

THE FEMALE WRITING THE TABOO: MARY SHELLEY'S *MATILDA*

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Hélène Cixous calls out the female to get rid of the trappings of tradition and convention. She beckons women to wake up from the imposed lethargy that patriarchal culture has delivered upon them. Cixous feels that the female must go all the way, and expresses it thus,

Because you punished yourself for writing, because you did not go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret not to go further; but to attenuate the tension just a bit ... we go and make ourselves feel guilty. (Cixous 335)

Certainly in *Matilda*, Mary Shelley's heroine, Matilda, goes all the way; she does not feel guilty for writing. Moreover, she does not feel ashamed of writing the forbidden, the taboo, a father's incestuous desire for her daughter or her own seduction fantasy. She writes with a language of her own, with a body of her own, obliterating the very reader that, as she says, "will toss these pages lightly over" (151). What really matters is the self as it unfolds in writing: "I forget myself, my tale is yet untold" (152). She challenges the close scrutiny of the patriarch, she ignores the voyeuristic male and goes on to tell the story. Conventions, rules, laws, constricting patterns are left aside and forgotten, when her "self" is about to be asserted. The opening pages corroborate the naturalness of what will next come since she "records not crimes" and deems her faults "easily pardonable" (152).

The purpose of this paper is to examine what it means for the female writer to write about incest and how she writes about it. To aim at this, special attention will be devoted to the violation of the taboo in a patriarchal culture, to her usage of language, mainly rooted in the categories of the natural world, and to how incest can be a destructive power—almost cannibalistic, as far as the "incorporation" of that power is concerned. *Matilda* depletes the father figure of his strength and she is consequently empowered in the overt disclosure of her incestuous desire by means of her written text.

Matilda, our heroine, "inspired with courage" (170), delivers, in a "lengthy suicide note" (Todd xiv), the circumstances of her own life. *Matilda*'s mother dies during *Matilda*'s birth, and her father deserts his child to wander in exotic lands, hoping to assuage his pain. Eventually, after years of lonely wandering, her father comes back to meet his forsaken daughter. After his return, parent and daughter create a seemingly idyllic lifestyle, framed by paternal and daughterly love. However, during this period, the father's love metamorphoses into a more surreptitious passion for his daughter. *Matilda*, realizing that something is wrong, urges her father to confide in her and is stunned by the revelation of his incestuous passion. After his disclosure, *Matilda* repudiates and reviles her father. This abhorrence leads him to commit

suicide, drowning himself in the ocean. Matilda, secludes herself in the forest as a hermitess and, throughout her retirement, tries, apparently, to expiate the sinful passion she inspired in her father. Moribund and weak, Matilda finishes her days at the same pace of her narrative.

Apparently demure and feeble, Matilda abhors this crime and considers herself as a monster with "whom none might mingle in converse" (203). Nevertheless, Matilda, in her writing, reshapes the actual father's incestuous love in her own seduction fantasy and voluptuously enjoys her narration as such. The public exposure of the taboo constitutes the first attack upon patriarchal culture, and as Felman suggests violation of the taboo constitutes "the sine qua non of female identity in a patriarchal society" (6). Revelation of incest in the threshold of the Victorian era can be translated as a direct attack on social codes and on the stereotype of the prudish female character, praised by the temperance of her passions and submissiveness to the masculine figure.

In the literary sphere, writing the taboo is equally an act of rebellion. It is the Romantic ego who enjoys the privileges of freedom; he pens and pins the female on his writing, she becomes source of inspiration, object of idolatry and he is the creator of language "which rules with Daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts, and forms which else senseless and shapeless were" (Mellor 7). In Matilda's writing the untouchable god-creator of the Romanticism banishes to give way to the female creator who writes with a language and meaning of her own. She becomes a subject creator and inverts, thus, traditional associations of male as subject and female as object of male contemplation.

