

“I Cannot Rule Myself” The Pitfalls of Sensibility in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man

DIANE A. SAGER

In the exhaustive body of scholarship relating to Mary Shelley’s first and signature novel, *Frankenstein*, an emerging tradition suggests that a helpful way of placing the work within a context of genre and culture is to consider its commentary on sensibility and sympathy. Betty T. Bennett suggests that the parallel characters of Elizabeth Raby and Elizabeth Lavenza (in *Falkner* and *Frankenstein* respectively), representing marked sensibility, consistently develop an ethic of reform that many critics assumed Shelley had abandoned as age and loss punctured her radicalism.¹ Anne K. Mellor notes the masculine failure of sensibility in Victor Frankenstein, who callously creates a doomed being in arrogant imitation of nature, then abandons it to a cruel world.² Isabelle Bour argues that, like Walter Scott’s *Waverley* and William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, Frankenstein represents a transitional genre between the Romantic novel of sensibility and the

reconfigured Victorian novel of education. She denotes a new category, the end-of-sensibility novel, in which characters of sensibility who express such feeling through sympathy are thwarted by modernity and reality.³ For Bour, *Frankenstein* in particular presents a bleak picture, in which “sensibility is repeatedly, inevitably defeated.”⁴ In all of the central characters, sensibility proves flawed or ineffectual, and unlike in *Waverley*, the end offers no particular hope of redemption through compromise. Bour suggests that the “disintegration of the paradigm of sensibility” represented in these three novels is “a significant stage in the development of the novel” in that it forces a shift to an emphasis on psychology of characters and preliminarily begins to group the categories of youth and modernity against the counter-categories of age and tradition.⁵

The focus on sensibility in

¹ Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, ed., *Mary Shelley in Her Times* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000): 17.

² Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1998): 42.

³ Isabelle Bour, “Sensibility as Epistemology in *Caleb Williams*, *Waverley*, and *Frankenstein*,” *SEL* 45 (2005): 814 – 27.

⁴ Bour, 821.

⁵ Bour, 823 – 4.

Frankenstein, and Bour's argument in particular, can be usefully extended to Shelley's lesser-known third novel, *The Last Man* (1826). Much recent scholarship on *The Last Man* has tended to downplay its literary value and examine it within the context of Shelley's biography (Mellor, Spark, Brewer, Hill-Miller), as an expression of her politics and ethics (Bennett, Bunnell), or as a flawed example of genre (Smith).⁶ The novel's apparently uneven structure, transitioning from marriage/intellectual novel to Gothic horror and apocalypse, has baffled modern critics as much as it did Shelley's contemporaries, many of whom treated it as a flawed continuation of the theme better explored in *Frankenstein*.⁷ In the last decade,

⁶ Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987); William D. Brewer, *The Mental Anatomies of William Godwin and Mary Shelley* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001); Katherine C. Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny": *Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995); Charlene E. Bunnell, "All the World's a Stage": *Dramatic Sensibility in Mary Shelley's Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Johanna M. Smith, *Mary Shelley* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

⁷ "The present work has all the beauties and defects of her former production [Frankenstein]" (*Ladies' Monthly Museum* 23 (1826): 169); "After the first volume, it is a sickening repetition of horrors" (*Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres* 473 (1826): 102–3); "the offspring of a diseased imagination and of a most polluted taste" (*Monthly Review* 1 (1826): 333–5). The 20th century critics who rediscovered the book were hardly more forgiving: "The story is, unfortunately, an offshoot of the Gothic novel, and the style is turgid...Mrs. Shelley remains the author of a single book, and that book, of course, is *Frankenstein*" (Charles W. Mann, *Library Journal* 91 (1966): 163); "Such an apocalyptic vision requires a style beyond the author's reach" (Walter Guzzardi, Jr., "Romantic Vision of Destruction," *Saturday Review of Literature* 49 (1966): 86). In "The Last Man: Apocalypse without Millennium," Morton D. Paley explains this derision on the part of Shelley's contemporary critics as fallout from a cultural malaise concerning the overused

