

Frankenstein and the Subversion of the Masculine Voice

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IT STRIKES MANY READERS of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as curious if not paradoxical that the daughter of so renowned a feminist as Mary Wollstonecraft would write her first novel from the perspectives of three men — with only minimal attention to female characters. But some recent approaches to the novel have established that the stories of the men actually advance feminist themes, especially Victor's story, which details his efforts to usurp the role of women in giving birth and to create life by himself. Victor Frankenstein can create only a male figure, and a monstrous one at that. When he contemplates his nearly completed female figure, which he has agreed to construct only at the insistence of his Monster, he is repulsed by the potential reproductive and social independence of the patchwork woman, and he tears apart the female form. As we shall see, his behavior in the laboratory resembles his behavior as a story teller, revealing his fears of letting women speak. He opposes female generation of life and of text: he rends apart both the physical and the rhetorical "form" of female creativity. In fact, all three male narrators attempt to subvert the feminine voice, even in those brief moments when they tell women's stories. Their virtual exclusion of female characters and perspectives purposefully enacts in the novel's form the misogyny that dooms the male characters to failure and that particularly victimizes families, women, and children.¹ The three men may undermine the female voice, but Shelley subverts their subversion, revealing the social consequences of their misogyny and, by implication, the broader historical effects of the masculine literary tradition that they embody.

As each male narrator tells his story, each briefly digresses at some point to present the story of a woman. These three women's stories — which become progressively more autobiographical and feminist — comprise an inner triptych of women's tales in the novel that ironically mirror the stories of the three men. Briefly exploring the pursuits of these three men provides us with a context for examining the women's lives and the men's rhetorical behavior as they mediate between the reader and these stories.

The structure of *Frankenstein* has been compared to a series of concentric narrative circles in which three men who narrate their autobiographies push the women to the perimeter, relegating them to passively serving as an audience for male stories.² The primary narrator is Robert Walton, an arctic explorer who sends letters and then his journal to his sister, Mrs. Margaret Saville, who does not herself write any reply in the novel. Shelley presumes that the text addresses a female reader, and she places the fictive male author Walton between the reader and the autobiographies of the other two men whose stories are embedded within Walton's. Within the material Walton sends to Margaret is his account of meeting Victor Frankenstein, who tells him his life story, stressing his creation of and reactions to the unnamed Monster. Within Frankenstein's narrative is a third autobiography, that told to him by the Monster, whose neglect at the hand of his creator has doomed him to living as an outcast. The stories of these three men, Walton, Frankenstein, and the Monster, comprise the principle narrative layers and serve together as a triptych illustrating different stages of human endeavors that fail because of a shared contempt for women and for values construed as feminine.

The men's stories are sufficiently similar to have invited studies of various kinds of doubling, especially that of Walton and Frankenstein, and of Frankenstein and his Monster. All three men are engaged in quests that remove them from domestic interaction with women and that take them to the barren, icy realms of the polar north. Despite Margaret's "evil forebodings," to which he vaguely alludes in his first letter to her, Walton hopes to study the mysterious operations of electromagnetism, "the wondrous power which attracts the needle," "the secret of the magnet" (16).³ Motivated by his belief that among the "undiscovered solitudes" lies a land of "eternal light" surpassed only by "heavenly bodies," he endures "cold, famine, thirst," and the most difficult of his voluntary deprivations: "the want of a friend," "the company of a man" (18, 19).

The man whose company Walton finds is Victor Frankenstein, who is at a further stage than Walton in a similar quest after nature's secrets. Frankenstein tells of his even more grotesque suffering and solitude as he

labors to bestow life on lifeless matter. But instead of providing the "encouraging voice" that Walton hopes will affirm the value of his pursuits (17), Frankenstein, at first, offers his tale as an admonition against overreaching and neglecting quieter domestic affections:

Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow. (53)

Frankenstein recognizes that Walton is in many ways a younger version of himself, and he repeats the moral to his story as he sees it:

"Whither does your senseless curiosity lead you? Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy? Peace, peace! learn my miseries, and do not seek to increase your own." (209-10)

At the end of his tale, however, Frankenstein has evidently not learned his own lesson. He concludes that his conduct was not "blameable" (217), and he delivers to Walton's discouraged shipmates a panegyric to masculine quests:

"Oh! be men, or be more than men. Be steady to your purposes, and firm as rock. This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if you say that it shall not. Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return, as heroes who have fought and conquered, and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe." (215)

Frankenstein's final message, therefore, does affirm the value of Walton's pursuits. And just as Walton has not heeded his sister's warnings, Frankenstein fails to heed his own.

