Numerous recent critical works on Mary Shelley’s *Matilda* have brought the long-neglected 1819 novella, published for the first time in 1959, into something like popularity of late, with critics such as Charles E. Robinson calling it her “second most important text and only now receiving the attention it is due … one hundred and forty years after it was written” in 1819.¹ The reasons for this long delay may be traced to the failure of Mary Shelley (whom I will call simply “Shelley” hereafter) to publish the novella in her lifetime, since, after her death, the vicissitudes of scholarship and family inheritances plagued its distribution. Most scholars point to the scandalous subject matter of father-daughter incestuous passion as the root of the problem for publication, as I will explain, but I submit that this scandalous plot is largely a vehicle Shelley uses to explore another shocking topic: the right to commit suicide. The incest theme of *Matilda* serves Shelley’s main argument that suicide may be regarded as virtuous, honourable, and even socially beneficial. Through her delineation of the family drama in which a father desires his daughter, Shelley incorporates ideas from the broad cultural debate about the right to take one’s own life as they are represented in the writings of members of her own family—and, in so doing, she enacts another kind of family drama.

*Matilda*’s first editor, Elizabeth Nitchie, reports that the manuscript and its draft form, “The Fields of Fancy,” were divided and archived in different locales, and access to the papers was restricted until they were gathered, finally, at the Bodleian where they are now available to scholars (vii-viii). The story of why the manuscript was never published in Shelley’s life, however, is far from dry and academic: having started the tale while she was living with Percy Bysshe Shelley at the Villa Valsovano near

¹ Charles E. Robinson, “Mathilda as Dramatic Actress,” in *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 76–87; 76. Since I am using as my source text the Penguin edition of the novella, edited by Janet Todd (*Mary and Maria* by Mary Wollstonecraft, *Matilda* by Mary Shelley, ed. Janet Todd [London: Penguin, 2004]), I spell the title as Todd does: “Matilda.” That is, I spell it without the h that appears in other editions and critical works about the novella (i.e. “Mathilda”), but I will maintain this alternate spelling when I quote from critical sources that use it. This spelling discrepancy is grounded in Shelley’s own practice, as Todd notes in her introduction to her edition of the work: “In her letters Mary Shelley referred to her work as ‘Matilda’ and in her draft as ‘Mathilda’” (note 3, xxvii).
Leghorn, Mary Shelley sent the finished manuscript to her father, William Godwin, but, as Nitchie puts it in her introduction, the “manuscript apparently stayed in Godwin’s hands.” Godwin was outraged at the overt subject matter of Matilda, that of father-daughter incestuous passion, which he called “disgusting and detestable” (Nitchie xi). Godwin suppressed Matilda intentionally. In her introduction to the novella, Janet Todd notes that he “did not return the manuscript to his daughter despite repeated requests.” Godwin’s frank censorship of Shelley’s text was probably motivated by his fear that readers would interpret it autobiographically, casting him as the incestuously desiring father. After all, the circumstances of Matilda’s birth echo closely those of Shelley, since both author and character are left motherless in infancy. Godwin’s fears were justified and, as history would show, well founded. Lauren Gillingham notes that “In the dozen or so years that Mary Shelley’s Matilda has received sustained critical attention, … the biographical collapse of the author into her text remains a critical commonplace.” Nitchie inaugurated this line of criticism in no uncertain terms, declaring about Matilda in the original 1959 edition of the work, “The biographical elements are clear: Matilda is certainly Mary herself; Matilda’s father is Godwin; Woodville is an idealized Shelley” (xii). I agree that strong autobiographical elements appear in this tale, but in this essay I focus on Shelley’s engagement in a philosophical conversation with members of her family, alive and dead, who, through their writings and lived experiences, represent various aspects of the Romantic-era suicide debate.

Both sides of this debate had powerful proponents from the literary, philosophical and religious spheres. Some argued that the prerogative to end one’s life was a basic human right while others contended that “self-murder” was a crime against God and society. One of the most outspoken philosophers in the debate was William Godwin, the addressee of the novella’s argument. Shelley’s choice of subject was stimulated by her interest in the philosophical conversation, and by personal reasons, for her family was embroiled in the debate. Through Matilda, Shelley enters into dialogue with...

5 More accurately, Nitchie started the spate of biographical interpretations of the novella some years before she published it for the first time. An article she published in 1943, called “Mary Shelley’s Mathilda: An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance,” Studies in Philology 40 (1943): 447–62, frames the tale firmly in the context of Shelley’s life, as the title of the article promises. (All other references to Nitchie in the present article are to her 1959 edition of Mathilda.)
6 The novella may also express Shelley’s own struggle with thoughts of suicide, the existence of which we may surmise from her extreme melancholy during the time that she wrote Matilda (Nitchie xii, Newman Ivey White, Shelley, 2 vols. (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940), 2:40–56). Her depression seems to have been produced by the death of the Shelleys’ daughter, Clara Everina, on September 24, 1818. Shelley wrote in her journal entry for 27 October 1822 that writing the novella comforted her (Nitchie xi); perhaps part of this comfort was the result of working out, in a created fictional world,
three family members: first, her half-sister, Frances Imlay Godwin, whose suicide note implies an argument for the act that accords closely with the novella’s reasoning; second, her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who twice attempted suicide and portrayed her protagonists’ suicidal tendencies as an assertion of female dignity and autonomy; and finally—most directly—her father, who asked in the first edition of the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness (1793), “‘Is there then no case in which suicide is a virtue?’” I will demonstrate that this question is one of the major organizing principles for Matilda. Several mysterious aspects of the plot and of Shelley’s characterization can be clarified in relation to it, such as why Matilda is raised apart from her father, why she dresses like a nun, and why Shelley repeats, almost ad nauseum, that Matilda believes herself to be loathsome, isolated, and practically dead. The shocking nature of the incest plot has captivated readers and critics of Matilda, thereby distracting them from recognizing the rhetorical coup she accomplishes through this device with respect to several of the key components of the Romantic-era suicide debate. No one has before recognized that Shelley ingeniously undermines her period’s major objections to suicide through the fictional circumstance of the incest plot, which she uses to propose a situation in which “suicide is a virtue.”

Suicide had become a flashpoint in the long-standing debate on human rights throughout the eighteenth century, and most major Romantic-era writers in all fields published on this issue. Yet the topic also gained the taint of the frivolous, the selfish, the unrealistic—in short, what was and is termed the “romantic.” This taint may be traced directly to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s hugely popular sentimental novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther, published in German in 1774, which ends with the protagonist’s suicide. The novel inspired Werther-mania: hundreds of young Europeans emulated the protagonist’s impassioned and frustrated artistic sensibility by copying his clothing—and, so the critical myth goes, even committing imitative

7 William Godwin, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness, 2 vols. (Dublin: Luke White, 1793), 1:86, Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, accessed 2 December 2012, http://find.galegroup.com.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/ecco/informark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=univmanitoba&tabID=T001&docId=CW105154866&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE. Nitchie and others suggest that Percy Shelley also makes an appearance in this work as Matilda’s poet-friend, Woodville, who argues strenuously for the position that suicides neglect their social duty to serve their fellow humans through extended life, but I have not located texts in which Percy Shelley allies himself with this view in the suicide debate. As such, more than Percy Shelley’s own, Woodville seems to represent an aspect of Godwin’s view as it is expressed in Political Justice, as I argue hereafter. I will also show that Mary Shelley had yet other familial reasons for ruminating on the topic of suicide, since Shelley’s first wife, Harriet, committed suicide at age 21 on 10 December 1816.
suicide under what is still called “the Werther effect.” The theme was fashionable in Romantic-era literature, as it suited the appetite for extreme emotions favoured by so many in this “culture of sensibility.”

John Keats intoned, and he was not alone. Religious and social conservatives reacted with outrage at what they saw as a shameful resurgence of heathen, classical attitudes towards suicide, which treated it as a matter of honour and an expression of courage in the face of death.

