The Legacy of the Ancient Mariner: Mary Shelley's interpretation of 'The Wanderer'

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The Romantic and gothic fascination with Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, is exhibited on many levels. The notion of the Wanderer as a peripatetic solitary, excluded from all conventions of society, as well as the passing of time, fashions and political and world events, was attractive to Romantic writers such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, P. B. Shelley and Byron. One of Coleridge's greatest personifications of the Wanderer was the protagonist of *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* (1798). In this paper, I consider how Coleridge's characterisation of the ancient mariner influenced the works of Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley's characterisation of the main male protagonists in her novels including *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Last Man* (1826), and her short story, *The Mortal Immortal: A Tale* (1833), owe a large debt to Coleridge's characterisation of the ancient mariner as a personification of the Wanderer.

The figure of the Wandering Jew became ambivalent, with many possible interpretations, including that of an oppressed victim, or (anti-)hero, but also, in orthodox terms, of a justly punished offender. According to popular belief in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, Ahasuerus, a Jewish shoemaker, was cursed for taunting Christ on his way to the Crucifixion, and, as a result, was doomed to wander the Earth in perpetuity. As described in Percy's *Reliques*:

> [He] said, 'Away, Thou King of Jews!
> Thou shalt not rest thee here;
> Pass on, thy execution-place
> Thou seest now draweth near'.
>
> And thereupon he thrust Him hence;
> At which our Saviour said,
> I sure will rest, but thou shalt walk...'[1]

Coleridge's ancient mariner, like Ahasuerus, commits a crime against God, by shooting the albatross. Christ, the son of God, destined to be crucified on Earth, is generally understood as being represented in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by the albatross – 'And as it were a Christian soul/ We hailed it in God's name'. Whilst the serious nature of insulting Christ on his way to the Crucifixion is likely to be generally acknowledged, the severity of the mariner's crime depends on how the reader interprets the albatross. The mariner's crime in comparison is miniscule if the killing of the albatross is taken at face value, but if interpreted as symbolic of the assassination of the *One Life* — the fusion between God and Nature, and the expression of God in Nature — then the

[1] Robert Aris Willmott (ed), *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs and Other Pieces of our Earlier Poets, Together with Some Few of Later Date by Thomas Percy,* (London, George Routledge & Sons, 1857), 75

mariner's crime is profound. The albatross eventually falls from the mariner's neck once he is able spontaneously to bless the water snakes, but the legacy is that he, like Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, is fated to wander the Earth telling his story forever.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner was a great influence on the works of second-generation Romantic writers, particularly Mary Shelley, whose novels reveal the fragmentation and disintegration of the family, both as a comment on her personal domestic situation and itinerant lifestyle, and of family as a microcosm of society as a whole.

For Mary Shelley, an appreciation of Coleridge's works had formed part of her unconventional education. Coleridge was just one of the eminent literati who frequently graced the Godwins' home when she was a child. John Williams notes:

> … literary giants, Godwin himself, Sheridan, Thomas Moore, Lamb, Southey, all pass[ed] through the living-room; Samuel Taylor Coleridge would sit there reading from *The Ancient Mariner*, a poem destined to live with Mary for the rest of her life…[2]

Mary Shelley developed a fascination for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which remained with her throughout her life, as it did with Coleridge himself. The notion of the peripatetic story-telling social outcast was something which both could readily identify with. This nebulous archetypal figure appears throughout Mary Shelley's literary works. It is particularly well-documented in her first novel, *Frankenstein* (1818), and many years later in her short story, *The Mortal Immortal: A Tale* (1833), written originally for inclusion in *The Keepsake* for 1834.