The innermost autobiography in the triptych is that of the Monster, which he, too, offers to his auditor, this time Frankenstein himself, as a moral parable:

"Listen to me, Frankenstein. You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands." (101)

Here, a murderer addresses a would-be murderer, and just as Frankenstein offers his tale to warn Walton of what he might become, so too does the Monster envision his own tale as one that will make Victor less monstrous. Yet, at the start, the Monster's autobiography seems in many ways to be the reverse of Frankenstein's. Instead of being raised by a loving family as Victor was, the Monster was abandoned at birth and left to seek shelter, food, and education on his own. His demand that Frankenstein create for him a

female companion also seems to contrast with Victor's prolonged evasion of his fiance and preference to reside alone. But both men end up in similar positions, as several strikingly parallel events in their lives emphasize. As Victor becomes more harried and isolated, his haunted appearance inspires only unjust treatment by those who see him, as when he is arrested for Clerval's murder only because he exhibited extreme confusion and agitation upon arriving at the site (175). The Monster is met with similar injustice when, after rescuing a drowning girl, he is shot by the first person he sees, who is repulsed by his appearance (141). Frankenstein destroys the Monster's intended companion just at the moment she was to come to life; so, too, does the Monster murder Victor's fiance, Elizabeth, on the evening their conjugal life together was to begin.

If the Monster's demands for female companionship initially seem to validate the importance of women, his subsequent behavior suggests that he embodies in giant and more explicit form the misogyny at the root of Victor's behavior. As the Monster attempts to justify to Victor his murder of William, Victor's youngest brother, and his subsequent framing of Justine for the act, he reveals that he has been motivated not merely by anger at Victor but by hatred of women:

"Should she [Justine] awake, and see me, and curse me, and denounce the murderer? Thus she would assuredly act, if her darkened eyes opened, and she beheld me. The thought was madness; it stirred the fiend within me — not I, but she shall suffer: the murder I have committed because I am for ever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment!" (143–44)

He speculates about how she might act, when he has never before encountered her. He resents her presumed unwillingness to provide "all that she could give me," language showing his belief that women should satisfy him, and then, with all the demented illogic of a rapist, he blames her for his crime.

Victor similarly invents hypothetical actions of women and then lashes out to prevent what he anticipates they will do. As he contemplates the nearly finished female companion for the Monster, he speculates about how she will act:

she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. . . . She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species. (165)

Frankenstein's assumptions that women have a far greater capacity for evil than men, that they can delight in crime for its own sake, that their fickle rejection of men is a "provocation" — these are not nearly so alarming to

him as the threat of female reproductive powers, which his earlier experiments had sought to subvert. The possibility that his female monster might reproduce moves Victor to destroy her:

one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? (165)

Victor's fear of his enabling heterosexual procreation makes him "trembl[e] with passion" and "[tear] to pieces" the female form (166).

His fears of female sexual powers are evident in another famously misogynistic scene: his dream of Elizabeth just after the creation of the Monster:

I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the graveworms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (58)

Newly completed, Victor's abstruse experiments haunt him and corrupt his sexual fantasies. Elizabeth walks the streets and represents to him a sexual offering that initially seems appealing but transforms into a vision of incestuous necrophilia. He not only equates sexuality and death, but also confuses his fiance with his mother, showing a dangerous tendency to consolidate the women he knows into one loathsome form. Such are the psychological consequences to him of his efforts to subvert maternal reproductive power. In his eerie dreamscape, the figurative becomes literal, and his actions have murdered his fiance and defiled the corpse of his mother. For a moment, even if only in a dream, Victor faces the consequences of his experiment: the destruction of the erotic and reproductive potential of women.

If Victor's example suggests the ultimate destination for Walton's and the Monster's journeys as well, it may seem surprising that all three men initially share impulses that are hardly monstrous. All three begin their pursuits motivated by lofty ideals of serving mankind, benevolently sacrificing themselves for others. As if to stress the high-minded good intentions of the three men, Shelley compares the men's earliest conceptions to those of visionary poets. As he muses on his plans, Walton reports, "I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven" (16), and he compares himself with the "Ancient Mariner," crediting Coleridge with having prompted his "passionate enthusiasm." "But," he adds, "I shall kill no alba-

cross" (21). This last statement shows that Walton recognizes that his voyage toward the pole might present him with vague moral dangers. But the fates of his doubles in the novel and his excitement at hearing Victor's tale suggest that he does not fully understand these dangers and will not be able to avoid them.