Godwin attacked this thorny issue in an appendix in the first edition of Political Justice. He ventured to ask if suicide might ever be honourable, as it was regarded in Imperial Rome—a shift from attitudes in Republican Rome. Seneca’s words from his essay “On Anger” frame suicide as an expression of defiance against all forms of tyranny: “But why should any man complain of bondage, that, wheresoever he looks, has his way open to liberty? That precipice, that sea, that river, that well, there is freedom in the bottom of it. It hangs upon every crooked bow; and not only a man’s throat, or his heart, but every vein in his body, opens a passage to it.” In his letters to his friend Lucilius, Seneca counsels, “Freedom is so near; and does anyone remain a slave? … Poor fellow, you are a slave to men, a slave to things, a slave to life; for if you lack the virtue of dying, life is slavery.” Shelley’s protagonist, Matilda, restates this sentiment by asking, with regard to suicide, “What slave will not, if he may, escape from his chains?” The idea of suicide as a form of self-possession—of control over one’s own destiny, and, therefore, as strength—developed by means of this classical model.

Christianity imposed the taint of sinfulness on suicide, but the Western literary tradition retained the earlier notion of the act alongside the Christian perspective, particularly in the Romantic period, during which the art and literature of antiquity enjoyed a resurgence in recognition. In 1816 at Covent Garden, John Kemble helped to repopularize Joseph Addison’s play, Cato. A Tragedy (1712), about the hero of republican virtues and enemy of the tyrannical Julius Caesar. The drama, which became an inspirational text for the American and French Revolutions, was influential in reviving the notion that suicide could not only be honourable, but also heroic, even altruistic, since Cato reportedly killed himself to avoid contributing to Caesar’s oppressive regime. Literature depicting the rejection of tyranny was destined to be admired by many in the Romantic period.

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However, not everyone agreed that Cato represented righteous rebellion. Conservative writers argued that, in fact, Cato was a coward who blanched at a life fraught with difficulties under a new ruler and sought the easy way out. For instance, in *Sermons Preached on Several Occasions*, the Rev. John Francis argues in a sermon originally given in 1749 that Cato’s “mean Pride, unjustly by some stiled greatness of Soul, would not suffer him to fall under the Power of his Enemy,” and he chastises Addison when he adds, “it may be a Matter of great Surprize, that one of the greatest Geniuses of the last Age, should ever think such an Action worthy that amiable Light he has set it in. If he could have foreseen the Mischief it has done since upon weak Minds, he would I am persuaded, have suppressed his Design.”

Francis’s theorization about the cause of suicide in Addison’s audience is based on the idea of what has been called “contagion” since Émile Durkheim’s ground-breaking study of 1897, in which he claims that, if their cultural values allow it, individuals may be induced to copy the suicidal actions of others. Long before Durkheim, though, medical writers were offering correctives to the idea of suicide as honourable. In *A Treatise on Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Convulsive Diseases; Apoplexy and Palsy; With Thoughts on Madness, Suicide*, the midwife-cum-psychologist, William Rowley, writes, “The example of Cato is applauded by some writers as a proof of great magnanimity. The action was the reverse: it was the effect of pride and timidity. … To desert the duty Rome had a right to demand, by a voluntary death, was the meanest conduct in his character.”

Godwin also considers the significance of Cato’s suicide, but his analysis is in line with Addison’s. Calling it “much admired,” Godwin writes in *Political Justice*, “The death of Cato … was dwelt on with admiration by all the lovers of virtue under the subsequent tyrants of Rome,” adding that “[i]t seemed to be the lamp from which they caught the sacred flame” (87). Godwin thereby suggests that suicide can not only be considered to be virtuous, but also productive of virtue in others.

By approaching the debate from a philosophical perspective, Godwin followed most closely in the footsteps of that lion of eighteenth-century British empirical philosophy,

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14 William Rowley, *A Treatise on Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Convulsive Diseases; Apoplexy and Palsy; With Thoughts on Madness, Suicide, &c. in which the Principal Disorders are Explained from Anatomical Facts, and the Treatment Formed on Several New Principles* (London: printed for C. Nourse, Strand; E. Newbery, Corner of Ludgate Hill; and T. Hookham, New Bond Street, 1788), 339.
David Hume. Hume offers a thorough discussion of suicide in his suppressed essay “Of Suicide,” which was printed and withdrawn before publication as part of *Five Dissertations* in 1756. The essay was not published under Hume’s name until it appeared in *Essays on Suicide and the Immortality of the Soul* in 1783 as a dangerous curiosity. Notably, too, the first edition was accompanied by the editor’s censorious subtitle, *With Remarks, Intended as an Antidote to the Poison Contained in These Performances,* which implies that Hume’s presentation of suicide as morally defensible is poisonous to his readers. In this way, the editor of Hume’s text demonstrates another early recognition of the late Victorian concept of “contagion.” Arthur Schopenhauer expresses his outrage at the censorship of Hume’s text in his own essay, “On Suicide,” in which he writes:

> It is a great disgrace to the English nation that a purely philosophical treatise, which, proceeding from one of the first thinkers and writers in England, aimed at refuting the current arguments against suicide by the light of cold reason, should be forced to sneak about in that country, as though it were some rascally production.

Far from being a “rascally production,” Hume’s focus on the social implications of suicide would reshape the debate for ages to come.

Classical authors’ commentaries dominated the pro-suicide side of the discussion for centuries, and Seneca was foremost amongst these voices, but Hume expanded the outlines of the debate when he resurrected it, so to speak, in the eighteenth century. While Seneca’s famous letters on suicide focus mainly on the personal significance of the act and do not mention how suicide may interfere with one’s broad public duty, Hume’s text foregrounds this matter. He proposes to “examine … whether Suicide … be a breach of our duty to our neighbour and to society” (18). Hume thus anticipates the arguments levelled by the likes of Francis and Rowley. As might be expected from a sermon on suicide, Francis begins by drawing a hard line against it based on our duty to God: “If we had made ourselves, we should have a most undoubted Right to dispose of and do by ourselves as we pleased. But this, I think, none of us will pretend to. That Being, therefore, … that made us, must alone have Power over us, and …

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16 David Hume, *Essays on Suicide, and The Immortality of the Soul, Ascribed to the late David Hume, Esq. Never Before Published. With Remarks, Intended as an Antidote to the Poison Contained in These Performances,* By the Editor (London: M. Smith, 1783).


18 Seneca mentions family duty, but not broad public duty, as a consideration for those contemplating suicide when he writes, “I often felt the urge to break off my life; it was the old age of my devoted father which held me back. For I thought not of the bravery I would need to die, but of the bravery he would need to do without me” (*Letters* 132).
we invade his Right” if we dispose of ourselves (79). The clergymen maintain an equally firm stance on the social duties of the would-be suicide: “There is no Man, how low or inconsiderable soever his Station or Abilities may be, but may be of some Service to the Public; and every Man, by being born a Member of any Community, is obliged to do it all the Good he can. He, therefore, who violently rids himself of Life, is guilty of defrauding the Public” (81–82). In addition to murder, then, the self-murderer is also guilty of “fraud,” making him doubly culpable.

Rowley, as an early doctor of the mind, might be expected to have greater compassion for and insight into the tortured psychological state of suicides, but he too is rigid about their social obligations. Suicide, he opines,

is an heinous crime, as far as it relates to the duties a man owes to his relations or friends through life: it is a dissolution of all those ties by which men are bound either by interest or affections. No human being can exist without the assistance of some of his own species; nor does any person live whose corporeal or mental services, either for labor or advice, may not become useful. … He who deprives society of his services, either in a political or a moral view, therefore, must violate those obligations he owes his country, family, or friends, and becomes immoral and criminal by the act of suicide. (334–5)

Rowley treats social duty as paramount in the consideration of suicide, perhaps indicating the broad influence at the end of the eighteenth century of Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarian thinking, in which “the greater good” is the greatest concern. As I will show with respect to Godwin’s approach to suicide, the principle of the greater good is of utmost importance for him, too, even though he does not use the term “utilitarian.”

Writing around the middle of the eighteenth century, Hume, however, disagrees. Allowing that we owe obligations to society, he is also quick to point out that these are not “perpetual,” for “they have certainly some bounds,” and he even suggests that suicide may help one to serve one’s society: “But suppose that it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of society,” Hume challenges, “suppose that I am a burden to it, suppose that my life hinders some person from being much more useful to society. In such case, my resignation of life must not only be innocent, but laudable” (19). In light of Hume’s strong statement, Godwin’s seemingly extraordinary question in Political Justice—“‘Is there then no case in which suicide is a virtue?’” (86)—is clearly a response to the older philosopher and therefore less eccentric.

