In the Name of Matilda: Feminine Transgression and Romantic Conceit

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This essay explores frequent recurrences of the name *Matilda* throughout the British Romantic Period as a means of defining what I term the *Romantic conceit,* an idea whose sustained presence becomes a shared cultural construct with special meaning. The essay traces the name to primarily Continental sources, with special emphasis on Dante and Spenser, on members of the British royal family with Continental connections, and on Matthew Lewis's *The Monk.* The juxtaposition of historical and biographical sources suggests that the Romantics appropriated this name traditionally associated with strength and nobility to transform it into an emblem of feminine transgression and irrational behavior. Romantic Matildas are connected with physical violence, with incest, and with direct challenges to religious and political authority as presented most visibly in Gothic literature. As the Romantic Period progressed, the connotations associated with the name coalesced into a well defined set so that a mere invocation of the name also invoked revolutionary sentiment.

In 1819, Mary Shelley wrote a novella that she entitled simply *Matilda.*[1] The title character is a dark, brooding figure reminiscent of the Byronic hero. As she describes herself on the first page, "I am alone—quite alone—in the world—the blight of misfortune has passed over me and withered me" (1959/1992, 151). Shelley constructs the novella as Matilda's final act. The title character writes from her deathbed to her friend Woodville, to whom she finally has decided to reveal the circumstances surrounding her "tragic history." Matilda offers her story not as a confession, not as a cautionary tale, but as an explanation for her melancholy. She has rebuffed Woodville's repeated attempts to alleviate her emotional pain and has, until now, maintained a resolute silence when asked about its source. As Matilda's narrative unfolds, she reveals her dark secret: her father had fallen in

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love with her. The incestuous nature of this revelation is so scandalous that when Mary Shelley sends *Matilda* to her own father to be published, he suppresses the book.[2] However, Shelley's story—provocative as it may be—is not unique. Indeed, incest is a common theme in much of the literature of the Romantic Period in Britain, and Shelley's *Matilda* might fit into the category of Gothic tale. Shelley's decision to name her character Matilda also is not unusual. In fact, Shelley's Matilda is but one in a series of Matildas who appeared in the literary works published in Romantic Britain. The prevalence of the name, however, should not be dismissed merely as coincidence or popular convention. Naming her character Matilda, Shelley employs a shared cultural construct that I term the *Romantic conceit.* The Romantic conceit is a trope shared by Romantic authors and used to evoke particularly Romantic ideas. Authors had used the name *Matilda* long before Shelley wrote her novella, but by the time Shelley used the name, it had acquired special meaning shaped by Continental—and especially German—influences. Borrowing, perhaps from Dante Alighieri, perhaps from Edmund Spenser, perhaps from the lives of royal family members, and perhaps from the Gothic tradition's most scandalous novel *The Monk,* Romantic authors transformed a name traditionally associated with strength and nobility into an emblem of feminine transgression and irrational behavior. Romantic Matildas are connected—as victims or as aggressors—with physical and emotional violence, with incest, and with direct challenges to religious and political authority as presented most visibly in Gothic literature. As the Romantic Period progressed, the connotations associated with the name coalesced into a well defined set so that a mere invocation of the name evoked revolutionary sentiment.

The name *Matilda* has Continental origins and has varied in popularity since its introduction into England. E. G. Withycombe (1977), in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names,* traces the name's origin to the Old German

name *Mahthildis*, which combines the elements *mahti* ('might' or 'strength') and *hildi* ('battle' or 'strife'). Hence, the name itself implies nobility and security in its associations with might in battle. Based on the name's origin alone, one might expect Matilda to be a mighty warrior, the subject of epic poetry and a defender—if not builder—of nations. In fact, *The Oxford Names Companion* reinforces the nobility of the name by tracing it to "an early German queen" who lived from 895 to 968 (Hanks, Hodges, Mills, and Room 2002). Moreover, the name has retained strong associations in the British imagination with conquest, for, as Withycombe (1977) explains, the name *Matilda* was introduced into Britain in 1066 by the wife of William the Conqueror, Matilda of Flanders. Withycombe also notes that the name was popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, fell into obscurity during the next four hundred years, and then was revived in popularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The name has gone through a number of permutations, both as a given name and as a surname. Latin forms include *Matillis* and *Matilldis*; French forms include *Mahhild, Mahault, Molde, Maud,* and *Mathilde*; the Spanish use *Matilde*; and the Italians use *Mafalda* (Withycombe 1977; Hanks and Hodges 1990). The name also has other forms in English, including a variant form that inserts an *h*—*Mathilda*—and shortened forms like *Mattie, Tilly,* and *Tillie* (Hanks and Hodges 1990). Withycombe notes that surnames like *Madison, Moulson, Tilson,* and *Tillotson* also developed from the name *Matilda.*

The spike in the name's popularity that Withycombe remarks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincides with the Romantic Period in Britain, which lasted roughly from 1780 through 1830. While most scholars credit Lord Tennyson's poem *Maud* (1855) with the popularity of the name *Matilda* in the latter half of the nineteenth century,[3] no one has identified a cause for the name's prevalence in the late eighteenth century. Beyond the aggressive possibilities implied in the name's origin, I suggest three significant

influences that helped to shape the name *Matilda* in the Romantic imagination. First, two illustrious writers whom the Romantics admired—Dante Alighieri and Edmund Spenser—used the name in their works. Second, the royal family had used the name in the eleventh century and was using it again in the eighteenth century. Third, and most important, Matthew Lewis used the name in his best-known work, *The Monk*. Admiration for earlier writers' works, combined with concern over recent developments in the royal family and with an interest in Lewis's Gothic novel, gave the Romantics ample incentive to use the name for their own purposes.

