Mary Shelley’s short stories notebook in the Bodleian Library

“Valerius: The Reanimated Roman” and “An Eighteenth-Century Tale: A Fragment”, two short stories by Mary Shelley, were published for the first time in 1976 by Charles E. Robinson in his fine edition of her Collected Tales and Stories. Robinson’s copy-text was a microfilm in Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina, of the holograph manuscript notebook containing them [ROBINSON 1976, pp. 397, 399]. The notebook, part of the Abinger Collection (also known as the Abinger Papers), was photographed in August 1952 under the supervision of Marion Kingston who described it in a typescript inventory as a “[s]mall notebook in Mary’s hand, with stories begun at both ends.” [KINGSTON 1952, p. 5] The microfilming of the Abinger Collection, begun by Duke University on the initiative of Newman Ivey White in 1948, had been generously permitted by James Scarlett, 8th Baron Abinger, of Clees Hall, Bures, Suffolk, grandson of Lady Jane Shelley’s adopted daughter [PAITON 1953]. A few decades later, between 1974 and 1993, most of the Abinger Papers, including the original draft manuscript of Frankenstein, were deposited at the Bodleian Library. Recently, in 2004, they were purchased from the 9th Baron Abinger, thereby adding the final third of the Shelley family archive to the Bodleian’s collections, the first two thirds having already been acquired through gifts made by the Shelley family since 1893. Part of the interest of the notebook containing these stories is that it was not amongst those manuscripts deposited in the 1970s to 1990s but was handed over in 2004. In addition, the notebook has a particular poignancy in respect of this commemorative volume, for Betty Bennett may have been the only scholar apart from Marion Kingston to have consulted it prior to that date. But before briefly describing the notebook itself, it is perhaps worth summarizing the two stories and the existing scholarship relating to them.

“Valerius: the Reanimated Roman”, which appears to be unfinished, opens with a third-person narrator’s account of the arrival of “two strangers” at a bay in the gulf of Naples: the first, “an Englishman of rank,” the other, one “whose appearance resembled that of the statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Square of the Capitol at Rome.” [ROBINSON 1976, p. 332] The latter turns out to be a revived Roman, Valerius, whose narrative makes up most of the first part of the story and whose name indicates him to be trapped in a state of perpetual valediction. He describes himself to the Englishman as one who died during the Republic, persuaded that “since philosophy and letters were now joined to a virtue unparalleled upon earth, Rome was approaching that perfection from which there was no fall” [p. 336]. On his reanimation three years previously (apparently in the early nineteenth century), Valerius had returned to Rome, finding a refuge in the Colosseum to contemplate the fallen Republic and, to his despair, the fact that “Modern Rome is the Capital of Christianity” [p. 337]. He recalls being discovered there by a young Scot, Isabell, who, as we are told, is married to an older, educated Englishman, Lord Harley, by whom she has a “little son” [p. 338]. Their ensuing friendship has become “the only hope and comfort” of Valerius’s life, and he acknowledges that she “wins his soul [...] in a manner that I never experienced in my former life.” [p. 339] The first part of the story concludes with the narrator describing the pair’s return to Naples, and their impending departure from Italy for England. The second part comprises Isabell Harley’s narrative which recounts the befriending of Valerius from her perspective. Elizabeth Nitchie, the first scholar to notice this story [NITCHIE 1953, p. 208], dated it to the winter of 1818-1819 arguing for its indebtedness to Percy Shelley’s prose fragment “The Coliseum”, begun on 25 November 1818 during the Shelleys’ first, brief visit to Rome, in which a blind old man visits the Colosseum accompanied by his daughter. [SHELLEY 1959, p. 103 n. 6; FELDMAN AND SCOTT-KILVERT 1990, p. 239] In possibly the most sustained critical analysis of the story to date, Jean de Palacio proposed that the story was written between 15 and 20 March 1819, soon after the arrival of the Shelleys at Rome from Naples for a more extended stay, when Mary Shelley’s journal records ‘Write’. [DE PALACIO 1969, p. 190 n. 23; FELDMAN AND SCOTT-KILVERT 1990, pp. 253-254] Robinson, while not endorsing such a narrow time-frame, also conjectures the story to have been written in 1819 [ROBINSON 1976, p. 397].

