

Journal Work in the Time of Coronavirus

This is not the preface I intended to write. This preface was going to focus on our journal internships, but then a deadly pandemic upended all our lives with a speed that I could never have imagined, and a disrupted preface became the least of anyone's concerns. Now we are all working from home, socially distanced, and facing deep uncertainties about health and safety, the United States' economy, and the future of higher education itself. In such times, my natural tendency is to process life through the lens of fiction. I am hardly alone in this; movies like *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995) have shot to the top of the national streaming charts.¹ Personally, alongside binge-watching *Tiger King* (2020) with the rest of America, I have been trying to cope by rereading Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and feeling closer to my early modern forebears than ever before. For years, I have taught my students about the closing of theaters in times of plague and about the early modern antitheatrical belief that the playhouse was a site of both physical and moral contagion. I certainly never expected to live through a time when our own theaters and playhouses would have to shut down for the "plague," when the early modern remedy of distance would be the only hope available to us, too.

I have also been thinking about Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), which I wrote about extensively in my recently published monograph, *Religion Around Mary Shelley* (2019).² Shelley did not live through a pandemic, but she did experience great loss—of her husband, her children, her half-sister, and many friends—and at the age of twenty-six, she wrote the first post-apocalyptic novel to represent creatively the experience of constant bereavement. She wrote in her journal on 24 May 1824, "The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me."³ I have always loved the novel and have taught it several times, but it takes on new resonance in our current historical moment, with scenes of people calling out to a dysfunctional government to save them even as "commerce had ceased"; disease bringing out both the worst and the best in ordinary folk; the public hoping the change in season will save them from the disease (in *The Last Man*, characters wait for the winter to freeze the virus, while we pin our hopes on increased temperatures); and people finding in religion both solace and exploitation.⁴ For me personally, what resonates most in Shelley's novel is the speed and suddenness of the plague's onset. Much of the book has nothing to do with the pandemic; it spends many pages detailing the political intrigues and romantic entanglements of two main

couples. The disease itself does not emerge until midway through volume two, and it does not begin to affect England until the end of that volume. The plague originates in a far-away place in the east, and it does not mean anything to the novel's main characters . . . until suddenly it does.

My own year has been deeply wrapped up in local concerns, serving as Faculty Senate Vice President in a time of university turmoil, and those concerns were all consuming, too . . . until suddenly they were not. On Monday, March 9—less than three weeks ago as I write this preface—I heard the first rumblings that we might need to shift to online learning after spring break. At the time, that conversation seemed overly alarmist to me, but within twenty-four hours, the stock market was in freefall, COVID-19 cases were being diagnosed in Tulsa, and we were moving immediately to social distancing and online classes. By Friday, all of our lives—faculty, students, staff, and administrators alike—had shifted in ways that did not seem possible on Monday. Now university concerns, when we can think about them, are both perversely comforting (because they are familiar, a reminder of our “normal” lives that may never exist again) and deeply terrifying (because no one knows what the higher education landscape will look like on the other side of the pandemic). Shelley writes, “There was but one good and one evil in the world—life and death. The pomp of rank, the assumption of power, the possessions of wealth vanished like morning mist” (p. 229). I think that is an apt encapsulation of the sense of estrangement, dislocation, and loss that we are collectively experiencing right now.

So where do we go from here? Some academics have tried to treat the pandemic as a forced sabbatical. I made my own set of quarantine research goals but confess that besides finishing this preface, I have made little progress on that list. I have had to force myself to do any work, including reviewing the many dissertation chapters I need to read for graduate students who are counting on me to graduate. One of my students texted me the other day that she feels like she has suddenly developed an executive processing disorder, and I know exactly what she means. Even the slightest work feels overwhelming right now. So maybe trying to pretend like it is business as usual is not the way to go, an opinion espoused in many online think pieces and in a viral tweet from Dr. Janet Goodall: “Dear all in HE [higher education]: this is NOT an ‘opportunity’—it is not a ‘great time to write.’ It is a global pandemic. People are dying. There is no possibility of ‘business as usual’ and the very idea is abhorrent. This discourse shows how broken things have become.”⁵

Yet the demand for productivity is, at least for me, a way of reestablishing some sense of normalcy and control. It is also a way of reaffirming the importance of the arts and humanities at this scary and uncertain juncture. As I argue in *Religion Around Mary Shelley, The Last Man* is at its base a

love letter to human creativity (pp. 120-23). As the disease spreads, what Lionel, the protagonist, mourns the most is the loss of human art, the plays that can no longer be staged, the symphonies that can no longer be performed, the books that can no longer be read. Some of the novel's most poignant scenes occur as Lionel sees *Macbeth* and hears Joseph Haydn's music performed for the last time; he writes: "O music, in this our desolation, we had forgotten thee! . . . thou camest upon us now, like the revealing of other forms of being" (p. 325). The consoling and necessary power of creativity, of art and literature, has also been a central theme in our own culture as we try to cope as a society with the crisis. This sentiment underlies many memes circulating online. As one viral post noted on Facebook, "I love how the world has decided that we need the arts right now to survive. Free opera, free concerts, free books, free museum exhibits, all online. Maybe think about that the next time someone proposes slashing funding for the arts."⁶ As we all must by necessity turn away from the human connections that sustain us, we are finding power and beauty, worth and strength, in the creations of human minds. These values are why the arts and humanities matter, even as we wait for our counterparts in STEM fields to find scientific ways to save us. Looking back to the plague stories of "Boccaccio, De Foe, and Browne," Shelley's Lionel writes, "I am able to escape from the mosaic of circumstance, by perceiving and reflecting back to the grouping and combined colouring of the past" (p. 209).⁷ We, at least for the time being, will try to do the same.