At least two writers from the Romantic Period used the name *Matilda* pseudonymously, and in both cases the writers produced texts whose notoriety came, in part, from depictions of transgressive feminine sexuality. Della Cruscan poetry, for example, consisted of a series of poems written by Robert Merry and Hannah Cowley, who styled themselves, respectively, Della Crusca and Anna Matilda. The Della Cruscan poems dramatized, in epistolary form, the love affair between these fictional figures. When the poems were published serially in 1787 and 1788, they created a sensation, partly because of their candid presentation of erotic attraction. As Jacqueline Labbe (2000) acknowledges in her article on the Della Cruscans in *Romanticism On the Net*, "[T]he romance between Della Crusca and Anna Matilda offends sensibility exactly because it is sexual, rather than sensual." Later Romantic writers were well aware of the Della Cruscans and certainly associated the name *Anna Matilda* with transgressive behavior. Lord Byron (1996), for example, mocks the Della Cruscans in his famously biting *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Some years later, Charlotte Dacre wrote Gothic novels that similarly shocked the British public with transgressive feminine figures, and Dacre used the pseudonym *Rosa Matilda*.[4] Her best known work is the novel *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806), which Percy Shelley read and used as a model for his Gothic-inspired novella *Zastrozzi* (Holmes

1975, 31). Critic Douglass Thomson describes Dacre as the creator of "women, strong-willed and with minds, ransacking . . . gender types," and he points out that the title character of *Zofloya* is "a female version of Matthew Lewis's infamous monk" (2002, 100-01). Burton Pollin, writing almost forty years ago in *Names*, suggests that even Dacre's pseudonym came from Lewis's *The Monk* (1968, 399). To evoke an even more transgressive tradition, Adriana Craciun, in her introduction to the Broadview edition of *Zofloya*, detects Sadean qualities in the book (1997, 9).[5] Dacre's other fictions were no less shocking. As the Romantic Period unfolded, writers remained aware of these pseudonymous Matildas and could not help but associate them with transgressive feminine sexuality.

Perhaps even more important than these pseudonymous Matildas, a surprisingly large number of works from the Romantic Period include characters named Matilda or references to actual Matildas.[6] One of the earliest literary Matildas for the Romantics appears in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. *Otranto* was published in 1765 and cannot be classified chronologically as a Romantic text. However, Walpole's book was significant to Romantic writers and has been credited with initiating the Romantics' interest in the Gothic. Many critics consider *Otranto* to be the first Gothic novel in English—Pollin calls it the "prototype of the genre" (1968, 399)—and when Romantic writers like Matthew Lewis and Anne Radcliffe created their disturbing visions of Gothic sensibility, they used Walpole's creation as a guide.[7] In fact, Lewis's scandalous and immensely popular novel *The Monk* (1796) includes a Matilda figure who is arguably the most important of the Romantic Matildas. Matildas appear also in Sophia Lee's book *The Recess, or A Tale of Other Times* (1785), in Ann Radcliffe's first romance *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), in Elizabeth Inchbald's play *The Married Man* (1789), in Inchbald's book *A Simple Story* (1791), in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Elegy Imitated from One of

Akenside's Blank-Verse Inscriptions" (1794), in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1795), in Coleridge's poem "To Matilda Betham from a Stranger" (1802), in Percy Shelley's novella *Zastrozzi* (1810), in Mary Shelley's novella *Matilda* (written in 1819, though not published until 1959), in John Keats's fragmentary drama *King Stephen* (written in 1819, though not published until 1848), in Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* (1820), and in Thomas Love Peacock's novella *Maid Marian* (1822).

The Matildas who appear in these works, moreover, are but a fraction of those who surfaced in the literature of Romantic Britain. The catalogue of the British Library lists at least a score of other books that contain stories of other Matildas. Thomas Best published *Matilda, An Original Poem in Seven Cantos* in 1789; George Richards published *Matilda; or, the Dying Penitent* in 1795; Richard Scrafton Sharpe's *Matilda: or, the Welch Cottage, a Poetic Tale* appeared in 1801; and Barbara Hofland's *Matilda; or, The Barbadoes Girl* appeared in 1816. The complete list is too long to reproduce here, but it includes novels, poems, and plays.[8] Some of the titles suggest love stories, such as *The Man of Sensibility; or The History of Edward and Matilda* from 1810, while others, like *Matilda; or, The Efforts of Virtue,* published in 1785, suggest didactic content. George Longmore's *Matilda: or, The Crusades* was so popular that it entered a fifth edition by 1827. In no other period of literary history was the name Matilda so popular in literature as it was during the Romantic Period.

One of the most interesting points about the many Romantic Matildas is that a large number of them, particularly those whose notoriety has endured beyond the Romantic Period, are associated with transgressive behavior. The transgressive behavior may or may not be their own, for in fact, many of them function as hapless victims. However, for many authors, to use the name *Matilda* is to employ a Romantic conceit implying that the character will become

either a victim of physical or emotional aggression or a perpetrator of such aggression. Mary Shelley's Matilda, for example, is the victim of the guilt caused by her father's incestuous desire and early death.[9] Inchbald's Matilda in *A Simple Story* is the victim of her father's irrational tyranny and his emotional—and semi-incestuous—conflation of Matilda's identity with that of her mother.[10] In *The Castle of Otranto*, admittedly an earlier text, Walpole's Matilda is the victim of the whims of her tyrannous father, who stabs her to death near the end of the tale. Other Matildas, such as the one in John Keats's *King Stephen*, take a more aggressive tack. Keats's Matilda—he calls her Maud—is the Holy Roman Empress and the leader of an army invading England. Percy Shelley's Matilda in *Zastrozzi* is a malignant figure who plots to destroy her rival for Verezzi's love.[11] And Lewis's Matilda orchestrates the tragic downfall of the pious monk Ambrosio. Not all Matildas who appear in Romantic texts are associated with such transgressive behavior as is exhibited in these instances of incest and violence. Although the Matilda of Coleridge's "Elegy" is plagued by a paralyzing guilt that might associate her with transgressive Matildas, Coleridge's other Matilda, Matilda Betham, is neither perpetrator nor victim.[12] Despite such exceptions, so many of the Romantic Matildas are linked with transgression and irrational behavior that the similarity cannot be coincidence. Moreover, it also is no coincidence that these Matildas linked to transgression and Gothic irrationality are the ones who retain the most currency in the canon of Romantic literature.

