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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2023, vol. 18, iss. [1], pp. 19-38

ISBN 978-80-280-0547-4 (print); ISBN 978-80-280-0548-1 (online ; pdf)
ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online ; pdf)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80121
Access Date: 30. 11. 2024
Version: 20240716

Central European Journal of Canadian Studies
Revue d'Etudes Canadiennes en Europe Centrale
volume 18 (2023) | (19–38)

Pandemic, Prophecy, and Politics in Mary Shelley and Emily St John Mandel

Pandémie, prophétie et politique chez Mary Shelley et Emily St John Mandel

Michelle Gadpaille

Abstract
In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, readers and scholars turn to previous pandemic writing. Among the older accounts of past pandemics, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) stands out for its female author and futuristic, dystopian mode. Among contemporary plague narratives, *Station Eleven* (2014), by the Canadian writer Emily St John Mandel, offers an eerie echo of Shelley's plague-infested Europe in the devastated Great Lakes region during a 21st-century pandemic. This article explores the coincident motifs of the two narratives, while focusing on their parallel predictions about the social and political fallout of a pandemic in ways that echo the global experience of coronavirus reaction over the last few years, specifically, the ideological polarization created by anti-pandemic measures.

Keywords: science fiction, pandemic literature, Mary Shelley, Emily St John Mandel

Résumé
Dans le prolongement de la pandémie de COVID-19, les lecteurs et les chercheurs se tournent vers les écrits antérieurs sur les pandémies. Parmi les récits les plus anciens sur les pandémies passées, *The Last Man* (1826) de Mary Shelley se distingue par le fait qu'il a été écrit par une femme et par son mode futuriste et dystopique. Parmi les récits contemporains, *Station Eleven* (2014) de l'écrivaine canadienne Emily St John Mandel, offre un écho inquiétant à l'Europe de Shelley dans la région dévastée des Grands Lacs au cours d'une pandémie du XXIe siècle. Cet article examine les coïncidences entre les deux récits, tout en se concentrant sur leurs prédictions parallèles concernant les retombées sociales et politiques d'une pandémie qui font écho à l'expérience mondiale de la réaction au coronavirus au cours des dernières années, en particulier la polarisation idéologique créée par les mesures antipandémiques.

Mots-clés : science-fiction, littérature pandémique, Mary Shelley, Emily St John Mandel

This research was conducted within the ARIS project "Pandemic Literature in the USA and Slovenia" (BI-US/22-24-177).

Introduction: Writing the plague

Living through a pandemic has always led some survivors to record their experiences, whether with the disease itself or with the social fallout from the high death rate. An early such account is that of Michael Platiensis, who records the arrival of the plague on the island of Sicily in 1347, while the classic account in English is Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). These European accounts, separated by 375 years, both influenced Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* (1826). Like her predecessors, Shelley describes the fearful rumours, the arrival of disease, the rising death rate, the quest for refuge and the final breaking of the wave of disease over a stricken population. Even in the late 21st century of the novel's setting, Shelley's characters "called to mind the plague of 1348, when it was calculated that a third of mankind had been destroyed" (Shelley 233). From Platiensis, Shelley takes the motif of the arrival of the plague-stricken ship in a European harbor, although her doomed ship comes from Philadelphia, not the east (Shelley 217). Shelley herself had not lived through one of the major outbreaks of *Yersinia pestis* in Europe. At the time of writing *The Last Man*, a cholera pandemic had arisen in India and was spreading rapidly. This did not reach Great Britain until long after the novel was published (not till 1832), but English awareness of the disease would have come through the British military, which was engaged in the affected regions (McGrew 61).

In contrast, the 21st-century setting of *Station Eleven* mandates a swifter strike from the pandemic virus, borne by the multiple networks of our interrelated global system. The novel's opening shows the virus striking a theatre in Toronto, where *King Lear* is being performed. The main actor, Arthur Leander, collapses and dies in Act 4, with Mandel offering a grim forewarning in the lines describing how the theatre emptied that fatal night: "Of all of them at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later on the road out of the city" (Mandel 15). Mandel's projection of the origin and spread of a viral pandemic in a globalized world builds on then-recent events, such as the SARS epidemic of 2002–2003 (which struck particularly hard in hospitals in suburban Toronto)[1] and accounts of the wartime Spanish influenza outbreak and the spread of the West African Ebola virus.[2] However, the emphasis lies on the random human interconnections of characters connected to Arthur, the actor playing King Lear, who dies on page 5. At the centre of a global network of family, friends and cultural inheritance, Arthur functions as the notional Patient Zero despite his cause of death being a cardiac arrest. This character

1) "Outside Asia, Canada was the country hardest hit by SARS" (Ries 2006).

