



DECONSTRUCTING THE PLAGUE: AMBIVALENCE OF MARY SHELLEY'S *THE LAST MAN*

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Abstract

This article will examine Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as an end-of-the-world narrative and explore the ambivalence of the global progression of the deadly plague that brings the end of the world. I would like to examine the plague's ambivalence not only as a deconstructive strategy that resists traditional orientalist readings and promotes a counter-politics of nationalism and orientalism, but also an effective self-effacing principle that persistently eliminates any possibility of a meta-narrative in the novel, even when that same meta-narrative could involve a critique of western hegemony. With the purpose of examining the text's self-deconstructive foundation, I will do a double reading of the novel that on the one hand illustrates its critique of orientalism and nationalism while on the other hand focuses on the ambivalence as a central disorienting force in the narrative, which is perhaps a gesture that stands for the text's refusal to colonize itself.

Keywords: *Mary Shelley, The Last Man, Orientalism, Apocalypse.*

VEBANIN YAPISÖKÜMÜ: MARY SHELLEY'NİN SON İNSAN'INDAKİ MUĞLAKLIK

Özet

Bu makale Mary Shelley'nin *Son İnsan* adlı romanını apokaliptik bir metin olarak incelemekte ve dünyanın sonunu getiren ölümcül vebanın yeryüzüne yayılışındaki belirsizliğe odaklanmaktadır. Vebanın çıkış ve dağılışındaki muğlaklığı, geleneksel şarkiyatçı okumalara karşı çıkan yapısökümcü bir strateji olarak yorumlamanın yanı sıra, aynı zamanda metnin genelinde bir üst-anlatının (ki bu üst-anlatı Batı hegemonyasını eleştirel nitelik taşıyor olsa bile) oluşma imkanını baltalayan etkin bir "kendini yoketme" prensipi olarak analiz edeceğim. Metnin yapısökücü temelini irdelemek amacıyla, bir yandan romanın milliyetçi ve şarkiyatçı yaklaşımlara eleştirel tutumunu, öte yandan da belirsizliğin metnin ana merkezi oluşunu, iki yönlü bir okuma yaparak tartışmayı hedefliyorum.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Mary Shelley, Son İnsan, Şarkiyatçılık, Kıyamet.*

Published in 1826, eight years after the first release of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is an apocalyptic narrative set at the end of twenty-first century. After surviving the death of her husband and three children, Shelley wrote the novel on returning to England from Italy with her only remaining child. A much-quoted diary entry from May 14, 1824 reveals her state of mind when she set out to write the novel: "*The Last man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me*" (qtd. in Mellor, 1988: 157). Interpreting the novel mainly as a *roman à clef*, various critics referred to this diary entry in order to point out the parallels between the main characters in the novel and important figures in Mary Shelley's personal life (Mellor, 1988: 148; Synder, 1978: 436). On the other hand, the book was often interpreted as a "*tale of the future*" which was popular in the first decade of the nineteenth century—a century of "profound uneasiness" due to failed revolutions and ideological crisis in response to

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the effects of the industrial revolution (Franci, 1985: 183). The novel has equally been acclaimed through its Gothic elements and sensationalism (Synder, 1978: 447-448; Canuel, 1998: 166). In its thematic focus, *The Last Man* has mostly been read as a return of the repressed story, reflecting on the imperialist anxieties of a rapidly expanding Empire that fears reverse colonization. Accordingly, it is possible to consider Shelley's novel firstly as a sensational invasion story, and secondly, as a story that opens up a critique of western colonial involvement with the Orient. Since the novel at least initially starts like a classic orientalist invasion story (such as H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*), the solidarity among fellow countrymen against "the return of the repressed" can be seen to trigger patriotic sentiments that end up with a concern to preserve the English national identity intact from oriental "threats." In spite of its initial association with the Orient, the disease's pandemic effect is soon proven to be provoked by the colonial enterprise, which is embodied in Raymond's somewhat blindfolded and egoistic scheme of "liberation" to take over the city of Constantinople. Indeed, the novel, at certain crucial points, turns into a criticism of colonialism, and of English nationalism that would justify the colonial ideology.

