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*Shelley, Mrs. Mason and the Devil Incarnate:
An Unpublished Poem*

BY PAULA R. FELDMAN

"She is everything that is amiable and wise You will think it my fate either to find or to imagine some lady of 45, very unprejudiced and philosophical, who has entered deeply into the best and selectest spirit of the age, with enchanting manners, and a disposition rather to like me, in every town that I inhabit. But certainly such this lady is."¹ So Shelley characterized Mrs. Mason, a central figure in the Pisan circle who in turn portrayed her friend with wit and humor in a hitherto unpublished poem entitled "Twelve cogent reasons for supposing P.B. Sh-ll-y to be the D-v-l Inc-m-t-."²

Margaret Jane King Moore, second Countess Mount Cashell (1773–1835),³ was, when Shelley knew her, separated from her husband and living in Pisa under the name "Mrs. Mason" as the common-law wife of George William Tighe. She was an Irish republican and freethinking disciple of her one-time governess and friend Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1791, she married Stephen, second Earl of Mount Cashell, and pursued her interest in Irish and English politics despite the responsibilities of a growing family. When she visited London in 1794, the period of the Treason Trials, she mixed with Hardy and other leading Radicals. It was at this time, too, that she became involved in the United Irish party, founded by Wolfe Tone, which planned the Rebellion of 1798.

Lady Mount Cashell first met the philosopher William Godwin, who had been the late Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, in Dublin in July 1800, and they began a correspondence. She saw him again in London

¹5 April 1820, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F.L. Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), II, 180.

²For permission to publish this poem, I am grateful to Signora Flavia Farina-Cini, widow of Signor Neri Farina-Cini, Lady Mount Cashell's great grandson. The manuscript is housed in the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin (MS File Shelley, PB, Misc B). My thanks also go to Signora Margherita Santi Farina for kind suggestions regarding the reading of the manuscript.

³Biographical information is from Edward C McAleer, *The Sensitive Plant: A Life of Lady Mount Cashell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

in 1801 before departing for France where she met Godwin's radical friend, Thomas Holcroft, as well as Thomas Paine, John Philip Kemble, Helen Maria Williams and others. In Rome, early in 1804, she became acquainted with George William Tighe, the man for whom she would eventually leave her husband and seven children. When Lord and Lady Mount Cashell parted in Germany in 1805, they were never to meet again.

Shortly afterwards, she returned to England where Tighe joined her, and she adopted the name "Mrs. Mason" after a character meant to represent the author in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life*. Mrs. Mason was to dedicate her intellectual energies toward realizing two projects Mary Wollstonecraft had not lived to accomplish: a series of children's books and a book on the physical education of children. In December 1807, after several meetings with Godwin, his Juvenile Library published her *Stories of Old Daniel*. Later she was to publish the much praised *Advice to young mothers on the practical education of children, by a grandmother* (1823).

Mrs. Mason had two daughters by Tighe: Laurette, born in 1809, and Nerina, born in 1815 after their removal the previous year to Italy where they settled in Pisa at Casa Silva. There they avoided the English and those who had known them before their elopement, mixing mainly with Italians. Mrs. Mason occupied herself with medicine and ran an unofficial dispensary for the Pisan poor.

It was on 30 September 1819 that the Shelleys and Mrs. Mason met in Pisa.⁴ She warmly welcomed the poet whose work she admired and his wife, Mary, the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. During the time the Shelleys lived in Florence, Mrs. Mason corresponded with them, advising them about Italian life, discussing politics and exchanging books. In one instance, when Shelley inveighed against Castlereagh, Mrs. Mason wrote Mary: ". . . Mr. Shelley ought to endeavour to turn his thoughts from what he cannot mend, and what is only likely to produce new subjects of vexation. Since my country sank never to rise again, I have been a cool politician; but I cannot forget how I once felt, and can still sympathize with those capable of similar feelings."⁵ Mrs. Mason recommended her friend Andrea Vaccá, Professor of Surgery, who was to treat Shelley after he moved to Pisa in late January 1820.

⁴*Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947, p. 124. There is some indication that Mrs. Mason may have met Shelley at Godwin's home as early as October 1812 (McAleer, p. 123).

⁵McAleer, p. 139.

During the early part of 1820, the Shelleys saw Mrs. Mason and her family almost exclusively. Visiting almost daily, they became increasingly close.⁶ The Shelleys found at Casa Silva not only enlightened conversation and wit, but a fine library from which they borrowed books, many on Irish history. It was with Mrs. Mason that Shelley read the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus in April,⁷ and she is widely believed to have been the inspiration for Shelley's poem "The Sensitive Plant," composed in March 1820.