Figuratively, Victor and the Monster do kill an albatross. Victor, too, alludes to the "Ancient Mariner" but to the section showing the mariner's fear of being punished for his sin (59). He, too, had started out with lofty and laudable purpose, extraordinary gifts, and a sensibility attuned to the beauties of nature. His fond recollections of his more literary friend Henry Clerival attest to his own poetic and moral facilities. But high purpose, enterprising intellect, and liberality do not prevent his misogyny from corrupting his project, destroying his better side, and helping to kill family and friends. The Monster also begins as a benevolent man—alert to natural beauty, appreciative of literary works, desirous of human companionship, and sympathetic to the poor and to the fate of Native Americans. His tale documents the effects of neglect, poverty, social prejudice, and loneliness in converting such benevolence to murderous hatred of women. The point to Walton's, Victor's, and the Monster's examples is that the best men—the most talented, most moral, and largest-hearted—are vulnerable to their habitual ignoring of female voices and values.

My argument here runs counter to two excellent studies of the novel that claim the three men are questing after an idealized family life, an image of divine maternity, and a geographic locus of femininity. Marc Rubenstein claims that Mary Shelley's search for her own mother is transfigured in the lives of her three protagonists. Walton, we are told, yearns for a "maternal heartland," "the fantasied mother locked within the ice," "a maternal paradise beyond the frozen north" (174–75). Kate Ellis argues that

each of the novel's three interconnected narratives is told by a man to whom domestic affection is not merely amiable but positively sacred. Yet each narrator also has been denied the experience he reveres so highly, and cannot, because of this denial, transmit it to a future generation. (123)

While it is true that the motherless men have been denied domestic affection and that their metaphors and stated sentiments often reveal their need for feminine and maternal nurturance, Walton's and Frankenstein's evasion of women suggests that to the extent they pursue an ideal of maternal values, they do so in flight from the real women whose company is available to them. And while the Monster explicitly requests that a female be created

for him, he, too, wants one made to order, the deficiency of which leads him to despise more tangible women he encounters.

The best evidence of the protagonists' shared flights from women and of the importance of misogyny as a theme in *Frankenstein* is the systematic exclusion of women's voices as the three men narrate their tales. Their rhetorical behavior as autobiographers attests to their own fears and loathings of values construed as feminine.

With the exception of two letters from Victor's fiancée, Elizabeth, no written text authored by a female character is presented in the work without a male intermediary, and except for brief passages of quoted dialogue, most of the women's verbal comments are summarized or paraphrased by a male author. The men, however, are permitted whole, uninterrupted passages of narration. Although Victor's text is delivered to us through Walton's narrative, Walton allows Victor to read and revise his document: "Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history: he asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places" (210). Within Victor's tale is his record of the Monster's life, but the Monster, too, is permitted to revise the story of his life. During his final meeting with Walton, he tells him:

"You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But, in the detail which he gave you of them, he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured, wasting in impotent passions." (221)

The Monster's revised account effects a remarkable shift in sympathies that entirely recasts the significance of his life story and reinforces the importance of point of view in shaping the meaning of a text. Victor's desire to revise Walton's notes and the Monster's suspicion of someone else's rendering of his story both establish the narrative value of telling one's story oneself, without an intervening voice. The fictive authors equate direct access to the reader with power — a particularly telling equation when we observe what all three male authors do with women's voices and tales.

For readers of frame tales, however, what is rhetorically most distant from us is often the most important: the mariner's tale, not the wedding guest's, motivates us to keep reading; it's the ancient, often obscure text in a gothic novel that provides an explanation of events, as the rhetorically distant legend of the Bleeding Nun suggests the sexual repression that dooms the characters in Lewis's *Monk*; we read *Heart of Darkness* not to find the unnamed shipmate who is the primary narrator, or even to understand Marlow, but to glimpse Kurtz deep within Conrad's narrative jungle. Shelley empowers her male authors with direct voices to reflect cultural, literary,

and historical reality; but the key to *Frankenstein* is not the unmediated voices but the ones in the center.