One of the reasons the name *Matilda* was popular with Romantic Period writers may have been its use in the works of Dante Alighieri and Edmund Spenser. *Purgatorio* includes a Matilda who acts as Dante's guide through Purgatory before handing him off to Beatrice. Dante first encounters Matilda gathering flowers in the Garden of Eden. He describes her in Canto XXVIII as "A lady all alone, who, singing, went, / And culling flower from flower, wherewith her way / Was all o'er

painted" (1955, 265-66). This Matilda does not exhibit the associations with the transgressive that are apparent in most Romantic Matildas. However, her heavenly qualities and her role as guide ennoble her and endow her with a type of power that the Romantics would have admired. As Dante's guide, she is a controlling figure, a sort of muse who directs Dante's fate and explains his surroundings. In Canto XXIX, she guides him along the stream of Lethe to the point at which Beatrice appears. Matilda is, as Dante hints in Canto XXXIII, a teacher (1955, 291), and she accompanies the protagonist until his ascent into the heavens.[13] Spenser, on the other hand, includes two Matildas in his most famous work *The Faerie Queene*. They are minor characters, and they also do not exhibit the extremes of transgressiveness present in many Romantic Matildas, but their roles are germane in that they would have appealed to the Romantic imagination as much as Dante's Matilda did. The Matilda of Book III, Canto III, Stanza XIII, is the mother of the magician Merlin. Her association with the supernatural, and particularly with a son who can control the supernatural, gives her a position of great power that would have kindled the Romantic imagination. Spenser's second Matilda, who appears in Book VI, Cantos IV and V, is the wife of Sir Bruin, who recently conquered lands governed by the giant Cormoraunt. Since she has no children, she agrees to care for an orphaned baby whom Sir Calepine rescued from a bear. She then deceives Sir Bruin into believing that the child is his own. Matilda's deception is transgressive in a way that Romantic writers would have liked, for her decision gives the orphan a home and positions him to be the heir of Sir Bruin's demesne.

Interestingly, Mary Shelley mentions *The Faerie Queene* in her novella *Matilda*, and she directly quotes from it. Moreover, she quotes from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and, in fact, two of those quotations come from Dante's description of Matilda in Canto XXVIII of *Purgatorio*. Other Romantic writers likely knew of these passages as well, although whether they

borrowed from them as Mary Shelley did is not clear. Percy Shelley read Dante in his first months in Italy starting in 1818, but *Zastrozzi* had come off the presses eight years earlier. Additionally, Shelley translated the first fifty-one lines of Canto XXVIII of Dante's *Purgatorio,* though not until 1820. Mary Shelley later gave the fragment the title, "Matilda Gathering Flowers" (1820, 292-93). John Keats had read Dante before writing *King Stephen* and had been an ardent admirer of Edmund Spenser's work from childhood.[14] In short, the Romantic writers had read and were familiar with both Dante and Spenser, both of whose works maintained high levels of popularity.[15] Dante was so popular that in the early part of the nineteenth century, Henry Francis Cary produced a new English translation, the result of which was to generate even more interest in the Italian writer. Moreover, William Blake, who initially had read Dante in Italian, was commissioned to create engravings to illustrate a new version of the *Divine Comedy* in the mid-1820's (Ackroyd 1995, 227, 352-55).[16] Blake died before finishing the series, but one of his watercolors depicts Dante and Matilda gesturing to one another across the Lethe while Beatrice's procession arrives in the background (Roe 1953, 161-64).[17] The Matildas in Dante and Spenser likely provided some inspiration for the Romantic Matildas, but such minor characters probably would not have provided enough inspiration for such an overwhelming number of Romantic characters.

More compelling sources for the surge in interest in Matildas come from the British monarchy. The two spikes that Withycombe notices in the popularity of the name—first in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and then in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—coincide roughly with the notoriety of important royal figures who held the name Matilda. These figures also may be responsible, at least partially, for the development of the Romantic conceit that associated the name *Matilda* with transgressive feminine behavior. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, no fewer than

five British royal family members were named Matilda. The first was Matilda of Flanders, who married William the Conqueror and is credited with introducing her name into England from the Continent (Withycombe 1977). The Romantics might have found her history interesting because of the revolutionary nature of the changes wrought in Britain by the Norman invasion. Two more Matildas were less visible historically—King Henry I's wife Matilda and her great-granddaughter Matilda,[18] Duchess of Saxony, daughter of King Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Between these two less prominent Matildas, two other royal Matildas rose to considerable renown and distinguished themselves as aggressive political and military figures. Their active pursuit of political and military power made them transgressive because such roles traditionally were associated with masculine occupations. Henry I and his wife Matilda had a daughter whom also they named Matilda. She married Henry V of Germany and assumed the title of Holy Roman Empress (Chibnall 1991, 26).[19] After her husband's death, she married Geoffrey Plantagenet, and their son, Henry II, who reigned from 1154 to 1189, became the first of the Plantagenet kings of England. Hence, Empress Matilda was responsible for an influential line of eight kings whose collective reigns stretched nearly two and a half centuries through Richard II. More important, however, are the events that transpired when Empress Matilda's father, Henry I, died, and her cousin Stephen usurped the crown. Empress Matilda, who was Henry's legitimate heir, actively recruited troops and political allies before invading England from the Continent to take back the monarchy. Matilda was such a strong figure that William of Malmesbury reportedly called her a "'virago'" (Pain 1978, 101). Her troops managed to capture Stephen, and she was declared "Lady of England" (Chibnall 1991, 95, 98). However, the second important royal Matilda, Matilda of Boulogne, led troops against the Empress's forces to regain the monarchy for Stephen, who was her husband. Nesta Pain writes that