2) See Esyllt W. Jones, *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death and Struggle in Winnipeg*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007; and Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone: The Terrifying True Story* (1994), which deals with the Ebola virus.

maintains a framing presence in the narrative because he is the conduit through whom the *Dr. Eleven* comic books pass from one generation to another (p. 213). The utopian imagery of the *Dr. Eleven* comic frames Mandel's book much in the way that the Sibylline prophecy frames Shelley's *The Last Man*, making each work into a form of self-reflexive science fiction.

Neither Shelley's novel nor Mandel's *Station Eleven* offers a documentary record of a pandemic; instead, each makes a speculative projection of how a pandemic could alter the social and political norms of its particular technological and cultural era. Both works, I will argue, anatomize one feature of pandemic politics that will be familiar to us from the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–22: the political weaponization of denial.

The authors and their work

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was the daughter of the rationalist philosopher William Godwin, an early supporter of atheistic individualism, and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Fulfilling her intellectually and socially rebellious destiny, Mary would escape to Italy with the still married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Out of the chaotic perambulations of this couple and their friends came her novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), considered by some to be the first science-fiction novel in English (Aldiss 29 and *passim*; Holmes 490; van der Laan 298; Sterrenburg 347). Following her husband's tragic death, Mary Shelley kept writing: a journal, letters, a travel memoir and five long novels. Among the latter group is *The Last Man*, in which Shelley works through the romantic entanglements of her youth, while projecting a political experiment into the final decades of the 21st century.

The Last Man has been read as a roman à clef, where Percy Shelley, Lord Byron and Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont are ill-concealed in the guise of the fictional characters: Adrian, Lord Raymond and Perdita, respectively (Peck 198; Ruppert 149; Murphy n.d.). Sufficient has been written about this aspect of the novel (Paley, xvi-xix; Peck 1923, 202–214; Sterrenburg 327–328; Lokke, 117), and I will not explore it further.

Born in British Columbia, Emily St John Mandel is the author of five novels besides *Station Eleven*: *Last Night in Montreal* (2009); *The Singer's Gun* (2010); *The Lola Quartet* (2012); *The Glass Hotel* (2020*);* and *Sea of Tranquility* (2022). The latter two are connected to *Station Eleven*, which was also made into a television mini-series, with major changes to plot and characters (2021–2022). Mandel is not alone among Canadian writers in having written pandemic fiction. Saleema Nawaz, for example,

penned *Songs for the End of the World* in 2020, and several non-fiction works have explored previous outbreaks, such as Mark Osborne Humphries's *The Last Plague: Spanish Influenza and the Politics of Public Health in Canada* (2013).[3]

Being of its time, Mandel's 2014 novel is much shorter than Shelley's, and the flu virus enters its pages immediately (on page 17). By Chapter 6, the novel indulges in a devastating elegy for what has been lost in the pandemic:

> No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities. (Mandel 31)

The incantatory lament for what is no more occupies an entire chapter and is prefaced by the frightening admission that it is "AN INCOMPLETE LIST" (Mandel 31). These listed items constitute a tour of Canada's first-world comforts, of the idealized image of success in urban Toronto: the brief summer enjoyed to the full in pools and on playing fields, the defeat of winter in the tunnel retreats of the city's downtown.

In this novel, the pre– and post-apocalypse situations are clearly demarcated, unlike in Shelley's Europe, where there is a lengthy exploration of political decline, followed by a gradual slide into anarchy after the plague arrives in England.

Plots in parallel

Since *The Last Man* is long and, unlike *Frankenstein*, not canonical, I will offer a brief sketch of its plot. A frame story relates the finding of scattered fragments of an ancient prophetic story, inscribed on scattered leaves in the Sibyl's cave (Lokke 132). The external narrator of this frame reassembles the oracular fragments from the past to reveal the first-person tale of the last man on earth, Lionel Verney, who forms part of a group of men and women who take on leadership positions in the new republic (the British monarchy ended through abdication in 2073) (Shelley 20). Lord Raymond attempts to rule the country until he leaves to fight in the Greek-Turkish wars, where he is wounded and dies. Subsequently, the arrival of the plague on the shores of England destroys centralized governance, even the enlightened regime of Adrian, Earl of Windsor. City and country are in turn devastated, family members die and a small party including Verney, his niece Clara, and Adrian flee to continental Europe in search of a warmer climate. After a pause in Paris, where a plague-denial cult has taken over, the much-depleted group treks on to Italy. Verney, Adrian and

3) See Don Sparling's 2021 article for a review of pandemic literature in a Canadian context.

Clara are the last three survivors until the latter two drown off the coast of Italy, and Verney becomes the titular Last Man, who proceeds alone to Rome and thence by boat, perhaps to India. Although the reader forgets part-way through that Verney's story is a prophecy by the Cumaean Sibyl, this is important for the interpretation of the work, whose events are thus a prophecy from a distant classical past, rediscovered in the early 19th-century and foretelling the end of the 21st century, bridging millennia, in fact. Shelley, as Deirdre Lynch asserts, is running the tape of history backwards (Lynch 139) or leaving a fictional message in a bottle (Morton 264).