however, scholars have attempted to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies in tone and theme by using sensibility as a lens through which to examine the novel. Mark Canuel in particular defends the *The Last Man*'s unrelievedly grim descriptions of plague in the second and third volumes as a dramatic device to make a consistent ethical argument: that sensibility alone cannot save a doggedly hierarchical society from destruction, and that natural disaster is one drastic but sure way of leveling a playing field.⁸ Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor reinterprets the grim plot through its theatrical frame narrative (story-within-a-story) format, suggesting that the overwhelmingly pessimistic title and outcome (the death of the world and the prospect of unceasing loneliness for the protagonist) are mediated by the little-observed fact that Lionel Verney, the last man, miraculously does find an audience. For her, the novel's nested narrative "functions to re-present the narrator's mediated version of the story, insisting that this tale of a dead-end history be opened back up to reader responsiveness, back to that most important of human feelings, sympathy."⁹ In other words, the discovery of Verney's narrative by nineteenth-century tourists in a Sibyl's cave was not accidental, but intended by

idea of "lastness" (in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, Audrey A. Fisch et al., ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 107–23).

⁸ Mark Canuel, "Acts, Rules, and *The Last Man*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53 (1998): 147–70.

⁹ Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, "Performing History, Performing Humanity in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 42 (2002): 753–80; 768.

Shelley to rescue sensibility by giving Verney a hearing.

While Wagner-Lawlor's implication of authorial intent on Shelley's part is not backed up in her journals and letters, and Canuel's thesis of a cleansing and therefore essentially productive plague requires some mental acrobatics, both scholars importantly further a discussion on sensibility and its role in *The Last Man*. Bour's work on *Frankenstein* suggests another possible avenue for exploring sensibility, the notion that *The Last Man* may also be an end-of-sensibility novel, albeit a later and therefore more emphatic one. Reading *The Last Man* in this way rescues Shelley from some fairly unflattering analyses. First, if *The Last Man* is more definitively an end-of-sensibility novel than *Frankenstein*, then it can no longer be discounted as a failed experiment with form that was better accomplished in Shelley's first novel. Also, the unevenness often noted in the novel's structure can be regarded as a device of purpose and ingenuity; Volume I explicated the main characters' varied and powerful sensibilities and sympathies, Volume 2 showed how these mechanisms were inadequate to negotiate the crisis of plague, and Volume 3 (like the end of Scott's *Waverley*) suggested a way of coping with the failure of sensibility: through social cooperation at first and literary catharsis at last. Finally, reading *The Last Man* as a focused commentary on the inadequacy of sensibility pulls Shelley out of the shadow of her famous husband, friends, and parents. The lady novelist who, for more than a century

after her death, was regarded either as the one-hit-wonder author of *Frankenstein* or as the incidental beneficiary of an intoxicating intellectual and personal climate can be reconfigured as a genre-bending writer of unique style and increasing literary courage and sophistication.

Appealing as this sympathetic redrawing of Shelley is, such a thesis must be backed by textual evidence. I propose to argue that *The Last Man* can be usefully read as an end-of-sensibility novel, and that the primary evidence for that is in the novel itself. Shelley's prose is rife with direct and implied references to sensibility and its social expression, sympathy, and most of the first volume of the novel focuses in great detail on the various ways in which these ideals are expressed through a handful of diverse characters.¹⁰ As circumstance disrupts the best-laid plans of these protagonists in Volume 2, they rely on their ethic of sensibility to carry them through the crisis, but it is ultimately inadequate, despite offering a temporary promise of a better society. In Volume 3, the last man is left to deal with his own overwhelming and terrifying sensibilities, and can find no better outlet for them than in the creation of literature – an outcome that, as Wagner-Lawlor suggests, is vindicated by the fact that his words are discovered. Throughout *The Last Man*, sensibility plays an

¹⁰ Bour quotes Ann Jessie Van Sant's *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1993) definition of sensibility: "acuteness of feeling, both physical and emotional"; and defines sympathy as "its social manifestation" (815). This is a simple but useful definition, and the one I have chosen for this essay.

undeniably important role, and although Shelley's personal valuing of the ethics of sympathy and cooperation is evident in her heroic treatment of sensibility's proponents, her discomfort with these mechanisms as ways to deal with modernity is equally plain.

