

**The Disruptive Power of Frame Narratives In  
Mary Shelley's *Keepsake Tales***

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## Abstract

Thanks to the success of *Frankenstein*, scholars have begun to analyze one of Mary Shelley's signature techniques, the frame narrative, within her other novels. However, scholarly discourse on the subject routinely leaves out one aspect of Shelley's oeuvre that has received relatively little attention in general — her short stories for *The Keepsake* (1828-1857). In this essay, I propose that Shelley deliberately uses frame narratives in her short stories to both illuminate and deconstruct the structural, temporal and ideological constraints imposed upon her by publishing within the periodical space. Drawing on narratological and feminist readings of Shelley's work, I illustrate how two of Shelley's framed tales, "The Sisters of Albano" (1829) and "The Swiss Peasant" (1831), subtly call into question the "cult of beauty" and Romantic aestheticization of the "ordinary" within *The Keepsake* and other literary annuals. This argument thus fills a critical void in Shelley studies by properly contextualizing her tales within their own framing device, the literary annual itself.

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*“The real heart of the story had better remain in abeyance  
till I run the hall of my labours.”*

—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, letter to Frederic Mansel Reynolds (unpublished)

Thanks to the success of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s fiction, particularly her sophisticated use of frame narratives, has received such widespread critical attention that scholars are now beginning to examine this signature narrative technique within her later novels. However, such analyses have routinely left out one area of Mary Shelley’s oeuvre that has received relatively little attention in general — her short stories for *The Keepsake* (1828-1857) and other literary annuals. This lack of critical attention can be attributed in part to their original medium of publication. Developed as part of the pre-Victorian print culture of the 1820s and 1830s, the annuals have been characterized as objects of “frivolous and feminine consumerism ... both now and in their own day.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, until recently, the annuals were scarcely seen as “legitimately literary topics for study.”<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, these attitudes are evolving, and I propose that in examining Shelley’s frame narratives within the context of the annuals, we can observe an interesting dialectical negotiation she maintains between the restrictions imposed by the annuals’ limiting structure and her own artistic integrity. In short, Shelley uses frame narratives to both illuminate and deconstruct the structural, temporal and ideological constraints imposed upon her by publishing within the periodical space.

In this essay, I will examine two of Shelley’s *Keepsake* tales that explicitly use frame narratives to such disruptive ends. In “The Sisters of Albano” (1829), we can see Shelley both harness and subtly critique the “cult of beauty” *The Keepsake* and other annuals upheld through the use of her frame narrative. In “The Swiss Peasant” (1831), Shelley expands this subversion to the Romantic aestheticization of the “ordinary” that annuals like *The Keepsake* sought to commercialize (to the consternation of their critics). Therefore, while Shelley willingly chooses and even perhaps

embraces the idea of publishing within such a strict medium, her framed tales subtly subvert those impositions that would otherwise undermine her authorial control.

### **Ideological Control and Narrative Time Within *The Keepsake***

It would have been easy for Mary Shelley to write her stories without their introductory frames, so why did she include them? One reason could be that in structuring her stories this way, Shelley draws attention to the ideological power of the genre in which she is writing — in other words, that *The Keepsake* and other annuals are themselves framing devices. Indeed, scholarship on Shelley's short stories takes this fact for granted, as most scholars seem to assume that Shelley's work for the annuals was simply an exercise or a chore, to the detriment of the artistry found within her novels.<sup>3</sup> Such assumptions reflect the scholarly disenfranchisement of Shelley's work for the annuals and perpetuate the conventional view that all writing for the annuals was "frivolous" work done out of necessity, though even prominent male writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Tennyson published within them. Far from simply being a means for supporting herself — which Charlotte Sussman reminds us is a perfectly natural reason to write, and betrays a sexist critical bias when it comes to women's writing in particular<sup>4</sup> — Shelley's choice to publish within the annuals was a strategic business move because she recognized that the annuals were part of a popular and growing market of literary consumerism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in structuring her stories with frame narratives, Shelley mirrors the structure of her medium, in that they are both multivocal accounts written for the purposes of commercial entertainment.

Moreover, if we agree with Mary Poovey that Shelley's later work "suggests that even the most orthodox propriety could not wholly silence female desire,"<sup>6</sup> then Shelley's use of frame narratives reveals how the conventions of propriety marketed by *The Keepsake* and other annuals were constructed and thereby controlled by the commodification of literature. Both of the embedded tales within "The Sisters of Albano" and "The Swiss Peasant" subvert conventional

ideologies regarding romance, female desire and the artistic that their frames — and the framing structure of *The Keepsake* — imposes on them. As an author who sought to balance the “ideological extremes” of progressive radicalism and feminine propriety throughout her career,<sup>7</sup> Shelley thus raises the same types of disruptive, early feminist concerns within these tales as those found within her novels.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Shelley’s frame narratives call attention to the paradoxical relationship between time and periodical literature, what Margaret Beetham calls the “open-ended and end-stopped” nature of periodicals.<sup>9</sup> In both “The Sisters of Albano” and “The Swiss Peasant,” the stories embedded within the frame narratives are written accounts of past events, and are therefore “closed” within the narrative arc of the story (and *The Keepsake* itself). However, both stories resist this closure because the embedded tales are recounted in the reader’s present, being transcribed narratives of stories related to the frame narrator by a different (female) author. This blurring of narrative voice thus allows for “the possibility of alternative meanings”<sup>10</sup> and leaves the overall story “open” to interpretation. Moreover, readers (and scholars) may skip over the framed tale entirely to focus on the “main” or “real” story (as previous scholarship has done), reading non-sequentially, much like how they might peruse the entire volume of *The Keepsake* itself.