Stephen's Matilda "put aside all feminine weaknesses and set herself to play the part of a man" (1978, 108), and Marjorie Chibnall recognizes her as "a woman as resolute and indomitable as the empress herself" (1991, 95). Matilda of Boulogne worked, in the same way that the Empress had done, as an aggressive political force to raise troops and solidify influential alliances for Stephen's cause.

Writers during the Romantic Period knew of the two Matildas who had fought over the monarchy in the twelfth century. Most of them probably had learned about the Matildas in school, and they may have remembered the Empress Matilda in particular since she reportedly made several bold escapes from Stephen's forces during her campaign. One such story, probably apocryphal, reports that she was "smuggled out of Winchester in a coffin" (Chibnall 1991, 114). More credible sources report that after retreating from London and being besieged for three months in Oxford, the Empress made a daring escape one December midnight by dressing herself and three or four of her knights in white, crossing the frozen Thames, and fleeing *through* the encampment of Stephen's army (Chibnall 1991, 117). Many Romantic authors likely remembered Matilda's ghostly flight even when they may have known little of her military exploits. John Keats was one significant author who did have some knowledge of the Empress's military acumen. In the fragmentary *King Stephen,* Keats recreates the battle at which Stephen is taken captive by the Empress's army. Keats subtitled the play, "A Fragment of a Tragedy," and the 195 lines he wrote in four scenes suggest that his plan was to cast Stephen as a noble figure whom the Empress Maud (Matilda) and her son Henry destroy. The play begins *in medias res* as Stephen's cavalry is routed, and the opposing army's commanders admire the usurper's fortitude. Maud appears in Scene iv, where she orders Stephen to be brought before her. Based on the few lines Keats gave her, she is much like the historical Empress—a practical-minded, decisive figure who

has no time for frivolity. She exercises her power with a view to rule. As she says, referring to Stephen, "'Tis not for worldly pomp I wish to see / The rebel, but as a dooming judge to give / A sentence something worthy of his guilt" (1848, lines 19-21). Empress Maud transgressively assumes the active masculine role of judge in relation to her usurping cousin.

The five early Matildas, starting with Matilda of Flanders, certainly must have made the name *Matilda* popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially given the notoriety of the Empress Matilda and Matilda of Boulogne. Although the British split between those supporting King Stephen's forces and those supporting the Empress's forces, both sides had a heroic Matilda figure after whom to name their children. Indeed, one of the primary female figures in the British Robin Hood legends, which are set contemporaneously in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, may have been named after one of these royal Matildas. Maid Marian, with whom Robin Hood falls in love, is named, in some versions of the legend, Matilda Fitzwater. Because of the continued popularity of the Robin Hood stories, this Matilda may have helped to sustain the name's currency through the Romantic Period. In 1795, Joseph Ritson published *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to that Celebrated English Outlaw*, a book which, according to R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor, made Robin Hood a "thoroughgoing ideological hero" (1999, 174). Romantic writers would have admired the hero of the Robin Hood legends for his revolutionary defiance of tyranny, and they would have identified with the hero's struggle against oppression. Several of the Romantics, including Leigh Hunt, John Keats, Robert Southey, Caroline Bowles Southey, and the relatively unknown Bernard Barton, demonstrated their admiration for the Robin Hood legends by writing their own versions.[20]

Two of the best known of the Romantic Period's Robin Hood adaptations are those written by Sir Walter Scott as

Ivanhoe in 1820, and Thomas Love Peacock's *Maid Marian* of 1822. Scott includes a Matilda who functions as a minor character, but Peacock's version of the Robin Hood tale is especially interesting since its title character, on whom much of the work focuses, is called Matilda Fitzwater until about two-thirds of the way through the novella when she receives her outlaw name. Significantly, the king who declares Robin Hood and his cohorts outlaws is Henry II, son of the Empress Matilda. Peacock's Matilda, like many of the other Romantic Matildas and like the royal Matildas after whom she originally may have been named, exhibits unfeminine behavior and thus falls into the category of the transgressive. Marilyn Butler, who reads *Maid Marian* as Peacock's satire on contemporary oppression, calls this Matilda "an emancipated woman in Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist tradition" (1999, 150). Matilda is an intelligent, strong-willed woman who can wield a sword as well as any man, and one of her favorite activities is the manly sport of hunting. "She can fence," one of the characters remarks, "and draw the long bow, and play at single-stick, and quarter-staff" (1822, 17). His companion adds that when Matilda engages in such manly sports, she does so, "not like a virago or a hoyden, or one that would crack a serving-man's head for spilling gravy on her ruff, but with such womanly grace and temperate self-command, as if those manly exercises belonged to her only, and were become for her sake feminine" (1822, 17). Matilda wounds Sir Ralph in a fight; she later fights with Prince John; and when King Richard returns from the Crusades, he mistakes Matilda for a young man and fights her, too. Richard is struck with "great admiration" at her skill and comments that no man ever has managed to withstand his attacks as long as she does (1822, 241). Undoubtedly, the Matilda of the Robin Hood legends bolstered the name's popularity for the Romantics. If she had been, indeed, named after the Empress Matilda or Matilda of Boulogne, then the influence of the two powerful Matilda figures from British

history had an even longer-lasting effect through the Robin Hood tradition that the Romantics admired.