Both texts refer to Coleridge's works directly and indirectly. For instance, in *The Mortal Immortal*, Winzy, the protagonist, describes himself in the following terms:

> A sailor without rudder or compass, tossed on a stormy sea — a traveller lost on a wide-spread heath, without landmark or star to guide him - such have I been: more lost, more hopeless than either. A nearing ship, a gleam from some far cot, may save them; but I have no beacon except the hope of death.[3]

What the editors do not indicate is that this one short quotation clearly demonstrates the influence of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Dejection: An Ode*, and even a 1796 letter from Coleridge to John Thelwall.[4] This quote is only

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[2] John Williams, *Mary Shelley: A Literary Life*, (Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 2000), 21

[3] *The Mortal Immortal*, in Betty T. Bennett, and Charles E. Robinson (eds), *The Mary Shelley Reader containing Frankenstein, Mathilda, Tales and Stories, Essays and Reviews, and Letters*, (New York, Oxford University Press,1990), 324

[4] The 1798 version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* contains the following verse:

...Storm and Wind,
A Wind and Tempest strong!
For days and weeks it play'd us freaks –
Like Chaff we drove along. (PW 1, 1, 161) – [note continues next page]

one of many instances of Mary Shelley referencing Coleridge's works. *Frankenstein* also refers to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* several times, both directly and indirectly.

In *The Mortal Immortal*, the very first action undertaken by Winzy is to assure the reader that he is not the Wandering Jew, as he begins to relate his tale:

> The Wandering Jew? — certainly not. More than eighteen centuries have passed over his head. In comparison with him I am a very young Immortal.
>
> Am I, then, immortal? This is a question which I have asked myself, by day and night, for now three hundred and three years, and yet cannot answer it..
>
> …I will tell my story, and my reader shall judge for me. I will tell my story, and so contrive to pass some few hours of a long eternity, become so wearisome to me.[5]

Despite his denials, as Winzy relates the story of his life thus far, he describes many characteristics and circumstances also shared with the ancient mariner and the Wandering Jew. A note to the text helpfully explains how even Winzy's very name points to his true nature: 'winzy - derived from the Scottish term "winze", meaning curse: an appropriate name for the protagonist, who is cursed with eternal life.'[6] Winzy is also based on the wandering alchemist and titular hero of *St Leon* (1799) by Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin. St Leon was also cursed with eternal life through alchemy.

In *Frankenstein,* Robert Walton, the ship's captain, is the first character to identify himself with the figure of Coleridge's ancient mariner:

> I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow,' but I shall kill no albatross; therefore do not be alarmed for my safety or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the 'Ancient Mariner'. You will smile at my allusion, but I will disclose a secret. I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets.[7]

Dejection: An Ode describes the terror of a young girl lost on a heath:

> ... a little child
> Upon a lonesome wild,
> Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
> And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
> And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear. (PW 1, 2, 701-2)

Coleridge's letter to John Thelwall of Tuesday 17 December, 1796, contains the phrase '...yet the Light shall stream to a far distance from the taper in my cottage window.' This letter also discusses Coleridge's ill-health, the proposed Pantisocracy, and invites Thelwall to join in with 'a little sparring about poetry' (CL I 277)

[5] Bennett and Robinson, 314

[6] *The Mortal Immortal* in Harriet Devine Jump (ed), *Nineteenth-century Women: A Routledge Anthology*, (London, Routledge, 1998), 83

[7] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus*, (London, Penguin Books 1994), 19-20

However, Walton, in some respects, is far from being an ancient mariner figure, and more closely resembles the Wedding Guest, who 'cannot chuse but hear' (PW 1, 1, 372). From the start of *Frankenstein*, despite his apparent overwhelming Faustian thirst for knowledge displayed in his first three letters, Walton is portrayed as gentle and kind, giving food, shelter, medical aid and a sympathetic, if involuntary, ear to Victor Frankenstein and subsequently to his Creature. Circumstantially, as Captain of the only ship for miles around, Walton has been selected as the audience for the tales of both. He comments: 'Thus has a week passed away, while I have listened to the strangest tale that ever imagination formed.'[8]

Traits of the ancient mariner creep in when Walton begins to relay his strange tale to his sister, Margaret, through his letters:

