Victor Frankenstein's Romantic Fate: The Tragedy of the Promethean Overreacher as Woman

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My temper was sometimes violent and my passions vehement; but by some law in my temperature they were turned not towards childish pursuits but to an eager desire to learn . . . the secrets of heaven and earth . . . my inquiries were directed to the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world.[1]

WITH THESE WORDS Mary Shelley establishes Victor Frankenstein as the modern Prometheus of her novel's subtitle, the presumptuous human being who wishes to probe new territory where human beings are forbidden by the deity. These words also suggest that Victor's driving desire for forbidden knowledge of the world and especially of human nature—"the mysterious soul of man . . . occupied me" (37)—is the innate tragic flaw of his personality; he is the passionate Byronic man, his Byronic energies directed irrevocably from birth and by temperament toward this pursuit of superhuman knowledge: "The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature . . . are among the earliest sensations I can remember" (36). Victor's innate, internally compelling thirst for knowledge about human nature summons his tragic destiny. The "immutable laws" of Victor's destiny are internal laws that decree his "utter and terrible destruction" (41).

Mary Shelley depicts Victor's search for forbidden knowledge of "the mysterious soul of man" differently from many male Romantic

[1] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (New York: NAL, 1965) 37. All references hereafter are to this edition, cited in the text by page number.

authors who create the modern Promethean/Byronic soul; through Victor she lays bare not only the mysterious soul of man, but the mysterious soul of woman, pushing the boundaries of her readers' knowledge beyond what Carolyn Heilbrun has described as the predominating "male myths about women, interpreting women for male purposes."[2] Shelley speaks of Victor's pursuit of knowledge in female metaphors: metaphors of pregnancy and childbirth describe Victor's acquisition and use of forbidden knowledge concerning "natural philosophy," as well as the consequences of its use. When, for example, Victor briefly considers thwarting his destiny and giving up his pursuit of this knowledge, he uses these female metaphors: "I . . . set down natural history and all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation" (41). Yet his fate is to pursue this knowledge to fruition and to suffer its tragic consequences, as irrevocably as most women act out of their sexuality and experience the consequences, which up until this century were often dire—death in childbirth, a reality which Shelley learned about from the fate of her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.

Much has been said by critics, especially such feminist critics as Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, about this sexual metaphor and about Mary Shelley's use of the "female gothic" mode in her book. These critics try to connect Shelley's use of the sexual metaphor and the "birth myth" to the fact that she was "caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time she wrote the novel." As Gilbert and Gubar reasonably claim, "Mary Shelley explained her sexuality to herself in the context of her reading [hence her pursuit of knowledge] and its powerfully felt implications."[3] This biographical context works with literary convention's comparisons of the act of giving birth to a child to the act of creating a text; anyone who has read Shakespeare's sonnets knows about this comparison of the child to the text as a way of securing one's immortality. I too will explore this sexual metaphor and birth myth, demonstrating how Shelley enables Victor to analyze and reinterpret motherhood so that he and readers of the novel—men and women who are not mothers—may experience maternity intellectually and emotionally.

Shelley helps readers to understand motherhood in its often tragic context as—although she would hardly use these terms—a pair of

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[2] Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York: Norton, 1979) 151.

[3] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1977) 140; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman In the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 222. See also Moers 145–47.

dialectical relationships or binary oppositions which, in Robert Scholes's words, "organize the flow of value and power" in motherhood;[4] she suggests through Victor's experiences that most mothers alternately experience both poles of the two oppositional relationships, almost as a process of reversals. The first opposition is creative energy, or life, versus destructive energy, or death; the second is love versus hatred. Victor's experiencing of these two binary oppositions allows him to understand the profundity and tragic potential of maternity.