Additionally, these stories, like the periodical itself, disrupt the conventional narratological structure of beginning, middle, and end, because the stories’ beginnings are fluid — do they begin with the frame narrative or with the embedded tale? An analogous question may be asked about *The Keepsake* because of its “time-extended” or serial nature<sup>11</sup> — does the word “*Keepsake*” indicate a singular volume or the periodical’s entire print run? Similar to how Sofia Thomas describes the disruptive nature of the preface within Shelley’s *The Last Man*,<sup>12</sup> the frame narratives in Shelley’s *Keepsake* tales constitute a “beginning” of sorts, and yet the actual sequences of events have already taken place in the past. Even the act of recording the embedded tales is figured in the past, since both frame narrators indicate their inspiration to write arises from their presumably recent travels.

These temporal disruptions unsettle the supposed finality of the stories' meanings, because the act of recording past events shapes how they are interpreted by the narrator *and* the reader in the present. Thus, time within Shelley's framed tales becomes a circular vanishing point, where the tale has simultaneously "ended" but is always and already being recounted for the *Keepsake* reader. This recursive telling and retelling invites readers to consider the "sequence of narrative acts and, from that sequence, [attempt] to trace the threads of their serial influence,"<sup>13</sup> that is, the influence of the embedded tale on both the frame narrative and *The Keepsake* itself.

Therefore, when properly contextualized, Shelley's framed stories become not so much disjointed narratives written for the sake of her subsistence, but salient comments on the control that print culture exerts on her work as an artist and on her contemporary audience.

### **"The Sisters of Albano"**

"The Sisters of Albano" has traditionally been read as indicative of the type of sentimentalized tales found within literary annuals. As Charles Robinson writes, the story "manifests the deficiencies of some of the narratives included in the English Annuals: a thin plot; an explicit moral lesson that is not always integrated with the plot; and a narrative that is but tangentially related to the accompanying plate."<sup>14</sup> A quick, surface reading of this story reinforces Robinson's comments. The main narrative revolves around the eponymous sisters, Maria and Anina, who live with their father in the hills surrounding Lake Albano in Italy. Upon the age of maturity, the elder sister, Maria, enters a convent, and without the supervision of her mother-sister, the younger Anina falls in love with a *banditti* named Domenico. Domenico is both a romantic outlaw and forbidden lover, because he is a guerilla fighter against Napoleon's army, which occupies and controls the countryside. The French soldiers besiege Domenico's gang in a nearby village, and imprison Anina for trying to smuggle food into them. Maria visits her sister in jail and

attempts to rescue her by switching clothes with her, reasoning that the soldiers will “dare not murder the innocent, a nun!” (60)<sup>15</sup> once they learn of her duplicity. However, the French prove to be much crueler than Maria imagines — “one peasant girl to them was the same as another” (63) — and Maria is shot in Anina’s place. Meanwhile, Domenico and his men are slaughtered while attempting to rescue Maria. The tale concludes with Anina taking Catholic vows herself in repentance for her youthful passion, and wishing only “to find repose in the grave” (64).

If we read this narrative as the *entire* narrative, Robinson’s assessment seems accurate, but the story’s frame narrative complicates such a reading. The tale opens with the description of a “pleasure-seeking party” (51) consisting of the male narrator (presumably a British tourist), the Italian Countess Atanasia D—, her children, and a few unnamed others. After visiting the lake, the ruins of Cicero’s villa, and “other curiosities of the place,” the party reposes on a hillside, from which the narrator spies a few figures below inspecting “the stores of a pedlar [*sic*]” (51, 53). These figures are illustrated in the lower right foreground of the story’s plate engraving, a landscape of Lake Albano painted by renowned Romantic painter J. M. W. Turner. The narrator “fancies” that these peasants are a bandit and his lover, to which the Countess replies, “You speak lightly of such a combination ... as if it must not in its nature be the cause of dreadful tragedies. The mingling of love with crime is a dread conjunction” (53). She then shares that she knew such a pair in her youth, and after much pressing by the narrator and the entire party, she reluctantly tells her “tale of sorrow” (54) — that is, the tale of Maria and Anina. Therefore, the impetus for the tale of the sisters of Albano is the male narrator’s assumption that the picturesque peasantry must have some sort of romantic history. He remarks, “One might easily make out a story for that pair, ... his gun is a help to the imagination, and we may fancy him a bandit with his *contadina* [peasant] love, the terror of all the neighbourhood, except of her, the most defenceless being in it” (53), quite literally drawing attention to the fact that *The Keepsake* itself is a collection of romantic stories and pictures.



With such a statement, Shelley invokes the ideological construct of what literary annuals like *The Keepsake* are theorized to do: to contain (forbidden) female desire through the displacement of it into the realm of fiction. Terence Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter read this containment in a more feminist way, reasoning that “[w]ithin the *Keepsake* context, sensuality and sexual fantasy release women from social strictures,” and give them the freedom to indulge in the fantasy of forbidden love without leaving their sitting rooms.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, they admit that such indulgence is a “commercially distributed mirage of emancipation,”<sup>17</sup> because it was deliberately manipulated by Charles Heath and his editors to sell annuals. Furthermore, while making commercial profit, Heath and other annual publishers still “considered themselves legally and morally responsible for protecting the public from impropriety” and saw themselves as “guardians of middle-class values.”<sup>18</sup> As such, the tale engages in familiar distancing techniques, like its Italian setting (which was a popular choice in stories for the annuals), and its romanticized lower-class characters.<sup>19</sup> These techniques minimize any hints of impropriety the story might otherwise seem to endorse (like Anina’s forbidden love of Domenico). The tale also ends by moralizing on the folly of youthful passion, thereby “punishing” the kind of rebellion Anina engages in.

