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Eco-Poetics, Fragility, and Motion in P. B. Shelley's *The Sensitive Plant*

Abstract I: Nel contesto degli studi ecocritici, *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), il primo componimento pisano di Percy Bysshe Shelley, occupa uno spazio liminale tra immaginazione poetica e speculazione scientifico-filosofica. La *Mimosa pudica* è una curiosità botanica del tempo che il poeta fa propria come modello comportamentale umano. Dotata di sensorialità e vestita di moralità, la pianta incarna concezioni di singolarità e reattività vegetale. Attraverso la lente dell'ecologia profonda, l'articolo esamina come Shelley, quale pensatore protoecologico consapevole, trasformi l'oggetto del poema in un fulcro romantico di eco-sensibilità, alterità e autoidentificazione.

Abstract II: In the context of ecocritical studies, Shelley's first Pisan poem, *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), occupies a liminal space between poetic imagination and philosophical and scientific speculation. Grounded in sensoriality and endowed with moral significance, *Mimosa pudica* – a botanical curiosity and a sensation of its day that the poet seizes upon as a model for human behaviour – embodies conceptions of vegetal responsiveness and singularity. By examining the poem through the lens of deep ecology, this article investigates how Shelley, as a proto-ecological thinker, transforms the titular object into a Romantic locus of eco-sensitivity, alterity, and self-identification.

Keywords: Deep ecology, plant sensitivity, Romanticism, botany, P. B. Shelley.

A Sensitive Plant in a garden grew,
And the young winds fed it with silver dew,
And it opened its fan-like leaves to the light.
And closed them beneath the kisses of Night.
(P. B. Shelley, *The Sensitive Plant* I, 1-4)[1].

Eton, 1804. A young, eccentric Percy Bysshe Shelley enters the prestigious college and spends his junior years under the banner of chaos and nonconformity, taunted by bullies.

[1] All quotations from Shelley's poem, hereafter abbreviated as *SP*, refer to the text available at: https://kalliope.org/en/text/shelley2003060601 (consulted on 22/08/2026). Among the more extended discussions of *The Sensitive Plant* see: Bloom (1959); Wasserman (1971); Keach (1984); O'Neill (1997); O'Neill, Howe & Callaghan (2013); Weinberg & Webb (2015).

He refuses fagging[2] and withdraws from sporting and social life, finding some comfort in chemistry books, solitary study, and reading Pliny, William Godwin, Joseph Priestley, and Humphry Davy. His interests are Faustian: while his poetic vein lies dormant, he pursues ethical philosophy, amateur occult investigations, and experimental science, losing himself in the marvels of electricity and galvanism. He toys with burning glasses, charged Leyden jars, gases, and chemical mixtures, earning the nickname "Mad Shelley"[3]. At Oxford, Thomas Jefferson Hogg portrays him as "the chemist in his laboratory, the alchemist in his study, the wizard in his cave" (1858: 65).

The attitude of this young Prometheus – this fire-raiser – towards science and natural history, though, "was never to be 'scientific' in the empirical sense, but speculative and imaginative" (Holmes 1974: 16). Shelley was naturally much more inclined towards meta- and paraphysical inquiry than the hard sciences, as evidenced in major visionary poems such as *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* (1817), *Epipsychidion* (1821), and *The Witch of Atlas* (1824), all informed by philosophical abstraction and all articulating mystical conceptions of consciousness, cosmology, and incorporeality. Even his interest in botany was never primarily practical, though he was curious about Mediterranean flora, as evidenced in his letters from the Continent and in his poetic imagery. *The Sensitive Plant* (1820) is more imagistic than scientific in orientation[4], as it translates human and poetic sensibility into sensitivity and extends human experience into the vegetable world. It is Shelley's first Pisan poem and comprises no fewer than three hundred and eleven lines. The formal organisation of the text "is the same as *The Love of the Plants*, divided like Erasmus Darwin's poems into four parts, with the first describing beautiful 'good' plants and the third, poisonous plants" (Gallant 1989: 132).