Contrary to this tradition, Matilda becomes the female / subject that feeds voraciously on the male / object (her father). In *Matilda*, the female ceases to be the other, the projection of the male (Swann 84) to become herself. She trespasses the door, the cultural impasse that forbids the female to be an active source of power. As a writer, she appropriates the prerogative traditionally attributed to the male (pen / penis as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubert have related), and, attempts to be closer to the secluded sphere of men. Incestuous desire¹ means, somehow, a recognition that the father has power. The daughter seeks for identification with the father as a means of acquiring his maleness, which is emblematic of a sought-for power. As Judith Herman examines the father / daughter relation in her scientific and psychoanalytical study of the *Father-Daughter-Incest*,

in her imagination her father has the power to confer the emblem of maleness (penis or phallus) upon her. By establishing a special and privileged relationship with her father, she seeks to be elevated in the superior company of men. (Herman 57)

Matilda acts as a subject-creator by reshaping and modelling a language of her own as she writes the taboo. Matilda, with her pen, brings down the idealized strata of the Romantic male

¹ Although I refer to incest all the time, I only mean the potential of committing incest in the heroine's uncounscious mind. She only transgresses in the desire to do so but not in the fulfillment of such desire.

ego and reshapes them in a more realistic frame. For example, in her writing nature is highly tangible and material,¹

All objects —the sun, the stars, the earth, the sea and so forth— are present to man not as objects of individual perception (“poetic perception”) nor as objects of casual day-dreaming but exclusively as part of ... the battle. (Bakhtin 209)

Therefore, there is no idealization here, and nothing is disengaged from the body; the battle is held in commonplace reality. Even the act of writing is alluded to, as a physical process which involves putting ideas down on paper. Matilda consciously exposes “the drama of her life which she has now depicted upon paper” (209). Paper, sentences, and words —fit or unfit for utterance— conform to the physical act of writing: “In one sentence I have passed from the idea of unspeakable happiness to that of unspeakable grief but they were closely linked together” (166). Her story is not a tale, but instead, the chronicled “body” and “history” (151) of her real existence. This chronicled history of her desire becomes a way of consolidating her integrity as a female individual and female writer.

Seemingly, the natural world is not a subject for metaphysical elucubrations. All the elements of the natural world are accomplices of her seduction fantasy, they speak the body, the earth, the natural and celebrate the incestuous passion. We must read Matilda and these categories of the natural world, in the way she reads to her father Sir Guyon’s descent into Mammon’s grotto from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*². All the time she is reading, a suggestive double entendre underlies the narrated going on in the text. There is not only the innocent reading of the child to her father but also an invitation to the forbidden, to the cave where Sir Mammon lives. She beckons the father to the underworld of desire. As Sir Mammon, Matilda equally tempts the father in the recesses of nature and in the subterfuges of her mind.

Therefore, although the natural world is apparently immersed in a fairy-like aura of innocence and vagueness, it reveals more often than not the turmoil of her inner passion. Matilda’s language gives constantly way to new possibilities since it is “open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body” (Baym 157). Matilda looks consciously for the ambiguity between naiveté and cunning. Interestingly, she metaphorically projects herself as a fox: “I with my dove’s look and fox’s heart” (186) in order to point at her duality.

¹ Mary Shelley combined her roles as a editor, transcriber, critic and biographer of Percy Shelley’s work. But her idealization and sympathy was combined with irony in the sense that she made the poet more tangible, more pitiable, bringing him down from his throne and making him more accessible to the reader. She created her own language, rooted in the earth and reality while exulting her husband’s artistry.

² In book II of Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Sir Guyon descends into Sir Mammon’s grotto, a filthy hole in the earth. There, Sir Mammon tempts the knight with the underworld of desire: wealth and lust: God to the world and wordlings I me call, / Great Mammon, greatest god below the skye, / That of my plenty poure out onto all, / And unto none my graces do enuye: / Riches, renowme, and principality. (II. vii. 8).