Shelley’s plot in Matilda engages with the social aspects of the pro-suicide argument as they are encapsulated in Hume’s claim that suicide may be thought “laudable” (19) and Godwin’s related query about whether the act may be not only justifiable, but actually virtuous. One tactic she uses to achieve this end is in her depiction of the suicide of Matilda’s father. Much has been written about the frightening situation of
Shelley’s protagonist as the daughter of an incestuously desiring father, but few have considered the significance of her father’s circumstances for the narrative’s wider message. His desire threatens to undermine one of the most sacred relationships in society, and, should his “fierce passion” cause him to act upon it (175), he becomes, to use Hume’s phrasing, a “burden to” society (19). Therefore, he acts laudably by killing himself. Matilda’s father is convinced of the futility of his struggle against his own emotions—what he refers to as “my combats, my self-anger and my despair”—and he believes that no change in setting or time can eradicate them. Indeed, he confesses to his daughter, “I have been miserably mistaken in imagining that I could conquer my love for you” (179). Matilda’s father then takes the last needful step toward re-establishing his virtue: “He was too upright and noble to do aught that his conscience could not approve” (169), Matilda attests.

Notably, readerly sympathy is necessary to establish Matilda’s father’s suicide as virtuous. That Shelley encourages the reader to consider Matilda’s father to be honourable, even though he harbours an “unlawful and monstrous passion” (177), is evident from his characterization: he is separated from his daughter from the moment of her birth until she is sixteen years old (“he would never see me,” Matilda explains about their relationship in her infancy in the weeks before he leaves [155]). Because he delays acquaintance with his daughter until she is sexually mature, Matilda’s father does not view her as a daughter, for whom he should entertain no sexual thoughts. Shelley plots a separation between Matilda’s father and Matilda for this essential period in order to provide psychological credibility—he can desire her because he has not learned to view her as his child—and to supply the means for readers to sympathize with Matilda’s father on account of the involuntary nature of his desires. Although he does not discuss Matilda, Alan Richardson uses similar reasoning in his argument about the narrative punishment of brother-sister incestuous feelings in Romantic-era literature, including other writings by Shelley. Richardson explains that writers such as S. T. Coleridge and Bentham argued for the unnaturalness of incestuous passion on the basis of early psychiatric theories, such as associationist ones, about how co-socialization precludes the possibility of sexual desire between family members in most cases. Richardson also points to contemporary sociological evidence that fathers who take an active role in raising their daughters are less likely to commit incest.19 This evidence is highly pertinent to a consideration of the significance of Shelley’s unusual plot with respect to her characters’ psychological formation, as well as the formation of readerly sympathy. Along with Matilda, who confesses, “I did not yet know of the crime there may be in involuntary feeling” (169), the reader learns a psychological lesson from the curious plot device of dividing the father and daughter in her youth.

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Not only does Matilda’s father lack the necessary mental associations to deter him from desiring his own daughter, but he is also beset by other associations that push him into this unlawful territory. He identifies Matilda with her mother, Diana, whom he loves as fervently upon his return to Britain as he did on the day that he left. Matilda notes of her father upon their reunion, “He talked of my Mother as if she had lived but a few weeks before” (162). That Matilda’s father sees his daughter as his lover and wife is clear from his last letter to her: he confides, “in my madness I dared say to myself—Diana died to give her birth; her mother’s spirit was transferred into her frame, and she ought to be as Diana to me” (179). Shelley thus shows her understanding of the nature of involuntary feelings born of misguided associations, about which Joseph Priestley cautions in *Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind: On the Principle of the Association of Ideas.* In the section entitled “Of the desires of the sexes towards each other,” in which he describes the power of sexual feelings born of associations, Priestley warns,

> the theory here proposed for explaining the nature and growth of these desires shews in every step, how watchful every person, who desires true chastity and purity of heart, ought to be over his thoughts, his discourses, his studies, and his intercourses with the world in general, and with the other sex in particular. There is no security but in flight, in turning our minds from all the associated circumstances, and begetting a new train of thoughts and desires, by an honest, virtuous, religious attention to the duty of the time and place.

As though in accordance with Priestley’s advice, Matilda’s father attempts to fly from his daughter’s presence and to the death-place of her mother in order to destroy his amorous love for Matilda by replacing it with a more acceptable set of “associations,” to use his own Hartleyan word in his farewell letter. However,

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the associations have already been formed and his attempt to destroy them is unsuccessful, he tells Matilda: “I thought that if I could again awaken in my heart the grief I had felt at the loss of your mother, and the many associations with her memory which had been laid to sleep for seventeen years, that all love for her child would become extinct. In a fit of heroism I determined to go alone; to quit you. … But it would not do” (179; my emphasis). By insisting upon the character’s inability to overcome the associations that have created his illicit love for Matilda, Shelley demonstrates her impressive knowledge of the principles of associationism, since she recognizes that the network of ideas cannot be reformed in a significant way once it has been established.22 Equally important, though, is the plot development that this associationist belief necessitates: since he cannot eradicate or overcome his unnatural desire, the only way to avoid dishonourable action—and failure in his duty to his family and society—is suicide.

The question of whether theories of associationism accounted for free will is controversial. In “The Synthetic Imagination: Shelley and Associationism,” Bryan Keith Shelley argues that eighteenth-century associationism was characterized by differing approaches to the matter of free will, with Hume approaching the mind as a passive instrument and Hartley portraying it as more active, but, in the Romantic period, associationists gave little credence to the power of the conscious will to create these associations. Bryan Keith Shelley writes: “Associational patterns thus lead from voluntary to involuntary states … as acts of the will are supplanted by precise custom-based responses.”23 If associations are created by coincidence and circumstances beyond the subject’s control, then he cannot be held fully responsible for his actions, and far less so for his feelings.24

Most important with respect to Mary Shelley’s opinion of the relationship between free will and associationism are Godwin’s proclamations about the subject. In Political Justice, he is unequivocal about the absence of free will in human action, and he arrives at this conclusion through a careful delineation of his well-known theory of the “doctrine of necessity”: “He who affirms that all actions are necessary, means, that, if we form a just and complete view of all the circumstances in which a living or intelligent being is placed, we shall find that he could not in any moment of his existence have acted otherwise than he has acted” (263). Arguing that “all

22 For example, Thomas Brown, Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind (1820) (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1828), 253.
24 Thomas Brown’s Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind, the record of the lessons Brown delivered as Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University after he took over the post from his former teacher, Dugald Stewart, is a testament to the influence of the associationist’s views: after being published in 1820, it went into nineteen editions by 1851. According to Richard Hunter and Ida Macalpine, though, many people revolted against Brown’s theories, since they “left little room for the play of free will and self-determination” (Hunter and Macalpine, Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535–1860 [London: Oxford University Press, 1963], 753).
that strictly speaking we know of the material universe is [the perception and expectation of the] … succession of events” (264), Godwin explains that the same principle applies to the human mind; this approach to the workings of the mind he calls the “association of ideas” (267) after Hartley and John Locke.25 “Let us proceed to apply these reasonings concerning matter to the illustration of the theory of mind. Is it possible in this latter theory, as in the former subject, to discover any general principles? Can intellect be made a topic of science?”, Godwin asks, only to answer his own question in the positive in the next few sentences (263). Nor does he allow the counterargument that “theory of mind,” or what we presently call “psychology,” is unscientific because its subject is not physically observable: “It is of no importance that we cannot see the ground of that connexion” (263) in the mind upon which psychological principles, such as the association of ideas, is based, as we may deduce the structure of the mind through the repeated observation of evidence of it, Godwin claims. Confidently describing his own discussion as “a simple and impressive argument in favour of the doctrine of necessity” (272), then, he moreover establishes the character of those who disagree with him by adding that “the vulgar will universally be found to be the advocates of free will” (272), while the “philosopher” will always return to his investigations to find the “secret spring” of associative motivation that causes people to act in apparently unexpected ways (271), which might seem to suggest the presence of free will to the careless observer. In short, all human action is indisputably based on pre-established paths of the association of ideas in the subject, according to Godwin. The plot of *Matilda* seems to uphold this view of the power of associations.