Shelley thus transposes the complex spectrum of human disposition into the plant kingdom, with the garden becoming a symbolic moral landscape where innocence, desire, beauty, and corruption take root. Amid this *varietas*, the Sensitive Plant grows apart from the redolent blossoms that perfume the air. It stands as an emotionally receptive and solitary figure, embodying modesty, vulnerability, and fragility. Drawing principally on deep ecology, this article reflects on the boundaries between human and more-than-human sensibilities and on how the poem's pervasive imagery of vegetal motion informs these relations. The mimosa's physiological activity, responsiveness, and cycles become manifestations of universal and material mutability, giving poetic form to Shelley's philosophical inclination while reflecting his engagement with contemporary plant science. In this respect, the poem contributes to an ecocritical understanding of vegetal agency, poetic self-identification, and interspecies relationality by reconfiguring motion as emotion, revealing the mimosa not merely as an anthropomorphic symbol but as an agent within an interconnected biosphere. As the principal theoretical framework, deep ecology enables a close reading of Shelley's poem that brings its philosophical and empirical dimensions into dialogue, while foregrounding the seemingly humble and simple living being as worthy of literary, cultural, and critical consideration.

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[2] In British boarding school tradition, "fags" would typically run errands for senior pupils.

[3] He would go thereafter by Shelley "the Atheist" following his expulsion from Oxford and the circulation of the anonymously published pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), co-authored with Hogg.

[4] Elisa Cozzi sheds light on William Tighe's influence on Shelley's intellectual life and agricultural knowledge during the Pisan period, as well as on his links to the Lunar Society of Birmingham. See Cozzi (2024).

In botanical taxonomy, *Mimosa pudica*, a member of the legume family *Fabaceae*, is also known as the "touch-me-not", "shame plant", "humble plant", and "shy mimosa". When stimulated by touch or thermal variation, it immediately folds its leaflets inward and lets its footstalks droop, thereby taking on the appearance of a delicate, bashful maiden. A freak of the vegetable world, it fascinated Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Aristotle, all of whom wondered whether its tropism and thigmonasty (that is, its response to touch) might constitute a physical manifestation of volition. The science behind its shrinking was also discussed in Enlightenment literature, where the mimosa became a curious borderline case between the animal and plant kingdoms. With advances in nineteenth-century plant physiology, the Sensitive Plant and the Venus Flytrap became the subjects of case studies that delineated plant sensitivity or irritability in mechanistic terms, challenging – though never fully refuting – longstanding analogies to animal nervous systems.

Within three years of the appearance of Shelley's poem in *Prometheus Unbound and Other Poems*, Bess Kent – associated with the Cockney milieu and Leigh Hunt's sister-in-law – published *Flora Domestica, Or, The Portable Flower-Garden* (1823). Although she did not explicitly acknowledge Shelley in the entry on "mimosa", she described the late, lone poet in the preface as a man with a "strong and powerful intellect" whose manners were "gentle as a summer evening" and who would stroll in the fields with "his hands filled with bunches of wild-flowers plucked from the edges as he passed, and his eyes […] beaming with the benevolence of his heart" (Kent 2017: xix). Her description of the shy mimosa conforms to contemporary anthropomorphisms, its nervous sensibility resembling that of "human beings [who] are more sensitive in proportion to the tenderness of their nursing" (2017: 282).

While poetic treatments of the mimosa outside Shelley are rare[5], the nurturing presence of the Lady tending the paradisial garden is steeped in classical and medieval imagery. The archetype of Proserpine gathering flowers on the plain of Enna – to which Shelley dedicated a separate fragment, later published by his wife – recurs powerfully. The abduction in the Ovidian myth coincides with the Lady's untimely death in Shelley's poem – the epitome of the breakdown of human authority – and both calamities are tied to the cyclical alternation of the seasons, with the cold and harsh ones corresponding to the absence of the women gardeners. The episode of Matilda gathering flowers in Dante's *Purgatorio* – which Shelley translated in part (Alighieri 2007: *Purgatorio* XXVIII, 1-51) – is a further source of inspiration. Together, these archetypes give body to a shy, graceful, muse-like figure whom Shelley defines as a "power", an "Eve", a "ruling Grace", and a goddess of a sublunar heaven of her own, an image he likely drew from John Donne's metaphysical poetry[6]. Like the