The second spike in popularity for the name *Matilda*, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, also coincides with the public visibility of royal family members named Matilda. More importantly, the notoriety of these two Matildas came from negative circumstances in ways that would encourage the association of the name with feminine transgression and, from the point of view of their contemporaries, irrational behavior. Interestingly, both Matildas were members of the Royal House of Hanover, so the second surge in the popularity of the name also is due to Continental influences. Additionally, in both cases, the family members left England for the Continent, and it is there that they became involved in, from the British point of view, transgressive activities. The eldest daughter of King George III, who ruled during most of the Romantic Period, was named Charlotte Augusta Matilda. Married to Frederick William Charles, Duke of Würtemberg, in 1797, she moved to the Continent, where the Napoleonic wars isolated her from the royal family of England for nine years (Stuart 1939, 39). When Napoleon himself arrived in 1805, the Princess exhibited great fortitude and political acumen in welcoming the invader.[21] Ultimately, she found Napoleon's rule to be salutary, for at his instigation, she was raised to the position of Queen of Würtemberg. The British royal family, however, was displeased. Dorothy Stuart notes that George III and the British people "identified [Napoleon] with the Beast of Revelation," and King George refused to allow anyone to refer to Charlotte as "Queen" (1939, 48). Queen Charlotte of Britain was deeply offended when she received from her daughter a letter whose salutation employed wording reserved for fellow monarchs: "'*Ma très chere Mère et Sœur*'" [My very dear Mother and Sister] (1939, 48).[22] It must have seemed treasonous and a crushing disappointment to the royal family for Princess Charlotte to accept any honor bestowed by

Britain's greatest enemy. To the British, the Princess was, at best, a poor victim of circumstances who was forced to welcome Napoleon or, at worst, a traitor and collaborator. In either case, her story would have interested contemporary writers because, as victim or traitor, she was associated with the transgressive irrationality, from the British viewpoint, of Napoleon's imperial expansionism.[23]

Even in her isolated situation, Charlotte Augusta Matilda still would have kept some of the attention of the British public. Interest in the affairs of the royal family ran high, as is evident in Elizabeth Inchbald's pocketbook diaries. Inchbald repeatedly notes attending or performing in plays that were enacted at the king's command, and she sometimes mentions going to the theatre simply to see the royal family. On November 6, 1780, for example, she writes that she "went and saw the King & queen come to the House." On the 27th, she is excited at having seen the "3 Princesses." Such references appear frequently in Inchbald's surviving diaries, and some refer directly to Charlotte Augusta Matilda. On February 14, 1788, for example, Inchbald sees the "king queen and all the Princesses" at the theatre, and the November 16 entry mentions the king's "attempt on Love for the Princess Royal." Interest like Inchbald's would not have dwindled after Charlotte's departure for the Continent. Indeed, Charlotte's direct involvement with Napoleon certainly attracted more attention. British writers might have been inspired by her example as they created their own transgressive Matilda figures.

While Princess Charlotte Augusta Matilda may have acted transgressively out of necessity for survival, the transgression of her aunt, George III's sister Princess Caroline Matilda, was deliberate. And, unfortunately for her, it was a spectacular disaster. Critic Michael Bregnsbo explains that in 1766, when the Princess was fifteen, George III arranged her marriage to their cousin King Christian VII of Denmark and Norway, who was only seventeen (2004, 350). The young king

treated Caroline abusively, and she soon developed an intimate, and rather public, relationship with the king's physician, Johann Friedrich Struensee.[24] As if infidelity were not transgressive enough, Caroline also scandalized the court by challenging established gender codes in a way that marked her as transgressive on yet another level. When she went riding with Struensee, she "frequently wore uniforms and rode *en homme*" (Wilkins 1904, I: 224-25). In 1772, Struensee was executed, and Caroline Matilda was charged with adultery, divorced, and then banished from the realm. News of the scandal spread quickly, and most of the British sympathized with Caroline Matilda's fate.[25] When Caroline died unexpectedly in 1775 at the age of 23, many British speculated that she had been poisoned (Chapman 1972, 205; Wilkins 1904, II: 295-96).[26] Although Adolphus Ward suggests, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, that Caroline Matilda's death "met with little public comment" (1917, 1059), the public was well acquainted with her fate. As biographer Hester Chapman reports, "The majority on the Continent thought that she had been monstrously used[,]" and in her native land, "The English people looked on her as a martyr, unjustly cast out by a group of fiends" (1972, 179). The scandal and her subsequent death occurred just before the Romantic Period was to begin, and the knowledge of her experiences might have helped inspire writers to create similarly transgressive Matildas in their artistic work.

Princess Caroline Matilda's notoriety surged early in the Romantic Period when Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about her in a travel narrative entitled *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, and marital strife within the royal family that same year may have reminded the public again of Caroline Matilda. The short book of Wollstonecraft's consisted of twenty-five letters that she wrote to Gilbert Imlay. By the time the letters were published in 1796, Wollstonecraft already had garnered significant acclaim with her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published four

years earlier, so her new book received much attention. Emily Sunstein remarks that the new publication was "widely read and translated into several languages," and that most of the public, including the book's reviewers, responded to it positively (1975, 295). In Letter XVIII, Wollstonecraft discusses Caroline Matilda at length and exhibits deep sympathy for the Princess. At one point, she pauses to apostrophize, "Poor Matilda! thou hast haunted me ever since my arrival; and the view I have had of the manners of the country, exciting my sympathy, has increased my respect for thy memory!" (1796, 203). Wollstonecraft then returns her attention to the reader to comment, "I am now fully convinced that she was the victim of the party she displaced" (1796, 203). As the letter continues, Wollstonecraft praises Caroline Matilda's philanthropy, excuses her attachment to Struensee, and summarily dismisses charges that the Princess may have drugged her husband (1796, 204-05).