The center of *Frankenstein* may seem to be the Monster's tale, yet all three autobiographies, including the Monster's, present embedded, paraphrased stories of women. The novel includes three such stories, one provided by each of the male narrators. Each story appears as a digression, usually without a clear relationship to the male authors' lives. Each of these stories is told to the male authors by a woman, and each tells the fate of a woman victimized by changing economic circumstances, marriage customs, dissolution of their families, social prejudice, and powerlessness. These embedded stories serve as a second triptych in the novel that illustrates, like the three into which they intrude, variations on the theme of misogyny.

The first such tale appears near the beginning of Walton's narrative and is offered as a brief anecdote illustrating the gentle demeanor and kindness of the master of his ship. Walton recounts the master's efforts in matrimony as "his story," without much attention to the woman involved in the arrangement. Walton explains,

I heard of him first in rather a romantic manner, from a lady who owes to him the happiness of her life. This, briefly, is his story. Some years ago, he loved a young Russian lady, of moderate fortune; and having amassed a considerable sum in prize-money, the father of the girl consented to the match. He saw his mistress once before the destined ceremony; but she was bathed in tears, and, throwing herself at his feet, entreated him to spare her, confessing at the same time that she loved another, but that he was poor, and that her father would never consent to the union. My generous friend reassured the suppliant, and on being informed of the name of her lover, instantly abandoned his pursuit. He had already bought a farm with his money, on which he had designed to pass the remainder of his life; but he bestowed the whole on his rival, together with the remains of his prize-money to purchase stock and then himself solicited the young woman's father to consent to her marriage with her lover. But the old man decidedly refused, thinking himself bound in honour to my friend; who, when he found the father inexorable, quitted his country, nor returned until he heard that his former mistress was married according to her inclinations. "What a noble fellow!" you will exclaim. He is so; but then he is wholly uneducated: he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command. (20-21)

Walton's source for the story, the "lady who owes . . . [the master] the happiness of her life," is presumably the Russian woman involved in the love triangle. No mention is made of her mother, so, like the other significant characters in the novel, she probably has only one parent—a father. If we read this anecdote as "her" story, rather than "his," we find a rather formidable set of obstacles to her happiness. One is her vulnerability to shifting economic classes: the master's good fortune in gaming renders him, in her

father's eyes, an attractive match for her. Her father regards her as a sort of commodity with which he rewards the master without consulting her. If it hadn't been for the master's response to her tears—in short, a male voice speaking on her behalf against her father—she would have had no choice whatsoever but to comply with the terms of the arranged marriage. Upon discovering that the woman did not desire him, a possibility he apparently had not considered, the master does behave in an “astonishing” way, as he donates his property to her, speaks on her behalf to the father, and then withdraws from the society of women to join Walton's voyage north. Her fate, if we disregard the fact that it wasn't entirely hers to choose, appears to be the happiest of any of the married women in the novel, though the details are sparse. The master's fate, however, is far less jolly. Despite his chivalrous behavior, which Walton finds so praiseworthy, “he is silent as a Turk,” he is characterized by “ignorant carelessness,” and he withdraws from the world of women entirely. The anecdote implies that, unless a man acts in an astonishing way, listening to and honoring the requests of the woman, marriage will victimize the woman. Read as “his,” the story encourages perpetual bachelorhood by showing the dire financial and psychological consequences to men of courtship.

Victor's digression tells of two women—his mother, Caroline, and his eventual fiancée, Elizabeth. These women, like the unnamed lady in Walton's tale, are victims of economic change, all the more vulnerable because they lack mothers. Caroline is the daughter of Victor's father's friend, Beaufort, a widower and merchant who has fallen, “through numerous mischances, into poverty” (31). The shame of his economic failure leads Beaufort to retreat with his daughter and to hide even from Victor. His unemployment is especially debilitating because it gives him leisure to reflect on his loss of fortune, and Caroline's best efforts to earn money and to cheer her father are not sufficient to prevent his dying of grief. Victor's father finds the now orphaned Caroline, places her in the protection of a relative, and marries her two years later. The portrait Victor provides of his parents' marriage, though an ideal one to him, reveals their relationship to be predicated on feminine weakness, with consequences to both husband and wife. His father, we are told,

strove to shelter her, as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind, and to surround her with all that could tend to excite pleasurable emotion in her soft and benevolent mind. Her health, and even the tranquillity of her hitherto constant spirit, had been shaken by what she had gone through. During the two years that had elapsed previous to their marriage my father had gradually relinquished all his public functions; and immediately after their union they sought the pleasant climate of Italy, and the change of scene

and interest attendant on a tour through that land of wonders, as a restorative for her weakened frame. (33)