[5] The seventeenth-century English pastoral poet William Browne (1590-1645) alludes to the sensitive plant in a few verses: "Look how the feeling-plant […] / Shrinks up his dainty leaves if any sand / You throw thereon, or touch it with your hand" (1894: 309). Matthew Prior (1664-1721) instead mentions the scientific uncertainty around the phenomenon: "Whence does it happen that the plant, which well / We name the 'sensitive,' should move and feel? / Whence know her leaves to answer her command, / And with quick horror fly the neighbouring hand?" (1860: 96).

[6] See *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* (c. 1611), where Donne's "dull sublunary lovers" cannot cope with physical distance.

companionless mimosa, the Lady has "no companion of mortal race" (*SP* II, 127). Her death particularly affects the plant, which Shelley imbues with human characteristics:

> The Sensitive Plant, like one forbid,
> Wept, and the tears within each lid
> Of its folded leaves, which together grew,
> Were changed to a blight of frozen glue.
>
> For the leaves soon fell, and the branches soon
> By the heavy axe of the blast[7] were hewn;
> The sap shrank to the root through every pore
> As blood to a heart that will beat no more (*SP* III, 252-259).

The sudden death of the attendant Lady[8] is announced with stark abruptness in the closing line of Part II: "And ere the first leaf looked brown – she died!" (*SP* II, 174). This narrative compression recalls the Mariner's equally terse confession – "With my cross-bow / I shot the ALBATROSS" (Coleridge 2017: I, 81-82). The Lady's death precipitates the decay of the virtuous flowers, allowing weeds and parasitic growths to overrun the garden's ecosystem. The compassionate nature of the species emerges first through its singular sensorial receptivity, and subsequently through poetic characterisation. The philosophical bent of the concluding section underscores the poet's gnoseological uncertainty, as he refrains from speculating whether, and to what extent, a natural automaton such as the Sensitive Plant possesses any awareness of its surroundings. The closing verses blur the distinctly Shelleyan principle of universal mutability with motion, the composition's threading conceit. The mimosa becomes a visible embodiment and sensory manifestation of change in both matter and being. As a perceptive and receptive body at once, its mechanical movements signal, or rather posit, two levels of consciousness: one organic and the other cognitive. "It is said" – writes Shelley in his *Speculations on Metaphysics* – "that mind produces motion; and it might as well have been said, that motion produces mind"[9].

The specimen's sensibility is also indicative of its sensitivity, that is to say, its ability to detect alterations in its environment through chemical signals. Its leaf-folding is at once the product of physiological and emotional sentience. Like Darwin's, Shelley's portrayal of the mimosa becomes increasingly anatomical. The plant is endowed with a lymphatic and circulatory system, which accommodates the poet's tendency to humanise natural processes.

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[7] A Coleridgean image. Indeed, the Gothic sublime of Shelley's poem is deeply indebted to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, particularly with regard to its decaying, cataclysmic imagery.

[8] In a letter to Leigh Hunt written at Lerici on 19 June 1822, Shelley identified Margaret King, Countess of Mount Cashell, known in Italy as Mrs Mason, as the antitype of the unnamed Lady. A central figure within the Pisan circle, the Irish expatriate had been a protégée of Mary Wollstonecraft. Shelley's cousin Thomas Medwin later reported that the poem "was laid in her Garden, as unpoetical a place as could be well imagined – but a true poet can turn everything into beauty" (1913: 265).

[9] The Literature Network: https://www.online-literature.com/shelley_percy/defence-of-poetry/5/ (consulted on 22/08/2026).

Similarly, agarics and fungi are pale and fleshy, recalling a putrefying body. Overall, Shelley's vocabulary is replete with scientific terminology, which he most probably drew from Darwin and from Richard and George Knight's *Catalogue of Chemical Apparatus* (Worthen 2019: 25). Capitalising on contemporary poetic trends of pathetic fallacy and feminisation, Darwin describes the Sensitive Plant as a shy maiden recoiling from human touch:

> Weak with nice sense, the chaste MIMOSA stands,
> From each rude touch withdraws her timid hands;
> Oft as light clouds o'er-pass the summer-glade,
> Alarm'd she trembles at moving shade;
> And feels, alive through all her tender form,
> The whisper'd murmurs of the gathering storm (2021: 30, 301-306).