However, we must consider the Countess’s reaction to the narrator’s nonchalant invocation of such romantic fantasies. She refuses to give in to the narrator’s “fancy,” and her sober characterization of the tale as a “tragedy” undermines its supposed romance, and thus also undermines the ideological control it seeks to enact. She stresses how such romanticizing occludes the real suffering that the “mingling of love and crime” actually bring about, stating that “lawless pursuits are never followed without bringing on the criminal, and *all allied to him*, ineffable misery” (53, my emphasis). In other words, the supposed “romantic” actions of men often result in collateral damage to the “defenceless” women around them. Indeed, within the Countess’s tale, it is not the love between Anina and Domenico that is censured — as the line “the mingling of love with crime is a dread conjunction” would imply — but the actions of men. For example, Domenico’s gang “way-

lay passengers and make prisoners” of their own countrymen “whom they keep as hostages for mild treatment from the government” (57). When the gang members capture Anina as she makes her way home after Maria’s rescue, they complain about the worthlessness of her ransom value as a supposed nun, treat her roughly, and exchange “coarse jests” about what to do with her (61). Similarly, the French soldiers are frequently described as “terrible,” “merciless,” and “cold-hearted” men who have little scruples when it comes to controlling the countryside (55, 57, 59). They “scour the country” for resistance groups like Domenico’s, tracking them like those who “hunt the wild beasts of the forest” (55), and they “destroy the convents” and “desecrate the churches” (60). Anina and Maria’s father approves of their presence as a means of controlling the “ruffians” like Domenico’s gang, but ironically, the French execute his innocent daughter to suit “their purpose of awe-striking the peasantry” (63). Thus, the tragedy within this “tale of sorrow” is not that Anina carelessly falls in love with a bandit, but that the violence of men often results in womanly suffering. If anything, the Countess expresses sympathy for the plight of Anina and Domenico. She calls their love “ill-fated” (54), removing their agency in the matter, much like Romeo, Juliet, and their crossed stars. She even venerates Domenico’s character in that though he is the son of a robber and was raised among “lawless” men, “no dread crime stained him” and he “yearned for the peace of the guiltless” (55). Therefore, to fully understand “The Sisters of Albano,” we must, as Beth Newman reminds us, “attend ... to the relations between the stories in the center and those in the frame, and listen to the dialogue between the voices that speak them.”<sup>20</sup>

Within this tale, however, narrative voice itself becomes problematic, because the multiplicity of voices within the tale obfuscates the individuality of the speakers. Because the frame structure enacts a textual transference of the Countess’s spoken word to the frame narrator’s written one, point of view within the story blurs such that the reader forgets “who [exactly] is speaking.”<sup>21</sup> Shelley’s fair copy manuscript illustrates this complicated vocal transference well. As she transitions from the frame narrative (in the male narrator’s voice) to the Countess’s narrative,

the manuscript reads, “meanwhile thus *spoke* the Countess Atanasia.”<sup>22</sup> In *The Keepsake* for 1829 (and consequently, Robinson’s edition), the text reads, “meanwhile thus *commenced* the Countess Atanasia.”<sup>23</sup> The substitution may have been the work of the editor, Frederic Mansel Reynolds, a copyeditor, or perhaps even the typesetter, and it may seem insignificant if we agree with Robinson that Shelley “artificially constructs an introductory frame [simply] to describe the Turner plate [engraving].”<sup>24</sup> However, as Newman observes, the transcription of a *spoken* narrative divorces the story from its speaker, such that “it exists as a verbal structure with its own integrity,” standing apart from any contextualizing influences.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in linking the frame narrative to the Countess’s narrative through the word “spoke,” the entirety of the story begins to deconstruct the idealized “romance” — the romance that *The Keepsake* sells — invoked by the frame narrator’s comment and supposedly upheld by the Countess’s story.

Furthermore, by converting the Countess’s tale into a written text as opposed to a spoken one, Shelley introduces temporal ambiguity into the story. The subtle shift in narrative voice, centered on the word “spoke,” makes us almost forget that the Countess’s story is in fact a transcription. As such, time within the tale becomes ambiguous. The Countess’s narrative invokes people from her own past, but the tale’s beginning is situated by the narrator’s remark on the peasants he sees. Furthermore, the frame narrative itself begins as an account of the narrator’s (presumably past) vacation, his “last excursion before quitting Rome” (51), as the opening line informs us. Thus, within these nested layers of narrative, time loses relevance, much like the passage of time while one reads.