The incest plot of *Matilda* might seem gratuitous if it is considered only in light of the Gothic genre, in which incest is commonly used to shock and horrify the reader, but Shelley presents Matilda’s father as much more than a debased monster, a stock figure in a Gothic tale. Her attention to his psychological development renders him a complex, conflicted character. An associationist reading of Matilda’s father’s abnormal urges allows readers not only to sympathize with him—necessary for us to begin to view his suicide as honourable—but also to pity him, for associations are formed without the subject’s knowledge and beyond his conscious will.

It is as though Matilda’s father’s mind has betrayed him to feel improperly for his daughter, and, due to the power and permanence of associations, his only escape from resulting dishonour is death. Reading his farewell letter to her, Matilda knows that his sense of duty—a sense so closely tied to notions of virtue—will lead him to kill himself: “he had determined to die. … The few ineffectual words he had said concerning his duty were to me a further proof—and the more I studied the letter the

25 Elsewhere in *Political Justice*, Godwin claims as a source Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (294, footnote), and, with reference to *Observations on Man*, he gushes, “The sagacity of Hartley, in having pointed out the necessary connexion of the phenomena of mind, and shewn the practicability of reducing its different operations to a simple principle, cannot be too highly applauded” (296, footnote).
more did I perceive a thousand slight expressions that could only indicate a knowledge that life was now over for him. He was about to die!” (181; my emphasis). Indeed, Matilda’s father kills himself out of a sense of duty towards others, just as Hume argues that one may commit suicide “laudably” if it would help one to fulfill one’s social obligations, and as Godwin suggests that “it is impossible not to applaud” the intention of choosing one’s own “death as a source of additional benefit” to society (87, 86). Shelley thus devises characterization and plot to illustrate that, sometimes, ending one’s life is, in fact, a duty.

This aspect of *Matilda* does more than breathe life into an abstract philosophical debate about suicide and social duty, though. In addition to responding to her father’s text, Shelley also defends her half-sister’s decision, made a few years before this novella was written, to commit suicide. When Frances Imlay Godwin killed herself in 1816, she left a suicide note that strongly implied that she had committed the act because she considered herself a “burden,” to use Hume’s word, to her family (19). Born on 14 May 1794 at Le Havre, France, in the *Maison Commune* of what was called “Havre-Marat” during the French Revolution, Fanny was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay, described in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry about him as “an American revolutionary soldier turned commercial adventurer,” but known to literary history as the businessman and heartless jilt who abandoned Wollstonecraft when their baby was only a few months old.26 Godwin did not hesitate to adopt little Fanny when Wollstonecraft, then his wife, died in 1797 after giving birth to Mary. In 1814, when Mary and her step-sister Claire Clairmont absconded to France with Percy Shelley, Fanny was left behind in the Godwin household. She was left behind a second time in 1816, and felt the household’s poverty keenly. In her last letters to Mary, she acted as intermediary between Godwin and Percy Shelley, who had promised Godwin money to ease his crushing debts.27 On 29 May 1816, Fanny wrote in a letter to Mary that Godwin “has been busy … to raise money but I do not choose to interfere further than I am obliged by him.” A few months later, mere days before her suicide, it appears that Godwin did so oblige her. Fanny wrote her most direct plea to Mary on 3 October 1816:

It is very painful for me to have to mention papa’s affairs—particularly as you appear to wish to avoid them. … [Y]ou know he cannot write when pecuniary circumstance’s overwhelm him, you know that it is of the utmost consequence for his own and the world’s sake that he should finish his novel and is it not your and Shelley’s duty to consider these

things? and to endeavour to prevent as far as lies in your power giving him unnecessary pain and anxiety.  

The underlined passages and earnest tone of this letter indicate Fanny’s desperation in her final days. As a non-earning member of the Godwin household, Fanny seems to feel that she owed him her best effort to ease his debts through the only means she could—by pressuring Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley to give Godwin money. And, according to her reasoning in the passage, if she was a burden to Godwin, who could not write under stress, then she was a burden to the entire world (or, at least, to “society,” as Hume would say): she claims that “it is of the utmost consequence for his own and the world’s sake that he should finish his novel,” so highly did she estimate the positive social effect of his writing.

With respect to people’s responsibility to maximize their public utility and the potential social impact of writing, Fanny’s views here demonstrate her familiarity with Godwin’s *Political Justice*, in which he asserts,

> The true instruments for changing the opinions of men are argument and persuasion. The best security for an advantageous issue is free and unrestricted discussion. In that field truth must always prove the successful champion. If then we would improve the social institutions of mankind, we must write, we must argue, we must converse. To this business there is no close; in this pursuit there should be no pause. Every method should be employed. (185)

Well-versed in the utilitarian beliefs of the only parent she really knew, and seeing herself as unable to contribute to the advancement of society—perhaps even deterring it—Fanny decided her life was detrimental to all around her. She felt shame and guilt for being unwanted and extraneous, a social position for which she can only be pitied. In this way, Fanny’s death demonstrates the disastrous effects of victim-guilt, a complex psychological reaction that Shelley would incorporate into the character of Matilda, as I will explain below.

For a range of possible reasons—which certainly include her feeling of being a financial burden on Mary Jane and William Godwin—Fanny decided to take her own life. Her suicide note, written on 9 October 1816 at the Mackworth Arms inn at Swansea, Wales, explains clearly that she felt that she took the laudanum overdose not for her own sake, but for the good of others, amongst other reasons:

> I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an
end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed as [Fanny]. (Stocking 86)

Her signature was missing from the note. William St. Clair suggests that the staff at the inn tore it off, knowing “the indignities … the law commanded for suicides.”

Percy Shelley and William Godwin, who had sought Fanny in Bristol after receiving suicidal letters from her (“I depart immediately to the spot from which I hope never to remove,” she wrote to Godwin), must have identified her through the Cambrian newspaper article of 12 October 1816 reporting her death, and promptly dropped their search. Neither they nor any other member of the family claimed the body (St. Clair 412). Godwin, who wrote to Shelley of his “horror” that the “public papers” should learn of the ignominious death of his adopted daughter, begged the young poet to “avoid anything that leads to publicity. Go not to Swansea; disturb not the silent dead; do nothing to destroy the obscurity she so much desired that now rests upon the event. It was … her last wish” (ibid.). Perhaps not coincidentally, Fanny’s “last wish,” as expressed by Godwin, answered well his own earnest demand. Fanny’s suicide was so successfully hushed up that her own step-brother, Charles Clairmont, had not yet learned of her death a year later (Stocking 87). Fanny’s suicide note shows that, like Matilda’s father, she wished not to be a burden by living. Under Godwin’s management, not even her death would burden her family.

In like manner, Matilda earnestly wishes for death in order to unburden her society. Although it is not obvious that Matilda attempts to serve society through her suicide, as do Matilda’s father and Fanny (in response to her feelings of victim-guilt), Shelley encourages the reader to consider it in this regard through intertextual illumination. Matilda quotes the first two lines of William Wordsworth’s most fully developed poem about suicide, “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman”: “And morning and evening my tearful eyes raised to heaven, my hands clasped tight in the energy of prayer, I have repeated with the poet—‘Before I see another day / Oh, let this body die away!’” (189). In his preface to the poem, Wordsworth frames it as concerning a particularly feminine situation when he writes, “When a Northern Indian, from sickness, is unable to continue his journey with his companions; he is left behind. … It is unnecessary to add that the females are equally, or still more,
exposed to the same fate.” In accordance with her society’s cruel attitude towards its sick members, the female speaker of Wordsworth’s poem believes that she serves it by choosing to die, rather than burden it with her illness. She expresses bitterness about being left behind (“Alas! ye might have dragged me on / Another day, a single one!” [ll. 21–2]), even while she admits to instigating her own demise (“Too soon I yielded to despair;/ Why did ye listen to my prayer?” [ll. 23–4]). Yet, these same lines also imply that her community bears the blame for failing to support her in her illness and too eagerly snatching at the opportunity to let her die: by asking her community “why” it “listen[ed] to [her] … prayer,” she implies that their response—allowing her to die, sick and alone—is problematic and demands an explanation. And, indeed, her society’s motivations are dubious, morally speaking, since she is unjustly saddled with the responsibility of freeing it from its rightful responsibility, that is, to care for its weakest members. Wordsworth thereby outlines a case like that of Fanny, who, too, was doubly encumbered: both by her unfortunate circumstances, and by the guilty feeling that her personal misfortune weighed heavily upon her community. Similarly, Matilda’s references to herself as a “Cain” or “living pestilence. … only fit for death” (204) indicate that she believes that her society would be better off—morally and physically—without her. This confluence of biographical and intertextual sources establishes as feminine Shelley’s portrayal of the peculiar tragedy of victim-guilt, in which the unfortunate and even preyed-upon feel responsible for saving their communities from bearing the weight of what, in reality, establishes their personal right to demand social support.