Interestingly, by having a male protagonist experience psychologically both pregnancy and the birth of his "creature," Shelley is breaking down the usual distinctions between the male and female psyche, the emotional perspectives that western culture has erected over the centuries. Victor uses his "phallogocentric" learning and masculine reasoning powers to bypass women's biological route to motherhood, thereby experiencing a blended sexuality which Hélène Cixous has called "the *other bisexuality*, . . . multiple, variable and ever-changing, consisting as it does of the 'non-exclusion either of the difference or of one sex.'"[5] In fact, Shelley appears to be doing the kind of feminist writing that Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" hails as "'working [in] the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and of the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death . . .'"; through Victor, Shelley works with concepts of the "same," male, and the "other," female, bringing both Victor and the reader from the pole of life to the pole of death and back. While Cixous might praise such writing and glorify Victor's experiencing of bisexuality, Shelley, working in the (patriarchal) Romantic context, must phallocentrically curb any enthusiasm she might feel for Victor's androgynous experience and view it as belonging to the realm of forbidden experience because it tampers with nature, both nature as the protector of the secret sources of life and as the biological essence of women. Hence, although Victor's maternal experience begins in hope and love, it ends in despair and hatred, and in death: the death of loved ones, the death of Victor's capacity for love, and the death of Victor—a tragedy of grand, Romantic proportions.

Before exploring Victor's "forbidden" and tragic experiences, we must consider what is implicit in the claim that Victor experiences

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[4] Robert Scholes, *Textual Power* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 4.

[5] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985) 109 (quotes Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," tr. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1 [1976]: 875–99. Moi's quotations are from the reprint in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* [Brighton: Harvester, 1980] 254).

maternity. Such a claim implies an essentialist or biologistic view that there *is* a pure, essential state of pregnancy and motherhood to be experienced and that women can experience physically and emotionally in the same way, cross-culturally, regardless of prior social experiences that an individual woman may have had. Many feminist critics have in recent years called this view untenable because it perpetuates a univocal and reductive notion of sexual difference that reinforces patriarchal society, or promotes what Toril Moi describes as "the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified."[6] Instead, these critics, including Moi and her role model, Julia Kristeva, advocate as a truly feminist stance or process a deconstruction of the opposition between masculinity and femininity. They challenge the very notion of sexual identity, opting for androgyny or a multiplicity of sexual differences. Simone de Beauvoir ushered in this anti-essentialist view with her sweeping claim, "One is not born a woman; one becomes one."[7] Ann Rosalind Jones similarly argues against the notions that sexual identity is innate and that sexuality can be experienced purely outside of social relationships and "damaging acculturation." Citing recent psychoanalytic theory, Jones claims that sexuality "is formed through the individual's encounters with the nuclear family and with the symbolic systems" that are activated as the mother and father relate to the child by acting out their own "socially imposed roles."[8] Where does Mary Shelley fit into this debate over the concept of femininity (culture) vs. femaleness (biology)?

On one level, Shelley seems to write in archetypes or pure essences in her novel, archetypes that go back through the Hebraic spirit of *Paradise Lost* to The Book of Genesis and through the Hellenic spirit of the Romantics (including Percy Shelley and Byron) to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*. Even many of the landscapes of *Frankenstein* have an archetypal, metaphysical quality, from the snow-capped Alps to the lakes and oceans to the frozen Hell of the Artic wastes where Victor and his creature end their deadly struggle. And if Shelley were indeed "caught up in a maelstrom of sexuality" when writing her book, she might, given this context, very plausibly be seen as also expressing herself in sexual archetypes or essences in order to describe Victor's

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[6] Moi 9.

[7] Moi 92 (quotes de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, tr. H.M. Parshley [New York: Bantam, 1970] 249).

[8] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: *L'Ecriture Féminine*," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 367.

experiences. Part of what makes Shelley's description of Victor's "pregnancy" powerful is that it seems to speak in the female Voice that Cixous describes, touching the pre-Oedipal Mother or the Lacanian Imaginary, "a space outside time" which Cixous claims is "the source of the song that resonates through all female writing." Although Cixous states that men may occasionally write in this space too, she says this is rare because they repress more libidinal drives than women;[9] thus, she reaches a biologistic conclusion in her designation of female writing, and her descriptions reflect Shelley's description of Victor's womb-like workshop of creation. On another level, however, into Victor's womb-space comes phallocentric thinking, a process that reasons out the sources of life and the way to build a creature. Patriarchal language also enters, particularly phallic objections to the "filthy" nature of the female creative process. Does this invasion break down the opposition between male and female, both undermining the biologistic impulse of the novel, and, as Moi says of Cixous, leading to Victor's bisexual experience or integration of "both penis and nipple" —of penis and womb?