The plot of *Station Eleven* also focuses on a small survivor group, after having identified the vastly distributed network of connections swirling around the dead figure of the actor Arthur Leander, who has had three wives and has many theatrical connections. It is one of Arthur's ex-wives, Miranda, who wrote and illustrated the utopian space comic *Dr. Eleven* that gives its name to the novel and provides a frame for interpreting the action. Like *The Last Man*, the contemporary novel also involves a trek by survivors across a vast territory, from Toronto down and around the Great Lakes region. The symbolic hub for survivors becomes a deserted airport concourse, a fitting 21st century equivalent to Rome in Shelley's 19th century. Both locales embody a salient value of their civilization – rooted historical culture as opposed to mobility. Kirsten, a child actor from the staging of *King Lear* in Chapter 1, survives the pandemic and joins an itinerant entertainment troupe, who circle the region putting on performances from the pre-pandemic era. Kirsten owns the comics, while remaining ignorant of their provenance or meaning. The plot jumps from one focal character to another and back and forth in time, to fill in the back stories of the victims and the survivors. As the narrative tacks between post-apocalyptic chapters and flashback chapters, it explores the contingent meetings of the characters that will ultimately connect Miranda to Arthur, to his friend Clark, to Jeevan, and to Kirsten, the final carrier of the revelatory prophecy in the *Dr. Eleven* comics.

By the end of Mandel's novel, one of the *Dr. Eleven* comics achieves relative immortality by being included in the fragile, post-apocalyptic Museum of Civilization that has been established in Concourse A of the re-purposed airport (Mandel 331), thus becoming another vessel to carry a "message in a bottle" into the future, akin to the Sibylline prophecy in *The Last Man*.

Issues in plague and pandemic

As has already become clear, despite the nearly 200 years between them, *The Last Man* and *Station Eleven* share several motifs, some dependent on their work's exploration of societal values and others stemming directly from the account of the disease. In this

section, I focus on the second group, the issues framing the discourse about disease in these two disparate centuries. Some of these issues are common to both novels, but some overlap only with the 21st-century COVID-19 pandemic.

Origin theories and isolationism

Shelley's plague outbreak has an eastern origin: "This enemy of the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile" (Shelley 175). The disease first afflicts Constantinople, where the Turkish war is raging and Lord Raymond is bound, then Athens (Shelley 223), France and Italy (Shelley 235). Once the disease has crossed the Channel, the description of a deserted London recalls our own recent experience of lockdown: "… since the commencement of the visitation, London appeared sufficiently changed. There were no carriages, and grass had spring high in the streets; the houses had a desolate look; most of the shutters were closed; and there was a ghast and frightened stare in the persons I met, very different from the usual business-like demeanour of the Londoners" (Shelley 250). Within months, desertion has given way to mass death, or as Shelley metaphorically expresses it, "the banqueting hall of death was spread only in London" (281).

In *The Last Man*, the plague moves across Europe (not as swiftly as either the recent coronavirus, or the *Station Eleven* outbreak, since travel is more leisurely in Shelley's imagined decade of the 2090s), and various theories of its cause are advanced. Most people blame "effluvia" (188) or "pestilential air" (192), relying on what Wills calls "the now-outdated miasma theory of disease", and imagine that a cold winter will help to dissipate it (Shelley 195). "It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased" (Shelley 231). This causal uncertainty leads to hesitation and over-confidence about the protective effect of geographical separation: "These were questions of prudence; there was no immediate necessity for an earnest caution"; being an island, it was felt, "England was still secure" (231). Only after the plague has arrived in London do the inhabitants see the futility of their myth of isolation:

> [W]e fancied that the little channel between our island and the rest of the earth was to preserve us alive among the dead. It were no mighty leap methinks from Calais to Dover… the sea was to raise a wall of adamant – without, disease, and misery – within, a shelter from evil, a nook of the garden of paradise – a particle of celestial soil, which no evil could invade – truly we were wise in our generation, to imagine all these things! (Shelley 248)

Even the narrator Verney succumbs at one point to the illusion that he can save his family by seeking "uncontaminated seclusion" (Shelley 243).

Similarly, the inhabitants of Toronto in the opening chapters of *Station Eleven* initially seek isolation as the best form of protection. Jeevan, an early focus of reader sympathy in the novel, holes up in a downtown tower block, cocooning with his invalid brother and several trolley-loads of groceries. "We can wait this out for quite a while" he muses optimistically (Mandel 179). "Quite a while" turns out to mean 58 days, after which the brother quietly commits suicide and Jeevan leaves on foot (189–190), navigating south through a wasteland riddled with gunshots. In contrast to *The Last Man*, there has been no steady advance of a disease front; with a single planeload of passengers from Moscow, the "Georgia Flu" arrives in North America (Mandel 17). The "east" here is more a political than a geographical point of origin, and the spread is fractal rather than linear. Seclusion and isolation provide limited protection; eventually, everyone begins to move, looking for a safer place elsewhere.