Another suicide from Shelley’s biography that surely informs her consideration of its potential virtue and relative guilt is that of Harriet Shelley, the first wife of Percy Shelley. He had left her for Mary in 1814 and had little contact with her after the spring of 1815.31 Thus, at age 21, Harriet Shelley found herself alone with two young children—living again with her parents—and, according to Emily Sunstein, “heavily pregnant” with a child that was likely not Percy Shelley’s.32 On 10 December 1816, her body was recovered from the Serpentine. By the end of the same month, Mary and Percy Shelley married. The scenario oozes guilt on each side. Mary and Percy Shelley must have felt that they drove Harriet to commit suicide because he abandoned her with two children to be with Mary. Moreover, this feeling of guilt was surely compounded by their obvious recognition of the convenience it offered them with respect to their own marriage—they could marry once Percy’s first wife was no longer—and the boost it promised to give to Percy’s suit to win custody of his two children with Harriet (Sunstein 128). On the other side, Harriet Shelley left her two children motherless at the tender ages of two and four. This last circumstance must have reminded Mary Shelley of her mother’s suicide attempts, since Fanny was only

a toddler when Mary Wollstonecraft tried to drown herself. Quite possibly, Shelley was trying to inject a terrible scenario from her biography with some degree of positivity, or at least to consider it philosophically and more objectively, by exploring the virtuous aspects of suicide in *Matilda*.

With regard to the distinctly female dimensions of Matilda’s death-wish, Shelley seems to consider her mother Mary Wollstonecraft’s biography and writings about suicide. That she responds to her mother’s fiction is clear from the title of the draft version of the work, “The Fields of Fancy,” which echoes an early, unfinished fictional tale by Wollstonecraft, “The Cave of Fancy,” as Nitchie notes in her introduction to the first publication of *Matilda* in 1959 (ix). I suggest that Matilda engages more closely with Wollstonecraft’s novellas, *Mary, A Fiction* and *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* than “The Cave of Fancy,” but Wollstonecraft’s life history inevitably informed Shelley’s thinking about female suicide, too. As Godwin notes in *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft “was twice, with an interval of four months, … prompted … to purposes of suicide” out of grief over her failed relationship with Imlay and his unfaithfulness to her.33 Thus, when Wollstonecraft’s eponymous protagonist in *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* attempts the act in the most fully developed of the fragmentary endings of this unfinished novella, the author wrote with great personal investment and knowledge.

However, the private dimensions of Wollstonecraft’s relationship to suicide do not undermine the broad political significance of it in her, and her daughter’s, fiction. Wollstonecraft used the theme to express a feminist sentiment about the worthlessness of the unfulfilled female life, and to protest women’s lack of control over their own destinies. Wollstonecraft suggests that, for women of her day, life is a cruel prison from which death (not feminism, alas) will release them. In this light, a phrase that originated in her life takes on new political meaning as it echoes throughout her and Shelley’s fiction. In *Memoirs*, Godwin reports, “The last words her [Wollstonecraft’s] mother ever uttered were, ‘A little patience, and all will be over!’ and these words are repeatedly referred to by Mary in the course of her writings” (28). Indeed, in Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, the incarcerated protagonist writes to her infant daughter of her own mother’s death: “I shall not dwell on the death-bed scene, lively as is the remembrance, or on the emotion produced by the last grasp of my mother’s cold hand; when blessing me, she added, ‘A little patience, and all will be over!’ Ah! my child, how often have those words rung mournfully in my ears—and I have exclaimed—‘A little more patience, and I too shall be at rest!’” (103)34 True to her word, the deserted Maria counsels herself to wait for her reward, death, as she swoons

34 Remarkably, Wollstonecraft’s own last written words may have been very similar; according to Janet Todd in the *Letters*, they were, “I must have a little patience,” although Wollstonecraft apparently referred to the safe delivery of her baby, not to her own death. (Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. and intro. Janet Todd [New York: Penguin, 2003], 437).
from a laudanum overdose in one of the fragmentary endings of the tale: “‘Have a little patience,’ said Maria, holding her swimming head (she thought of her mother), ‘this cannot last long; and what is a little bodily pain to the pangs I have endured?’” (147). Eva Pérez agrees that, for Wollstonecraft, suicide is partly an assertion of a woman’s right to choose her own destiny, but she discusses the matter mostly in terms of Godwin’s account of Wollstonecraft’s lived experience as revealed in the Memoirs.\(^{35}\) I suggest that suicide has a more imaginative and political significance in Wollstonecraft’s fiction than it did in her biography—and that her daughter shows her recognition of this detail by repeating, in italics, Wollstonecraft’s catchphrase for the feminine death-wish in Matilda. In her plea to her friend Woodville to drink an overdose of laudanum with her, Matilda says,

“‘That drink will plunge us in a sweet slumber, and when we awaken what joy will be ours to find all our sorrows and fears past. \textit{A little patience, and all will be over; aye, a very little patience; for, look, there is the key of our prison; we hold it in our own hands, and are we more debased than slaves to cast it away and give ourselves up to voluntary bondage? Even now if we had courage we might be free.” (200–1; emphasis Shelley’s)\(^{35}\)

With this reference to life as “slavery” and “bondage,” Shelley echoes not only Seneca’s representation of suicide as a release from the cruel prison that is life; she again uses her mother’s words as intertextual illumination of her own. In Wollstonecraft’s final novella, Maria asks, “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (64) Wollstonecraft allies herself with a strong coterie of English abolitionists by using the word “slave,” which appears dozens of times throughout Rights of Woman, the most memorable instance being, perhaps, when she calls wives “house slave[s].”\(^{36}\) Shelley’s and Wollstonecraft’s novels present female suicide as a powerful feminist statement by framing it as a legitimate means for women to free themselves from various manacles, mental and sexual. Indeed, all three of the protagonists of Mary, Maria and Matilda are trapped by marriage or, in the case of Matilda, by being cast against her will in the wifely role of sexual partner by her father.

Yet the family member to whom Shelley responds most pointedly and thoroughly in Matilda is Godwin. To represent the abstract concepts about suicide that her


\(^{36}\) Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 213. William Murray, Lord Mansfield, had worked to abolish slavery in England in 1772. However, the slave-trade was still alive and well in the English colonies and would not be outlawed until 1808, when the government finally bowed to the pressure of the many tracts, poems and protests written in favour of total abolition, in addition to other circumstances.
father advances in Political Justice, Shelley creates characters that feel love, disgust and shame in human ways, thereby giving life to this theoretical debate about death. Godwin’s discussion of suicide is clinical and detached, but he is also quite flippant about addressing the serious problem that he delineates: he dispenses with this important topic in a few pages, and responds to his own query, “Have I a right under any circumstances to destroy myself in order to escape from pain or disgrace?” with a terse, “Probably not” (86). Shelley wished to draw renewed public attention to Godwin’s Political Justice by developing this question fully and enlivening his short appendix with a fictional repartee. Pamela Clemit, the general editor of Godwin’s letters, agrees that Shelley wrote Matilda “for Godwin’s benefit”:

Contrary to the opinion of Jane Blumberg and others that ‘publication was not a serious original consideration,’ there is evidence that Mary Shelley planned to publish Matilda for Godwin’s benefit. The fair copy is dated November 9, 1819, indicating that Mary Shelley began rewriting The Fields of Fancy as Matilda on the very day she heard that Godwin had lost a lawsuit concerning his house in Skinner Street and was required to pay back rent of £1500. Matilda was probably completed in February 1820, and in May of that year Mary Shelley gave the manuscript to [her friend] Maria Gisborne to take to Godwin in England.37

To reintroduce Godwin’s Political Justice to readers from a range of political sympathies, Shelley probes further her father’s focus on social responsibility, which lies at the heart of all expressions of the suicide debate, from the conservative to the liberal. My argument—that Matilda’s father’s and Fanny’s suicides support Hume’s position that the suicide can serve society and therefore act laudably—extends to its logical conclusion the argument regarding the social duties fulfilled or denied by the act. Through the words of her main character, Matilda, Shelley also considers the basic terms of the suicide debate as they are articulated by Godwin.