It may not be possible or desirable to reconcile these readings of the oppositional forces of the novel (the desire for neat closure or unified meaning in a text is after all phallogocentric), but we can hold the conflict in abeyance and speak of the novel also in Kristevan terms as describing not a female essence, but the multiplicity and "marginality" of all feminine sexual experiences constructed by patriarchal society,[10] something which Victor learns of in the isolation of his laboratory. In her essay "Woman's Time," Kristeva speaks of pregnancy in terms that reject the notion of a pure female experience and that reach beyond male and female sexual identities. Pregnancy is the "redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech," and it not only challenges the concept of identity but it also is "accompanied by a fantasy of totality—narcissistic completeness." These qualities characterize Victor as he labors to create the monster, and reflect Kristeva's view that "the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*."[11] The feminist theories of Kristeva, Jones, Cixous, and Moi join with the metaphorics of creation described by Moers,

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[9] Moi 114–15.

[10] Moi 166–67.

[11] Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 49, 51.

Gilbert, and Gubar to provide the context for the following reading of Victor's experiences.

Victor's search for the creative energy necessary to re-enact human life begins as a naive idealist's lofty ambition: "what glory would attend the discovery [of the elixir of life] if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" (40). He wants to use his considerable intellectual gifts not for self-aggrandizement, which Cixous would characterize as belonging to the (masculine) libidinal realm of the *Proper*, but rather for the benefit of humankind as a kind of nurturing mother, illustrating the (female) realm of the *Gift*; [12] Victor seems unaware that in his fantasy he is dangerously overstepping "natural" bounds and becoming a pretender to god-like powers. His ambition is not dissimilar to a first-time pregnant women's pride and grandiose hopes for her unborn child, as western culture frames those feelings; she is intimately linked to the creative process, and she may fantasize that she is carrying the next leader of the nation, the savior of a people. Yet even the first-time pregnant woman's rosy hopes are not unalloyed with fears: that she may miscarry, that she may not survive the labor and delivery, that the child will be stillborn, and that she is carrying a malformed child or even a non-human being, a "hideous progeny"—some pregnant women actually dream that they are carrying animals in their wombs. A pregnant woman usually intuits how close she is to death even as she is carrying life and feeling the pulses of the creative process in her own body; surely, when she became pregnant and wrote of pregnancy in her novel, Shelley must have had in mind her mother's death in childbirth. A man, denied the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, cannot so closely feel intimations of death in life-pulses, and Victor is ignorant of them in his first fantasies of creating life. He must gradually travel beyond the role of male and of ordinary human being after he vows to "pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (47). Through his inspired intellect and sensitivity, he will gradually assume a woman's emotional outlook, sensing death in life both as he labors to give birth and after the birth.

The night after he vows to unfold the mysteries of creation, Victor begins to undergo internal emotional changes suggesting a feminizing of himself, a symbolic creation of a womb and preparation of that womb for the reception and gestation of the fetus: "I closed not my

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[12] Moi 110–11.

eyes that night. My internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil; I felt that order would thence arise, but I had no power to produce it" (47). As this passage suggests, Victor is already experiencing the vulnerability and turmoil of the newly pregnant woman as her body changes before her eyes. The passage also suggests that he feels the pregnant woman's incomparable sensation of being productive internally in a realm that is hers, yet beyond her conscious control, which is similar to Kristeva's description of pregnancy's impact on the individual.[13] In his commitment to unfold the mysteries of creation Victor is, moreover, about to experience an even more important aspect of motherhood: the merging of life and death energies. By embarking on the female experience, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, Victor "learns that 'the tremendous secrets of the human frame' are the interlocking secrets of sex and death."[14] Ultimately, both Victor and the reader will be made aware of "the horror of sexuality" as tied to death through the Monster's appearance on Victor and Elizabeth's wedding night and his murder of Elizabeth.[15]

