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**On ‘Srumfredevi’ in Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’**

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’, written in late May to early July 1822 and first published by Mary Shelley in Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley (London, 1824), contains, in Mary’s text, a blank space in line 260:

“And near walk the [ ] twain,

The tutor and his pupil, whom Dominion

Followed as tame as vulture in a chain.

(ll. 260–2)[[1]](#footnote-1)

G. M. Matthews was the first to note that, in Shelley’s manuscript, the intriguing word ‘Srumfredevi’ is written, in a darker ink, below the space.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is, as Donald H. Reiman later asserted, ‘phonetic doodling for “Sir Humphry Davy”’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Matthews also observes Shelley’s jotting in the margin of the same manuscript page, which reads: ‘Srumfredevi / Sir Humphry Davy / Davi’. As Nora Crook, in her superb recent editorial notes to the poem, has reminded us, Matthews thought Shelley’s filling of the blank with ‘Srumfredevi’ ‘ludicrous’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Crook, in examining the origin of Shelley’s strange addition to his draft, refers to Anna Jameson, who, in her Diary of an Ennuyée (London, 1826), provides a description of Salvador (surname and dates unknown),[[5]](#footnote-5) Davy’s guide to Vesuvius during his stay in Italy between September 1818 and April 1820, during which time Davy also attempted to unroll the Herculaneum papyri using chemical methods:[[6]](#footnote-6)

Salvador[,] well known to all who have visited Mount Vesuvius, had been engaged by Mr. R. [Rowles, for whom Jameson was acting as a governess] as his guide. He is the principal cicerone on the mountain. It is his business to despatch to the king every three hours, a regular account of the height of the eruption, the progress, extent, and direction of the lava, and, in short, the most minute particulars. He also corresponds, as he assured me, with Sir Humphry Davy;\* and is employed to inform him of every interesting phenomenon which takes place on the mountain. This man has resided at the foot of it, and been principal guide for thirty three years, and knows every inch of its territory.

[Jameson’s note:] \* Was the letter addressed ‘Alla Sua Excellenza *Seromfridevi*,’ which caused so much perplexity at the Post Office and British Museum, and exercised the acumen of a minister of state, from Salvador to his illustrious correspondent?[[7]](#footnote-7)

The minister of state referred to by Jameson, as Crook, citing the London Magazine, points out, is Nicholas Vansittart, 1st Baron Bexley, Chancellor of the Exchequer and a principal trustee of the British Museum. As reported in the London Magazine, having received a letter addressed to ‘Al, Sua Excellenza, Sromfridevi’, ‘[a] committee sat, and after long deliberation, Mr. Vansittart suggested that it might be for Sir Humphrey [*sic*] Davy, which turned out to be the case’.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 1820, Davy had become a trustee of the British Museum, *ex officio* as President of the Royal Society.

Jameson’s speculation (was the letter from Salvador?) is supported by Davy’s own correspondence. In a fragment of a letter recently published for the first time, in The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy, from Davy to the vulcanologist and mineralogist (and Permanent Secretary of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Naples) Teodoro Monticelli, dated [April 1822], Davy writes:

 —Je cherche l’occasion d’envoyer un petit cadeau à Salvadore, il n’a pas trouvé un echantillon de ce que j’ai cherché, mais je suis reconnaissant pour sa bonne volonté.—

 Voila comme il m’addresse c’est drole

 al Cavaliere nob:

 Sanfredevi

 dalla nazione Inglese

 &

 [—I am looking for the [proper] occasion to send a small present to Salvadore; he did not find a sample of what I was looking for,[[9]](#footnote-9) but I am grateful [to him] for his good will.—

 This is how he addresses me it is amusing

 to the noble Cavaliere:

 Sanfredevi

 of the English nation

 &][[10]](#footnote-10)