So confident was Shelley that she had found an undeniable “case in which suicide is a virtue”—the case of avoiding the dishonour of incestuous passion—that she sacrifices two characters to make her point. Meanwhile, the third major character, Woodville, acts mainly as the addressee of this epistolary confession and a mouthpiece for the opposite side of the suicide debate. From her pointed references to her father’s work, it is evident that Shelley engages directly with Godwin’s Political Justice in its treatment of social utility and suicide. Godwin states the argument against suicide in the first paragraph of the appendix: “It is perhaps impossible to imagine a situation,

that shall exclude the possibility of future life, vigour and usefulness” (86), but he modifies this position on the next page: “The difficulty is to decide in any instance whether the recourse to a voluntary death can over-balance the usefulness I may exert in twenty or thirty years of additional life. But surely it would be precipitate to decide that there is no such instance” (87). In the figure of Matilda, Shelley answers Godwin in an almost word-for-word restatement of his claim from *Political Justice*. “Let me not be reproached with inutility,” Matilda requests, and continues,

*I believed that by suicide I should violate a divine law of nature, and I thought that I sufficiently fulfilled my part in submitting to the hard task of enduring the crawling hours and minutes—in bearing the load of time that weighed miserably upon me and that in abstaining from what I in my calm moments considered a crime, I deserved the reward of virtue.* (189)

While Matilda does not argue that her suicide would be useful, she nevertheless begs to be excused from a critical assessment of her utility by pointing out that she “deserved the reward of virtue” for other reasons. Crucially, she also thereby shows her belief that her right to commit suicide is inherently linked to the matters of virtue and social utility.

Godwin considers carefully the conservative view of suicide that everyone can always offer some benefit to society through their future lives, which makes all suicide dishonourable. Shelley recognizes this argument in the poet Woodville’s words, offered in response to Matilda’s invitation to enter into a suicide pact: “From my youth I have said, I will be virtuous; I will dedicate my life for the good of others. … Believe me, I will never desert life until this last hope is torn from my bosom. … [I]f you can bestow happiness on another; if you can give one other person only one hour of joy ought you not live to do it? … Let that be sufficient motive against suicide” (202–3). Woodville thus reveals himself to be Godwin’s representative in the narrative by creating an argument against suicide that takes honour and virtue—not sin, crime, or any of the period’s other popular arguments—as the heart of the debate. The very fact that Matilda invites Woodville to enter into a suicide pact further underlines the social aspect of the discussion: she wants company in her final act, perhaps in the opinion that Woodville’s partnership would be a form of social sanction for what was then a crime. Finally, Matilda suggests that Woodville should accept her invitation to a suicide pact if he wishes to avoid the dishonour of cowardice and disloyalty: “If he dies with me it is well, and there will be an end of two miserable beings; and if he will not, then will I scoff at his friendship and drink the poison before him to shame his cowardice” (200; my emphasis). In this way, Matilda makes the suicide pact a kind of test of Woodville’s honour.

Matilda’s ruminations reflect her immense concern with honour and virtue. That she values these principles above all is clear from her speech on what makes life worth
living: “What had I to love?,” she asks, then answers, “Oh many things: there was
the moonshine, and the bright stars; … all lovely forms that visited my imagination,
all memories of heroism and virtue” (188–9). By making virtue one of Matilda’s key
values, Shelley melds the personal with the social, for the concept involves others’
esteem for one’s character. Thus, when she bemoans her loss of honour in becoming
the object of her father’s amorous attention, she mourns losing the esteem and respect
that join her with society.

Matilda must die, she reasons, so that no one should know of her loss of honour:
“I believed myself to be polluted by the unnatu[r]al love I had inspired, and that I
was a creature cursed and set apart by nature. I thought that like another Cain, I
had a mark set on my forehead to show mankind that there was a barrier between
me and them” (203). Since she writes to respond to Godwin’s focus on the question
of honour and suicide, Shelley’s choice of incest-victim as her innocent (and therefore
sympathetic), but dishonoured, suicidal protagonist makes excellent argumentative
and psychological sense.

Many critics believe that Matilda’s expressions of guilt, so closely tied to her
suicidal feelings, reveal her own incestuous desire, but I contend that her feelings
of guilt are born of her father’s real culpability, her shame created by his shameful
desires. In this way, Shelley reveals her insight into the psychological phenomenon of
victim-guilt. So much is evident when Matilda claims, “I must shrink before the eye
of man lest he should read my father’s guilt in my glazed eyes” (185). Notably, too,
some of her guilt derives from her sense that she forced him to admit to his passion
for her, a verbal confirmation of his hidden desire that gives actuality to what might
have remained unreal for Matilda if unspoken. Because her father only confesses his
incestuous love for her after she naively presses him to tell her what is bothering him,
Matilda imagines that this tragedy, which includes his subsequent suicide, could have
been avoided had her father not expressed his desire in words: “the day would finally
have been won had not I, foolish and presumtuous [sic] wretch! hurried him on until
there was no recall, no hope. … I alone was the cause of his defeat and justly did I
pay the fearful penalty” (169). It is arguable that Matilda is somewhat responsible for
eliciting his confession of his illicit love for her, but it is illogical to argue that she is
responsible for the desire itself. Still, since she believes herself to be the embodiment
of her father’s “unlawful … passion” (196), she feels she must die.

Admittedly, though, the novella does provide enough ambiguous evidence to raise
the question of who bears responsibility and whose guilt is the logical outcome of
real transgression. For instance, before Matilda’s father admits to his desire for her,
Matilda praises Vittorio Alfieri’s tragedy, Myrrha,38 a drama based on the Greek myth,

38 Alfieri’s Myrrha was written in Italian in 1786 and published in English by Charles Lloyd in
1815, as noted in Iconoclastic Departures; some critics believe the Lloyd translation to be the one that
Mary Shelley read. (Syndy M. Conger, Frederick S. Frank, Gregory O’Dea, ed., Iconoclastic Departures:
Mary Shelley after Frankenstein: Essays in Honor of the Bicentenary of Mary Shelley’s Birth [Madison,
first recorded in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, about a daughter who tricks her father into having sex with her. Even more damningly, Matilda seems to admit to her unnatural love for her father when she describes her suicidal feelings thus: “In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part” (208). Ignoring the word “mental” in the phrase “mental union,” some critics cite this passage as the most concrete proof that incestuous desire between father and daughter runs both ways, but it is important to note that Matilda imagines herself in heaven, that is, without a material, sexually desiring body. Also significant is Shelley’s clear reference to Sophocles’ *Antigone* in these lines. Sophocles’ suicidal heroine laments that her only wedding will be in death, where she will meet her father:

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O tomb, O bridal bower, o underground
home everlasting, whither I journey
to my own people. . . .

Nevertheless, as I go, I nurture
the hope that I will come dear to my father.39
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Significantly, in this scene Antigone bemoans the incestuous desires of her parents, Oedipus and Jocasta:

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Oh, the sins of my mother’s bed
and my ill-fated mother’s
self-creating intercourse with my father!
From such as these was I born miserable!
I am going to live with them,
accursed, unwed. (ll. 868–73)
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Through this overt intertextual gesture, Shelley implies that, like Antigone, Matilda is the blameless victim of parental incestuous desire. Why, then, does Matilda feel guilt? I agree with Gillingham, who explains, “In the struggle to remember and make sense of her experience, Matilda revisits the question of responsibility for what has befallen her unfortunate family, and reattributes the blame variously” (262). In short, looking back on her intense love for her father and—precisely because of her love for him—loath to blame him, Matilda takes responsibility for his illicit love and seems to question the difference between her daughterly affection and his

unnatural desire for her, both of which go by the name of “love”: “My daughter, I love you,” her father confesses, in a statement that, under normal circumstances, would denote innocent parental feeling (173). Her father’s guilt creates her guilty feelings.

