

Melissa Bailes, “The Psychologization of Geological Catastrophe in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.” *ELH* 82. 2 (2015): 671-699.

Melissa Bailes explores the ways in which Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man* (1826), is crucially informed by the catastrophist theories of Georges Cuvier and William Buckland. Emphasising that previous scholarship predominantly focused on the plague as the cause of human extinction in the novel, Bailes makes the case for understanding Shelley as staging individual deaths in terms of catastrophe within a Cuvierian framework of geohistory. In doing so, Shelley is seen to challenge scientific generalisations about species extinction by shifting geological catastrophe into the psychological world of an individual.

The author first establishes a striking parallel between Shelley's and Cuvier's methods of “deciphering” from “scattered and unconnected” remains (674), be it Sibyl's leaves found in a cave in *The Last Man*, or excavated fossils in *Ossemens Fossiles* (1812), and building an account of past epochs, which becomes a narrative in which to speculate on the future of the human species. Shelley found herself in the middle of disputes between geology and biblical authority: her geological knowledge came partly from the appreciation of Byron's work, which was ridiculed as blasphemous by cave palaeontologist Buckland, on whom Shelley nevertheless relied when depicting Sibyl's cave.

Importantly for Bailes' argument, Shelley reports to have come across a “skeleton of a goat” in Sibyl's cave and that “Ages perhaps had elapsed since this catastrophe” (681). Juxtaposing this with Shelley's journal entry on Byron's remark about the difficulty of distinguishing a human corpse from a sheep carcass, which he made upon seeing Percy Shelley's drowned body, Bailes argues that Shelley's novel crucially “shifts catastrophe away from the level of the geological world and into that of the individual” (685). She is seen to invoke natural disasters, ranging from flood to “black sun”, only to eventually dismiss them in favour of the plague, which follows a Cuvierian understanding that the Earth's catastrophic power (through which continents emerged from and sank in the sea) has gradually diminished and is not likely to cause human extinction. The plague, on the other hand, physically corrupts individual bodies, shattering their domestic worlds, which Bailes links to Shelley's experience of the loss of her husband in July 1822 and their three children prior to that.

Bailes claims that Shelley's “understanding of catastrophe combats scientific generalisations about extinction that disregard the experiences of individuals” (688). This is supported by the portrayal of astronomer Merrival as completely detached from his plague-stricken family. Merrival's speculations “about the conditions of the earth a hundred thousand years in the future” voice contemporary geological debates around the planet's age while manifesting the “frivolity” of such speculations “when one's private world is under threat” (688). While I agree with this reading, the scientist figure in fact also seems to be strangely disinterested in, rather than preoccupied with, what might happen to the whole human species. Bailes, however, continues to emphasise Shelley's focus on individual death. Thus she reads the last man figure as primarily signifying the end of Verney's own “particular world” (696) and not really raising any serious speculations about post-human worlds, as geologist Charles Lyell did in 1830 by suggesting that a recurrence of specific Earth's conditions might give rise to the return of extinct species. Shelley's emphasis on the individual is further supported by

suggesting that the novel does not offer any “ideological justification for humanity’s annihilation” (694), an issue geologists were concerned with. However, a possible justification for extinction does surface when Verney, in the middle of the Greco-Turkish war and surrounded by corpses, proclaims himself “ashamed” of human violence, and suggests “So perhaps were the placid skies; for they quickly veiled themselves in mist” (144), leading to a scene of dramatic wind and darkness. In my view, this staging of a climatic disturbance ensuing from Verney’s moment of shame foregrounds Shelley’s continuous preoccupation with the catastrophic end of humanity and a possible reason for it. I therefore see Shelley’s focus on extinction at the species level (as informed crucially by science) as intersecting with the focus on individual death throughout the novel, rather than seeing them at odds.

Nevertheless, Bailes’ article meticulously and intriguingly shows us the key relevance of geological catastrophist theories for the novel, and more particularly, the ways in which Shelley broadens the scientific meanings of catastrophe to include individual death. In this way the article contributes significantly to current scholarship on Shelley and science, which has been so far, in reference to *The Last Man*, predominantly focused on the staging of disease and the relevance of medical science.

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