If kinetic language is to be expected in scientific and poetic descriptions of the mimosa, Shelley's own is a signature trait. The nature he poetises is always in transit; it is a flux that denotes physical and philosophical movements. The Sensitive Plant trembles and pants. Earth lilies shake their tremulous bells, while water lilies lie tremulously; vapours quiver, meteors flit, and the nursing Lady – whose breath is likewise "tremulous" – treads delicately upon the turf. In this context, the Sensitive Plant acquires a significance that exceeds its biological singularity: while retaining its exceptional status as a responsive and emotionally sensitive organism, it thrives and ultimately withers in a garden where everything else is in motion. The mimosa is therefore an emblem of an all-encompassing universality, a reading reinforced by Shelley's use of the neuter pronoun where the plant is otherwise gendered and serves as a figure of feminised sensibility[10].

Such universality is reflected in the general atmosphere of stagnation and vegetal marcescence pervading the third section. As weeds begin to grow, their leaves appear speckled like toads' backs, their knotted roots resembling water-snakes. The Coleridgean influence is, at this point, undeniable; though the Ancient Mariner ultimately blesses the water-snakes after admiring their "rich attire", "Blue, glossy green, and velvet black" (Coleridge 2017: IV, 278-279), here the image evokes a lurid, leprous vision that engages multiple human senses. Roots creep through the "monstrous undergrowth" (*SP* III, 233) with tiny movements, rivulets trickle, and stinking vapours stifle the still air. In *The Witch of Atlas*, Shelley resorts again to the oneiric vision of "naked boys bridling tame water-snakes, / Or charioteering ghastly alligators" (Shelley 2025b: 34), thus reconciling humans and queer nature. The theme of androgyny that Shelley hints at in this latter poem points to an ideal of Neoplatonic perfection; however, his choice to de-gender and de-eroticise the Sensitive Plant may have been driven by an attempt to classify it within a distinct order of existence, which is that of a natural, universal whole rather than that of anthropomorphised femininity. From a scien-

[10] Erasmus Darwin was not the only writer to turn the mimosa into a symbol of female demureness. In *Epitalamio Botanico. Gli Amori delle Piante* (1835), the anti-Austrian Giuseppe Barbieri compared the plant to a bashful maiden who recoils reluctantly from the perils of physical contact: "O verginella fra le piante umili, / Fior d'innocenza, che profano aborri / Contatto insidioso, e ne rifuggi, / E tremi […]" (64-67), cited in Favaro (2016: 94).

tific perspective, "The companionlessness of the Sensitive-plant is […] primarily a reference to a botanical fact, namely that the particular species of mimosa Shelley was describing is a hermaphroditic plant, it needs no other plant to reproduce" (Barcsák 2013: 37).

"For the Sensitive Plant has no bright flower; / Radiance and odour are not its dower" (*SP* I, 74-75). Its biological anomaly sets it apart from other specimens, from those bright, short-lived blooms that in mythological lore evoke transience and the fleeting side of human passions[11]: the pied windflower, the fair narcissus, the hyacinth[12], the violet, and the jessamine. Though these bloom and fade swiftly, "Like young lovers, [they are] / Wrapped and filled by their mutual atmosphere" (*SP* I, 68-69). The flowers of the garden – all smiling at the sky and lulled by their caretaker like infants – share a sense of kinship from which the feeling plant is excluded. Shrouded in melancholy and marked by fragility, it emerges once more as aesthetically and biologically deviant, enabling Shelley to thematise shame, reticence, and alienation as central concerns across both his literary works and correspondence[13].