How news of Salvador’s phonetic spelling of Davy’s name had reached Shelley by the late spring/early summer of 1822 is a matter of speculation. Shelley may have picked up on the English report (or a variation on it) published in late 1821. Crook suggests that Charles Clairmont, who may have passed on an Austrian newspaper report, may also be a source.[[11]](#footnote-11) An alternative, entirely likely source of Shelley’s hearing is Lord Byron, with whom Davy socialised – and, indeed, gossiped[[12]](#footnote-12) – in Ravenna in late April 1820, two months after a visit to Vesuvius,[[13]](#footnote-13) and with whom Shelley had frequent contact between November 1821 and April 1822. Jane (and possibly Humphry) Davy had also previously socialised with Byron in 1813. Byron had, only the year before, composed a short, ribald poem on Davy’s and Jane’s marriage; it is safe to assume that Davy was unaware of it.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However Shelley received the news, the case for Salvador’s ‘contribution’ to Shelley’s poem in manuscript is strengthened by the evidence of Davy’s letter to Monticelli. The ‘stray “devi”’ on Shelley’s manuscript, noted by Crook, ‘at a point [in ‘The Triumph of Life’] where the “glass” of the “shape all light” is about to appear’[[15]](#footnote-15) may also represent an oblique allusion to Davy’s invention, in 1815–17, of the miners’ safety lamp, early versions of which were, as we might expect, based on the more familiar glass-panelled lanterns used above ground.[[16]](#footnote-16) If we are prepared to admit this possibility, then Shelley joins Byron in alluding to Davy’s lamp in his poetry:

This is the patent-age of new inventions

For killing bodies, and for saving souls,

All propagated with the best intentions;

Sir Humphrey [*sic*] Davy’s lantern, by which coals

Are safely mined for in the mode he mentions.

(Don Juan, Canto I, Stanza cxxxii)[[17]](#footnote-17)

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1. Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Mary Shelley (London, 1824), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. G. M. Matthews, ‘“The Triumph of Life”: A New Text’, Studia Neophilologica, xxxii (1960), 271–309 (292 n.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts, gen. ed. Donald H. Reiman, 23 vols (New York, 1986–2002) (hereafter abbreviated to BSM), I (‘Peter Bell the Third and The Triumph of Life’, ed. Donald H. Reiman (1986)), 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, gen. eds Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook, 7 vols (4 vols to date) (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000–), (hereafter abbreviated to CPPBS), VII (ed. Nora Crook (2021)), 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There are several contemporaneous references to a ‘Salvator Madonna’ (or minor variations on the name, e.g. Salvatore, Salvadore), who is described as ‘the principal guide to Mount Vesuvius’ in David Brewster, ‘Account of Comptonite, a New Mineral From Vesuvius’, Edinburgh Philosophical Journal, iv (1821), 131–3 (131 n.); reliable primary sources providing any further useful information are, however, distinctly lacking. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on Davy’s visits to Vesuvius, see especially vol. III of The Collected Letters of Sir Humphry Davy, ed. Tim Fulford and Sharon Ruston, advisory eds Jan Golinski, Frank A. J. L. James, and David Knight, assisted Andrew Lacey, 4 vols (Oxford, 2020) (hereafter abbreviated to CLHD), and Humphry Davy, ‘On the Phaenomena of Volcanoes’, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, cxviii (1828), 241–50 <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rstl.1828.0012>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Anna Jameson], Diary of an Ennuyée, new edn (London, 1826), p. 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. London Magazine, iv (December 1821), 681. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Salvador sent Davy not only letters (as Jameson mentions) but also, it would seem, geological and/or mineralogical samples: writing from London, Davy informs Monticelli that ‘Salvador m’a inviato qualche pietre’ [‘Salvador has sent me some stones’] (Humphry Davy to Teodoro Monticelli, 23 April 1822, in CLHD, III, 336). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Humphry Davy to Teodoro Monticelli, [April 1822] (fragment), in CLHD, III, 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See CPPBS, VII, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. After Davy and Byron met in Ravenna in 1820 (see below), Byron reported to John Murray that Davy thought William Sotheby’s poem ‘Naples’ (published in Farewell to Italy and Occasional Poems(London, 1818)) ‘a bad one’ (Byron’s Letters and Journals, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London, 1973–94) (hereafter abbreviated to BLJ), VII, 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Davy, ‘On the Phaenomena of Volcanoes’, 242. According to Byron, who provides an (in parts amusing) account of their meeting, Davy was ‘much taken with’ Ravenna, but ‘only staid a day’ (BLJ, VII, 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lord Byron to [Samuel Rogers], 12 April 1812, in BLJ, XI, 180–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. CPPBS, VII, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Frank A. J. L. James, ‘How Big is a Hole?: The Problems of the Practical Application of Science in the Invention of the Miners’ Safety Lamp by Humphry Davy and George Stephenson in Late Regency England’, Transactions of the Newcomen Society, lxxv (2005), 175–227, especially the photographs on 184–92. The allusion is oblique because Shelley is referring to a drinking glass; nevertheless, Shelley’s glass, held aloft in a hand, was, at various times as he worked on ‘The Triumph of Life’ in manuscript, a locus of ‘splendour’, ‘light’, and ‘bright[ness]’ (BSM, I, 224–5). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lord Byron, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford, 1980–93), V, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)