Losing track of time due to a good story is precisely what *The Keepsake*’s publishers wanted their readers to do, so that, finding the stories entertaining and irresistible, readers would buy the next year’s issue. By invoking temporal and vocal ambiguity within her tale through a frame narrative, Shelley thus subtly draws attention to this seductive commercialization.<sup>26</sup> As a literary object that signified “education, taste, luxury ... aristocratic (self-) possession ... elite wealth and

status,”<sup>27</sup> *The Keepsake* was a perpetually seductive symbol constructed to play upon readers’ desire to take part in what Katherine Harris calls its “cult of beauty.”<sup>28</sup> The most expensive of the literary annuals, it cost a guinea (£1, 1s), and was covered in vibrant red watered-silk with gilt-edged pages and gold lettering on the cover. It also included larger engraved illustrations made with steel plates rather than with cheap copper plates or by lithography.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, when read as a complex, interconnected narrative (as opposed to a “thin” frame and main narrative), “The Sisters of Albano” calls the seduction of *The Keepsake* into question by pointing out that it is in fact a construct of the literary market. In buying into the romance and beauty that *The Keepsake* sells, readers also buy into its commercialized representations of female desire as something to be contained.



Figure 1 – “Lake Albano,” by J. M. W. Turner (engraved by Robert Wallis) in *The Keepsake* (1829), p. 80.

Shelley’s disruptive purposes become clearer if we also consider the story’s plate engraving. As I mentioned earlier, one of Robinson’s criticisms of “The Sisters of Albano” is that the Countess’s tale has little to do with the accompanying illustration, which depicts a Turner landscape rather

than a picture of the eponymous sisters or the lovers (Figure 1). However, we must consider the plate engravings themselves as framing devices. As the most expensive part of *The Keepsake*, the engravings were often commissioned first, and writers like Shelley were asked to come up with a story to accompany them, often without seeing the final image until it was almost time to print.<sup>30</sup> This constrains the writer's imagination, and the result is what we see in "The Sisters of Albano," in that seemingly the only thing the text and image have in common is the location, "Lake Albano." However, as Hoagwood and Ledbetter observe, even though "the text has little in common with the picture except a title ... together they produce a subtext in two languages — first the engraved art, and then the textual after-image of the visible object."<sup>31</sup> In Shelley's tale, this "image with textual after-image" introduces further ambiguities to those found within the text when we read the version originally published in *The Keepsake* for 1829. The engraving lies opposite the story's beginning, leading the reader to initially associate the image with the frame narrator's party of tourists.<sup>32</sup> It isn't until three pages later that the reader realizes that the illustration actually depicts the peasants the narrator fancies as a romantic couple.<sup>33</sup> As a framing device, the image in "The Sisters of Albano" thus displaces the readers' expectations about who the central figures in the story are, and Shelley's text disrupts the image's nominative place as short-hand for the tale itself.

Moreover, the figures in Turner's engraving, who themselves look at "pictures and prints— views of the country, and portraits of the Madonna" (53) — calling attention to their representational status — serve merely as referents for both the narrator and the Countess. The fact remains that *we never actually learn who these people are at all*. Instead, they function as objects for the narrator to romanticize and for the Countess to memorialize. In this way, Shelley's treatment of the Turner plate participates in the deconstruction of *The Keepsake's* seductiveness, in that she seems to deliberately point out that the annual's audience is itself objectified. As Beetham notes, within nineteenth-century periodical print culture, the reader is often "addressed as an individual but is positioned as a member of certain overlapping sets of social groups," such that the

person “invoked or positioned in the text” may or may not directly correspond to the person “who buys the [periodical] and actually reads it.”<sup>34</sup> So, just as the figures in the engraving remain unnamed and unknowable within Shelley’s tale, so are the readers of *The Keepsake* to its publishers.

Therefore, once we take the contextual constraints imposing on “The Sisters of Albano” into account, the story becomes more than a thinly plotted narrative tangentially related to its accompanying image. Instead we see Shelley strategically working within the confines of the annual, while also subtly resisting its hegemonic control. Through the blurring of voice and disruptions of time within the narrative, as well as the referential displacement enacted by the image, Shelley’s story produces “not a structure with closure but an opening into further discourse, implicating its own listener [or reader], violating its own frame”<sup>35</sup> — that is, *The Keepsake* itself. This open-ended critique breaks down the supposed romance and sublimation of female desire that *The Keepsake* and other annuals sell, pointing out that such stories may not be so romantic after all, despite the fact that Shelley herself chooses to write them.

### **“The Swiss Peasant”**

Shelley makes the same rhetorical move in “The Swiss Peasant,” written for *The Keepsake* for 1831, but in this case widens her subversion beyond genre to include Romantic notions of art. In this story, the frame introduces two friends, again presumably British tourists, who, while making their way through the Swiss Alps, pass the time by debating the role of aesthetics in elevating the “everyday” or the “ordinary” to the realm of art. The narrator, who “had been complaining of the commonplace and ennui of life,” asserts that there is no such artistry, while his companion, Ashburn, a painter, insists that “our existence [is] only too full of variety and change—tragic variety and wondrous incredible change” (137). Both Robinson and Lisa Vargo note that the debate, and the embedded tale that seemingly decides between them, echoes the differing artistic perspectives

of Byron and Wordsworth.<sup>36</sup> Thus, within this frame, Shelley invokes a prevailing debate of her time on the nature and role of art within society, a role that literary annuals were attempting to promulgate through their “cult of beauty.” Indeed, this commodification of art within a domestic-oriented medium was one of the harshest criticisms *The Keepsake* endured when it first debuted. Ledbetter notes that contemporary critics worried about the “feminization of art in *The Keepsake* and other annuals,” that privileged the “new middle-class taste for domestic modern themes” over traditionally classical or political ones.<sup>37</sup> So, as with “The Sisters of Albano,” Shelley begins her tale by invoking the conventions within which she’s writing, but proceeds to disrupt them through her embedded tale.