Mobility, uprootedness, is thus one of the motifs shared by *The Last Man* and *Station Eleven*, although Mandel's characters are moving south, not east (193). Plague and pandemic alike destroy the notion of home or national belonging, although both Shelley and Mandel envisage that some family bonds remain intact despite multiple deaths. In both novels, however, the refuge provided to newly constituted 'families' by forward motion proves elusive and temporary. Only in pockets has any order survived from the time before the North American disease apocalypse, while in *The Last Man*, survival is archaeological rather than social or human.

Scepticism and denial

In Shelley's vision of a plague-threatened England, some leaders are sceptical of the danger and ridicule any attempt to plan for the arrival of the contagion in Britain (Shelley 221). The plague-denial and downplaying depicted in *The Last Man* are described by Olivia Murphy as similar to Britain's real historical actions, "ventriloquizing the complacent response from England to early signs of disease in its colonies" (Murphy). As in the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders initially worry more about the impact on trade and the economy in general than about losing their population. There is a theory that "in a year or two pestilence would cease" (Shelley 237). However, it soon becomes apparent that "the epidemic was gifted with a virulence before unfelt" (Shelley 223) and that an escape to the country is not a permanent solution (223). The year 2094 proves to be the *annus horribilis* for England (Shelley 239). Given the uncertainty about origin, the privileging of commerce over life, and the deluded denialism of a few leaders, Shelley has anticipated our 21st-century experience of the pandemic. What

differs with the novel's plague is its fatality rate – almost 100%; unusually, Verney does survive his infection (Shelley 342–343); moreover, Shelley's futuristic society has not advanced medically to the point of vaccines, so there is no treatment, either preventive or curative.

Such scepticism hardly has time to develop in Mandel's urban scenario; the time between rumour and arrival of the virus is minimal. Because of the rapidity and ubiquity of the strike, there is no sense of a medical or even political response to the pandemic. The mortality rate exceeds that of other similar pandemics: "If you got sick," says one character, "you were gone in forty-eight hours" (192). Unlike the recent response to COVID-19, there is no time in this novel for scientific debate, experimental treatment or vaccine development. Accordingly, scepticism and denial have no opportunity to develop. The staff at Miranda's Malaysian hotel, relatively distant from the viral epicenter, exhibit early symptoms of doubt, denial, distancing, avoidance and quiet panic in the short interval before the virus definitively arrives on international flights from Russia and Georgia (217–219). Doubt and denial appear only in relation to the technology-borne nature of 21st-century news. Those who have turned off their phones, televisions or laptops are late to hear the news: "Just turn on the news, Laura," Jeevan begs his girlfriend. But she replies "You know I don't like to watch the news before bed" (24). A single character, the Toronto supermarket worker, is granted a short minute to be sceptical; her response to Jeevan's warning about the coming disaster is to cite the previous SARS epidemic: "That?" She gestured towards the television. "It'll be like SARS … They made such a big deal about it, then it blew over so fast" (25). In neither case does the minor denial of these two characters amount to a delay that could affect their chances of survival, and soon even the news becomes historical:

> [T]he local news became more and more local, stations dropping away one by one … and then one night Jeevan opened his eyes at two a.m. and the newsroom was empty. Everyone had left. He stared at the empty room on the screen for a long time… A day later, someone finally switched off the camera on the empty newsroom, or the camera died on its own. The day after that, the Internet blinked out. (Mandel 177)

The scepticism and denial in Shelley's novel more closely resemble the 21st-century experience with the novel coronavirus, mostly because of the temporal duration and spread of the catastrophe. These two elements make but a truncated appearance in *Station Eleven*, because Mandel adopted and took to the extreme the SARS-like instantaneous model of global transmission, which was salient in her Canadian experience.

Racist conjecture

In Shelley's futuristic England, as with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, there are indications of ethnocentrism, "racist assumptions" (Murphy), and even outright racism in the attribution of the plague's origin and spread. "It [the plague] is of old a native of the East, sister of the tornado, the earthquake, and the simoon. Child of the sun, and nursling of the tropics, it would expire in these climes. It drinks the dark blood of the inhabitant of the south, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt" (Shelley 233). Even welcoming travellers from the East is initially thought to be safe for Europe: "If perchance some stricken Asiatic come among us, plague dies with him, uncommunicated and innoxious" (Shelley 233). This imperialist ideology proves wrong as the plague enters Europe. Verney's own experience disproves this concept of Celtic imperviousness: he eventually catches the infection from a "negro half clad" (336), who collapses, dying against him as Verney is returning to his family. By the time England has ceased to be a place of refuge from the plague and has become instead a place fled by pandemic refugees, it is clear that "this sense of racial superiority and immunity is unfounded" (Murphy).