> So strange an accident has happened... that I cannot forbear recording it, although it is very probable that you will see me before these papers come into your possession.[9]

They are exclusively addressed to her, and so presumably are not intended for the eyes of anyone else – 'The Marinere hath his will' (PW 1, 1, 372). Walton is not only compelled to hear what Victor has to say, but also to record it for posterity:

> I have resolved every night, when I am not imperatively occupied by my duties, to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what has related during the day. If I should be engaged, I will at least make notes.[10]

Along with Walton and the Creature, Victor shares the compulsion of the ancient mariner (and also of Ahasuerus) to relate his story, selecting his rescuer Walton as the auditor of his tale. Unlike the ancient mariner, Victor carefully explains to Walton his reasons for choosing him:

> I do not know that the relation of my disasters will be useful to you; yet, when I reflect that you are pursuing the same course, exposing yourself to the same dangers which have rendered me what I am, I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale… nothing can alter my destiny; listen to my history, and you will perceive how irrevocably it is determined.[11]

This is a stark warning from Victor to Walton, not to seek an excess of power or knowledge, by informing him of the consequences of this action. This warning comes directly from the 'Modern Prometheus' of the novel's sub-title,

[8] ibid, 203
[9] ibid, 23
[10] ibid, 29
[11] ibid, 28-9

urging Walton metaphorically not to steal the fire of the Gods.

The Creature is depicted as an innocent, corrupted by society. He is similar to both the ancient mariner and Ahasuerus in the sense that he is cursed and ostracised by society at large. The Creature turns to crime following his rejection by Victor; bereft of paternal love, he learns to hate society as much as he is hated by his creator. Victor Frankenstein is the audience to whom the Creature seeks to relate his tale; the one who 'cannot chuse but hear' (PW 1, 1, 372), and who knows that he must grant an audience to his Creature, as part of the penance for his own crime, that of having usurped God by creating a living being.

In *The Mortal Immortal*, Winzy also is eager to preserve his story for posterity:

> … a miserable vanity has caused me to pen these pages. I would not die, and leave no name behind… if I survive, my name shall be recorded as one of the most famous among the sons of men; and, my task achieved.[12]

The first event which Winzy relates is his crime. Instead of insulting Christ, or stealing fire from the Gods, or shooting the albatross, Winzy's crime is to expressly disobey the orders of his employer, the alchemist Cornelius Agrippa, which were to awaken him when Agrippa's potion began to change colour, and not to consume it. Winzy describes the compulsion which overcame him:

> …the vessel seemed one globe of living radiance, lovely to the eye, and most inviting to the taste. The first thought, instinctively inspired by the grosser sense, was, I will – I must drink.[13]

The consumption of Agrippa's elixir gives Winzy eternal life, as it also did St Leon. Like both the ancient mariner and Ahasuerus, Winzy eventually becomes a figure of suspicion because his wife, Bertha, ages, but he does not. Because of this, they are forced to remain constantly on the move:

> It was a cruel thing to transport poor Bertha from her native village, and the friends of her youth, to a new country, new language, new customs. The strange secret of my destiny rendered this removal immaterial to me…[14]

Frankenstein (1818) contains three wanderers; Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature, all of whom take turns to narrate the action as it unfolds, and all of whom could be considered to share characteristics with the ancient mariner and Ahasuerus. Walton identifies himself as a traveller and explorer in letters to his sister, Margaret W. Saville, otherwise 'MWS', a self-incarnation of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. However, Walton's journey is not

[12] *The Mortal* Immortal, in Bennett and Robinson, 325-6
[13] ibid, 317
[14] ibid , 323

profitless or aimless. His goal is to discover the fabled North-West Passage, a route to the North Pacific through Russia and the seas surrounding the North Pole.