Calling himself "Exotic" in a letter to his sister-in-law Claire Clairmont[14], Shelley wrote that he felt "unfortunately belonging to the order of mimosa, thriv[ing] ill in so large a society" and unable to "endure the company of many persons" and that "the society of one is either great pleasure or great pain" (1914: 924). In Pisa, Lord Byron, his lover Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, the Irish poet John Taaffe, Thomas Medwin, and Leigh Hunt – who would join the group in the summer of 1822 to launch the periodical *The Liberal* – figured as flowers united by a shared political vision, a cosmopolitan garden of British exiles. Still affected by the death of John Keats, much like the Sensitive Plant mourns the tending Lady, Shelley had no desire for sociability: "The Exotic as you please to call me droops in this frost – a frost both moral and physical – a solitude of the heart. These last days I have been unable to ride, the cold towards sunset is so excessive and my side reminding me that I am mortal" (924). The contrast between exoticism and a wintry atmosphere, framed as cultural and ecological displacement, is further developed in the flowery poem through references to Indian plants losing their foliage in autumn and to the basket of Indian woof carried by the Lady.

The same winter frost kills the mimosa, causing it to droop. If the "young winds" feed it "with silver dew" (*SP* I, 2) in the opening lines, their chains lash it by the end, so the fragile plant withdraws, bends, and freezes; beneath its roots, moles and dormice perish from want. Images of "thawing rain" and "freezing dew" (*SP* III, 276, 278) construct a paradox of thermal dynamics, a natural anomaly that parallels the "wondrous cold" spreading through Coleridge's *Rime*, further echoed in the reference to "the tenfold blasts of the Arctic zone" (*SP* III, 267). The poem's convergence of winter frost, displacement, and vegetal distress may evoke Shelley's experience of the hostile weather and social climate of Tuscany – briefly

[11] The image of meteors fading and traversing the sky, which recurs strikingly throughout Shelley's corpus, reinforces this idea.

[12] This floral triad also appears in *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821).

[13] For further insight, see Roberts (2020).

[14] Pisa, 11 December 1821. Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister and Lord Byron's lover, maintained a suspiciously intimate relationship with Shelley.

relieved by his encounter with the Florentine *contessina* Teresa "Emilia" Viviani – which caused distress in an atheist, radical ecologist, and unconventional lover who appeared exotic even within his own circle.

Overall, the mimosa's drooping remains first and foremost a botanical response, while parallels between Shelley and the mimosa are not to be reduced to a purely autobiographical reading; rather, they provide one context for the poem's metaphorical layers, particularly in light of the succession of tragedies that marked his short life. By the time of its composition, Shelley had already lost three children, the last two, Clara Everina and William, within the span of a single year. As Mary Shelley writes in her editorial note to Shelley's poems, "His heart, attuned to every kindly affection, was full of burning love for his offspring. No words can express the anguish he felt when his elder children were torn from him" (2025a: 990). The companionless plant, whose life is punctuated by loss and grief, "give[s] small fruit", "has no bright flower", and feels love "from the leaf to the root" (*SP* I, 70-74). Its stunted generative power and blighted blossoming may therefore recall the poet's own experience of bereavement, once more casting the mimosa as a vegetal embodiment of vulnerability and resilience without thereby reducing it to a mere reflection of the poet's experience. The poem envisions an unbroken, sympathetic bond between human and plant life, one in which mutuality is grounded in shared fragility rather than in simple anthropomorphic projection. The plant, which dreams and awakens with the light of a new day, carries out its vital processes, transforming light energy and releasing oxygen as pure love. Along the lines of contemporary observations on plant respiration, in fact, "the image of this plant respiring and providing love in the blissful sunlight coincides, in botanical terms, with the function of photosynthesis which plants perform to produce oxygen" (Kitani 2011: 201).

Drawing on Darwin's poetic natural history, Shelley merges scientific knowledge with Neoplatonism, expressing his fascination with invisible laws and unseen forces. The love the mimosa gives forth is an endless, aggregating energy that reconciles apparent divisions between *animalia* and *vegetalia* within a living (and dying) whole. This sense of interpenetration is reiterated through the shared atmosphere that holds the flowerets together as an indivisible, erotic Platonic unit, with the exception that the "exotic" plant is excluded from their rejoicing. It receives love from the ministering winds that blow upon it and, since "its deep heart is full" (*SP* I, 76), directs and proffers it outward. Its isolation transcends the divine law of sorority Shelley invokes in *Love's Philosophy* (1819), according to which "nothing in the world is single" and "no sister-flower would be forgiven / If it disdain'd its brother"[15].

