love for its offspring, - the true affection of the human parent commences. We no longer look on this dearest part of ourselves, as a tender plant which we must cherish, or a plaything for an idle hour. We build now on his intellectual faculties, we establish our hopes on his moral propensities. (178, emphasis mine)

Lionel remarks that their son's access to the public school system allows him to "grow" and develop his "intellectual faculties", which sets Alfred apart from the "tender plant[s]" or "idle" playthings which children are without such an education. Alfred is coded a masculine plant that is able to develop rationally, which sets him apart from feminized plants which are rendered "tender" or "idle", effectively plants which are only cultivated for sensuality, or useless objects of desire. Through Alfred, then, Idris and Lionel may "establish [their hopes]" of a future on him their male heir, adequately cultivated for a productive life in the public sphere. Lionel looks onto Alfred as his heir in that respect, as he says "Willingly do I give place to thee, dear Alfred! advance, offspring of tender love, child of our hopes; advance a soldier on the road to which I have been the pioneer" (180). For Idris, though, she is merely the vehicle from which Alfred was the "offspring of tender love", performing reproductive labour in a love union such that Alfred may replace his father in the public sphere. When Alfred dies, the blow to Idris is devastating, as he is where much of her hopes for a future lie.

As Idris fears the death of all of her children, Lionel calls Idris "the anxious mother, my own beloved and drooping Idris" (224). Adrian too tells Lionel, "Her [Idris'] faultless nature, one sum of perfections, is wrapped up in her affections - if they were hurt, she would droop like an unwatered floweret, and the slightest injury they receive is a nipping frost to her. Already she fears for the children she adores, and for you, the father of these, her lover, her husband, protector; and you must be near to support and encourage her" (201). But when Lionel too is touched by plague,

she loses all her strength. With the loss of her children, and the fear of losing her husband, Idris finally dies, a 'drooping' lily nipped by 'frost', or the miserable anxiety of losing those she lives for.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued that Mary Shelley enters into the lively debates on botany and female sexuality which were prominent in her literary and cultural milieu through her engagement with the 'botanical woman' figure in her novels *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*. Following suit from the botanical texts of authors such as Carl Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin, and especially Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley interrogates questions about female sexuality, the role and education of women in society, and marriage through the depiction of women as sexualized plants and their relationships with men. Through these botanical women, I have suggested that Mary Shelley shows how women, when rendered flowers subject to male desire, fail to cultivate their rational minds or to reach their full potential. While men are educated and cultivated to grow their minds, write books, lead leagues of men in politics, women are reared to be decorative or ornamental to men's lives, playing the role of wife or mother. *Mathilda* dies purposeless, a failed wife, mother, and author, her rational potential wasted. Shelley shows that even for those exceptional few, like *Perdita*, whose minds and political talents find a way to grow despite all obstacle, the patriarchal system would find a way to diminish them to the same fates as women like *Idris* whose only ambitions are to be wives or mothers; to die, like flowers in decay.

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