An incident in which Shelley was allegedly attacked for his atheism was probably the occasion for Mrs. Mason's playful poem, "Twelve cogent reasons for supposing P.B. Sh-ll-y to be the D-v-l Inc-rn-t-." Every Sunday the Reverend Dr. George Frederick Nott (1767-1841) held religious services for the English inhabitants of Pisa on the ground floor of the *Tre Palazzi di Chiesa*, the same house in which the Shelleys had taken rooms by the end of October 1821. Mary Shelley attended at least four times.⁸ She explains:

In the piano sotto di nos there is a Reverend Divine who preaches and prays, and sent us so many messages that I now make one of his congregation, and that from a truly Christian motive—Vaccá reported that this Doct^r Nott said in Society that Shelley was a *scelerato* [villain]. We told Taaffe and the little gossip reported it to all the world. Doct^r Nott heard of it, and sent a message by Medwin to deny it, and put our absence from Church on the score of this report, so to prove that I forgave or disbelieved, I went once, and then that I might not appear to despise his preaching, I went again and again.⁹

When she found the sermons directed against atheism, however, it was difficult for her and for others to resist the suspicion that Nott had chosen to attack the poet through his wife. For this reason, these sermons created quite a stir among the English at Pisa, and Mary Shelley wrote indignantly to Nott asking whether any personal allusion had been in-

⁶See *Journal*, pp. 128-132.

⁷See Shelley's letter to T.J. Hogg, 20 April 1820, in *Letters*, II, 186.

⁸She attended on 9 and 16 December 1821 and 24 February and 3 March 1822 (*Journal*, pp. 162, 163, 169, 173).

⁹Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, 18 January 1822, in Frederick L. Jones, "Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne: New Letters, 1818-1822," *Studies in Philology*, 52 (January 1955), 71.

Twelve cogent reasons for supposing P. B. Sh-ll-y
to be the D-v-l Inc-rn-t

'Tis often thought by learned men
That Satan walks the earth again;
And some ev'n go so far's to say,
He neer one hour has been away,
Since first to Eden's garden went he
As Dame Eve's Cavalier's Servant:
But always in one form or other
Contrives the Lord's elect to bother.
I oft with holy zeal had tried
To find him out; but he defied
My efforts almost half a century,
And (though I scarcely dared to venture) I
Still sometimes thought a doubtful matter
This Devil, who makes such a clatter
Among the Saints & the Saintesses,
And teaches them such pranks (God bless us!)
As frighten unbelieving sinners,
And give the holy priests good dinners.

Excerpt from the opening verses of Mrs. Mason's "Twelve cogent reasons for supposing P.B. Sh-ll-y to be the D-v-l Inc-rn-t." Pisa, ca. 1822. The poem appears on a single sheet folded once and written upon recto and verso, totaling four pages.

tended. He paid the Shelleys a visit and emphatically denied it.¹⁰

Though Shelley seems to have remained unruffled by the preacher, Byron took offense at Nott's attack on the Satanic school and at his denunciation of *Cain* as blasphemous. He viewed Nott's actions as the embodiment of priestly malevolence by one who had revised the ninth commandment to read: "Thou shalt, Nott, bear false witness against thy neighbor."¹¹ He satirized the preacher in a poem entitled "The New Vicar of Bray" in which he said of Nott, "'Gainst Freethinkers,' he roars, / 'You should all block your doors / Or be named in the Devil's indentures:'" and concluded, "In a very snug way / You may still preach and pray, / And from bishop sink into backbiter!" Mrs. Mason's amused assessment of Shelley's Satanism, probably written in the early months of 1822, follows:

Twelve cogent reasons for supposing P.B. Sh-ll-y to
be the D-v-l Inc-rn-t- —

'Tis often thought by learned men
That Satan walks the earth again;
And some ev'n go so far's to say,
He ne'er one hour has been away,
Since first to Eden's garden went he
As Dame Eve's Cavalier' Servente:¹²
But always in one form or other
Contrives the Lord's elect to bother.
I oft with holy zeal had tried
To find him out; but he defied
My efforts almost half a century,
And (though I scarcely dared to venture) I
Still sometimes thought a doubtful matter
This Devil, who makes such a clatter
Among the Saints & the Saintesses,
And teaches them such pranks (God bless us!)

¹⁰See Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne 7 March 1872 in *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. F.L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), I, 160.

¹¹Newman Ivey White, *Shelley* (New York: Knopf, 1947), II, 339-40.

¹²"Cavalier' Servente": Since it was not customary for an Italian husband and wife to be seen together outside their own home, a *cavalier servente*, and sometimes several if the lady were of high rank, would escort her in public. His role could be that of guardian, lover or servant.

As frighten unbelieving sinners,
 And give the holy priests good dinners.
 I must confess, for want of parsons
 (Who in this popish land are scarce ones)
 Churches with pews (for pews¹³ none add)
 Un=Crucified & un=Madonna'd,
 Free from the sad abomination
 Of odorifrous exhalation;
 <And> Breathing alone such vapours pure,
 As pious Protestants endure,
 To shew their faith in holy writ;
 In Luther's or in Calvin's wit.
 For want of all these saving aids
 I thought (how conscience me upbraids!)
 That Satan was a mere non=entity,
 A shadow which had no identity,
 The blind caprice of troubled brain
 Seeking for something wise in vain.
 Such were my silly dreams <at> when first
 Conviction met me, and disperst
 All doubts; shewing that but too well I
 Might see the Devil in P.B. Shelley.
 Of this sad truth are proofs abundant,
 To write one half would be redundant;
 But twelve I will select, to shew
 That Satan still walks to & fro,
 And without doubt's the cause of all
 The ills which Kings & Queens¹⁴ befall.