The embedded story in “The Swiss Peasant” calls the frame’s Romantic debate into question. The two friends decide to put their ideas to the test by asking a passing peasant woman, Fanny Chaumont, to relate her life story, wagering a louis between them as to whether hers is a “romantic tale” of “no common fate” (137). The resulting narrative consumes the rest of the story. Though “the child of humble cottagers,” Fanny befriends the governor’s wife, Madame de Marville, as a young girl, and becomes a permanent ward of the de Marville family when a freak landslide kills her entire family (138). Fanny is “brought up kindly, but humbly” by Madame de Marville, who gives her a “bourgeois education, which would raise her from the hardships of a peasant’s life, and yet not elevate her above her natural position in society” (140). Years pass, and the de Marvilles’ son, Henry, falls in love with Fanny; however, she has fallen in love with an eloquent but uncouth peasant, Louis Chaumont, setting up a typical love triangle plot. The rivals engage in a violent quarrel, and Monsieur de Marville banishes Louis from the district and sends Henry to Paris to forget about Fanny, her peasant’s heritage making her an unsuitable match for him despite her education.

Inspired by the events of the French Revolution, Louis returns with a peasant army at his back seeking revenge on the de Marville family. Caught between her bourgeois friends and former

lover, Fanny attempts to help her friends escape but Louis and his mob capture her, Madame, and Henry on their way out of town. Louis agrees to let the women go, but vows to “deal with the young aristocrat according to his merits”; to this, Fanny exclaims that Henry is “no aristocrat” because he is her husband (149). Her lie does little to move the mob but it has an electrifying effect on Louis. In a sudden fit of compassion, he agrees to let them all go, miraculously quelling the mob by the strength of “his energy [and] his strong will” (149). Seemingly parted forever, Louis joins Napoleon’s army in hopes of dying, while Fanny retires to Subiaco in Italy, where “her love for [Louis] haunted her soul” (151). After the wars, she meets Louis by chance in a little village and the two are reunited, and return to their native land to live happily ever after.

Once again, it appears that Fanny’s embedded narrative supports the Romantic notion that even the life of the “meanest peasant will offer all the acts of a drama in the apparently dull routine of [her] humble life” (137). Furthermore, because of her history, Fanny becomes “a fitting heroine for romance,” and her story of true love demonstrates “the strange pranks love can play with us” (138) — the comedic and expected outcome of a story for *The Keepsake*. Indeed, this type of escapist romance is what Harris highlights as one of the annuals’ hallmark characteristics:

The annual’s proper separation from other genres [like albums, almanacs, and emblems] came from its preparation, production, and packaging of the literary, artistic, and beautiful in such a way that it transported and translated its readers away from the daily life represented in the [other] periodicals and newspapers of the day.<sup>38</sup>

However, if we read Shelley’s frame narrative concurrently and intertextually with its embedded narrative, the supposed valorization of Romantic sensibility unravels. Indeed, throughout Shelley’s oeuvre, embedded tales become “enabling and activating narratives” that shape and are shaped by their framing narratives, a series of internally supporting frameworks rather than art pieces enclosed in a limiting, ornate picture frame. Thus, in “The Swiss Peasant,” Fanny’s tale becomes a critical “determining matrix” of the ideological debate invoked by the frame narrator and the escapism that *The Keepsake* sells.<sup>39</sup> When properly contextualized, we can observe



Shelley's subtle critique of these governing forms, interpolated through a paradox undermining the entire tale: Fanny's life is worthy of being included within *The Keepsake* only because it is so *extraordinary*. As Laurie Langbauer writes, "Although Ashburn insists that we can find something of interest in the everyday, it only becomes interesting when it is no longer the everyday but the exceptional and uncommon."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, neither the narrator nor Ashburn is entirely correct in their assumptions about what counts as being "artistic," something *The Keepsake* itself challenged by its lavish representations of everyday domesticity. Even though Ashburn ostensibly "wins" the bet, he does so only because a peasant girl has lived a distinctly un-peasant-like life.



Figure 2 – "The Swiss Peasant," by Henry Howard (engraved by Charles Heath), in *The Keepsake* (1831), p. 122

Shelley's critique can be further inferred from the story's plate engraving, a stylistic portrait of a young woman with a naked toddler on her shoulders by Henry Howard and engraved by Charles Heath (Figure 2). The engraving is typical of the "frank sensuality of peasant women and young girls" found within *The Keepsake*,<sup>41</sup> in that though barefoot, Fanny's skin (especially on her feet) appears silky smooth, her posture a sensuous curve as she looks up at the child astride her shoulders, who is styled after a curly-haired Roman cherub. As with the "Sisters of Albano," the image's description in the *Keepsake* letterpress follows the engraving, and the textual "after-image" reinforces Fanny's idealization. Ashburn exclaims,

What a figure! ... oh that she would stay thus but one quarter of an hour! ... her upturned face—her dark hair—her picturesque costume—the little plump fellow bestriding her—the rude scenery around— [...] She steps a goddess—her attitude—her looks, are all filled with majesty.<sup>42</sup>

A few paragraphs later, the narrator remarks that Fanny, "peasant as she was," is both "beautiful and refined" in terms of her physique and "bears the stamp of superior intellect."<sup>43</sup> These remarks underscore Fanny's exceptionalism, orientaling her rustic charm such that she ceases to belong to the "stultified and sullen" souls of the "Swiss who are most deeply planted among the rocky wilds" (138). Therefore, the hyperbolic visual and textual descriptions of Fanny also undermine Ashburn's position, and expose the objectification of art (and women) found throughout *The Keepsake*. And though the narrator's position is similarly called into question, his skepticism of the romance of the everyday is continually, if subtly, deployed throughout Fanny's tale.