Thus, *TSWL* remains open for business in this time of crisis. We will be reaching out to specialist readers as usual and will understand completely if they are not in a position to read for us right now. We also hope you will send us submissions as you finalize them. I especially invite Academy pieces, if you find yourself more inclined to personal reflection. How has the pandemic reshaped your readings of various works? To which works are you reaching out for solace, and what works can you not bear to pick up? Given that the pandemic has already disproportionately affected women and people of color, how are you proceeding (or not proceeding) as a scholar in this moment?⁸ In sum, what does it mean to study literature in the time of the coronavirus?

I am always grateful to Karen Dutoi, our Managing Editor, but I am especially grateful now for her seemingly infinite resource of calmness and capability. She is keeping our office running from home, and we will continue to publish on schedule, despite the pandemic. I am also grateful to our interns Caleb Freeman, Lily McCully, and Jennarae Niece, who have made the transition to working from home without complaint. This semester, Caleb

will graduate with his Master of Arts degree and leave us. We will miss him terribly, and while we are sad that we cannot get together to celebrate his success, we send him all our best wishes in print. With this issue, we are also saying goodbye to editorial board members Diana Maltz, Fiona Morrison, and Iyunolu Osagi, with gratitude for their service to the journal. In their place, I am pleased to introduce the following board members:

Anupama Arora is Professor of English and Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, where she specializes in post-colonial and global Anglophone Literature, multicultural literature, including Asian British and Asian American literature, global/transnational feminism, and Bollywood studies. The recipient of the Provost's Best Practices Award for the Recognition of Excellence in Teaching and Learning with Technology in 2011 and 2014, she is a coeditor of the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, an open-access online journal. Her work has appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Women's Studies*, *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing*, *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*. Her current research projects focus on India in the United States in the long nineteenth century, contemporary South Asian/diasporic literature, and Bollywood.

Mary Jean Corbett is University Distinguished Professor of English at Miami University, Ohio, where she specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglophone writing and Victorian literature. She is the author of *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies* (1992), *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold* (2000), and *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (2008), and she has published articles in venues including *ELH: English Literary History*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Victorian Review*, and *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*. Her current project, *Behind the Times: Virginia Woolf in Late-Victorian Contexts*, is forthcoming in 2020 from Cornell University Press; it offers a new account of Woolf's multiply mediated outlook on her mid- and late-Victorian predecessors. Through biographical, literary, and cultural analysis as well as archival research, it reconstructs the varied networks in which members of her immediate and extended families participated, demonstrating the imbrication of these networks with those of earlier and later generations.

Hala Halim is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. She specializes in modern Arabic, English, and Anglophone literature; Mediterraneanism and Levantinism; the Afro-Asian movement; South-South comparatism; translation stud-

ies; and the Nahda and comparative modernities. Her book *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive* (2013) received the American Comparative Literature Association's Harry Levin Prize for First Book Honorable Mention. Halim's articles have appeared in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*; *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*; *California Italian Studies*; and *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, among others. Her translation from Arabic of Mohamed El-Bisatie's *Clamor of the Lake* (2004) won an Egyptian State Incentive Award. Halim served as guest editor of a 2017 special issue of the annual peer-reviewed bilingual (Arabic and English) journal *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* published by the American University in Cairo. One of her current scholarly projects addresses the Afro-Asian Writers' Association and its journal, *Lotus*.

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NOTES

¹ Chris Lindahl, "Beyond 'Contagion': Interest in Outbreak Movies, Podcasts, and More Surges Across the Internet," *IndieWire*, 17 March 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/03/contagion-pandemic-outbreak-movies-coronavirus-1202218477>.

² Jennifer L. Airey, *Religion Around Mary Shelley* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814-1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2:476-77.

⁴ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, vol. 4, *The Last Man*, ed. Jane Blumberg and Nora Crook (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996), 204. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See Janet Goodall (@janetifimust), Twitter, 22 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/janetifimust/status/1241658731533873158?s=20>. See also, for instance, Monica Torres, "Please Don't Be Guilted Into Being More Productive During the Coronavirus," *HuffPost*, 20 March 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/coronavirus-productivity_1_5e712a89c5b6eab7793de6c7; and Carolyn L. Todd, "Is Anyone Else Just Barely Functioning Right Now?," *Self*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.self.com/story/coronavirus-stress?fbclid=IwAR1Kj-B6BfXC-19KQ-NUipOfQ4myB-6HKBYIScW9LfhYjj1dgeyQDQKGVzP8>.

⁶ Rebeccah Lutz, Facebook, 17 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/rebeccah.lutz/posts/10221842422512671>.

⁷ Here, Shelley refers to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-1351), Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, and Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1799).

⁸ See, for instance, Madeleine Simon, "Women and the Hidden Burden of the Coronavirus," *The Hill*, 19 March 2020, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/>

respect/equality/488509-the-hidden-burden-of-the-coronavirus-on-women; and Emma Whitford, "Job Uncertainty Looms Larger for People of Color," *Inside Higher Ed*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/23/people-color-disproportionately-affected-pandemic-expect-need-more-education-if-laid>.