The opening pages of the novel are ambiguous and introduce the sense of duplicity that characterizes Matilda. Her undefined mood discloses her inner battle. Matilda, about to die, is in a strange state of mind. It is four o'clock on a dark winter afternoon. This darkness conveys a feeling of desolation, yet, about to die and freeze like the landscape, she feels happy. The sun shines, and the whiteness of the snow harmonizes with her throbbing heart and her sparkling hand. The rhythms of death contrast with the rhythm of her vital heart. Matilda both embraces and despises her dying hour. She lives and dies. She desires union with her dead father, but she does not disclose it overtly. For instance, in Matilda's narrative, when her father declares that he loves her, Matilda longs for his death and his decay: "Be thy days passed among savages, and thy nights under the cope of heaven! Be thy limbs worn and thy heart chilled!" (175). Yet, his death leads her to a profound agony that accentuates her longing for him,

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)

Despite the apparent ascetism that the enchanted meadows of Scotland immure and where Matilda looks more "like a spirit than a human maid" (161), the landscape emblemizes, on another level, the physical longing for her father. The wet grass, the intricacies of the landscape, the rain enhancing her body and her corporeality—her clothes adhere to her body in such a way that she cannot take them off—and the secluded forests all reflect Matilda's sexual desire for her father:

I invited him to walk with me, and led him to a neighbouring wood of beech trees whose light shade shielded us from the slant and dazzling beams of the descending sun—After walking for some time in silence I seated myself with him on a mossy hillock. (170)

The secluded forest with its chiaroscuro contrasts of sun and shade differs from the ideal trope of the "locus amoenus"; the forest invites to the revelation of passion. The sexual significance is made explicit when Matilda sits on a "mossy hillock" (with its phallic connotations); in the forest the natural world is celebrated with ritualistic enthusiasm, and Matilda participates in it. Rain, landscape, and mountains know no inhibiting laws. The minute description of the surroundings where the illicit desire lurks suggests Matilda's joyful recollection and gaunt delightness in the narration of the taboo.

The triumph of a sometimes grotesque and sometimes luscious nature over a too rigid morality, bespeak what the voice must conceal: freedom, an explosion from the "within" of human conventions. Matilda does not embrace the natural world to seek penitent expiation. On the contrary, in nature she finds refuge from the false, conventional civilized world that deems her love unnatural and polluted. Her nun-like attire is not emblematic of a redemptive flagellation, but, rather, symbolizes an alternative to the London world of deceit and hypocrisy. In

London, Matilda, who “had before clothed herself in the bright garb of sincerity must now borrow one of diverse colours” (186), one that enables her to laugh with grace. The garb of diverse colors suggests that the only way to survive false values is by means of the carnivalesque attire of the harlequin, the “comic evil” (Bakhtin *Rabelais* 259).

The connection between Matilda and the harlequin reveals how Matilda mocks the London world, the epitome of the false. In London, she sneers, mocks, and jeers with “cunning frauds” in “treacherous laughter” (186). However, in the woods, Matilda does not need to disguise herself with a carnivalesque attire to proclaim her rebellious nature. In the woods, where she feels free and unfettered, the simple attire of a nun suffices; this attire is emblematic of sincerity and opposed to the affectation of London. As a result of her communion with nature, Matilda feels free to speak with her body and through her body. In the natural order, to love the father is deprived of its sinful nature. As the spirit of nature, Matilda, the nursling of mountains, feels free; she destroys and creates, she is the earthen womb and the regenerating womb.

On another level, incest is also a means of destructive-power because the other is annihilated in the hypothetical fulfilment of the desire: “Like eating, intercourse makes two bodies one, though in a union that if fortunately less absolute and permanent” (Mellor 7). In this sense, incest also constitutes Matilda’s desire to displace and engulf the phallogentric. This almost cannibalistic impulse is a direct consequence of Matilda’s melancholia, her mourning for her father. Julia Kristeva’s analysis of melancholia in *The Black Sun* sums up clearly Matilda’s position in the novel. Kristeva argues that melancholia originates in the loss of the other, the lover (5); as a consequence of this loss, life lacks meaning:

Life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can be easily lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters. (Kristeva 6)

This personal crisis results in a self-consuming aggressiveness. The lost object is internalized, devalorized, loved and hated, and there is a frantic desire to recover this lost object, no matter what: “better fragmented, torn, cut up, swallowed, digested ... than lost” (13). Swallowed and digested —a grotesque melancholia is closely allied to the cannibalistic; Matilda participates in just such a cannibalistic impulses by attempting to metaphorically devour and consume her father (a representative symbol of patriarchy itself). Her cannibalism, then, constitutes another aspect of Matilda’s attack against the oppression a patriarchal society exerts upon her.