Proof 1st First, all who see his face, observe
 A sensibility of nerve
 That's quite unnatural to man,
 And shews the Devil soon began

¹³"pews": See "odorifrous exhalation" three lines down.

¹⁴"Queens": a reference to ills having recently befallen Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821) wife of George IV who wanted to divorce her. Upon acceding to the crown on 29 June 1820, George IV had Queen Caroline's name removed from the prayers for the royal family, and she was later tried for adultery. In her defiance of the King, she became something of a heroine. The popular excitement and scandal which shook the throne were great even among the English at the Baths of San Giuliano where the Shelleys were staying in August of 1820 when Shelley began writing "Oedipus Tyrannus; or Swellfoot the Tyrant" a satirical drama inspired in part by these events.

To make his nest in Shelley's gizzard,
Who straight became a dreadful wizard.

Proof 2nd Seeking good Christians to devour,
He clapped his claw in early hour
On orthodoxy's lulling preacher;
Made him a philosophic teacher,
To lead his pious flock astray
In toleration's wicked way.

Proof 3rd Then set gold traps for honour'd sage,
And filled his mind with Mammon's rage,
So that the voice which gained applause
While erst employed in virtue's cause,
And oft so well of Justice spoke,
Can now no power but Wealth invoke.¹⁵

Proof 4th Next good dull folks (in Study small)
Frugal in food, in hats, in all,
He lends three hundred foul temptations;
So wafts them off to distant nations,
To cut a dash in Paris town,
Which surely marks them for his own—¹⁶

Proof 5th Who hears him talk of Hell's delights,
(That red hot furnace which affrights

¹⁵An allusion to Shelley's father-in-law, William Godwin, author of *Political Justice*, who badgered Shelley constantly for money.

¹⁶The "good dull folks" are John (?-1836) and Maria Gisborne (1770-1836) who had been living on a small income in Italy. Shelley tried to aid them financially by investing in a project of their son, Henry Reveley, who planned to build a steamboat to ply between Leghorn, Genoa and Marseilles. Records show that Shelley subsidized the project beginning on 7 December 1819 with one hundred pounds and with another hundred pounds on 23 December (White, *Shelley*, II, 164). Apparently by the time Mrs. Mason's poem was composed, Shelley had furnished them another hundred pounds. In May 1820 the Gisbornes left Italy for a visit to England, stopping in Paris on their way. The Shelleys' relationship with the Gisbornes was strained upon the latter's return to Leghorn in October. Finally Shelley became understandably indignant when Reveley presented Mr. Gisborne's proposal that the steamboat project be abandoned unless Shelley could come up with another four hundred crowns. Shelley refused and wrote to Claire Clairmont that he assured Reveley ". . . I should take some pains to acquaint my friends with the vile treatment which I had received from him and his family." Shelley added: "The Gisbornes are. . . altogether the most filthy and odious animals with which I ever came in contact" (29 October 1820, *Letters*, II, 243). In a few months, though, the families were once again on friendly terms.

Those worthy souls whose faith ne'er fails
In fire & brimstone, horns & tails)
And sees him chuckle at the thought
Of myriads, who must there be brought,
Can never question that his home
Is somewhere near that dev'lish dome.

- Proof 6th All unknown tongues he speaks at will;
And this another proof is still,
For Satan ever has been known
To strange outlandish lingos prone:
And when exorcised by a Priest,
Has always talked Latin at least.
- Proof 7th Oft he cajoleth simple souls
When with kind soothing looks, he strolls
About; and helps the sick & poor;
Feeds one & pays for t'others cure.
Little they know the reason why:
He fears lest these in grace should die,
And so to Heaven from him escape,
Though Hell with all its might should gape.
- Proof 8th Whene'er he <might> meets with folks so wicked
That such black crimes they do not stick at
As living without visit=paying,
Or daily gossipping, or praying;
Who laugh at holy priests & kings
And queens & other sacred things:
With these he feels in near relation,
Brothers & sisters of damnation—
- Proof 9th But when he meets the Lord's elect
None who behold but must suspect
That piety puts him to pain
For, as if he were a snake again
He twists & winds about, & tries
To shun the gaze of Christian eyes;
And when no other means avail,
Springs from his chair & turns his tail.
- Proof 10th With learning of a Grecian sage,
And genius of an Attic age,
No mark of arrogance he shews,
As would the mortal wight disclose.

So 'tis not possible that he
Can other than old Satan be—

Proof 11th In holy places ev'n he lurks
To carry on his sinful works.
With looks as harmless as a child,
And words of blasphemy so mild,
Corrupts the spouses of the Lord
And makes them speak in tongues abhorred—
All mischief quietly he plans,
The flame of every ill he fans;
Makes nubile spinsters lose their beauty:

Proof 12th And matrons old forget their duty.
Witness alas! this dogg'rel rhyme;
Whose writer should have all this time
Been otherwise employed: and now
Can only wish it had been so—
But when the Devil drives, they say
No mortal can direct the way————