In assuming a woman's outlook on birth, as he labors to create life, Victor must recognize and deny the binary opposition between the life force and the death force; they are really one and the same. Raising questions about the source of the life principle, which requires meddling with death and the dead, and in addition exchanging one accustomed sexual role for another, takes great courage and "almost superhuman enthusiasm" (50); Victor's larger-than-life grandeur is evident in the courage and enthusiasm he exhibits throughout his undertaking. Throughout his search for life, Victor bravely connects himself with death: "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death . . . I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body" (50). He comes to understand how life and death are parts of one whole or positions on one continuum: "I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life . . . I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life" (51). Many critics have observed that Shelley uses the language of sexuality and maternity to describe Victor's arrival at the Godlike knowledge of the source of life and acquisition of the power "of bestow-

[13] Kristeva 49.

[14] Gilbert and Gubar 233.

[15] George Levine, "The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U.C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979) 9.

ing animation upon lifeless matter" (51): this success has been achieved "after days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue" with "painful labour" leading to "gratifying consummation" (51). U.C. Knoepflmacher suggests that Victor's success is Shelley's playing out of her fantasy to restore her dead mother and her first dead child to life, again merging death with life.[16]

In analyzing the components of the life-death principle, Victor views the dazzling, empowering core of its truth, a prospect reserved for superhuman heroes, promethean seekers, God, Satan,[17] or women. With a woman's perspective shaped by experiencing pregnancy and childbirth, he understands how death "feeds" the creative process, and he feels the woman's exhaustion at and after conception. His new knowledge impregnates him with the being he is about to bring to life. He has already come a long way from the oppressive "phallogocentrism" of western culture that Kristeva and Cixous write against.[18]

Shelley expands Victor's consciousness of womanhood—and the reader's—by taking him inside a woman's womb, or rather by constructing a womb around him in the metaphor of his laboratory, "a solitary chamber, or . . . cell, at the top of the house, . . . my workshop of filthy creation" (53). Gilbert and Gubar observe that Shelley uses the word "filthy" to suggest "obscenely sexual,"[19] obscene perhaps because of sex's disconcerting juxtaposition of life and death, or obscene because Shelley has internalized a patriarchal view of female sexuality. In his cell/womb Victor handles the elements of death gathered from "the unhallowed damps of the grave" (53) and erases the "ideal bounds" between life and death in order to create life: "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world" (52); grandly and like the "tarnished angel" Satan, Victor pretends to the Godlike here by discovering that death and life are one and by envisaging his central role in another Genesis story, replete with the creation of light and life and the gratitude of the race he will engender. The breakdown of the barrier between life and death is suggested by this unifying image of the liquid light (life) being poured into the dark vessel (death).

[16] U.C. Knoepflmacher, "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein* 96.

[17] Gilbert and Gubar 233.

[18] Jones 362.

[19] Gilbert and Gubar 232; see also Moers 147.

As he works, Godlike, in his laboratory, Victor also alludes to the sensations of a pregnant woman, her intimate involvement with the forces of light/life and darkness/death and the irreversible forward motion from sexual consummation to conception and from gestation to delivery: "No one can conceive [a significant choice of verb] the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success" (52). In his irrevocable commitment to his project, once he experiences life-and-death energy, Victor understands the range, intensity, and movement of a pregnant woman's feelings in our culture. This is an "unnatural" understanding for men, or perhaps a bisexual feeling, just as it is "unnatural" for man to attempt to endow lifeless matter with life; Victor steps outside his masculine role and his human role in his workshop of creation, and Shelley wants us to recognize his separation from nature throughout the "creature's" gestation: "It was a most beautiful season . . . but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature" (53). He is as insensible to nature as his creature will, ironically, be sensible, "a genuine Wordsworthian child," says Knoepflmacher, who is able "to derive intense 'pleasure' in the natural world."[20] Victor is not only cut off from nature, but also from human nature in the form of his family and friend Clerval during this time of his travail. As he confesses, "I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime" (55).