This cannibalistic impulse is present when Matilda particularly devours her father’s words. As a child, Matilda reads his father’s letter over and over again, until “all sleep and appetite fled from *her*” (160). Her father’s words, printed upon the page, become a replacement for food. Later, she deprives him of the power of utterance:

When in the morning he saw me view with poignant grief his exhausted frame, and his person languid almost to death with watching he wept, but during all this time he spoke no word by which I might guess the cause of his unhappiness. (168)

While her father succumbs to Matilda's charms and is made inarticulate, feeble and weak, Matilda grows and aggrandizes herself. Her best act of eloquence is her own text, and her power is, thus, confirmed in this living testimony of herself.

It is in her writing where she mocks the vanity of the Romantic poet: nature becomes tangible, and she is empowered through the very forces of the earth; she mocks the puritanical projection of the male pen in order to assert her own body naturally —she loves her father and desires a mental union with him when a physical union is impossible, she curses the earth that separates them as well as the physical distance between both of them. She usurps the place of the father because she annihilates him, she kills him with her words, makes him silent and weak. She confines him to the unfathomable eternity of the ocean.

Therefore, although Matilda dies in the end, her text is not her mourning stone but her own living epitaph. This epitaph is the written story of a female who dares to utter the unutterable, to celebrate the incest taboo which the contemporaneous Percy Shelley's count Cenci¹ concealed so carefully. Matilda's voice, her written text, continues to celebrate the resilient power of the true heroine —always living and always assertive.

Ana María Sánchez Mosquera
University of Santiago de Compostela

REFERENCES

- Baym, N. 1984: *The Madwoman and her Language: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory*. > Warhol, R. R. & Herndl, D. P. ed. 1991: 154-68.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1984: *Rabelais and his World*. Bloomington, Indiana UP.
- Cixous, H. 1975: *The Laugh of the Medusa*. > Warhol, R. R. & Herndl, D. P. ed. 1991: 334-50.
- Felman, S. 1975: *Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy*. > Warhol, R. R. & Herndl, D. P. ed. 1991: 6-20.
- Gilbert, S. M. & Gubar, S. ed. 1984: *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven, Yale UP.
- Herman, J. L. 1981: *Father-Daughter Incest*. Cambridge, Harvard UP.
- Kristeva, J. 1989: *Black-Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. New York, Columbia UP.
- Mellor, A. K. ed. 1988: *Romanticism and Feminism*. Bloomington, Indiana UP.

¹ Interestingly, Percy Byshee Shelley's drama *The Cenci* was composed at the same time in which Mary Shelley was writing *Matilda*, around 1819. *The Cenci* also deals with incest with the only difference that incest is never uttered in the play, and it is only felt as an unutterable blank space. Incest is shrouded in silence (Ferris 135). See Ferris, S. 1989: *From a Reflection in a 'Many-Sided Mirror': Shelley's The Cenci through the Post-Revolutionary Prism in The Wordsworth Circle* 12: 134-140.

Spenser, E. 1979: *The Faerie Queene*. New York, Longman.

Swann, K. 1988: Harassing the Muse. > Mellor, A. K. ed. 1988: 81-93.

Todd, J. ed. 1992: *Mary Wolstonecraft: Mary and Maria / Mary Shelley: Matilda*. New York, Penguin.

Warhol, R. R. & Herndl, D. P. ed. 1991: *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick, Rutgers.

* * *