This article will examine *The Last Man* as an end-of-the-world narrative and explore the ambivalence of the global progression of the deadly plague that brings the end of the world. Shelley's centralization of the ambivalence of the plague – its nature, origins, mode of transmission and progress and its literal and figurative connotations – deconstructs the orientalist perspective that poses a binary opposition between the conquering West and the conquered East that comes back with a vengeance. In order for this opposition to function, the plague needs to be clearly associated with the East through one or more identifying points, which would then be contrasted with "western" (i.e. English) values clearly and undisputedly provided in the novel. In addition to, and perhaps more than its destructive power as a health hazard on a global-scale, however, what is so terrifying about the disease is the lack of clarity about its actual nature and its defiance of all referential sense (Synder, 1978: 440). I would like to examine the plague's ambivalence not only as a deconstructive strategy that resists traditional orientalist readings and promotes a counter-politics of nationalism and orientalism, but also an effective self-effacing principle that persistently eliminates any possibility of a meta-narrative in the novel, even when that same meta-narrative could involve a critique of western hegemony. In other words, in my reading of the novel, as much as *The Last Man* potentially provides a critique, it also deconstructs the main tenets of that same critique. With the purpose of examining the text's self-deconstructive foundation, I will do a double reading of the novel that on the one hand illustrates its critique of orientalism and nationalism while on the other hand focuses on the ambivalence as a central disorienting force in the narrative, which perhaps stands for the text's resistance to categorize itself.

Narrated by the title character Lionel Verney, Mary Shelley's novel recounts the gradual extermination of humanity because of a fast-spreading pandemic that rages the earth for seven years. The plague "*rais[ing] its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile*" (Shelley, 1826: 175), originates in the East, and marches across the Atlantic to America before besieging England. Focusing solely on this aspect of the story, one could argue that the novel reflects western anxieties about "*the dangers of Oriental 'infection' for individual bodies and for the body politic*" (Lew, 1998: 262). While narrating the rapid progress of the plague, the narrator initially portrays an orientalist narrative based on a clear dichotomy between the plague-ridden East and the impermeable West, all the more segregated because of the corrupt influence of the East:

... [the plague] is of old a native of the East, sister of the tornado, the earthquake, and the simoom. Child of the sun, and nursling of the tropics, it would expire in these climes. It drinks the dark blood of the inhabitant of the south, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt. If perchance some stricken Asiatic come among us, plague dies with him, uncommunicated and innoxious. (Shelley, 1826: 233)

Indeed, the plague is partly presented as an inherent aspect of the city of Constantinople, where plague "*rage[s] each year*" (Shelley, 1826: 193). "*The black sun that rose in the east*" confirms the unnatural, almost threatening side of the East that can no longer be kept captive. It is noteworthy that "*From Constantinople [...] the epidemic spreads Europe and through the whole world*" (Shelley, 1826: 185). The ongoing war over Constantinople between the "barbaric" Turks and Greeks supported by the liberating troops, when considered together with the route of the plague's progress, emphasizes the East vs. West dichotomy. Perceived as "irrational" as its place of origin, the plague eventually threatens to invade London. The gradual dispersal of the plague westward is so mystified that one fails to comprehend its progress with rational reasoning, let alone stop it using prophylactic measures. "*... the East and disease are fused into a single image, the primary obstacle to a perfect social order,*" asserts Raymond, as one of the key characters in the novel and the English commandeer of the Greek army (Shelley, 1826: 300). According to the more "enlightened" characters in the novel, Adrian and Raymond, the disease champions a state of disorder, or in Bewell's words "*an expression of the failure of science and society*

to perfect the means by which life can be rid of 'self-raised obstacles.' Like poverty, it is a social condition and, as such, has a social cure" (Bewell, 1999: 300). That "cure," which will eventually be discredited, takes the form of a military occupation of the oriental city, believing that the plague will terminate once the oriental chaos is put into order.