Overall, the impression in the novel is of an advanced western-European civilization unfairly wiped out by a contagion brought in from places far to the east in an atmosphere reminiscent of the conspiracy theories and ethnic name-calling and bullying that accompanied the recent pandemic.[4] Shelley's plague originated with the Other and has resulted in the destruction of whatever bulwark of values had been erected against the Other.

In contrast, Mandel's *Station Eleven* is almost devoid of such racist assumptions. Characters' ethnic origins or religions are barely mentioned, and there is no discourse of blame aimed at other races, regions or religions in terms of disease. The rapid onset of the outbreak rules out flight bans, quarantine regimes or other attempts to displace responsibility for the disease on to any specific group. By the present time of the novel ("Year Twenty" (48)), any prejudice has become merely insider/outsider. Small communities prefer to remain closed to outsiders, and "civilization … was an archipelago of small towns" (48). The Travelling Symphony constitutes a small exception; apparently, they have been welcomed in most places. Curiously, the one place exhibiting any sense of human division along "us/them" lines is in the *Dr. Eleven* comic that Kirsten has inherited from Miranda, through Arthur. On the fictional space station where Dr. Eleven has taken refuge, a "schism" has appeared (83) between the remainers and the returners. The difference between them is spatial, with the would-be returners to Earth occupying the Undersea and the Doctor's loyal

4) See Farhart and Chen for a discussion of racist assumptions, in-group identity and how these feed out-group hostility and conspiracy theories.

followers living on the surface islands of the planet-like space station (83). This division is reminiscent of another science fiction novel, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), where the planet in one era is divided between the above-ground Eloi and the subterranean Morlocks. Although evidence from the comic's pages is scant, there is some indication of the rift's involving blame, lack of communication and concomitant prejudice (Mandel 83).

Leadership failure

Both Shelley and Mandel consider the aftermath of pandemic in terms of power vacuums at the top of the social order. This topic is more salient in the earlier novel because there still *is* a social order for much of *The Last Man*, and the question of who leads occupies the philosophical centre of the early parts of Shelley's novel.

If *The Last Man* has a villain other than disease, it is Ryland, the nominal Protector of England, who must abandon his oligarchical principles and reveal his incompetence once the plague threatens. "He was incapable of meeting these evils by any comprehensive system; he had resorted to expedient after expedient, and could never be induced to put a remedy in force, till it came too late to be of use" (131). Ryland gives in to despair and refuses the burden of leadership, which then falls on Adrian, the scion of the former royal family and the Percy Shelley-figure in the novel. Ryland had talked the politician's talk, but in times of crisis he retreats to a selfish and despairing individualism. This contrasts with Adrian's insistence that community offers the only solace in extreme conditions. Ryland, we later learn, dies alone in the solitary spot to which he had retreated for an illusory safety, surrounded by hoarded food (Shelley 319). The plague thus exposes the failings of the conservative, aristocratic, oligarchic view of power and temporarily validates Adrian's more socialist, communitarian, egalitarian ideal – even though Adrian, ironically, is the real aristocrat.

In Mandel's novel, the issue of political leadership never rises to importance, mainly because, as Chapter 6 intones, there are "No more countries, all borders unmanned" (31). Even in the ranks below national leadership, there is a vacuum: "No more fire departments, no more police" (31). The survivors holed up in the airport concourse soon discover that calling 911 is futile (242), and that the National Guard will not be arriving anytime soon (244). Informal leaders surface and retreat at the airport and in the Travelling Symphony, but no one claims supremacy. The one exception is the figure of the prophet, who rises to power over his group of believers and will be dealt with in the next section.

Shelley's plague of 2094, then, resembles that of 2019–2022 in these four accompanying features: conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of the disease;

reliance on exclusion and national isolation; racist ideology and actions accompanying its onset; and failures of leadership both before and after the arrival of the epidemic. Mandel's novel, in contrast echoes only two of these four features, with notably less emphasis on the racist or national blame game. Despite being closer to the coronavirus years of 2019–2022, *Station Eleven* proves somewhat less predictive of the main social, political and discourse trends that accompanied the outbreak of COVID-19 in the real world.

The rest of the paper will concentrate on one further similarity between the two novels and the 2019–2022 pandemic, involving the appearance of a strong pandemic denial movement, led by a charismatic figure.