First, because *The Last Man* has never been and is not now a popularly read novel, a brief plot summary is necessary for most audiences. The novel begins with a pair of tourists in Italy who find a well-hidden Sibyl's cave, and within it, the scattered leaves of a remarkable tale. One of the tourists dedicates his or her life to collecting and translating the tale, which comprises the rest of the novel. It is the first-person story of Lionel Verney, an Englishman of the 21st century (presumably the future from the perspective of the tourists) who transcends a respectable but impoverished background, with the help of an idealistic nobleman named Adrian. Other characters soon enter the picture: Adrian's beautiful and tender-hearted sister, Idris (very much an Elizabeth Lavenza type); Perdita, Verney's beautiful, temperamental, and doomed sister; and Lord Raymond, the impossibly handsome, charismatic, impulsive hero of wars and politics. In the midst of a politically shifting England (the monarchy of Adrian's father was abolished and a republic established, with an elected Lord Protector), Verney falls in love with and marries Idris, Raymond sacrifices monarchical ambitions to marry Perdita, and Adrian is disappointed in love and commits to a life of study. All are deliriously happy for several years in an

idyllic forest setting, but with Lord Raymond's election to Lord Protector, their close-knit association begins to unravel. Eventually, Raymond is killed in the Greek wars after an estrangement from Perdita, and Perdita drowns herself in grief. Verney returns to England after burying his sister and friend to hear news that an Asian plague has begun to make inroads into America and Europe. Over the next few years, Verney and Adrian do their best to combat the plague's disruptive effects and protect themselves and their family, but eventually they are all overwhelmed by the disease or the effects of its social disruption, and Verney is left, as far as he knows, alone in the world, the last man.

It takes no genius to recognize that these characters are drawn from Shelley's own life, and many scholars have argued that *The Last Man* is unsatisfying because it is essentially a cathartic release of grief following the deaths of Shelley's husband, Percy, her good friend Lord Byron, and one of her children with Percy.¹¹ Shelley herself seems to be conflated in the characters of Perdita and Lionel, the brother and sister who are always on the outside observing the main action – Perdita frustrated by her sex and Lionel by his social and intellectual inferiority to Adrian and Raymond. Adrian is clearly a Percy Shelley type, passionately republican and infused with all the charms and virtues of a grieving widow such as Shelley might retroactively confer on her all-too-human

¹¹ Barbara Johnson, "The Last Man," in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, Audrey A. Fisch et al., ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 258 – 67. Johnson argues that Shelley's life is a metaphorical parallel to the story of extinction in *The Last Man*.

husband; even his drowning death is a direct echo. Most evidently, Lord Raymond is a mirror-image of Lord Byron, from his scandalous and often selfish behavior to his undeniable genius and energy to his untimely death fighting for Greek independence (although Raymond's death is considerably more glorious than Byron's). The tendency to focus on these biographical factors, however, obfuscates the literary value of Shelley's novel and invites dismissal. *The Last Man* is assuredly more than a diary cloaked as fiction.¹² A close reading of the novel through the framework of sensibility provides one avenue away from biography and toward a larger cultural context.

Sensibility is referred to overtly by the narrator and by the characters in dialogue. When describing Perdita's virtues, for instance, Verney drapes them in sensibility; "Her active fancy wove a thousand combinations . . . a sensation with her became a sentiment, and she never spoke until she had mingled her perceptions of outward objects with others which were the native growth of her own mind."¹³ This sensibility is the undeveloped, wild Perdita; when she comes in contact with the civilizing influence of Adrian, Verney notes a difference; "Perdita appeared . . . different from and yet the same as the wild mountain girl I had left . . . when

she smiled her face was embellished by the softest sensibility, and her low, modulated voice seemed tuned by love."¹⁴ Here, sensibility is clearly equated with feminine virtues, among them love, which Shelley repeatedly insists is tortuous, but necessary.