The ensuing narrative, however, immediately undoes the too convenient and comforting orientalist plot. Shelley's narration brings the Greeks against the Turks and yet undoes this opposition by eliminating their radical differentiation: while the Greeks, Turks and the liberating troops are all violent, "...their shared brutality culminates in an account of a rape of a Moslem girl by two Greek soldiers, an image that collapses military coercion and the abuse of masculine sexual power" (Goldsmith, 1990: 151). Moreover, the section on the process and the after effects of the city's fall suggests that the dispersal of the plague is due to the colonial enterprise rather than an existing essential difference between the East and the West. As Bewell argues, it is only after the narcissistic Raymond seizes the city by force that the catastrophic events follow: "*The plague appears at a significant moment in the novel, just as Lord Raymond is about to enter the deserted city of Constantinople (Stamboul). (...) What he does not recognize is that his own actions are transforming the ecology of the disease, as the fall of Stamboul erases its traditional boundaries. Just as the British influence in India unleashed cholera, Raymond's conquering the city produces a catastrophe in Europe*" (Bewell, 1999: 298). In this scenario, the plague uncovers the colonial guilt rather than colonial corruption, and potentially turns the narrative into a stark criticism of colonialism. Although Constantinople, "*the strong hold of Moslems*" falls, and "*rescued from slavery and barbarism,*" it is no longer a desired city (Shelley, 1826: 176-177). Turks have already abandoned the city and the Greek soldiers are reluctant to enter through the gates. When finally the Lord Byron figure Raymond triumphantly enters the ghost city, he finds nothing more than a vast necropolis (Synder, 1978: 440). With the absence of the inhabitants of the city, it is no longer possible to categorically stereotype them, which would be fundamental for an orientalist reading. What is even more striking is the text's dual self-deconstruction. *The Last Man* seems equally disorienting and lacking clarity in its critique of colonialism and orientalism –the point where one could consider the novel as undoing itself. As noted by Goldsmith, for instance, Shelley is equally distant to a sympathetic representation of Turks (which would otherwise help bolster the novel's critique of colonialism and orientalism) since "*The Last Man is never particularly favorable to the Moslems.... But her open criticism of the Greek cause and its supporters undermines the language of hierarchy necessary to the European rationalization of domination*" (Goldsmith, 1990: 151).

Such a tenuously constructed dichotomy soon-to-be-deconstructed can also be perceived in the way the English make a distinction between different group of emigrants seeking refuge in England to escape the plague. Before the arrival of the disease, England's commerce-based economy is already unsettled because of the global recession in commercial activity. As the news arrive in London that the plague is now storming in France and Italy, England receives the first set of emigrants from Europe, which further exacerbates the economy. Together with the English expatriates coming back home, "Italians and Spaniards" arrive. The narrator expresses the general spirit of benevolence to the first group as follows:

It was impossible to see these crowds of wretched, perishing creatures, late nurslings of luxury, and not stretch out a hand to save them. As at the conclusion of the eighteenth century, the English unlocked their hospitable store, for the relief of those driven from their homes by political revolution; so now they were not backward in affording aid to the victims of a more wide-spreading calamity. We had many foreign friends whom we eagerly sought out, and relieved from dreadful penury. (Shelley, 1826: 236)

Coming from Europe, these "unfortunate" emigrants are presented as if they are escaping persecution. The way the English receive this first set of foreign population notably differs from the way the "unruly" Irish and Scottish will later be received. A number of people from North America, who escape from the plague, set sail for Europe, land in Ireland, and attempt to share in the natural resources of the country, which enrage the native population. Plundering the Irish land, the Americans move across the country, rousing "*the fiery nature of the Irish*" (Shelley, 1826: 296) and leave for England. The Irish follow "*in unnatural numbers*" (296) and cross the sea to Scotland and then joined by the Scots, pour into England from north. England would show the same degree of benevolence, the narrator assures the reader by asserting that "*There was room enough indeed in our hapless country for twice the number of invaders; but their lawless spirit instigated them to violence*" (Shelley, 1826: 297-298) and were supported by "*[t]he lower and vagabond English*" (298). Even though the disease spreads across the Atlantic to America before arriving in England, one could still read the book as an invasion story gone astray because England as the last country to be affected by the plague is finally invaded, perhaps not by the eastern populations, but by the Americans, the Irish and the Scots. Both invasion stories, either by the Europeans

escaping the oriental plague or by the unruly group of Irish, Scots, Americans, nevertheless fail to function as serious threats of the racial other. Moreover, the integrity of the English nation is threatened not because it is invaded by the “savages”, but because the countrymen leave England in the year 2096:

To leave the country of our fathers, made holy by their graves! (...) We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desert land, and the name of England died, when we left her. ... Let us go –the world is our country now. (...) The world is vast, and England, though her many fields and wide spread woods seem interminable, is but a small part of her (Shelley, 1826: 325-326).