If Wollstonecraft's attitude toward Princess Caroline Matilda is representative,[27] then it should be no surprise that other Romantic writers drew upon her story for their own fictions. Coincidentally, Wollstonecraft's book appeared the same year that the Prince of Wales separated from his wife, Princess Caroline. Most of the public supported Caroline in the ensuing quarrel (Hibbert 1972, 155), and they may have viewed her situation as similar to that of Caroline Matilda. The Prince fought publicly with his wife over visitation rights to their daughter, and, later, Caroline found herself under investigation after accusations of infidelity (243, 201-19). When George III died in 1820, the Prince—now George IV—attempted to bribe Caroline to stay out of England and away from the royal family (Ashton 1917, 1061). He even sued for divorce, though Caroline died the next year.[28] The continuing scandal surrounding these two figures certainly must have reminded Romantic authors of the infidelity, divorce, and subsequent death of Caroline Matilda of Denmark, especially after the attention Wollstonecraft had given her. Any

reminder of this Matilda would have encouraged authors further to use the name *Matilda* to evoke the transgressive.

Finally, if the examples of Dante and Spenser were not enough to inspire the Romantics, and if the historical Matildas of the British royal family were not enough to inspire them, certainly, Matthew Lewis's famous Matilda had a far-reaching influence. This Gothic Matilda likely had a stronger effect on Romantic writers than any other, and she, too, has Continental origins. Lewis wrote *The Monk* in The Hague, and his tale was inspired largely by the works of German Romantic writers.[29] While Ambrosio's ruin is the central issue in *The Monk*, Matilda is one of the most important characters. She is an embodiment of feminine transgression, for she wields her sexuality as a manipulative tool.[30] She is a seductive, deceptive creature who appears in Ambrosio's monastery disguised as a boy named Rosario. Hence, her first act is to lie about her identity and simultaneously to appropriate a masculine role. Indeed, as Christopher MacLachlan points out in his introduction to *The Monk*, "Matilda becomes so much the dominant partner in her relationship with Ambrosio that they almost undergo a role reversal" (1998, xvi). After revealing her true gender, Matilda incites Ambrosio to extremes of irrational behavior: fornication, sorcery, murder, torture, rape, and incest. In the final pages of the book, she gives Ambrosio, now imprisoned by the Inquisition, a means of escape, but he must trade his soul to Lucifer in return. In another irrational decision, Ambrosio agrees to Lucifer's terms but then learns that Matilda was a "subordinate" of Lucifer's who had been sent to ensure Ambrosio's downfall (1796, 375). The monk's demise is gruesome, and he endures damnation for his sin.

Lewis's book, written when the author was only nineteen, caused a scandal. Everyone knew of it, and everyone knew of the scheming Matilda at its core.[31] Even for authors who did not borrow the name *Matilda* from earlier writers or from the royal family, Lewis's character was a

compelling model of transgressive feminine sexuality linked with irrational behavior. Whether subsequent writers admired Lewis for his daring or condemned him for his sensationalism, they were familiar with Lewis's work, and many borrowed from his example. In an introduction to *The Monk*, John Berryman rightly claims that the book "exerted a considerable influence over the writing of several countries during the first half of the century" (1952, 26). For example, Richard Holmes suggests in *Shelley: The Pursuit* that Percy Shelley patterned his novella *Zastrozzi* on the work of Charlotte Dacre (especially *Zofloya*), on the novels of Ann Radcliffe, and, significantly, on the writings of Matthew Lewis (1975, 31), and Lord Byron, in a footnote to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, ridicules "sundry novels in the style of the first edition of the Monk" (1996, 35). Samuel Taylor Coleridge reviewed *The Monk* for the *Critical Review* and cast it as a horrifying but paradoxically pleasing romance (Ashton 1996, 99-100). If the name *Matilda* did not attain its status as an emblem of feminine transgression and irrational behavior beforehand, the success and notoriety attached to *The Monk* likely pushed the name firmly into the category of Romantic conceit.

The plethora of Matildas who appeared in the literature of Romantic Britain is, I suggest, the result of a confluence of primarily Continental influences in British culture. Romantic writers were reading about Matildas in Dante and Spenser; they knew the story of Empress Matilda and King Stephen; they worried over the fates of a current and a recent Matilda in the royal family; and they admired Matthew Lewis's daringly Gothic Matilda in *The Monk*. The prevalence of the name was not mere coincidence; it was an attempt to capture the potentially transgressive nature of the female mind and to explore the consequences of the irrational behavior often linked with the transgression. In a culture that expected women to exhibit proper decorum and chaste behavior, Matildas allowed for the revolutionary expression of

feminine sexuality and power, either as victims or as perpetrators of aggression. To invoke the name of Matilda was to alert readers to expect the unusual. As the Romantic Period progressed, so many writers began associating the name with transgressive feminine and irrational behavior that *Matilda* became a Romantic conceit—an extended metaphor for the provocative and the revolutionary. So when Mary Shelley wrote her novella *Matilda* about an incestuous relationship between father and daughter, she chose her title character's name with deliberation. Romantic Matildas challenged authority figures and were linked with incestuous sexuality and with physical and emotional violence. In general, the Romantic Matilda was the *ne plus ultra* of Gothic femininity. The Romantics had moved a name associated with strength in battle to a more abstract level so that it became a shared construct used to evoke the transgressive.