If Perdita's sensibility is a virtue, how is the theme of an end-of-sensibility novel supported? Shelley takes care of that by condemning Perdita to be a victim of her own excessively heightened senses; she doesn't even make it long enough to let the plague kill her. When Perdita discovers Raymond's infidelity, she is unable to either forgive him or let him go. As a result, he flees to Greece to fight in a dangerous war. When he is captured, Perdita and Verney try to ransom him, but her excessive sensibility renders her less than useful. Knowing that he suffers, she suffers as well. "She abstained from food; she lay on the bare earth, and, by such mimicry of his enforced torments, endeavoured to hold communion with his distant pain," a nearly textbook example of empathy.¹⁵ Such activity is neither healthy for Perdita nor helpful for Raymond, and is a presentiment of her inability to survive without him. When he is killed in the fighting, she commits suicide.

Raymond, on the other hand, combines colossal selfishness with a kind of towering sensibility that often translates into sympathy, although not usefully; he is unable to control his impulses sufficiently to avoid hurting

¹² See Canuel, Audrey A. Fisch, Wagner-Lawlor etc. for non-biographical readings of *The Last Man*. (Fisch's essay, "Plaguing Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*," appears in *The Other Mary Shelley*, 1993.)

¹³ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965): 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

others. This is seen first in his decision to marry Perdita despite the fact that marrying Idris would guarantee him a much-coveted throne. In an excess of emotion that he compels Verney to witness, Raymond proposes to Perdita extravagantly: "Take me – mould me to your will, possess my heart and soul to all eternity."¹⁶ Surrendering to raw emotion, Perdita and Raymond are briefly deliriously happy. But Raymond's attachment to his own emotional responses brings about infidelity and the necessity of lying to his wife, destroying his own sense of personal honor. "The mind of Raymond was not so rough cast, nor had been so rudely handled, in the circumstance of life, as to make him proof to these considerations [of honor] – on the contrary, he was all nerve; his spirit was as a pure fire, which fades and shrinks from every contagion of foul atmosphere."¹⁷ Thus Raymond is trapped between a lack of impulse control due to excessive sensibility, and insufficient callousness to cope with the results due to excessive sympathy. "I cannot rule myself," Raymond glumly admits, stepping down as Lord Protector after indulging in humiliating public debauchery. "My passions are my masters; my smallest impulse my tyrant."¹⁸ In the end, he sacrifices everything to the gratification of his own self-destructive desires, and like Perdita, serves as a warning against sensibility outside the context of the novel's destructive plague.

Adrian, however, is the moral center of the novel, the one character who can generally be counted on to temper principle with mercy without violating integrity. Nonetheless, he, too, is a victim of excessive sensibility, although he typically manages to overcome it in his personal life. Adrian is a poet, if not in profession, then in spirit. He values imagination and love above other considerations, and considers them divine; "What a noble boon, worthy the giver, is the imagination! It takes from reality its leaden hue . . . is not love a gift of the divinity? Love, and her child, Hope . . ." ¹⁹ In this instance, love and imagination have helped rescue Adrian from the consequences of his excessive sensibility; rejected in love by a woman who falls in love with Raymond (his eventual mistress), Adrian goes mad. Madness, Shelley suggests, is an expected response to excessive indulgence of sensibility. Perdita, likewise, enters a period of decline approaching madness when Raymond betrays her, and even Lionel feels a despair he identifies as madness when he thinks he cannot win Idris from Raymond; "Truly, I was mad that night – love – which I have named a giant from birth, wrestled with despair!" ²⁰ Adrian overcomes his madness with the sympathy of his friend Lionel, ²¹ but

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53 – 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44. For more on how Shelley constructed madness, and her father William Godwin's possible influence, see Katherine Hill-Miller, "My Hideous Progeny": *Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995).