Shelley's philosophical foundation and idealism are the key to reading the poem, with interspecies love and its semantic derivatives articulating an ontological and ecological continuum. "The Spirit of Love" (*SP* I, 6) invests anything, from the flowers in their "dear loveliness" (*SP* I, 20) to the Lady's "lovely mind" (*SP* II, 120); love operates simultaneously at individual and collective levels, binding the particular into a larger relational whole. Such a pantheistic effusion is cognate with Arne Næss's formulation of deep ecology and environmentalism understood in terms of an ultimate, encompassing Self:

[15] Poetry Foundation: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50262/loves-philosophy (consulted on 22/08/2026).

> Organisms and milieux are not two things […] Organisms presuppose milieux. Similarly, a person is a part of nature to the extent that he or she is a relational junction within the total field. The process of identification is a process in which the relations which define the junction expand to comprise more and more. The "self" grows toward the "Self" (1989: 56).

In a poem affirming the specimen's intrinsic dignity and advocating non-anthropocentric and biospheric egalitarianism, the Sensitive Plant exercises its own agency, shrinking, responding, and existing for itself. The Lady's airy footstep[16] "seem[s] to pity the grass it presse[s]" (*SP* II, 135). With the utmost delicacy, she treads upon the turf and gently relieves the flowers of the rainwater that weighs down their heads and revitalises those scorched by the sun. Having no desire to harm them, she removes insects, worms, and "*things*[17] of obscene and unlovely forms" (*SP* II, 156) from the garden, keeping them apart in a "basket of Indian woof" (*SP* II, 157) filled with grass and wildflowers to sustain them. The image parallels Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1995: 5.2. 237-256), where a countryman brings Cleopatra an asp concealed in a basket of figs; Cleopatra calls it the "pretty worm of Nilus" (243), while the countryman later describes it as an "odd worm" (256). It also recalls the "slimy *things*" crawling upon the putrid sea in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge 2017: II, 125-126), creatures that the Mariner later recognises as "happy living *things*" whose beauty "no tongue" can declare (IV, 282-283). This emphasis on living beings finds an ethical counterpart in *Prometheus Unbound*, when Prometheus declares, "I wish no living *thing* to suffer pain" (Shelley 1898: I, 304-305). Mary Shelley's creature, by contrast, begins as the "lifeless *thing*" lying at Victor's feet (2003: 58), occupying a liminal state between the animate and the inanimate. Synesthetic images sustain the poem's sensorial texture. The fragrance of the flowers is likened to "the voice and the instrument" (*SP* I, 16). Music is "felt like an odour within the sense" (*SP* I, 28), while the Sensitive Plant "fe[els] the sound of the funeral chant" (*SP* III, 180). Streams around waterlilies "glide and dance / With a motion of sweet sound and radiance" (*SP* I, 47-48), compressing our scientific understanding of the propagation of sound and light into a single poetic image. The ceaseless movement of leaves, streams, and clouds mirrors the Sensitive Plant's distinctive responsiveness on both physiological and poetic levels, where motion turns into emotion. The natural world is animated by continuous currents of air and water. Leaves quiver, plants decay, and worms tunnel through the soil, creating a choral vibration that echoes the subtle mechanical tremors the mimosa produces when it is startled. But the writing is also "evocative of interchange and alive to what it is doing, unravelling until it yields a sense of discovery, a movement enacted in stanza after stanza" (O'Neill 1996: 110). Overall, Shelley's interest extends beyond thigmonasty as a manifestation of vegetal vitality to include senescence and abscission, the natural shedding of foliage. These botanical processes are recast as profoundly emotional (and functional) Romantic images. As winter and frost take hold, the Sensitive Plant succumbs to seasonal change, standing apart like a stripped, leafless wreck.

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[16] By contrast, the "steps of the [coffin] bearers" are "heavy and slow" (*SP* III, 181).

[17] Emphasis added; further emphases follow.