That said, the narrator's position as the Byronic skeptic becomes complicated if we examine Shelley's fair copy manuscript of this tale. Amidst the narrator's soliloquy on the "contraries" of life that make "solitude abhorrent to me, now that I enjoy it in perfection" (136), I discovered a paragraph in the manuscript that is missing from *The Keepsake's* print version (and consequently, Robinson's edition). The paragraph falls between the second and third paragraphs of the print edition, and provides additional context for the narrator's sojourn to Switzerland: "I would go out in

spite of rain—but I am traveling for my health, and the last adjuration of my beautiful Emily was that I should avoid getting wet feet.”<sup>44</sup> He goes on to lament various proposed travel plans, such as a “voyage to Madeira,” that will “otherwise [threaten] ... to delay ... for ever [*sic*] my union with my adored—Emily!” and ends his reverie with the following rhetorical question: “[I]s not that word ‘charm’ insufficient to speed the longgoing hours—to people with bright images my sorrow? [misery?]—alas! It makes me but the more [intolerant?] to separation—and solitude.”<sup>45</sup> These comments illuminate the narrator’s “abhorrence” of solitude as being more than just a product of Byronic ennui, as theorized by Robinson,<sup>46</sup> but also as a product of his loneliness. Perhaps Fanny’s tale reminds him of his “adored Emily,” who is never reintroduced to the story.<sup>47</sup> Fanny’s story thus refigures the narrator’s own, and therefore also refigures the relative (un)importance of the artistic bet and cult of beauty that *The Keepsake* upholds. Indeed, the missing paragraph reveals that the narrator, who “never could concoct” a “true tale” (136-7), decides to record Fanny’s tale simply because of Emily’s remembered injunction against “getting wet feet.”

These decidedly un-Byronic sentiments make even more sense if we examine the original construction of the artistic bet found in Shelley’s manuscript. It appears that Shelley originally had the narrator take Ashburn’s position and vice versa. In the manuscript, the lines introducing the bet read as follows:

As he drew I continued to speak in support of an argument we had ~~began an hour~~ entered upon before. ~~The [he?] Ashburn~~ I had [been] complaining of the commonplace and ennui of life. ~~I Ashburn~~ insisted that our existence was only too full of variety and change, ~~and was~~ tragic variety and ~~and~~ [wondrous, incredible] change.<sup>48</sup>

One might argue that because the print version is ultimately what the audience reads, it matters little what Shelley seems to have originally intended. Given the revelation of Emily’s presence within the manuscript, however, I would argue that in doing her final revisions, Shelley may have realized that her original construction of the bet would uphold the ideology she sought to subvert.

The fact remains that the Romantic bet invoked as the impetus for the story is actually overcome by the paradox of Fanny's existence caught in the "double binds"<sup>49</sup> of class and gender. As Langbauer notes, "Throughout the story, [Fanny] remains true to both [Henry and Louis]; her choice between them, in fact, may be figured as a lie precisely because Shelley wants to emphasize that there is no real choice. In Shelley's fiction, neither side in the public struggle provides very different options for women."<sup>50</sup> By paying attention to the intertextual conversation that the frame narrative enacts, we can see how Shelley first invokes and then dismisses the Romantic aestheticization of the everyday — implying that such an exercise is itself a "pure romance" (137). The romance of the everyday that supposedly "wins" and helps readers escape the humdrum of daily life is ineffective in helping them overcome any real adversity they may face.

As I have attempted to illustrate, the frame narratives within "The Sisters of Albano" and "The Swiss Peasant" are more than simple introductory notes to otherwise normative, sentimental tales deemed appropriate for pre-Victorian middle-class ladies. They are in fact rhetorical strategies Shelley uses to highlight and also circumvent the restrictions imposed on her by the literary annual as a genre. In writing for the annuals, Shelley was always negotiating between the "expropriation of her authorial rule" by the annual's conventional forms (both ideological and artistic) and the story she wished to tell. As Sonia Hofkosh observes, Shelley's disruptive framing "addresses the primacy of form over content ... [and] thereby 'reveals to view' the dynamics which support [the] hegemony"<sup>51</sup> that *The Keepsake* seeks to exert on its authors and its audience. She therefore simultaneously works within the forms imposed on her by the literary annual, but subtly calls them into question.

Moreover, by having her tales enacted as *retellings*, Shelley underscores the power that storytelling has in shaping that hegemony in the first place, particularly within a market that

thrived on the commodification of a particular ideology, such as the annuals' attempts to uphold (and control) female propriety. Vargo writes that within her framework tales, "Shelley describes the value of listening as a positive virtue, particularly with respect to matters that challenge established beliefs. [...] [T]he power of telling of tales ... is Shelley's point for the consumers of the gift book."<sup>52</sup> In this way, Shelley underscores the power of *raconter*,<sup>53</sup> or the power of perpetual narration, which *The Keepsake* embodies by its very nature as a periodical. By placing her stories within a medium that begs to be read and reread, Shelley does not simply make the market work for her — she seeks to continue her subversions in perpetuity.