Politics and the cult

In 2021, a pastor from a Los Angeles megachurch confidently proclaimed, "There is no pandemic" (Henderson salon.com). This denialist mindset was surprisingly common in America and is well summed up by an article in *The Washington Post*: "Downplaying the threat and refusing to comply with social distancing measures require an indifference toward the common good, a certainty that the ends will justify the means and a brash confidence that God will be on one's own side" (DuMez 2020). A similar certainty emerges as a pandemic outcome in *The Last Man*: After 150 pages analysing governance issues in the futuristic England (monarchists versus republicans), Shelley complicates the challenges of leadership by having the English remnant abandon England for the continent. There she introduces a figure that one critic calls the "impostor prophet" (Peck n. p.), who heads a faction of the English refugees in Paris (Shelley 380–381). The reader's insight into the religious group is facilitated by their recruitment of Juliet, a sympathetic female character who occupies one of the novel's many sub-narratives. Widowed, alone and a single mother, Juliet epitomizes the vulnerable person who often falls into the clutches of a cult-like belief system; even in our day, these are the people who are "panic struck, and tamed by sorrow" (Shelley 387). This prophet exploits vulnerability by "desir[ing] to rule over these last stragglers from the fold of death" (386). The hero Verney tries to rescue Juliet, and the reader first anticipates another of the novel's rescued-maiden incidents. However, this time, reader expectations are dashed: Verney is captured by the cult and released only by Juliet herself, whom Verney describes as a "dupe" and "misguided victim" (392).

A similar prophet figure arises in the post-apocalyptic world of *Station Eleven*. Mandel's prophet was once a little boy named Tyler, who spent part of his childhood at the airport concourse where a civilizational remnant is holding out. The prophet

leads what some observers are quick to identify as "a doomsday cult" (62). Like Shelley's impostor prophet, Mandel's prophet figure offers a version of a recognizable belief system, with a demanding, wrathful divinity, needing to be appeased:

> "The flu," the prophet said, "the great cleansing that we suffered twenty years ago, that flu was our flood … For it has been revealed to me that the plague of twenty years ago was just the beginning, my angels, only an initial culling of the impure, that last year's pestilence was but further preview and there will be more cullings, far more cullings to come." (60–61)

In one of the novel's planned coincidences, the youthful prophet also possesses some of the *Dr. Eleven* comics that fascinate Kirsten. In his copy of the *New Testament*, there is a tattered page from the comic, showing Dr. Eleven kneeling over his dead friend. A speech bubble declares, "You were his second-in-command, Dr. Eleven. In his absence, you must lead" (304). Leadership, then, is an issue that the prophet acknowledges and a role he willingly assumes, leaving the airport and forming a nomadic band of believers. It is *absence*, the void at the top, that draws the prophet to a leadership position; this contrasts with *The Last Man*, where alternative leadership does exist.

Shelley's nameless prophet builds on established religion but extends its teaching to exact complete subordination to the group and its leader, who is "instigated by ambition" (386) and leads, not to keep his flock alive, but to prolong his own leadership. The Elite, as the group is called, thus resembles modern-day cults. It further recalls the recent pandemic experience by its insistence that they alone offer any hope in the face of the plague. The Elite exacts obedience in return for exclusive submission to a divine will (in reality, the will of the leader) (Shelley 385–386). Juliet becomes "a steadfast proselyte, and powerful auxiliary to the leader of the elect" (388). The group does not believe in any of the methods of avoidance practiced by Adrian's group, nor will they agree to seek a warmer climate as a method for potential survival. The Elite resemble the various anti-vaccine, anti-mask, "plandemic" and virus-hoax groups that sprang up in response to the recent pandemic, particularly in the United States. In contrast to the situation in 2020 and 2021, the opposing, normative group in Shelley's England and Paris lacks any solid prophylactic – no vaccines, no masks, no medicines, not even any coherent theory of social distancing – to offer its adherents. The line between the two sides is thus less clearly science versus anti-science, but hopeful communal action versus despairing individualist capitulation. In 2020, the polarization (Coren 2021) often came disguised as alternative science, among congregations in North America and parts of Europe "that have rejected vaccines and even social distancing and masks" (Coren). The anti-science factor in denialism became evident in the overlap between COVID denial and climate denial, as reported by the BBC in 2021 (Spring).

In the fictional world of Mandel's *Station Eleven*, pre-pandemic science and technology are far advanced; however, these are granted no opportunity to counter the virus or even to offer an explanation for it. The salient vacuum, therefore, is less one of leadership than of information. The prophet has a monopoly on causal explanation. Allied to powerful oratory (he is, of course, the son of Arthur the actor), this becomes the prophet's rallying point for the frightened survivors of apocalypse.

> "My people … Have you considered the perfection of the virus? … Consider, … those of you who remember the world before the Georgia Flu, consider the iterations of the illness that preceded it, those trifling outbreaks against which we were immunized as children, the flus of the past … The flus came every season, but these were weak, inefficient viruses that struck down only the very old, the very young, and the very sick. And then came a virus like an avenging angel, unsurvivable … I submit, my beloved people, that such a perfect agent of death could only be divine. For we have read of such a cleansing of the earth, have we not?" (Mandel 60)

Confident in the existence of "a greater plan" (290), the prophet's loyal band accept that they constitute the only light in the post-apocalyptic darkness (291).