In this example, the man has "relinquished all his public functions" prior to the marriage, and he rescues and protects a weakened woman. Caring for her, in Victor's view, demands that his father retire from public life, a sacrifice Victor himself is unwilling to make. Mary Shelley's use of horticultural metaphor here to describe their marriage echoes her mother's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, suggesting that such an arrangement is more likely to prolong Caroline's weakness than it is to restore her strength. In the opening paragraph of her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft writes that

women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. — One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men⁴

Viewed in light of Wollstonecraft's analysis, Caroline faces a twin challenge: recovering from her early deprivation and maintaining mental and physical vigor in too rich a domestic soil. She may please a "fastidious eye," but she dies young, "cheerfully" resigned to death, hopeful that Victor will marry Elizabeth (43).

Elizabeth's story, also interpolated into Victor's tale, presents us with a similarly powerless, orphaned woman who is raised to emulate the feminine virtues that Wollstonecraft calls "mistaken notions of female excellence" (11). Her story is even more distant from the reader than the tale of the master's intended fiancee or than that of Caroline, because Shelley has increased the number of narrators comprising the layers between the reader and the story. Elizabeth's early circumstances are related by a "peasant woman," who is serving as her guardian, to Caroline, who has presumably told it to Victor, who tells it to Walton, and thus to Mrs. Saville and to us. Although more distant in the narrative, some details in Elizabeth's story more closely resemble the autobiography of Mary Shelley, and her tale more explicitly enacts the social criticism of Mary Wollstonecraft. Elizabeth's mother, like Mary Shelley's, "had died on giving her birth" (35). Elizabeth's father, like William Godwin, Shelley's father, was renowned as a radical champion of liberty, but unlike Godwin he was either executed or imprisoned for his political actions. Elizabeth's circumstances are worse than Shelley's, as she becomes a beggar and an orphan, until cared for by

her poor foster parents, the Lavenzas. Victor tells us that she "bloomed in their rude abode, fairer than a garden rose among dark-leaved brambles" (35). Victor's parents encounter her on one of their charity missions, eventually adopting her as the daughter they had hoped would complete their family.

Even as a child, Elizabeth resembles the hothouse flower, the embodiment of feminine graces and mild manners that Wollstonecraft had decried as feminine weakness. And her welcome into the Frankenstein family shows that from the start Caroline regards her as "a pretty present for my Victor," to which Victor replies, "I . . . looked upon Elizabeth as mine — mine to protect, love, and cherish" (36–37). Elizabeth therefore becomes a modified form of reward for Caroline's charity and for Victor's possession. She even looks the part of the bygone heroine of romance: "Her hair was the brightest living gold"; her blue eyes are "cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness, that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp on all her features" (34). Caroline carefully nurtures Elizabeth, grooming her to be the sweet, beneficent, self-sacrificing helpmeet that Victor finds her to be upon the death of his mother:⁵

She indeed veiled her grief, and strove to act the comforter to us all. She looked steadily on life, and assumed its duties with courage and zeal. She devoted herself to those whom she had been taught to call her uncle and cousins. Never was she so enchanting as at this time, when she recalled the sunshine of her smiles and spent them upon us. She forgot even her own regret in her endeavours to make us forget. (44)

What Victor calls "courage" Wollstonecraft would call "slavish dependence," and Elizabeth's virtues, in Wollstonecraft's eyes, "the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness" (9). Victor's ultimate reaction to Elizabeth is as Wollstonecraft would predict it would be: "those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt" (9). Victor might not consciously feel contempt for Elizabeth, but he spends most of life evading her, and he kills her in his dreams.

Within the masculine narrative of *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth is the only woman to write without a male intermediary. Victor includes two of her letters to him within his story. The first of these, written shortly after Caroline's death, establishes her role in the family and hints at her frustration with that role. She expresses concern over Victor's illness and his presumed inability to write to her, and she says, "my persuasions have