Many features of “Valerius” are suggestive of Frankenstein: a restless and alienated protagonist who is resolutely solitary and alienated; the use of multiple narrative viewpoints; the distinctive combination of supernatural curiosity with scholarly knowledge (in this case, of Roman history) and the precise and accurate description of continental locales. There is also an unmistakable hint of autobiographical allusion in the heroine’s name (Isabella Baxter Booth was Mary’s close childhood friend with whom she had resided in Scotland for extended periods between 1812 and 1814), her situation (like Isabell, Mary was married to an older Englishman who took “pleasure in cultivating her mind” and by whom she had a son) and her reading (Isabell records reading The Georgics with Valerius in the Coliseum with a feeling “that I could not have believed that words had it in their power to bestow” [p. 343], while Mary calls this work of Virgil “the most beautiful poem I

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ever read” in a letter from Naples of January 1819 [BENNETT 1980, p. 85]). An additional theme in common with *Frankenstein* is the thwarting of the redemptive power of the female. For Isabell’s narrative tells not just of how she tries to effect a cure for Valerius’s stubborn melancholy but of her superior understanding of historical change whereby she can find enlightenment in the city’s ruins: “It is to me”, she says, “a singular and even a beautiful sight to see the care and pains with which [Rome’s] degenerate children preserve her reliques.” [p. 341] Moreover, during a tour of the Pantheon which the Shelleys visited on the same day as the Coliseum in March 1819, just as they had done in November 1818 [FELDMAN AND SCOTT-KILVERT 1990, pp. 251-252, 238], Isabell enables Valerius to experience, albeit fleetingly, “the existence of that Pantheic Love with which Nature is penetrated”. [p. 342] That is, she invites him to participate in a faith that transcends both the gods of his own era and the Christianity he reviles. Finally, the story is inflected with a delicate intertextuality. The ancestry of Shelley’s Scottish heroine and Roman hero recall loosely the half-English, half-Roman heroine and Scottish hero, Oswald, Lord Nelvil, of Staël’s *Corinne* (1807), a novel Mary re-read in Naples in December 1818 [FELDMAN AND SCOTT-KILVERT 1990, p. 243]. Moreover, the Elysian Fields where Valerius recalls Ancient Rome at the start of the story are associated with Book VI of *The Aeneid*, an epic that, in respect of the story’s chronology, was composed after his death. These allusions to the prophetic aspect of Virgil’s poem, which more generally look forward to *Matilda*, the novella Mary Shelley began in August 1819, as well as to her 1826 novel, *The Last Man*, foreshadow Isabell’s teaching that literature may help to counter a restrictive, undialectical understanding of the relationship between the present and the past.

The fragment, “An Eighteenth-Century Tale”, is set in a house on the River Thames between Marlow and Henley, and, as Emily Sunstein has noted, appears to be modelled on Boccaccio’s *Decameron* which Mary Shelley read in Rome in May 1819. [SUNSTEIN 1989, p. 164; FELDMAN AND SCOTT-KILVERT 1990, pp. 262-264] Robinson dates it simply “before 1824” commenting persuasively that it “appears to be the source of” the opening of her “Recollections of Italy” published in the *London Magazine*, 9 (January 1824) 21-26. [ROBINSON 1976, p. 398] Just before the tale breaks off, a few sentences in to Maria Graham’s narrative, we learn that she has been left to the care of an aunt before she was ten years old, a touch that could be argued to anticipate the narrative of *Matilda*.

The notebook containing these stories, now identified as “Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. [Abinger] S. N. [MWS short stories]”, contains sixty six leaves. Both stories are untitled in the manuscript with “Valerius” written in ff. 1r-31 and “An Eighteenth-Century Tale” *reverso* in ff. 66-64. The remaining pages are blank. Betty Bennett, who “inventoried” the notebook after Charles Robinson’s edition was published in 1976, noted it to be just over six inches long and four and a half inches wide, its cover to be of mottled blue and orange, and that its paper carries three kinds of watermark. Further research on the notebook’s watermarks has yet to be undertaken. But an examination in 2007 revealed faintly legible print visible beneath the surface of the paper paste-downs on the inside front and back boards, which on inspection turned out to be Italian, strongly suggesting that the notebook was acquired after the Shelleys’ arrival in Italy in April 1818. That the notebook should have been withheld when so much of the Abinger Collection had been deposited in the Bodleian by 1993 may be explained by several locks of hair, now encapsulated in Melinex by the Library’s Conservation section at the six openings where they were found, which may have endowed it with a special status for the family. Unmentioned by Bennett, and apparently not evident in the Duke University microfilm since not noted by Robinson either (perhaps because removed during the microfilming), the hair (pending proper scientific analysis) might possibly be thought to include that of William Shelley, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Claire Clairmont. A very tentative and highly speculative hypothesis is that the hair was placed in the notebook after the death of William in Rome from malaria on 7 June 1819, aged three years and five months. Since the entries in Mary Shelley’s second surviving journal notebook, also in the Abinger collection, end on that date, and she did not start her next journal-book until 4 August 1819, the same month in which she began *Matilda*, work on the two short stories may have remained incomplete because the death of her son forced her to abandon them and made it impossible for her to open the notebook again. To my knowledge, none of the other thirty or so Shelley manuscript notebooks in the Bodleian and Huntington libraries contain locks of hair, although the Bodleian houses amongst its Shelley relics a formidable collection of family hair (amongst it, that of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley’s mother) including locks certainly preserved by Mary Shelley herself.

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**Bibliografía**