Victor's neglect of his "domestic affections" and his unnatural "heart and soul" engagement with his task of creating a being has tragic consequences, an appropriate Romantic lesson of reverence for nature and human nature. Yet as unnatural and unloving as Victor's preoccupation with his labors may seem, it is not so different from the pregnant woman who may become absentmindedly detached from her environment, focussing instead on herself and the absorbing process occurring inside her body in a way that some might view as egocentric. Shelley is giving Victor the opportunity to experience this "natural" aspect of femaleness and may not entirely condemn Victor for his singlemindedness.

In addition to the breakdown of the life and death barrier, the weakening of the love-hatred opposition is increasingly evident during Victor's "pregnancy"; he neglects those he loves when he becomes absorbed in his fond hopes for the "child" he is about to bring forth. He even forgets his "more than sister" Elizabeth, who embodies "the living spirit of love" (37). Instead, he describes the "dreams that had

[20] Knoepflmacher 100.

been my food and pleasant rest for so long a space," "the beauty of the dream" (56–57), and the beauty he anticipates in the creature for whom he labors—"I had selected his features as beautiful" (56). Although he has been working with the horrors of death to bring forth life, Victor, unlike many pregnant women in western culture, seems wholly unprepared for the possibility that he may bring forth a deformed creature. The naive male mother is still emotionally unfamiliar with the gambles inherent in the birthing process and seems prepared only to love a pretty, lovable baby.

Clearly Victor is shocked at bringing forth a hideous monster, a loathsome abortion. This may be the ultimate insight emerging from Victor's breakdown of life and death: that one can give birth not only to glorious life but also to a monster. It is also the moment when anticipated love for a "child," which Kristeva characterizes as an otherwise rarely encountered experience, "love for an other . . . forgetting oneself" (49) turns into intense and egocentric loathing; when Godlike love for a new race of "many happy and excellent creatures [who] would owe their being to me" (52) is transformed into satanic hatred and revulsion; when the desire to nurture becomes the compulsion to destroy in Victor. As Harold Bloom remarks, "Frankenstein's tragedy stems . . . from his own moral error, his failure to love."[21] And Moers also notes that Shelley's novel is "most feminine" at this point, when Victor feels "revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences."[22] This moment begins the playing out of his tragic "feminized" destiny, as Victor's loathing and rejection give the being he created the motivation to kill everyone Victor has ever loved.

At this moment, the distinctions between love and hatred become blurred as love-loyalties change: forgotten love for his family and Clerval is henceforth renewed, while anticipated love of the creature for whom he has labored painfully turns into a loathing that fuels Victor's mania to destroy the "'miserable monster'" after the monster's rampage begins. As George Levine points out, love and hate in *Frankenstein* "are seen as symbiotic."[23] Victor hates the creature whose ugliness has stifled his love and thwarted his hopes, making him feel "the bitterness of disappointment" (57) that many a loving parent—especially a mother because of her initially closer bonding with the child—has felt, but on a blessedly short-term basis. The long-term

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[21] Harold Bloom, Afterword, *Frankenstein* 217.

[22] Moers 142.

[23] Levine 16.

hatred that Victor feels for his child is the hellish core of the tragedy of motherhood. He hates the creature whose demands he had expected to fulfill gladly, demands which henceforth he will perceive as horrible encroachments on his own life. Shelley herself had described "that 'strange perversity,' a mother's hatred."[24]

There are moments in the rest of the narrative when Victor's loathing teeters on the verge of affection for the monster, and this painful blurring of love and hatred is played out appropriately against two archetypally primitive, Romantic, larger-than-life canvases: the Alpine forests of Switzerland and the frozen wastelands of the North Pole. Shelley removes the love-hatred struggle far from England, where she must have struggled between her own yearning and resentment toward the mother who abandoned her by dying in childbirth. The monster eloquently persuades Victor to suspend his loathing and thirst for revenge and listen to his tale: "Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature? . . . Believe me, Frankenstein, I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not . . . miserably alone? . . . Let your compassion be moved . . . Listen to my tale" (96). Victor is moved by this plea and feels the stirrings of parental sympathy and obligation, if not love: " . . . compassion confirmed my resolution [to hear the tale]. . . . For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness" (97). Victor the androgynous parent agrees to hear his creature's tale of growing up.