The purpose of the Creature's wanderings, as soon as he learns the story of his own creation, is to seek out Victor, to ask questions relating to his creation, secondly to request a bride, and thirdly to reduce Victor's life to the same miserable state as his own if Victor refuses his demands. In this sense, the Creature is the opposite of the ancient mariner, who tells his story to the people he meets *en route*; the Creature has to travel at night, alone, and unable to seek advice or directions from anyone:

> My travels were long and the sufferings I endured intense… I travelled only at night, fearful of encountering the visage of a human being.[15]

The wanderings of Victor also have a purpose. Towards the end of *Frankenstein*, he travels to seek the knowledge and materials to build his Creature a bride, in return for which the Creature has promised to leave him, and his family, in peace. The Creature's desire to banish loneliness by spending eternity with one of his own kind is shared by Winzy in *The Mortal Immortal*:

> Thus I have lived on for many a year — alone, and weary of myself — desirous of death, yet never dying - a mortal immortal. Neither ambition nor avarice can enter my mind, and the ardent love that gnaws at my heart never to be returned — ever to find an equal on which to expend itself — lives there only to torment me.[16]

On catching sight of the Creature watching him working on the construction of the female creature, Victor comes to his senses, and realises that he must not continue with his second creation:

> As I looked on him, his countenance expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery. I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and… tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged. The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew.[17]

Victor's destruction of the female Creature was a declaration of war, and as a result, he spends the rest of his life fleeing from the wrath of his Creature. Unlike the ancient mariner, and possibly the Creature, Victor is not doomed to eternal suffering, as he dies on board Walton's ship, prematurely aged by his experiences. At the end of *Frankenstein*, the reader is left wondering whether

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[15] Shelley, 134
[16] *The Mortal* Immortal, in Bennett and Robinson, 325
[17] Shelley, 161

the Creature is in fact dead, or whether, like the ancient mariner, he may be immortal, as Mary Shelley is not specific on this point, stating only: 'He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance.'[18]

An important link between *Frankenstein* and *The Mortal Immortal* is the presence of Cornelius Agrippa, the 15th-century alchemist, occultist, and wanderer. In *Frankenstein*, young Victor acquires a copy of Agrippa's works whilst on holiday with his family. They are dismissed by his father as 'sad trash', and he advises Victor to 'not waste your time upon this.'[19] This marks the beginning of Victor's fascination with the occult side of science and pseudo-science:

> Under the guidance of my new preceptors I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life.[20]

The 'preceptors' referred to by Victor Frankenstein are the occultists Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus, all of whom were also wanderers at various points during their lives.

The outcomes of Agrippa's 'pseudo-science' or alchemy in both works could not be more different. Crosbie Smith states:

> Medieval alchemy… was also… concern[ed] with material and spiritual perfection. Perfection would be achieved by the liberation of material and other earthly substances from a temporal existence in which all objects, living and non-living, were subject to ageing and decay… Immortality or eternal youth would achieve material perfection for human beings—[21]

Winzy's punishment is eternal life, but coupled with the comparative blessing of eternal youth and beauty; whereas the Creature, not human but made in human form, from decaying human body parts, is cursed with the abominable ugliness representing the legacy of his rushed creation. Victor recalls:

> I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.[22]

The author and protagonist of *The Divine Comedy* (1308-21), Dante, wanders through 'the three realms of the afterlife: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven'.[23] Dante himself spent the last twenty years of his life wandering throughout northern

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[18] ibid, 215
[19] ibid, 37
[20] ibid, 38-9
[21] Crosbie Smith, *Frankenstein and Natural Magic*, in:
Stephen Bann (ed), *Frankenstein: Creation and Monstrosity*, (London, Reaktion Books, 1994), 45-6
[22] Shelley, 56
[23] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Translated, with notes, by Henry Francis Cary*, (Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 2009), xiii

Italy.