Matilda’s feelings of shame and dishonour derive not from her actual culpability, then, but they are part of the process of recording her traumatic experiences and the expression of deep and complex psychological processes, such as the workings of victim-guilt. Early in the novella, Matilda describes the love she bears her father and states unequivocally that his feelings alone are transgressive:

My heart was full of deep affection, but it was calm from its very depth and fulness. I had no idea that misery could arise from love, and this lesson that all at last must learn was taught me in a manner few are obliged to receive it. I lament now, I must ever lament, those few short months of Paradisaical bliss; I disobeyed no command, I ate no apple, and yet I was ruthlessly driven from it. Alas! my companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall. (162)

She is guiltless, yet she bears the burden of guilt for her father’s illicit desire. Nevertheless, many critics of the novella read Matilda’s expression of her feelings of guilt as deriving from her actual culpability. For example, critic Audra Dibert Himes discusses “Mathilda’s position as both the subject and object of the verb ‘to desire’” and calls “Mathilda’s desire … an especially transgressive one”; Ranita Chatterjee agrees that this novella is an expression of female desire;40 and Todd goes so far as to suggest in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the work that Matilda’s feelings of guilt amount to Shelley’s own confession of her “obsessive love for her father” (xvii). Such readings fail to see Matilda’s expressions of remorse as part of the process of narrating victim-guilt and demonstrating how the sufferer feels divided from society through her shame and feelings of the loss of honour, both of which narrative elements are vital to Shelley’s contribution to the suicide debate.

Key to Shelley’s argument for honourable suicide is the concept that when one’s very existence becomes identifiable with dishonour, the only way to re-establish honour is death. Through this theme of a woman’s honour, Shelley addresses a topic that Wollstonecraft develops in Rights of Woman, as well as in its fictionalization, The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria. In Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft encourages her reader to reconsider the value and justice of the very notion of a woman’s honour by suggesting that, frequently, young women are identified as dishonoured through no fault of their own:

It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice:—and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalenes [communal houses for “fallen women”] are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world! (155–6)

Shelley similarly implies that Matilda is not responsible for her dishonour and, like the rest of her sex, that she cannot liberate herself from this oppressive and unjust cultural notion. Matilda’s father escapes his disgraceful desire by drowning himself, but this act is not enough to erase the dishonour with which he has infected his daughter.

Shelley devotes many passages to portraying Matilda’s feeling that she has been soiled with her father’s dishonour and made into a different order of being, as she puts it—an “outcast from human feeling; … [a] monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love” (203–4). These powerful descriptions suggest that the stain of dishonour may never be lifted, as it has become identical to her existence. Matilda’s insistence upon the permanence of her dishonour also suggests Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman as an intertext, for Wollstonecraft asserts, “A woman who has lost her honour, imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away” (156). The dishonoured woman is, to use Julia Kristeva’s term, abjection embodied, the impurity that must be expelled to maintain order, health and cleanliness. Matilda laments, “my soul [is] corrupted to its core by a deadly cancer, [I] … fancied myself a living pestilence. … I was in truth a marked creature, a pariah, only fit for death” (204). Implicitly comparing herself to Shakespeare’s murdered King Hamlet, Matilda claims,

infamy and guilt was mingled with my portion; unlawful and detestable passion had poured its poison into my ears and changed all my blood, so that it was no longer the kindly stream that supports life but a cold fountain of bitterness corrupted in its very source. (196; my emphasis)

Like the elder Hamlet, Matilda is the passive victim of another’s incestuous passion, but the poison has transformed, not killed, her. Irrationally—but accurately, according to documented psychological responses in incest victims—her father’s passion makes her very life shameful: “my very existence was a secret known only to myself” (188), she claims. The “secret” that began as her father’s incestuous love has become her “very existence,” her life, her being. It is not merely that she feels shame or that honour has been removed from her range of experiences. Rather, as Shelley asserts repeatedly in this powerful meditation on victim-guilt, Matilda’s life is dishonour, and to lose honour is to lose the ties that bind us to our fellow
humans. Her reaction may be irrational, but her solution is not: she must die to erase the stain of dishonour.

Matilda’s insistence on her essential difference from the rest of society performs another important rhetorical function in this fictionalized debate: it neatly dispenses with the anti-suicide argument that no honourable person may choose death because she owes her society service through her continued life. To state Shelley’s position in a single phrase: she who has no society has no obligations. In other words, Matilda’s frequent lamentations that she is an outcast and without community are also declarations of her independence from social expectations. Her situation at the time of writing her epistolary memoir confirms that she is completely without ties, since her father commits suicide, and the aunt who raised her dies shortly after Matilda’s father returns from his travels (163). Even when her closest relations are alive, though, Matilda is almost alone: her aunt is exceptionally cold, and the departure of Matilda’s nurse when she is seven deprives her of her only friend in the world. Nor does her travelling father write her a single line for the first sixteen years of her life. By the time that Matilda composes the narrative, she has convinced even her distant relations that she is dead: “it was believed” by them, she writes, “from the letter that I left and other circumstances that I planned that I had destroyed myself” (187). In these ways, Shelley impresses her reader with the idea of a protagonist with no society, or very little society, much like those in the post-plague world of The Last Man (1826). While in Francis’ anti-suicide argument about the obligations one owes to others, the Reverend focuses on the near-universal duties of love and affection one owes to one’s family, but Shelley’s character does not exist even within this common area of the social web. The isolated character of Matilda exists as a rebuttal to the social conservative claim that everyone has relations. If Matilda has no family, Shelley seems to respond, then she is not bound to survive as long as she can. She is, in short, free to die.

Matilda is also geographically divided from society, since she retires from London to a remote area in the north of England (187). Her home is, she writes, “a solitary house on a wide plain near no other habitation: where I could … wander far without molestation from the sight of my fellow creatures” (188). Through this setting, from which Matilda writes her memoirs, Shelley expresses one of the most convincing arguments in the pro-suicide debate: the suicide is only as blameable as the recluse. Hume states the case in his essay, “Of Suicide”: “A man who retires from life does no harm to society. … All our obligations to do good to society seem to imply something reciprocal. I receive the benefits of society, and therefore ought to promote its interests; but when I withdraw myself altogether from society, can I be bound any longer?” (18). Moreover, I would add, recluses are often celebrated for their gravity and even piety, as they commonly choose solitude for religious reasons. Shelley clearly wishes her reader to consider Matilda in this light by emphasizing her strange fashion choices: like a “youthful Hermitess dedicated to seclusion,” Shelley tells us, Matilda adopts a “fanciful nunlike dress” (188). A few pages later, she refers to the “whimsical nunlike habit which denoted that I did not retire to solitude from necessity, but that
I might indulge in a luxury of grief, and fanciful seclusion” (195). Through words such as “fanciful,” and “whimsical,” Shelley anticipates the criticism that Matilda is shallowly performing a role. Understood thus, the reason for Matilda’s seclusion seems blameworthy, as though she is a willful brat indulging her fancies, but Shelley presents her seclusion as morally worthy by emphasizing that she is isolated through no fault of her own.

Within a Romantic context, isolated living had positive associations for a different, distinctly secular, set of reasons: the Genevan philosophe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, contended that humans are their most virtuous in a state of nature. Shelley presents Matilda as a Rousseauvian “solitary walker” through her long description of her natural surroundings in her isolated habitat. Matilda declares that her surroundings prepare her for “sympathy and love,” socially oriented feelings; however, she declares that this “love” is not directed toward people, but toward nature, like “the breezes and the refreshing rains; … the whole earth and the sky that covers it” (188). Shelley’s characterization of Matilda as Rousseauvian is not merely a means of emphasizing her credibility as a Romantic heroine, though. Rousseau’s writing about the individual’s right to commit suicide is frequently quoted in the era’s suicide debate. The notion of the evils of society is linked to the character St. Preux’s defense of the individual’s right to suicide in La Nouvelle Héloise, as it is summarized by Rowley:

Elegant writers have appeared in defence of suicide, and have produced many specious reasons in its favor, without solid argument.—Rousseau says, “To seek good, and avoid evil in that which does not injure another, is a right of nature. When life is an evil to us, and a good to no other person, we may then get rid of it. If there be in the world a maxim evident and certain, I think it is this; and if it is overturned, there is no human action which cannot be made out to be a crime!” (335)

Alarmed at this idea, Rowley opposes Rousseau in an enumerated retort:

I. If a man robs society of his present, or the prospects of his future services, he injures that society: it is immoral to commit injuries. II. Though life may be an evil to a disappointed, miserable man, yet no man can judge how serviceable his present or continued life may be to other persons; therefore he has no right to get rid of it. … M. Rousseau’s supposition, that any one can live without being beneficial, or probably so, to some other person, is visionary, and cannot possibly happen. (335–6; Rowley’s emphasis).