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## NOTES

1. Charlotte Sussman, "Stories for the *Keepsake*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther Schor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 165.
2. Kathryn Ledbetter, "The Necessity of Poetry in Victorian Women's Magazines," introduction to *British Victorian Women's Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 6.
3. See, for example, Richard Garnett's Victorian assumptions that the lack of intellectual vigor in Shelley's stories can be attributed to her "languor" following the death of her husband and children ("Introduction," *Tales and Stories by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* [London: William Paterson, 1891], vii, Hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015066063184>). A. A. Markley seems to privilege Shelley's taste for novel-writing over her periodical work, writing that "her feelings must have been mixed about frequently having to put aside her work on her novels during the 1820s to compose short stories in order to support herself and her son," though in fairness, he praises her ability to work within the "restricting genre of the annuals" ("Laughing That I May not Weep': Mary Shelley's Short Fiction and her Novels," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 46 [1997]: 98-99). Finally, Nora Crook surmises that these stories were "a challenge to [her] creative mind" and consequently, "the intensity, psychological explorations, complexity of character, and the political sub-texts of the novels are absent. Instead, the reader is given Mary Shelley's pervasive subjects modified in a well-honed, non-controversial expression" ("General Introduction," *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus*, Vol. 1, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley* [London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996], xlv).
4. Sussman, "Stories for the *Keepsake*," 163-164.
5. Kathryn Ledbetter attributes the extreme popularity of *The Keepsake* in particular to publisher Charles Heath's wildly successful marketing schemes that played upon middle-class

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desires to appear aristocratic, wealthy, and refined, which I will discuss later (see “‘White Vellum and Gilt Edges’: Imaging *The Keepsake*,” *Studies in Literary Imagination* 30, no. 1 [1997]: 36-41).

6. Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xvi.

7. *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

8. See Terence Hoagwood, Kathryn Ledbetter, and Martin Jacobsen’s “Introduction to *The Keepsake* 1829” (Romantic Circles, Oct. 1998, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/lcl/ksintro.htm>), which asserts that while the imagery and content of “*The Keepsake* seem innocent, they frequently suggest themes that threaten to disturb the carefully woven fabric of domesticity.”

9. Margaret Beetham, “Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre,” in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, eds. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 29.

10. *Ibid.*, 27.

11. *Ibid.*, 29.

12. Thomas writes that the “gesture of the preface [in *The Last Man*]” is “caught up in ... temporal ambiguity” because “The intention of a preface is normally to represent in some form what is to come, to say something of what will, logically speaking — and paradoxically — already have been written, since in the course of writing, it is the preface that is the last thing” (“The Ends of the Fragment, the Problem of the Preface: Proliferation and Finality in *The Last Man*, in *Mary Shelley’s Fictions: From Frankenstein to Falkner*, ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000], 35). Within *The Last Man*, the preface describes events that have already passed while introducing literally “what is to come,” that is, the novel itself *and* the future destruction of humanity in Lionel Verney’s time. In the same way, the frame narratives within Shelley’s *Keepsake* tales set up “what is to come” within the narrative, even though what is coming has already passed.

13. Gregory O’Dea, “Framing the Frame: Embedded Narratives, Enabling Texts, and *Frankenstein*,” *Romanticism on the Net* 31 (August 2003): sec. IV, para. 18, doi:10.7202/008697ar.

14. Charles Robinson, ed., *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 377. Robinson’s 1976 text is the most recent collection of Shelley’s tales, and thus has shaped scholarship on them for over 40 years. Nora Crook’s 1996 collection of Mary Shelley’s work leaves the tales out of its eight volumes in favor of Robinson’s edition (see f.n. b in her general introduction, 1: xlv). However, Robinson was forced to rely primarily on *The Keepsake* versions of most of the twenty-five tales he includes, having access to only eight of Shelley’s manuscripts (and none of them the two stories under consideration in this essay). As I will discuss, this leaves out important insights about Shelley’s possible intentions on how these stories should be understood. Both of the manuscripts for “The Sisters of Albano” and “The Swiss Peasant” are now housed at The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of the New York Public Library, having been acquired by the Collection in 1997.

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15. Mary Shelley, "The Sisters of Albano," in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories*, ed. Charles Robinson (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). All in-text citations will be taken from Robinson's edition. All other cited versions will be footnoted.

16. Terence Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter, "Voluptuous Opportunities: Visual Images in the *Keepsake*," in *Colour'd Shadows: Contexts in Publishing, Printing, and Reading Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 96.

17. Ibid.

18. Hoagwood, Ledbetter, and Jacobsen, "Introduction to *The Keepsake* 1829."

19. Hoagwood and Ledbetter note that the popularity of Italy as the setting for stories in the annuals plays upon British fascination with the scandals of Lord Byron, and we might infer by association, the Shelleys ("Voluptuous Opportunities," 112).

20. Beth Newman, "Narratives of Seduction and the Seductions of Narrative: The Frame Structure in *Frankenstein*," *ELH* 53, no. 1 (1986): 141, JSTOR, doi: 10.2307/2873151

21. Ibid., 146. This leads to readings such as Robinson's that ignore the frame story in favor of the embedded tale.

22. "The Sisters of Albano," fair copy manuscript, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library, p. 4, my emphasis. I will hereafter refer to this version of the story as "SA MS."