Another of Mary Shelley's later novels – *The Last Man* (1826) – also contains wanderers. The protagonist (and future last man) Lionel Verney, and his sister Perdita, are both initially characterized as the Romantic 'child of nature', unaccompanied children who roam the countryside, delighting in the natural world. Verney states: 'My first real knowledge of myself was as an unprotected orphan among the valleys and fells of Cumberland'.[24] As he grows up, Verney's solitariness takes on a more sinister character:

> … untaught in refined philosophy, and pursued by a restless feeling of degradation from my true station in society, I wandered among the hills of civilized England as [an] uncouth… savage…[25]

He becomes a social outcast, in a similar vein to the Creature, the ancient mariner, Cain, or Ahasuerus. Perdita (her name being Latin for 'the lost one') is also depicted initially in this way:

> All the time she could command she spent in solitude. She would ramble to the most unfrequentd (sic) places, and scale dangerous heights, that in those unvisited spots she might wrap herself in loneliness... she lost herself delightedly in these self-created wanderings, and returned with unwilling spirit to the dull detail of common life.[26]

Mary Shelley indicates that their poverty-stricken and deprived, friendless, upbringing was the cause of this social ostracism, as it was with Frankenstein's Creature, as I noted earlier.

Towards the start of *The Last Man*, Verney experiences a moment of conversion similar to the moment when the albatross falls from the neck of Coleridge's ancient mariner, allowing him to pray. This happens following Verney's first conversation with Adrian, the rightful King. Adrian speaks warmly about Verney's dead father, which is unexpected, as Verney is waiting to be punished, after being caught poaching game on Adrian's land. Verney reacts to Adrian's generosity:

> … and then quite overcome, I wept aloud. As this gust of passion passed from me, I felt more composed… I was as a child lisping its devotions…[27]

Mary Shelley expresses Verney's moment of conversion by employing imagery from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and an echo from Coleridge's *Pains of Sleep* (1816):

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[24] Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), 13
[25] ibid, 14
[26] ibid, 15-6
[27] ibid, 29

O'ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child;
And… thus by tears subdued
My anguish to a milder mood…[28]

To conclude, I have demonstrated the influence of Coleridge's ancient mariner on the works of Mary Shelley. For a variety of reasons, not least among them being her gender, previous generations of critics have tended not to view Mary Shelley's works from a political stand-point. This situation began to change in the 1970s, and Mary Shelley is now increasingly viewed as a political writer on a level comparable with her husband, P. B. Shelley. Both writers were influenced by archetypal cultural forms that took on profound significance during the late Eighteenth/ early Ninteenth-Century, not least among them being Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, who appears repeatedly in various guises, including that of the ancient mariner. As I have demonstrated, there are many echoes of Coleridge's works to be found in those of Mary Shelley.

Frankenstein (1818), Mary Shelley's first novel, featured three characters who were both wanderers and story-tellers: the ship's Captain Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature, all of whom also bore more than a passing resemblance to Coleridge's ancient mariner.

As I have shown, the persona of the wanderer/ ancient mariner also made appearances in other later texts by Mary Shelley, such as *The Last Man* (1826) and *The Mortal Immortal* (1833). Mary Shelley was greatly interested in science, with its attendant theological and political significance, and also in the pseudo-science of alchemy, both of which are explored in the above texts. Through her characterisations of the protagonists in both *Frankenstein* and *The Mortal Immortal*, Mary Shelley reveals how science can become dangerously obsessive, leading the scientist to dabble with the secrets of human existence and everlasting life. Coleridge was also interested in the emergent science, but for him, it was further proof, if proof was needed, of a benevolent God; the creator of an ordered Universe. For Mary Shelley, the possibility of everlasting life as an expression of disobedience to God was represented by the power of science, and the theoretical possibility of alchemy. For Coleridge, the possibilities of everlasting life were entirely in terms of redemption and spiritual resurrection. This is revealed in the on-going punishment of the ancient mariner, despite his repentance, and search for redemption; as stated in Coleridge's text, 'the man hath penance done, and penance more will do'.[29]

[28] PW 1, 2, 754
[29] PW1, 1, 403