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41 Nitchie recognizes this detail as odd in terms of Shelley’s oeuvre by mentioning that no other Shelleyan characters share Matilda’s sartorial eccentricity: “The comparison to a Hermiteess and the wearing of the ‘fanciful nunlike dress’ are appropriate though melodramatic. They appear only in Mathilda” (85, note 49).
Shelley’s construction of a protagonist who is almost entirely cut off from her fellow human beings acts as a challenge to the Rowleyan assertion of the anti-suicide crusaders that a truly solitary person “cannot possibly happen.” Daringly, Shelley introduces Woodville to the narrative as a representative of the idea that, when we least expect it, we discover that we are still bound to our fellow human beings and likely to find a friend, as Rowley promises we should. Who could expect, “living alone on a desolate heath” (195), as Matilda is, that she would meet another person of her elect, educated status? However, Shelley is careful to correct the reader’s assumption that Woodville’s presence revises Matilda’s anti-social condition. Describing her friendship with Woodville, she moans that there was “an eternal barrier between me and my fellow creatures. I was indeed fellow to none. … It must be the excess of madness that could make me imagine that I could ever be aught but one alone” (196). Nonetheless, Woodville, a poet of “intense sympathy” (199), seems formed to welcome her back into society: “Everyone loved him; no shadow of envy or hate cast even from the meanest mind ever fell upon him” (191), Matilda assures us. Yet, Woodville himself recognizes that Matilda is beyond his reach: “something, I know not what, in your expressive eyes,” he muses to her, “seems to separate you from your kind” (197). Even though Matilda admits that she “began again to wish for sympathy,” she would not have her reader misunderstand this feeling: “You will say perhaps that I gradually became fitted to return to society. I do not think so. … Believe me, I was then less fitted for any communion with my fellow creatures than before” (190). Having become so Rousseauvian in her isolation that she is nature itself (“I was as a solitary spot among mountains shut in on all sides by steep black precipices” [190], she claims), she owes no duty to her fellows because she has none.

Finally, Shelley suggests that Matilda is exempt from arguments against suicide by repeating throughout the narrative that she believes herself already dead. She describes herself as killed by her father’s words of desire: “I heard them and sunk on the ground, covering my face and almost dead with excess of sickness and fear” (173). So convinced is her father of the fatal effect his confession will have on Matilda—“these words … I thought … would blast her to death”—that he is amazed that she does not instantly perish upon hearing them, exclaiming, “The danger is over; she is alive!” (173). Matilda’s father obviously has not studied his Rousseau well. If he had, he would not equate life with the functioning of the physical body. Rousseau writes to parents on the education of children in *Émile*, “To live is not merely to breathe; it is to act, to make a proper use of our organs, our senses, our faculties, and all parts of our being which contribute to our consciousness of life.”

42 These words also kill her suicidal father, as he cries of himself, “surely this is death that is coming,” while she says of him, “‘Aye, this is his grave!’” (173). A fellow suicide, he has been dead long before this scene, since the reader is told he “no longer counted among the living” after his wife’s death (156).

that Matilda’s parent has killed everything in her that makes her “consciousness of life” tolerable. He thus kills her. After her father’s suicide, Matilda “sank lifeless to the ground … on the very verge of death. But life was yet strong within” (184) her in terms of her physical being. On the inside, she has expired: “the living were not fit companions for me” (184), she claims. Indeed, Matilda is like the living dead.

Shelley asserts that Matilda is as good as dead when the character attests, “My heart was bleeding from its death’s wound; I could live no otherwise. … Never for one moment when most placid did I cease to pray for death” (189). Matilda’s belief that she is practically dead is a reiteration of the argument for suicide in Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, in which Werther tells Albert (the husband of his beloved Charlotte) that the suicidal do not willfully choose to die, but that they are ineluctably destined to it, as are people with a severe physical illness. He writes to his friend Wilhelm, his epistolary addressee, of his exchange with the rational, kind, but bourgeois, Albert: “‘One might as well say, ‘The fool, to die of a fever! If only he had waited till he recovered his strength, his fluids were improved and his blood was calmer: it would all have been well, and he would still be alive today!’”44 Having passed the limits of human endurance, both the suicide and the invalid are, in a sense, already dead. Shelley confirms the truth of Matilda’s claim to being already dead when Woodville recognizes the stamp of fatality in her. He tells her how different she is from others who suffer from grief and isolate themselves, as he has. Referring to his dead fiancée, he says to Matilda: “‘You never smile. … I have lost for ever the loveliest companion that any man could ever have possessed,… . [y]et I smile, and sometimes I speak almost forgetful of the change I have endured. But your sad mien never alters; your pulses beat and you breathe, yet you seem already to belong to another world’” (197). Viewed thus, Matilda does not so much choose to die as she accepts her death.

In answer to Godwin’s question, “‘Is there then no case in which suicide is a virtue?‘,” Shelley provides two answers—in Matilda’s father’s suicide and Matilda’s wish for death—both of which are presented as virtuous. Notably, Matilda does not fulfill her wish, but this feature of the novella may be interpreted in other ways than simply as Shelley’s retreat from her own argument about the honourable nature of suicide. Matilda refrains from suicide only because she is infected with tuberculosis, which will allow her to die “an innocent death, … sweeter even than that which opium promised” (207).45 In the popular Romantic imaginary, consumption made the sufferer morally pure—the very attribute that Matilda hopes to obtain for herself

45 In an unpublished paper, Shoshannah Bryn Jones Square argues that Matilda does, in fact, fulfill her suicidal wish in that she develops consumption directly after walking out in the dewy evening in thin clothes and remaining lost all night, during which it rains and she becomes severely chilled. Although Matilda claims that this episode is accidental, she admits, “I particularly mark this night, for it was that which has hurried on the last scene of my tragedy, which else might have dwindled on through long years of listless sorrow” (206), a description of her lingering life that attests to her continued distaste for it and implies her desire to be rid of it.
through suicide. Tuberculosis invests Matilda with virtue and obviates her need to kill herself. Although this ending does not destroy Shelley’s rhetorical victory in establishing that suicide can be virtuous, ultimately, it renders her view of suicide as conflicted. While Shelley successfully defends Matilda’s right to kill herself, partly through the intertextual illumination of Wollstonecraft’s work, which establishes suicide as the assertion of a woman’s right to choose her own destiny, she sacrifices this victory to a sentimental ideal of purified, weak and passive womanhood.

In *Matilda*, Shelley attempts to establish an irrefutable answer of “Yes!” to Godwin’s question about whether suicide can be honourable and virtuous. Yet Shelley’s narrative provides more than only a response to her father’s brief musings about the philosophical dimensions of suicide. The author also advances the debate about suicide on the side of human liberty, and against the religious and conservative side, as developed by writers such as Rowley and Francis, as I have shown, as well as a host of others. Moreover, she imbues the public debate with a personal dimension by weaving into the tale hints of her familial history of suicide, which establishes, crucially, that the topic is not merely an abstract matter of philosophical dispute, but is an intensely private and emotionally charged one. Shelley thereby also implies that only the suicidal can fully understand the matter. As Goethe’s Werther states, “let us see if there is any other way of imagining the state of mind of a man who resolves to throw off this burden of life, a burden which is so pleasant as a rule. We may only speak of a matter, after all, if we have felt it” (62). In *Matilda*, Shelley devises a narrative situation that allows her both to defend suicide as honourable and warn against making it merely a matter of formal debate.

In so doing, however, Shelley fails to recognize that her discursive vehicle, father-daughter incestuous passion has such a strong emotional charge in its own right that it obscures her message about suicide. Godwin’s lifelong suppression of the manuscript and numerous critics’ single-minded attention to the theme of incest, and especially their insistence upon its biographical significance, attest to its distracting power. By tracing the many strands of argument regarding suicide in *Matilda*, though, we can appreciate this novella not only for its thoughtful rendering of the most important points on both sides of the suicide debate, but also for its sensitive evocation of the emotional isolation of the suicidal.

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47 All of these texts on suicide and many more may be found in the monumental, eight-volume collection, *The History of Suicide in England, 1650–1850* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).