²¹ Friendship rarely represents a dangerous excess of sensibility in Shelley; her mother's views on the virtues of

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

continues to demonstrate crippling sensibility throughout. His short adventure in Greece with Raymond ends when he discovers he sympathizes on a human level with a wounded or slain enemy. "The Turks are men," he says, "each fibre, each limb is as feeling as our own."²² While Raymond's selfish, quintessentially masculine brand of sensibility is able to put the sufferings of others aside when they conflict with his goal, Adrian's altruistic tendency prevents such distancing. Adrian, unlike Raymond, survives to fight another day, and enthusiastically embarks on a program of public service when the plague renders most men too scared or sick to lead. Ultimately, however, he is defeated by the bodily weakness that an excess of sensibility seems to imply, a weakness exacerbated by his madness over love and a war wound sustained in the defense of a beleaguered Greek girl accosted by soldiers.²³ His inability to swim to safety as Lionel does is Shelley's ultimate judgment against his sensibility; he is simply too good for the world. "For the will of man is omnipotent," he optimistically suggests, "blunting the arrows of death, soothing the bed of disease, and wiping away the tears of agony . . . I dedicate all of intellect and strength that remains to me, to that one work . . . of bestowing blessings on my fellow-men!"²⁴ Adrian makes this pledge immediately after recovering from madness, but Shelley

hints that he will be proved wrong regarding the power of man's will by having Lionel describe Adrian's appearance on uttering these noble words: "His voice trembled, his eyes were cast up, his hands clasped, and his fragile person was bent, as it were, with excess of emotion. The spirit of life seemed to linger in his form, as a dying flame on an altar flickers on the embers of an accepted sacrifice."²⁵ Sensibility, for Adrian, does not pay.

Finally, sensibility is observed in the character of Lionel himself. If Adrian is the moral center of the novel, Lionel is at the plot center, peripheral to but affected by the actions of more forceful characters. This essential passivity is usually gendered feminine by critics (in opposition to Raymond's masculinized, essentially aggressive and impulsive emotionalism), and that reading is supported in Shelley's descriptions of Verney's sensibility.²⁶ Shelley has Lionel always reacting; even his madness about Idris echoes his sister's, and Adrian's, feminized response. Shelley genders Lionel overtly feminine

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Scholars are endlessly fascinated by the gendering of Lionel Verney, mostly because the narrator of *The Last Man* is usually understood to be a literary version of Shelley herself, a sort of fictional autobiography. Brewer sees Verney as an expression of Shelley's ideas on the plot device of feminine victim confession, drawing from her mother's novels *Mary* and *The Wrongs of Woman*. Johanna M. Smith argues that Lionel and Adrian are both gendered feminine, as opposed to the overt and failed masculine sensibility of Raymond (*Mary Shelley*, 49). Most interestingly, Barbara Johnson views Lionel, like Frankenstein's monster, as a representative of a third and intermediate gender; "he resembles neither the men nor the women of the novel. He serves the function of witness, of survivor, and of scribe . . . the same role that Mary Shelley plays at the moment when she writes her novel" (in "*The Last Man*," in *The Other Mary Shelley*, 262).

friendship were well known (see Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*).

²² *The Last Man*, 116.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 54.

when he crouches over the sleeping form of his dying wife: "The solitude became intolerable – I placed my hand on the beating heart of Idris, I bent my head to catch the sound of her breath, to assure myself that she still existed – for a moment I doubted whether I should not awake her; so effeminate an horror ran through my frame."²⁷ Lionel's nursing posture and his physical, sensible reaction are sometimes read as expression of Shelley's own feminized sensibility. He is certainly subject to physical reactions; he cries along with his sister when Raymond is returned to them after captivity. "My swelling heart choked me; the natural current would not be checked; the big rebellious tears gathered in my eyes . . . they came fast and faster."²⁸ Lionel's sensibility, however, is not as ultimately destructive as Adrian's, Raymond's, and Perdita's. He is able to seek solace in physical reactions, but unlike Perdita, is not overwhelmed by them. He is the only person in all the world to survive the ravages of love, war, and plague, possibly because he has sufficient sensibility to produce sympathy and cooperation, but not so much that he is destroyed by circumstance.

By using the extreme plot device of killing literally everyone in the world save one, Shelley dramatically outlines the perils of excessive or unchecked sensibility. In Raymond, the failure to temper emotional impulses with calm consideration of consequences makes a wreck of his life and those of others. For

Perdita, the problem is directly opposite; rather than being too selfish, she is selfless, and her extreme sensibility renders her helpless to survive without the object of her passion. Adrian's sensitivity to all of society as well as his own emotions incapacitates him at times, and finally makes him a victim of his own unbridled optimism. Only Lionel's reactive sensibility stands the tests of circumstance.