Victor continues to fluctuate between rage—especially after the monster describes his murder of brother William, "an analogue" for Shelley's second child William who died in infancy, according to Knoepflmacher[25]—and a maternal, nurturing compassion which prompts him to honor the monster's request for a companion: "His tale and the feelings he now expressed proved him to be a creature of fine sensations, and did I not as his maker owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?" (139). Yet thinking about the monstrous race that might result from their union turns Victor back to hatred and a desire to destroy his creature. Through these fluctuations between hatred and compassion, this breakdown of the distinctions between his love and his hatred for his creature, he has understood the core of motherhood, its painful and potentially tragic consequences or "afterbirths." That love and hate may become

[24] Quoted by Moers 150.

[25] Knoepflmacher 102.

two sides of the same coin for a mother is an ultimate sort of revelation for Victor, one that perhaps makes him—and the reader—rethink the relationship with his mother, Caroline Beaufort, whom he had idealized for the "tender caresses" that combined with his father's benevolence to make his childhood "but one train of enjoyment" (33). Levine notes that Victor's mother is a forerunner of the Victorian angel in the house (14). Yet if the formerly nurturing Victor has experienced hatred and the desire to destroy the child he had created, may not a reader interpolate through the gaps or absences in the text of the novel that other "angelically" loving mothers have had satanically murderous impulses, even Caroline Beaufort? Perhaps as Kate Ellis argues, Shelley is trying to show "the deficiencies of Victor's family" in order to criticize "the concept of domestic affection" that Percy Shelley claims in his 1818 preface the novel will defend.[26] Surely his mother is in Victor's mind when he "delivers" the monster, as are most women's mothers when they themselves become mothers. In fact, the night the monster is born, Victor dreams of his mother; but she appears in his dream horribly transformed, a corpse in his arms attacked by grave-worms (57). Is his subconscious revealing that he mocks the woman who gave him life and undermines their son-mother relationship by his unnatural attempts to experience motherhood? Is he expressing Shelley's own fantasy that all newborns are potentially "at once monstrous agents of destruction [of their mothers] and piteous victims of parental abandonment"?[27] These questions of authorial intent are not answerable, but the reader does see, as this dream ominously foreshadows, that Victor must pay a high price in love and blood when he acquires his suprahuman knowledge of motherhood and its potential for tragedy.

Victor's obsession with the mysteries of life is thus transformed into an obsession with destroying the monster. Now beyond all capacity for love of others, the monster having destroyed everyone he ever loved, Victor courts hatred and death (the monster's and his own) by pursuing the monster to the frozen Hell of the Arctic wastes. He dies before the monster, his suicidal double,[28] ascends his own funeral pyre to "exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (211). Such a perverse mother-child relationship is bound to end in this mutual destruction. Yet Victor emerges as a grand tragic hero, for he has had

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[26] Kate Ellis, "Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein* 140.

[27] Moers 148.

[28] Levine 14–15.

several apocalyptic moments before his death. He has seen beyond himself as a man and as a human being, experiencing an epiphanic, Godlike, womanly insight into motherhood by dissolving the barriers between male and female, love and hate, and life and death. No human being can endure long after such apocalyptic unifying moments—at least in a Romantic context—and death is a fitting tragic end for him. Yet in allowing Victor and male readers to enter female realms, Mary Shelley is creating literary and social consequences that are far-reaching and far from tragic. She, not unlike her husband in "Ode to the West Wind," sounds the clarion calling for a revolutionary understanding between women and men. One hundred and seventy years before the French feminists, Shelley was writing "from the body" and thus creating a "powerful alternative discourse." As some French feminists have claimed, "to write from the body is to re-create the world."[29] In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley has recreated the world of motherhood in unexpectedly humane and insightful ways.

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[29] Jones 366.

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