restrained my uncle from undertaking a journey to Ingolstadt. I have prevented his encountering the inconveniences and perhaps dangers of so long a journey; yet how often have I regretted not being able to perform it myself!" (63–64). She speculates that the task of caring for Victor has fallen to "some mercenary old nurse, who could never guess your wishes, nor minister to them with the care and affection of your poor cousin" (64). She also describes the family he has left behind, noting that sixteen-year-old Ernest, Victor's brother, feels cramped by his father's prohibiting him to enter foreign service. The youngest brother, curly haired, dimpled William is reported to be enamored of "one or two little *wives*" (66). This letter may seem to describe a perfectly blissful family, yet everyone but the thoroughly domesticated William seems uneasily fettered by the narrowness of the roles prescribed for them. Even Elizabeth notes that she has only "trifling occupations" (64). The letter also provides exposition about Justine—the woman later unjustly convicted of murdering William—and hers is by now a familiar story in the novel. As a young girl, Justine loses one of her parents and is mistreated by the surviving one, in this case her mother. The emotional and financial poverty of her situation moves the Frankensteins to adopt her, and Justine's gratitude and the combined tutoring of Caroline and Elizabeth make her into yet another adoring and gentle female. Elizabeth's first letter only confirms what Victor's actions have implied about bourgeois domesticity: men and women alike maintain the fiction of familial bliss yet feel restrained by the roles they defend.

Elizabeth's second letter, composed after Victor's creation of the Monster and after the deaths of William and Clerval, betrays her growing sense that Victor might not desire to marry her. She speculates that they might have grown to be brother and sister instead of man and wife, and she wonders if Victor might love another. She frees him from any obligation to her, saying, "our marriage would render me eternally miserable, unless it were the dictate of your own free choice" (188). Her letter displays her generosity but also establishes that while men may have free choice, women are constrained by economic circumstances, obligations, and guilt. Victor might feel that marriage would shrink the scope of his pursuits, but Shelley makes it clear that, to women, marriage represents a desperate last hope for security, one that eventually wears away at their energy and strength.

We see yet another broken family when we read the third interpolated tale—the one included in the Monster's autobiography. We recognize in this tale many elements of the earlier ones, but the moral and political issues involved in domestic life are made much more explicit than before. The family involved has been closely observed by the Monster, who has con-

cealed himself within a "hovel" adjoining their cottage. Through a chink in their wall, he studies the blind old man De Lacey, and the two children, Felix and his sister. By watching them, the Monster learns to speak and to read, and he discovers the "difference of sexes" and "all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds" (121). As he details the circumstances that led to their poverty, he turns our attention to some letters that Felix has received from a Turkish woman named Safie, whom Felix hopes to marry. Safie's letters represent the voice most deeply embedded within Shelley's narrative layers. Safie writes to Felix De Lacey; the Monster obtains them and summarizes them for Victor, who shares them with Walton, who describes them to Mrs. Saville. The Monster believes that these letters are vitally important, because, as he says, "they will prove the truth of my tale" (123), although precisely how letters from Safie document the Monster's tale is never clear. Shelley reminds us at various significant points in the novel that the letters still exist. The Monster promises to give them to Victor (123), and at the end of Victor's narrative when Walton resumes his, Walton says that Victor has shared them with him (209). Yet none of the narrators ever reproduces them for us — except in summary. Safie's story is the closest of any of them to that of Shelley and her mother, and Shelley's placing it at the point of furthest remove from the reader continues the motif of putting what is closest to her furthest from us.

One study calls Safie's story "the emotional, not to say the geographic, center of the novel,"⁶ and indeed it serves as a parable about female bondage:

Safie related, that her mother was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of Safie, who married her. The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced. She instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet. This lady died; but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with infantile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue. (123–24)

To those familiar with Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, Shelley's debt to her mother for ideas and even phrasing will be self-evident. Wollstonecraft draws analogies between women's education and Mahometanism (8), and she laments that the behaviors women learn are better suited to life in a seraglio than they are to independent and virtuous women of reason (29). She, too, derides the infantile amusements that distract a woman from emulating true virtue.

Safie may share Shelley and Wollstonecraft's values, but she is still in the hands of a tyrannical father, the Turk who offers her hand to Felix to repay him for his working to free the man from his unjust imprisonment. At first, Felix is "too delicate to accept this offer" (123), but he looks forward to marrying her anyway, and he remains with them "in expectation of the event" (124). Once again, a woman is offered to a man as a reward without her being consulted; and once again, a genuinely caring man falls into behavior that discounts the will of a woman. When the freedom of the Turk is assured, he chooses not to honor his promise to Felix, whose family meanwhile has been incarcerated for his role in the plot. After months of confinement and an arduous trial, Felix and his family are condemned to live as impoverished exiles. Safie resolves to leave her father, and after enduring prolonged hardship, she ends up at the De Lacey cottage. We never discover whether or not she finally does marry Felix, because the Monster's appearance frightens the group into fleeing their cottage. Safie's unknown fate leaves her outside the text, still facing many challenges but representing a potential solution to the problems faced by all the characters.