Notes

1. Shelley's title usually is spelled *Mathilda*. See, for example, the edition in *The Mary Shelley Reader*, edited by Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (1959/1990, 173-246). To keep the spelling more consistent, however, I have opted to use *Matilda*, as exemplified in Janet Todd's edition (1959/1992).
2. Her father, William Godwin, also may have been influenced by accusations of incest that already had been leveled at the Shelleys (Clemit 2000, 67). A novella about incest certainly would have been damaging to the Shelleys' reputations.
3. See, for example, Withycombe (1977) and Hanks and Hodges (1990).
4. Lisa M. Wilson points out that *Charlotte Dacre* also was a pseudonym; Dacre's name was Charlotte King (1998, 393).
5. Craciun also calls the book an "innovative revision of Lewis' *The Monk*," and she argues that the *Rosa Matilda* pseudonym is "a clear reference to the Satanic *femme fatale*" from *The Monk* (1997, 9).
6. While collecting references to Romantic Matildas, I sent a query about the name to the e-mail listserv of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR). I am grateful for the participants' helpful discussion related to my query and would like to thank Hermione de Almeida, Donald Reiman, Lisa Wood, Staci

Stone, Fred Randel, Miriam Wallace, John Lauritsen, Amy Garnai, Maria Palacas, Amanda Berry, Michael Ferber, and Nora Crook.

7. W. S. Lewis, in his introduction to *The Castle of Otranto*, calls the book "the earliest of the 'Gothic' novels" (1969, vii), and E. B. Murray, Ann Radcliffe's biographer, also calls it "the first Gothic novel" (1972, 13). Matthew Lewis's interest in the book is clear in a letter he wrote to his mother to say that he had begun "'a romance in the style of *The Castle of Otranto*'" (qtd. in MacLachlan 1998, ix). He also was influenced by Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The importance of *Otranto* to Radcliffe is evident in E. B. Murray's biography, which begins with a discussion of Walpole's book (1972).

8. Other examples of such tales include *The Sorrows of Matilda, a Novel* (1798); John Delap's *Dramatic Poems* (1803), which includes a poem entitled *Matilda; Matilda; or the Adventures of an Orphan: An Interesting Tale* ([1804]); *Málone and Matilda: A Tragedy in Five Acts* ([1809]), attributed to "C— A—"; M. Woodland's *Matilda Mortimer; or, False Pride: A Moral Tale* (1810); *Matilda: A Tragedy*, listed as a translation of Voltaire's *Le Duc de Foix* (1811); *The Exile: or, Matilda of the Castle and Rousina of the Alps; An Historical Memoir* (1820); *Matilda: A Tale of the Day* (1825); *Matilda and Fanny, or, the Sisters of Rosedale* ([1828]); and Henry Ingram's *Matilda; a Tale of the Crusades* (1830). Two other works, though they fall just before the Romantic Period, are worth noting—*The Mountain Piper; or The History of Edgar and Matilda* ([1770]) and Thomas Francklin's *Matilda: A Tragedy* (1775). Moreover, a number of other works include yet more Matildas but do not list the name in their titles. Anne Stevens, working with the Corvey Collection in summer 2005, brought to my attention Anne Fuller's *Alan FitzOsborne: An Historical Tale* (1787); *The Rock of Modrec*, apparently by John Thelwall (1792); E. M. Foster's *The Duke of Clarence* (1795); Agnes Musgrave's *Cicely; or the Rose of Raby* (1795) and *Edmund of the Forest* (1797); Henrietta Mosse's *A Peep at Our Ancestors* (1807); Anna Maria Mackenzie's *Feudal Events, or, Days of Yore* (1800); and *Old Times Revived*, whose author is listed simply as Egestas (1809).

9. Pamela Clemit suggests, however, that Matilda hides a "secret complicity with, even encouragement of, her father's passion" (2000, 68). Clemit sees Matilda as "both guilt-ridden and innocent, both sexual transgressor and sexually pure" (2000, 71).

10. Interestingly, Inchbald had performed the title role of Thomas Francklin's play *Matilda: A Tragedy* in 1780, when the play enjoyed renewed popularity. In her pocketbook diary of 1780, she mentions being "at Matilda" several times that year, memorizing her lines, and

she mentions playing the role on February 24, April 25, and May 23. Francklin's play likely had a strong influence on Inchbald's decision to name her character Matilda.

11. Percy Shelley's Matilda is surprisingly vicious. In her final confrontation with Julia, Matilda stabs Julia "in a thousand places; and, with exulting pleasure, again and again burie[s] the dagger to the hilt in her body, even after all remains of life [are] annihilated" (1810, 101).

12. In an article on Coleridge's poem, Morton Paley suggests that in writing the piece, Coleridge meant to "recruit Betham as a successor to Mary Robinson as the partner in a literary flirtation" (1996, 171). Coleridge seems not to have been successful. If Paley is correct, then even this poem's Matilda verges on being transgressive.

13. According to Edmund Gardner's notes to the text, scholars generally have associated Dante's Matilda with the Countess Matilda of Tuscany (1955, 266n).

14. For a discussion of Keats's readings of Dante, see Walter Jackson Bate's *John Keats*, pages 212 and following (1963). Bate discusses Keats and Spenser as well, on pages 32 and following. He quotes Charles Cowden Clarke, who wrote, "John Keats and I used to sit and read Spenser's 'Faery Queene' together" (1963, 11). As Clarke's writings suggest, Keats adored Spenser's work. Keats even used the Spenserian stanza in composing his own poetry.