Concealment of the truth

In the 19th-century novel, the impostor prophet maintains his flock by offering blind faith and false assertions – "false, yet vehemently asserted" (Shelley 385). In this way, Shelley anticipates the "fake news" component of the COVID-19 pandemic, as her narrator notes the power of these false assertions over "the ready credulity of the ignorant and fearful." (385). Then as now, disinformation and "hypocritical jargon" (390) "seldom failed in drawing over to their party some from among our numbers" (385–386). Verney diagnoses correctly that the prophet rules through fear (390) and maintains the level of fear by artifice, cruelty and fraud (392). Journalists from the *New York Times*, writing during the recent pandemic, diagnosed similar features in the COVID scepticism of evangelical movements in the United States: "some have been energized by what they see as a battle between faith and fear, and freedom and persecution" (Dias and Graham, 2021). Concealment props up the illusion of safety offered by the prophet's cult; thus, any deaths within the cult are denied: "Those who sickened were immediately and quietly withdrawn … while some plausible excuse was given for their absence" (Shelley 406). Nor do the prophet's actions pursue from sincere belief; according to Verney the false leader is "fully aware of the lie" (406), resembling the 21st-century politicians who, possessed of the latest scientific

data, nevertheless led their party/country in the opposite direction. I choose not to name individual national leaders, but the reader can consult the following journalistic articles: Sumit Garguly, "5 Leaders Who Mishandled the COVID-19 Pandemic" (*USNews*) and Geoffrey York et al., "The Notorious Nine: These world leaders responded to the coronavirus with denial, duplicity, and ineptitude" (*The Globe & Mail*). Garguly's top five made the list by early denial of the pandemic and active propagation of misinformation. A similar issue of power drives the cultist in *The Last Man*, where concealment of the unpalatable death toll functions to burnish the power of the false prophet, as some regions in the US did in 2021 to prop up the anti-science stance of their leaders.

Mandel has been called "clairvoyant" for her novel's apparent prediction of future events (Brockes 2022). However, there had been monographs in popular science that laid out the ominous facts. David Quammen's *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012), for instance, traces the mechanism by which deadly viruses can move from animal populations to humans. The western world had plenty of warning that viral catastrophe was possible.

What is prescient in Mandel's figure of the prophet is his insistence on possessing the *only* truth by which the survivors can live, the only source of order in the middle of chaos. "This is a place of order," he declares about his community. "People with chaos in their hearts cannot abide here" (61). Despite these oracular claims, Kirsten and the Travelling Symphony soon realize that the prophet offers only authoritarian, sexist and abusive leadership. The claims of the prophet, though on a smaller scale, do recall the cultist proclamations of some American church and political leaders during COVID-19 (Coren; Spring). Moreover, Mandel's prophet quotes and devoutly relies on scripture, which in his case includes the *Dr. Eleven* comics, from which he quotes just before he is shot (302–303). Literal interpretation of and over-reliance on a half-understood sacred text mark *Station Eleven* as well as the popular reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in the real world. In *Station Eleven*, the issue is not so much concealment of the truth as wholesale redefinition of what truth means. This certainly recalls the drift towards factual relativity and "fake news" that marked the period between 2016 and 2021 in American politics (Schlesinger; Henderson; DuMez).

Violence

Both speculative narratives anticipate one of the most negative effects of the rise of a populist leader at a time of crisis: proxy violence – of the kind evident, for instance, on 6 January 2021 at the Capitol building in Washington DC.

In *The Last Man*, here is how Verney tells the story of the impostor prophet's regime:

> I found everything in a state of tumult. An emissary of the leader of the elect, had been so worked up by his chief, and by his own fanatical creed, as to make an attempt on the life of the Protector and preserver of lost mankind [i.e., Adrian]. His hand was arrested while in the act of poignarding the Earl… the wretch … vaunted his design, and madly claimed the crown of martyrdom. (Shelley 404–405)

Verney explains this cult-like pattern of behaviour by evoking human nature under stress: "Men love a prop so well, that they will lean on a pointed poisoned spear; and such was he, the impostor, who, with fear of hell for his scourge, most ravenous wolf, played the driver to a credulous flock" (405). The metaphor of the wolf, previously applied to the plague itself (Shelley 268), has here been transferred to the cult leader who feeds on human fear and vulnerability. Ultimately, the impostor prophet escalates from inciting violence among his followers to being violent himself: he stabs his follower Juliet, who has finally denounced him to the group: then "the wretch with that energy of purpose, which had borne him thus far in his guilty career, saw his danger, and resolved to evade the worst forms of it – he rushed on one of the foremost, seized a pistol from his girdle, and his loud laugh of derision mingled with the report of the weapon with which he destroyed himself" (Shelley 407). This kind of crisis leader relies on intimidation and violence and yet accrues the most fanatical followers. To be clear, Shelley does not distinguish between two types of ordinary people – the followers of either Adrian or the false prophet. Instead, Shelley reveals that it is the *leader's* character and motivation that differentiate one group from the other. Habitually pacifist, Adrian leads by example, and though he has (by 21st-century standards) no greater hope of cure to offer, he at least guides with honesty, imagination and selflessness.