Each of these three digressions dramatizes the compounding of women's problems by inherited ideas of courtship and women's roles. The tales become increasingly complex and thematically explicit, even as they become more deeply buried within Shelley's narrative frames. They stress the intergenerational transmission of ideas that render women mute and powerless and that subtly corrupt even the best intentioned of the men. They provide, therefore, a perfect correlative for the larger triptych on masculine failure that comprises the novel's exterior.

The familial and cultural legacies that doom the women in the interior triptych and the men in the exterior one are also literary legacies. Shelley is quite conscious of her literary precursors and the cultural impact of the generally male narrative tradition.⁷ Wollstonecraft traces the source of many of women's problems to their portrayal in men's novels and poetry, and Shelley's frequent allusions to and reinterpretations of prior literary works show her mind to be engaged in a sort of dialogue with her male predecessors. The form she gives to *Frankenstein* draws on Greek and Biblical creation myths, romance, epic, epistolary novels, travel and exploration narratives, journals, frame tales, biography, gothic fiction, novels of sentiment, and dream vision.⁸ In short, her novel recapitulates a misogynist literary tradition, beginning with the allusion to *Prometheus Bound* in the subtitle, the epigraph from *Paradise Lost*, and the opening pages in epistolary form that evolve into a journal of travels and exploration and finally into a multiplot psychological novel. Shelley shows by implication that the

masculine narrative tradition silences women's voices, her novel displaying the logical consequences of such an error taken to its extreme. In her introduction, she refers to *Frankenstein* as her own "hideous progeny," as if her novel, like Victor's Monster, is a seamy composite of dead forms, defiant of its creator, and loosed upon the world. And just as the Monster's life recapitulates the history of aboriginal man, as he forages for food, discovers fire, finds shelter, learns a language, and develops a sense of history and culture, so too does her novel reenact literary history for the purpose of providing a cultural warning. Her male narrators either crowd out the female voice, relegating it to the peripheral role of auditor, or confine it deep within the paraphrased middle of the novel. When her novel reenacts this cultural error, Shelley subverts the exclusivity of the masculine voice, revealing it to be monstrously destructive of men, women, families, and children. As Wollstonecraft claims, "the nature of the poison points out the antidote" (19).

Works Cited

1. Several studies have been particularly useful in establishing feminist critical approaches to *Frankenstein*: see Kate Ellis, "Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family," and Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979); and Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self," and Mary Poovey, "'My Hideous Progeny': The Lady and the Monster," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).
2. Marc A. Rubenstein provides an interesting psychoanalytic reading of the novel, with much attention to its multiple frames. See "'My Accursed Origin': The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*," *SiR* 15 (1976), 165-94.
3. All quotations from *Frankenstein* are from the 1831 text edited by M. K. Joseph (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969).
4. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975), 7. Subsequent quotations from Wollstonecraft are all from this edition.
5. Ellis writes that Elizabeth is "too superficial and monotonous" to be "a real force in the novel" (135).
6. Rubenstein, 169. He also argues that Safie "is surely a cartoon, distorted but recognizable, of the author's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft."
7. Devon Hodges explores Shelley's "ability to subvert patriarchal narrative conventions," noting that her fracturing of "the authority of the narrative 'I,'" her disruptions of narrative sequence, and her use of multiple narrators are "the violent gesticulation of a repressed femininity pushing against a patriarchal form that privileges male identity and speech and victimizes even obedient women. Shelley both appropriates the form and disrupts it . . ." See "*Frankenstein* and the Feminine Subversion of the Novel," *Tulsa Studies In Women's Literature* 2, (1983), 155-64.

8. For discussions of *Frankenstein* as Shelley's response to some of these genres, see Chris Baldick's *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Paul Cantor explores relationships between *Frankenstein*, *Prometheus Bound*, and *Paradise Lost* in *Creature and Creator: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 103 ff. Mary K. Patterson Thornburg discusses *Frankenstein* as an "antisentimental" work, in *The Monster in the Mirror: Gender and the Sentimental/Gothic Myth in "Frankenstein"* (Ann Arbor, MI: U. M. I. Research Press, 1987).

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