Beyond his poetic reinterpretations, Shelley was fully aware of the importance of established science. In the conclusion, which Michael O'Neill defines as a metatext that "stands in a deftly ambivalent relationship to the rest of the poem" (1996: 107), summing it up yet holding itself apart from it, the poet appears to adopt a more sceptical stance. At this point, the poem's eco-poetics brings fragility and motion into a productive relationship, as both become means through which the poem envisions vegetal agency, even as Shelley preserves uncertainty about the nature of plant sentience. He cannot tell whether the Sensitive Plant truly perceives changes in its surroundings. To some extent, this unresolvedness reflects the limitations of contemporary debates over whether the mimosa's movements were mechanical or sentient. For instance, James Tupper's 1811 *Essay on the Probability of Sensation in Vegetables* supported the theory of plant sensitivity, whereas other botanists favoured explanations based on mechanical and chemical responses. Likewise, Shelley refrains from speaking in terms of absolute truth. "I dare not guess" (*SP* Conc., 296), he writes, suggesting that certainty remains elusive in a world where error and ignorance are commonplace, while love and mutability endure as the only constant forces.

The plant's sentience is itself a form of empirical discovery that, like man's "modest creed" (*SP* Conc., 300), makes it a receptacle of patterns and impressions and gives it the illusion of grasping meaning in a world of shadows. "I read books", writes Shelley to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, "and, though I am ignorant enough, they seem to teach me nothing" (1914: 831). Yet the poet had consistently advocated for the right to knowledge and the duty of intellectual participation in his seditious *Declaration of Rights* (1812); he maintained the point in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), in which poetry is presented as a vehicle of education that "awakens and enlarges the mind" and "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world"[18], as well as from the shadows and mockeries to which *The Sensitive Plant* plainly alludes.

The poem's animated vegetables, the spared parasites, and the "living grass" (*SP* I, 85) stand as affirmations of the inherent worth of all life forms by virtue of their participation in the chain of being, an ethical outlook that accords with Mary Shelley's description of the poet as "looking on all human beings as inheriting an equal right to possess the dearest privileges of our nature, the necessaries of life, when fairly earned by labour, and intellectual instruction" (Shelley 2025a: 988). Shelley, whose commitment to vegetarianism appears to have become less consistent after his move to Italy in 1818, had passionately articulated a defence of a plant-based regimen in *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, first published in 1813, holding that man is naturally frugivorous. The poem reaffirms his ethical views beyond human concerns and expresses a profound respect for non-human life, even in its humblest forms. Having no bright flower, nor radiance or odour, the Sensitive Plant seems to provide little benefit to humans. Its apparent uselessness, however, does not diminish its value within the hortus, nor does its singularity exclude it from the garden's larger community of life. In a poem ostensibly devoted to it, in fact, Shelley expresses no doubt that the flowers "felt the spirit that came / From [the lady's] glowing fingers" (*SP* II, 145-146), yet he cannot determine "Whether the Sensitive Plant […] / Now felt this change" (*SP* Conc., 288, 291).

[18] Poetry Foundation: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry (consulted on 22/08/2026).

The flowers are all sensitive in their way, though the mimosa stands apart in its humility, fragility, and self-awareness. Impressed by the beauty of a fragment of *Hyperion* that John Keats had recently published, Shelley reflected on his own poor reception and his status as a misunderstood human being in a letter to Peacock, probably written in Pisa on 8 November 1820: "I have great designs, and feeble hopes of ever accomplishing them"; he added that "the reception the public have given me might go far enough to damp any man's enthusiasm" (1914: 831).

The mimosa's slow, vulnerable movements contrast with the feverish activity of the contemporary publishing world. By 1819, Byron had published the first two cantos of *Don Juan* (Byron 1986), while Keats's final volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* was published in 1820 (Keats 1978). That same year, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts, with Other Poems* (including *The Sensitive Plant*) was published after Shelley had twice abandoned the project during a period of grief and mourning. In this qualified sense, the image of the plant recoiling and curling in on itself might be read as recalling the author's own sense of isolation among the more conspicuous "flowers" of the second generation.

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