15. A brief perusal of the biographies of any of the major Romantics reveals the importance of both Dante and Spenser. Leslie Marchand notes that Lord Byron read Dante, for example, and reminds his readers that Byron used Spenserian stanzas for some of his poetry (1957, 413, 212). Indeed, Byron translated parts of Canto V of Dante's *Inferno* as "Francesca da Rimini." As Marchand explains, Byron wanted to visit Ravenna *because* it was Dante's burial place, and while there, Byron wrote *The Prophecy of Dante* (1957, 775, 794). In *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Rosemary Ashton remarks that Coleridge was familiar enough with Spenser to lecture on the earlier author (1996, 244). Wordsworth, too, was familiar with Spenser's work (Gill 1989, 235).

16. Blake also had read Spenser (Ackroyd 1995, 38, 56).

17. Roe's reproduction is in black and white, but a color version became available in January 2005 online at the William Blake Archive.

18. Her siblings included King Richard I (the Lionhearted) and King John, both younger.

19. Even more Matildas were associated with the Empress Matilda. According to Chibnall, she had a half-sister named Matilda (1991, 186); her first husband, Henry V of Germany, inherited lands from Matilda, Countess of Canossa (1991, 28); and one of her supporters during her invasion of England, Brian fitz Count, was married to Matilda of Wallingford (1991, 53).

20. In 1820, Leigh Hunt produced four poems about Robin Hood—"Robin Hood, A Child," "How Robin and His Outlaws Lived in the Woods," "Robin Hood, An Outlaw," and "Robin Hood's Flight." The same year, John Keats published a poem entitled simply "Robin Hood," which editor Jack Stillinger notes was a response to two sonnets about the outlaw that John Hamilton Reynolds had sent him (Keats 1820, 438). In a discussion of the poems by Keats and Reynolds, critic John Barnard suggests that Keats identified with Robin Hood because he felt that his poetry challenged generally accepted poetic tastes as established by figures like William Wordsworth, Leigh Hunt, and Lord Byron (1999, 134). Other writers addressed the legend, such as Bernard Barton, who produced "The Death of Robin Hood" in 1828, and Robert Southey and his wife Caroline Bowles Southey, who collaborated on "Robin Hood: A Fragment" (admittedly a much later text in terms of publication date—from 1847).

21. Just before Napoleon arrived, Charlotte reportedly said to her husband, in French, *"vous devez faire le pauvre, au lieu d'étaler vos richesses, si vous ne voulez pas avoir de fortes contributions à payer"* [you should play the poor man rather than displaying your riches if you don't want to pay heavy contributions] (Stuart 1939, 47). By this time, Princess Charlotte had long lived in fear of a French invasion and had once fled from the castle in Louisbourg at midnight to escape a reported French offensive (Stuart 1939, 42; Aspinall 1966-70, III: 252). The letters she wrote to her father during these years, part of Aspinall's *The Later Correspondence of George III,* indicate constant worry over the French, repeated moves to avoid their advances, condemnation of French extortion tactics and destruction, and an occasional request for George III's political support of her husband. She was forced to send many of her letters through visiting friends and ambassadors since the French often confiscated the mail.

22. When the royal family was able, once again, to exchange letters with Princess Charlotte in 1813, Queen Charlotte still refused to refer to her daughter as "Queen" of Würtemberg. She sent her letters to the Prince Regent first "to be 'redirected in a proper manner'" (Stuart 1939, 48).

23. Interestingly, Princess Charlotte's stepdaughter, Catherine of Würtemberg, married Jerome, King of Westphalia and Napoleon's brother; her daughter, born May 27, 1820, was Princess Mathilde Bonaparte (Bearne 1910, 365).
24. According to Bregnsbo, "The king lost any interest in her and preferred to gad around in the capital with his profligate friends and an infamous Copenhagen prostitute, vandalising property and fighting with the night watchmen" (2004, 351). Biographer W. H. Wilkins observes that the young king treated Caroline "with open indifference" after their first few days in Denmark (1904, I: 109). Months later, Christian continued to treat Caroline with "rudeness and contempt," and while he joked crudely about her pregnancy, he also "flaunted his infidelity before her eyes" (1904, I: 135-36).
25. The British Library holds transcripts of the inquiry into Princess Caroline Matilda's behavior with Struensee, including the British response to the Danish charges. The British lawyers found the evidence circumstantial—based, for example, on the testimony of maids who merely heard rumors—and asked for acquittal (Uhldal 1772).
26. Modern scholarship suggests that she died of typhus or scarlet fever (Chapman 1972, 205; Wilkins 1904, II: 295-96). However, the suspicion that she died of poison would not have been unreasonable. The new Danish government worried that Caroline Matilda might try to regain her position. In fact, their worries were not unfounded, for Caroline's sympathizers quietly began seeking supporters for her cause, among them the cautiously encouraging George III (Chapman 1972, 194-205), who had sent the navy to transport her to Hanover rather than leaving her at the mercy of the Danish.
27. Sunstein notes that Imlay also addressed the story of Caroline Matilda in *The Emigrants* of 1793 (1975, 288).
28. Again, Inchbald's diaries provide useful insight into the public response to the royal family's activities. In the 1820 diary, Inchbald carefully follows the divorce proceedings. Moreover, she notes each time she sees a procession pass through the streets of London to escort Princess Caroline, to whom she refers as "Queen."
29. As MacLachlan notes in a discussion of charges of plagiarism that were leveled at Lewis, "*The Monk* was regarded as relying for its success chiefly on its imitation of German originals" (1998, xxi).
30. MacLachlan comments, "All the characters are driven by sexual desire" (1998, xv).

31. As John Berryman notes in his introduction to *The Monk*, "The book created a sensation instantly [and] everybody read it" (1952, 20).

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