Hence, a group of countrymen survive the invasion of England as they detach themselves from their local environment and become perpetual wanderers on earth (or likewise, its sole masters).

Various critics have drawn attention to the enigma posed by the plague, and explored the significance of its ambivalence. As Eller argues, “*Shelley seems intent on seeing the plague less as an allegory for racial or colonial others, or indeed any world-historical actor, than as that which deflates the meaning of all such confrontations*” (Eller, 2009: 356). Similarly Synder indicates that,

...there is no logically adequate way of construing the plague. As a fictional device it is presented not, as in Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), as a naturalistic calamity nor, as in John Wilson’s *The City of the Plague* (1816), as a framework for melodrama with religious overtones. It is also not essentially comparable to the pestilence found in Shelley’s *Laon and Cythna* (1817), his symbolic epic dedicated to Mary and later retitled *The Revolt of Islam*, which unmistakably identifies this affliction with the barbarity, fraud, despotism, and reactionary politics of the ‘tyrants of the Golden City.’ (IV. XIV. 1531). Instead, the plague in Mary Shelley’s novel figures as an ‘invisible monster’ (p. 160) and grotesque enigma mocking all assumptions of order, meaning, purpose, and causality. It is, in short, an irreducible phenomenon that both challenges and defines the limits of rational understanding. (...) [In *The Last Man*] we are confronted with the darkly inexplicable and by the novel’s end are led to feel that nothing has been resolved. (Synder, 1978: 437).

Even at the end, there remain several unresolved issues regarding the plague. It is never clear, for instance, whether the plague is contracted through physical contact with the “racial other.” The text vaguely suggests that it is through the sole survivor on an American-built ship coming from Philadelphia that England is finally infected (217). While the disease needs to be proven to be contagious as to pose an undisputable threat to England, the only incident of contagion is Lionel’s contracting the plague from the survivor black man. All the same, “*this image remains ambiguous,*” as Lew argues: “*Verney is the only character who survives infection, although it remains unclear whether this is due to some special, biological merit of Verney’s or whether the ‘black’ plague with which he is infected is less virulent*” (Lew, 1998: 275). Although the plague is given as lethal, Lionel’s survival contradicts the detrimental aspect of the plague, which further contributes to its ambivalence. Moreover, the presence of the black man as the potential “racial other” complicates the significance of the plague. Reading the course of events and the fall of Constantinople, when one would be more naturally expecting to have an oriental figure (perhaps a Turk escaping the plague in Constantinople) as the racial other inflecting the Englishman, what does this surprising appearance of the black man signify? If one were to see him as “*the projection of Verney’s guilt upon the most blatantly colonial subjects of Shelley’s own day*” (Lew, 1998: 275), the black man could certainly symbolize the displacement caused by British imperialism, and stand for “colonial guilt.” As the rest of the article will argue, however, the novel, especially in the second half, is ambivalent in its critique of orientalist and nationalist politics as much as it lacks clarity and conclusiveness in its orientalist thread.

With the fall of Constantinople to the “liberating troops,” the dissemination of the plague speeds up and starts threatening England. On witnessing the extermination of the majority of the population in the island, the remaining English decide to leave the country for the warmer climate of the south: “*In the beginning of time, when, as now, man lived by families, and not by tribes or nations, they were placed in a genial clime, where earth fed them untilled, and the balmy air enwrapt their reposing limbs with warmth more pleasant than beds of down. The south is the native place of the human race...*” (Shelley, 1826: 323). While the march towards the south is given as a journey into the past, the novel does not present this temporal regression in positive terms. As the English walk through Europe, they will gradually die, leaving only four people behind when the plague ceases with an abrupt end. Hence, the novel complicates its criticism of national belonging by resisting to simply replace it with a pre-national formation. Instead, Shelley constantly shifts between a confirmation and condemnation of national belonging, which seems to target the arbitrariness of national identity at large. In her discussion of

Shelley's politics, Anne K. Mellor argues that "In political and philosophical terms, *The Last Man* first undercuts the dominant systems of government of the early nineteenth century and then shows that all cultural ideologies are but meaningless fictions" (Mellor, 1988: 144).