23. Mary Shelley, "The Sisters of Albano," *The Keepsake*, ed. Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London: Hurst, Chance, 1829), 83, Hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433074792015>, my emphasis.

24. Robinson, *Collected Tales*, 377.

25. Newman, "Narratives of Seduction," 147.

26. Newman calls this the "seduction of narrative" in framed tales (her example is *Frankenstein*) in which storytelling becomes a "form of seduction" (143), a persuasive technique to achieve a sublimated desire. Each of the embedded tales in *Frankenstein* thus "cast[s] suspicion" (144) on their speakers' motives, because the rhetoric gestures to his externally situated desires (Walton's desire for a friend, Victor's desire to destroy the Creature, the Creature's desire for a mate). Similarly, Shelley's embedded story in "The Sisters of Albano" casts suspicion on its own frame, that is, the overall story's appearance within the seductive trappings of *The Keepsake*.

27. Sonia Hofkosh, "Disfiguring Economies: Mary Shelley's Short Stories," in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, eds. Audrey Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther Schor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 206.

28. Katherine Harris, *Forget-Me-Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017), 147.

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29. See Harris, *Forget-Me-Not*, 148-151, and Ledbetter, "White Vellum," 44. In the preface to *The Keepsake* for 1829, Reynolds records that the publishers spent over 11,000 guineas (about £11,550) on the "prosecution of this design" (i), most of it on the engravings.

30. You can see evidence of this appropriation within Shelley's manuscript of "The Sisters of Albano." In her textual description of Turner's plate, she has corrected the number of people in the text by adding "or three," and adds that the hunter's gun is "lying on a bank" (SA MS, p. 3).

31. Hoagwood and Ledbetter, "Voluptuous Opportunities," 101.

32. Shelley, *The Keepsake* (1829), 80.

33. *Ibid.*, 82. Within the annuals, the engravings are not officially paginated, so the jump is technically three pages, though the page numbers make it two.

34. Beetham, "Theory of the Periodical," 28-29.

35. Newman, "Narratives of Seduction," 153.

36. Robinson, *Collected Tales*, 382, and Lisa Vargo, "Mary Shelley, 'The Swiss Peasant,' and *The Keepsake*," *Wordsworth Circle* 48, no. 1 (2017): 46. Vargo also conceptualizes this tale as being a "keepsake" of Shelley's memories of eloping with Percy Shelley to Switzerland in 1814 and of their infamous stay with Lord Byron in Geneva in the summer of 1816 — the summer that gave birth to *Frankenstein*.

37. Ledbetter, "White Vellum," 41.

38. Harris, *Forget-Me-Not*, 61.

39. See O'Dea, "Framing the Frame," sec. I, para. 3-4. This is similar to Newman's insistence that we must pay attention to the "dialogue" between the narratives at the center of the story and its margins to fully grasp its rhetorical meaning.

40. Laurie Langbauer, "Swayed by Contraries: Mary Shelley and the Everyday," in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, eds. Audrey Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther Schor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 197.

41. Hoagwood and Ledbetter, "Voluptuous Opportunities," 97.

42. Mary Shelley, "The Swiss Peasant," in *The Keepsake*, ed. Frederic Mansel Reynolds (London: Hurst, Chance, 1831), 123, Hathitrust.org, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433074792031>.

43. *Ibid.*, 123-24.

44. Mary Shelley, "The Swiss Peasant," fair copy manuscript, The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library, p. 2. I will hereafter refer to this version of the story as "SP MS."



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45. Ibid., Shelley's emphasis. I have included brackets around "misery" and "intolerant" because they are difficult to make out in the manuscript due to blotting, particularly "misery." In the manuscript, both the words "sorrow" and "misery" appear, the latter being partially obscured by a blot, making Shelley's word choice unclear. I have included both because they both seem relevant to underscoring the narrator's antipathy toward his solitude.

46. Robinson, *Collected Tales*, 382.

47. To date I cannot find any reference to this paragraph within Shelley's letters or journals, or in critical discourse on her work. It is possible Reynolds or a copyeditor removed it, recognizing its incongruity with the rest of the story. Interestingly, by invoking the absent female recipient of the male narrative, "The Swiss Peasant" mimics the frame narrative in *Frankenstein*, in which Captain Walton transcribes Victor Frankenstein's (and the Creature's) story for his sister, Mrs. Saville. We might similarly theorize *The Keepsake* as an initially male-directed literary object designed for "absent," unknowable female audiences, as discussed earlier.

48. SP MS, p. 2. Words struck through are struck through in the manuscript, and words underlined are what replace them; words in brackets indicate additional insertions. Notice here too that the timing of the bet was originally significantly reduced. In the published version, the bet takes place a week prior to the narrator's transcription of Fanny's tale. In this version, it would have happened a mere hour before, an incongruous gap in time that Shelley seems to have realized while drafting.

49. Langbauer, "Swayed by Contraries," 187.

50. Ibid., 195.

51. Hofkosh, "Disfiguring Economies," 208.

52. Vargo, "Mary Shelley, 'The Swiss Peasant,'" 47-48.

53. The etymology of this word elucidates what I mean here, in that the French word *conter* means "to tell," often used in the sense of "to recount" or "to tell a story" (the phrase *conte de fée* means "fairytale"). The prefix "re" indicates a perpetual repetition of *conter*, to "retell" and is changed to "ra" primarily for pronunciation, as the French are so often fond of doing. Thus the act of "telling a story" happens in perpetual motion, never starting and never ending.

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