In *Station Eleven*, the violence emanates from the prophet and his followers, who are armed and engage in abduction and murder. As in *The Last Man*, members of the cult absorb violent rhetoric and transmute it into action, attacking the members of the Travelling Symphony because they have rescued one of the prophet's unwilling brides. Mandel does, however, engineer some poetic justice when late in the novel the prophet is shot by one of his own followers (303). Fittingly, the *Dr. Eleven* comic that partly inspired the prophet's grandiose, self-serving cult also becomes a treasured deposit in Clark's Museum of Civilization (331).

One episode of the comic (VOL: 1, No. 2 (330)) introduces a complexity into what might otherwise have been a starkly polarized epistemological situation. Dr. Eleven is visited by the ghost of his friend Captain Lonagan and asks, "What was it like for you, at the end?" Whereupon the Shakespearean reply comes back: "It was exactly like

waking up from a dream" (330). Since the Travelling Symphony have been performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and we recall Puck's parting words in the epilogue, we receive this as an unsubtle challenge to our mundane assumption that we already know the difference between dreaming and waking, dream and reality, and know, moreover, in which condition we exist. In the end, therefore, the framing effect of the *Dr. Eleven* comics serves to challenge assumptions about the truth-claim of the whole narrative.

A conclusion and a speculation

These parallels between *The Last Man*, *Station Eleven* and the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the US, struck me forcefully on re-reading Shelley's novel during lockdown. That disinformation and denial should emerge in a pandemic had previously seemed a purely 21st-century phenomenon, born of the World Wide Web with its dark niches where odd conspiracies could flourish. But here was Shelley in the 1820s clearly anticipating how fake news, forcefully enunciated, could be harnessed by an amoral leader to impose a false reality in which followers would live – or die. Only slightly less remarkable is Mandel's more recent vision of populist cultism occupying the epistemological vacuum in a complacent technological society. Whether modern science or traditional religious belief – both could be twisted (in Shelley as in Mandel) to uphold the power base of an unscrupulous leadership. Suddenly, the oracular frame in which Shelley had wrapped her tale became a mirror of the author's own Sibylline act of prophecy.

Let us talk about that framing story, which may be the least persuasive feature of *The Last Man* for the 21st-century reader: we are likely to balk at that fragmented, leaf-inscribed prophecy from ancient times. Nor do we believe in the frenzied trances of the Cumaean Sibyl. But before judging, let us pause to acknowledge two aspects of the frame. First, Shelley's daring connection of pagan antiquity to her own imaginatively-driven Romantic era – and her projection 250 years ahead. Though failing to foresee the industrial revolution, fossil-fuel exploitation, jet planes and a few other things, Shelley nevertheless correctly saw that what human beings will become is always conditioned by the lessons learned (or not learned) about our shared humanity. Therefore, it is vital to transmit those lessons across centuries and even millennia.

Similarly, Mandel's *Station Eleven* uses the intertext of the *Dr. Eleven* comics to intimate that earthly reality may be more a dream than our comic-book adventures on other planets or distant space stations. Where does reality lie in a shattered world that cultivates dramatic illusion from the past and dreams of refuge (however schismatic) on a distant world? One of the most significant elements in *Station Eleven*

is the vision of the Museum of Civilization, with its time capsule of remnants from the time before "the collapse" (57). "What was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty" (57), things worth preserving so that any future truth could be based on something tangible, something actual and true from the time before.

The second salient aspect of the Sibylline frame of *The Last Man* involves an analogy for the scattered leaves on which the prophecy was written, because this does exist in our own time – yes, even in a sceptical age, we have our own time-travelling narratives, our own time-capsules of lost artefacts like Mandel's forlorn Museum of Civilization. Consider the Future Library Project, an art installation by Katie Paterson (2014) that stores multiple texts (by writers such as Margaret Atwood and Karl Ove Knausgård) to be opened and published only in 2114 when a forest specially planted for the purposes of the project will have grown sufficiently to provide the wood pulp to make the paper on which these texts can then be printed – if, that is, human beings are still around and printing is still a thing. Paterson's unique art has deepened the time dimension of art; Shelley's *The Last Man* moves freely in this dimension, constructing a tale from the mythological past, to be assembled in her present (which is our past), and foretelling the distant future (our century) in which the tale is composed and written down, thus re-initiating the narrative cycle. Shelley's conception is of a Möbius loop of narrative floating in deep time. A similar epistemological loop encircles the text and intertext of *Station Eleven*, through which questions such as 'What is the comic?' and 'What is real?' lose their urgency, for both dissolve in the dramatic illusion. And, just as the Future Library is built on trust, Shelley's and Mandel's visions of leadership/governance are equally dependent on the mutual trust of mortal beings that wisdom can be transmitted through time in the "time capsule" of imaginative writing (Atwood 243).

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