If we consider the linear progression of the novel from domestic fiction to national and global calamity, the first volume of the novel, a *bildungsroman* of sorts, traces the coming-of-age of the narrator and his gradual maturation as his wild manners are "tamed" so that he achieves a harmonious relationship with his environment. The novel's initial focus is on the narrator's development as an individual as he grows up wild and lawless without parental guidance, followed by an intense period in which he is disciplined by Adrian, the Earl of Windsor. The two next cross each other's path as they take refuge in the idyllic atmosphere of a small community at Windsor Castle. Together with the spouses and children, Lionel and Adrian temporarily take part in this close family circle, while the political unrest in England among aristocrats, royalists, and democrats, and the ongoing war between Turks and Greeks over Constantinople eventually disturb this idyllic unity. The middle section of the novel narrates the dissolution of the Windsor Castle community as each individual dies and leaves the others to assume new social roles, to redefine themselves by breaking out of the small communal attachment and start roaming –and even haunting –the earth with an almost ghost-like presence. If Shelley concluded the novel at this point, it might have been possible to read the end as the restoration of order: this is a confirmation –albeit regressively– of the very first stages of a national formation. Instead, the plague comes to a sudden halt leaving four people behind: the narrator, Adrian, narrator's niece Clara, and the narrator's son Evelyn. In that sense, the title is misleading because the survivor of the plague is in fact a group of four people and the last man appears only in the last few pages, left all alone in Switzerland as the last victim who will later settle down in Lake Como, Italy. This curious group of four, described in the second quote below, posits a reversed mirror image of the earlier group at Windsor Castle, described in the first quote:

We had our separate occupations and our common amusements. Sometimes we passed whole days under the leafy covert of the forest with our books and music (...) When the frequent rains shut us within doors, evening recreation followed morning study, ushered in by music and song. (90)

In the morning we rode in the adjoining country, or wandered through the palaces, in search of pictures or antiquities. In the evening we assembled to read or to converse. (Shelley, 1826: 430-431)

Since the author puts great emphasis on the idealization of this Windsor Castle community, and since the major events of the novel take place around this close circle (how *they* are affected by the plague is the main focus), the most detrimental aspect of the plague seems to be the elimination of this small group and of its symbolic value. According to Charlotte Sussman, "Founded on domestic and cultural pleasures rather than on ancient traditions or collective industry, this tiny community nonetheless represents a national idyll... The community's capacity to persist for years without alteration allows it to build a sense of collective, rooted memory" (Sussman, 2003: 293). This short period of temporary bliss is crucial in the novel, especially since the following narrative can be seen as a nostalgic desire to regress back to this idyllic familial/tribal union, which is presented as an early microcosmic formation of the nation.

The plague, as a disorienting global force unsettles all frameworks of reference including national boundaries (Shelley, 1826: 231). With the end of the plague, Shelley brings back what the plague destroyed, but also eliminates the national connotations of that earlier idyllic unity. The idea of national belonging (mainly in relation to local environment) is first disturbed and then replaced in the novel with a different type of belonging to the world that is pre-national such as a tribal existence. *The Last Man* ultimately proposes a different type of belonging to the world, which can be read as an early harbinger of global connectivity, especially since no country or community remains unaffected by the disease. At the end of the novel, the last man to remain on earth becomes a man of the world when he decides to travel around the globe. As much as the plague is quite destructive, one could also interpret the disease as an enabling mechanism to initiate a new beginning and to build up on the remains: the plague is a structural principle that does away with national belonging at the cost of loss on a global scale – a loss that initiates celebration of cosmopolitan values as the plague is conveniently transformed into a narrative device of self-affirmation. Shelley's *The Last Man* is ultimately a melancholic text that does not mourn for the loss of the nation in a conclusive way, but instead engages with this loss in a life-affirming, open-ended, even productive fashion. As much as the novel, even at the very end, remains distant and aloof to the significance of national belonging, the ruinous and equally self-rejuvenating conclusion also deconstructs the conceptual boundaries between the East and the West, which enables the novel to maintain its distance from the categorizing orientalist discourse as well.

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