The Last Man can be rescued from the dismissive characterization of a sort of fictional diary for Shelley by viewing it as an expression of Shelley's views on sensibility and sympathy. As demonstrated by a close reading of the novel, these ethics are present in each of the main characters in importantly varying ways. Lionel, Adrian, and Perdita all represent degrees of feminized sensibility, whereas Raymond demonstrates an impulsive sensibility and reluctant sympathy no less pivotal to plot and character development for being masculine. Considerations of biography and authorial intent aside, Shelley's use of sensibility suggests that sensibility was very much a relevant cultural framework in her day. That sensibility is ultimately helpless against primeval forces of nature is not necessarily a rejection of sensibility as a useful and necessary societal attribute; by varying the type and degree of sensibility in her characters and giving them all different fates, Shelley indicates instead that while sensibility does not solve all problems, it should not be rejected out of hand as a means of coping with modernity. Lionel Verney's survival, and the projection of his biography into a distant past,

²⁷ *The Last Man*, 192.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

underscores the cautionary tale aspect of *The Last Man*. The nested frame narrative, as Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor suggests, can be interpreted as a final vindication of sympathy by paradoxically giving the last man an audience.²⁹ It also hints that Shelley's contemporary readers should view modernity with skepticism and should consider neither technology nor sensibility adequate protections against the caprices of nature, a theme first suggested in *Frankenstein*. As in *Frankenstein*, but more explicitly, Shelley uses the plot and characters of *The Last Man* to carve a middle ground for sensibility and its product, sympathy. She creates a world in which sensibility is necessary, but fraught with traps made increasingly hazardous by the distractions of modern society

²⁹ Wagner-Lawlor, 768.

"I Cannot Rule Myself"

REFERENCES

- Bennett, Betty T., and Stuart Curran, ed. *Mary Shelley in Her Times*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. PR 5398.M27 2000
- Bennett, Betty T., ed. *Selected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. PR 5398.A4 1995
- Bour, Isabelle. "Sensibility as Epistemology in *Caleb Williams*, *Waverley*, and *Frankenstein*." *Studies in English Literature 1500 - 1900* 45 (2005): 813 - 27.
- Brewer, William D. *The Mental Anatomies of William Godwin and Mary Shelley*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001. PR 5398.B74 2001
- Bunnell, Charlene E. *"All the World's a Stage": Dramatic Sensibility in Mary Shelley's Novels*. New York: Routledge, 2002. PR 5398.B86 2002
- Canuel, Mark. "Acts, Rules, and *The Last Man*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53 (1998): 147 - 70.
- Fisch, Audrey A. "Plaguening Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction, and *The Last Man*." In *The Other Mary Shelley*, Fisch et al., ed., 267 – 86. PR 5398.087 1993
- Fisch, Audrey A. et al., ed. *The Other Mary Shelley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. PR 5398.087 1993
- Hill-Miller, Katherine C. *"My Hideous Progeny": Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995. PR 5398.H5 1995
- Hill-Miller, Katherine C. *"My Hideous Progeny": Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995. PR 5398.H5 1995
- Johnson, Barbara. "*The Last Man*." In *The Other Mary Shelley*, Fisch et al. ed., 258 – 267. PR 5398.087 1993
- Lyles, W.H. *Mary Shelley: an Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1975. PR 5398.L84 1975
- Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. New York: Methuen, 1988. PR 5398.M4 1988
- Nitchie, Elizabeth. *Mary Shelley*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953. PR 5398.N5
- Paley, Morton D. "*The Last Man*: Apocalypse without Millennium." In *The Other Mary Shelley*, Fisch et al., ed., 107 – 23. PR 5398.087 1993
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York: Signet, 2000. ISBN: 0451527712
- . *The Last Man*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. PR 5397.L3 1965
- Smith, Johanna M. *Mary Shelley*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996. PR 5398.S55 1996
- Spark, Muriel. *Mary Shelley*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987. PR 5398.S63 1987
- Wagner-Lawlor, Jennifer A. "Performing History, Performing Humanity in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *Studies in English Literature 1500 - 1900* 42 (2002): 753 - 80.