

Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979; new edn. 1984)

See Pt. III: How Are We Fall'n?: Milton's Daughters. 6. Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers [187]; 7. Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve [213]; 8. Looking Oppositely: Emily Bronte's Bible of Hell [248]. Note: The page-numbers of the 2nd Edition are given in bow-brackets. See online at Internet Archive online for page and text versions— <https://archive.org/stream/TheMadwomanInTheAttic/>.

Chapter 7: Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve

The nature of a Female Space is this: it shrinks the Organs Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite
And Satan vibrated in the immensity of the Space! Limited To those without but Infinite to those within ...

— William Blake

The woman writes as if the Devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything
worth reading.

— Nathaniel Hawthorne, on Fanny Fern

I probed Retrieveless things
My Duplicate—to borrow—
A Haggard Comfort springs
From the belief that Somewhere—

Within the Clutch of Thought
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love—forgot—
I plucked at our Partition

As One should pry the Walls—
Between Himself—
and Horror's Twin—
Within Opposing Cells—

— Emily Dickinson

What was the effect upon women writers of that complex of culture myths summarized by Woolf as Milton's bogey? Surrounded by "patriarchal poetry," what strategies for artistic survival were they able to develop? The comments of writers like Bronte, Woolf, and Wollstonecraft show that intelligent women were keenly conscious of the problems Milton posed. But they were dizzied by them, too, {213} for the secret messages of *Paradise Lost* enclosed the poem's female readers like a roomful of distorting mirrors. Keats's wondering remark—"Whose head is not dizzy at the possibly [sic] speculations of Satan in the serpent prison" [1]—seems to apply with even greater force to women, imprisoned in the coil of serpentine images that misogynistic myths and traditions constructed for them. On the surface, however, many women writers responded equably, even docilely to Milton and all he represented. Certainly the following dialogue from *Middlemarch* seems to suggest a dutiful and submissive attitude toward patriarchal poetry:

"Could I not be preparing myself now to be more useful?" said Dorothea to [Casaubon], one morning, early in the time of courtship; "could I not learn to read Latin and Greek aloud to you, as Milton's daughters did to their father, without understanding what they read?"

"I fear that would be wearisome to you," said Mr. Casaubon smiling; "and, indeed, if I remember rightly, the young women you have mentioned regarded that exercise in unknown tongues as a ground for rebellion against the poet."

"Yes; but in the first place they were very naughty girls, else they would have been proud to minister to such a father; and in the second place they might have studied privately and taught themselves to understand what they read, and then it would have been interesting. I hope you don't expect me to be naughty and stupid?" [2]

Usefulness, reading aloud, "ministering" to a wise father—all these terms and notions reinforce Milton's concept of woman as at best a serviceable second, a penitent Eve bearing children or pruning branches under Adam's thoughtful guidance. Offering herself with "ardent submissive affection" as helpmate to paternal Casaubon, Dorothea Brooke appears as nobly free of Satanic aspirations as George Eliot herself must have wished to be. A closer look at this passage and at its context, however, transforms this interpretation, revealing that with characteristic irony Eliot has found a way of having submissive Dorothea intend, among other things, the very opposite of what she says to Casaubon. Indeed, even the passage's concern with Milton as father (rather than with,

say, Milton as {215} politician or Milton as bard) tends paradoxically to sap the strength of the patriarchal associations that accrue around the name “Milton.”

To take the last point first, paintings of Milton dictating to his daughters were quite popular at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. One of Keats’s first acts on moving into new lodgings, for instance, was to unpack his books and pin up “Haydon—Mary Queen [of] Scotts, and Milton with his daughters in a row.” [3] Representing virtuous young ladies angelically ministering to their powerful father, the picture would seem to hold a mirror up to the nature of one of Western culture’s fondest fantasies. At the same time, however, from a female point of view—as the *Middlemarch* passage suggests—the image of the Miltonic father being ministered to hints that his powers are not quite absolute, that in fact he has been reduced to a state of dependence upon his female descendents. Blinded, needing tea and sympathy as well as secretarial help, the godlike bard loses at least some of his divinity and is humanized, even (to coin a term) Samsonized. Thus, just as Charlotte Bronte implies that Jane Eyre leading blinded Rochester through the grounds of his own rural seat has found a rather Delilah-ish way of making herself not only useful to him but equal to him, so Eliot, working in the same iconographic tradition, implies that Dorothea secretly desires to make herself the equal of a Romantically weakened Casaubon: “it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek... she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband: she wished, poor child, to be wise herself.” [4]

But this unspoken wish to be as wise as a wise (though weak-eyed) husband is not only made possible by the dramatic situation of Milton and his daughters, it is expressed by Dorothea herself even when she seems merely to be stating her “ardent submissive affection,” and it is clarified by Eliot in other passages. Milton’s “naughty” daughters, Dorothea says, should have been “proud to minister to such a father.” Not to “their” father, not to any father, but to a special father whose wisdom they might imbibe from close daily contact, as she herself hopes to imbibe Casaubon’s learning. More important, she speculates that “they might have studied privately and taught themselves to understand what they read, and then it {216} would have been interesting.” They might, in other words, have refused to accept their secondary position, might have made themselves their father’s equals in knowledge, might—like Dorothea—have wished to be wise themselves.

To the extent, however, that Dorothea’s wish to be wise is not only a wish to be equal to her husband but also a wish to penetrate those forbidden “provinces of masculine knowledge ... from which all truth could be seen more truly,” it is a longing for intellectual self-reliance that parodies the Satanic. More, such a wish obviously subverts the self-effacing rhetoric in which it is couched (“Could I not be preparing myself now to be more useful?”), making it possible to impute to Dorothea—of all people—a sort of Satanic deviousness. And in fact, though any deviousness on her part is largely unconscious, her Satanic aspirations for power and wisdom as well as her Eve-like curiosity (itself a function of the Satanic) are clearly if guardedly defined in several places. Her desire “to arrive* at the core of things,” for instance, though ostensibly the result of a docile wish to “judge soundly on the duties of a Christian,” is inextricably bound up with her ambitious plan to renovate her society by designing new housing for the poor. But “how could she be confident that one-room cottages were not for the glory of God,” asks Eliot dryly, “when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottagers with zeal for the glory? Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary,” she notes, “at least the alphabet and a few roots—in order to arrive at the core of things” —and in order, by implication, to defeat the arguments of learned men on their own terms. [5]

In an earlier passage, in which Dorothea considers together the problems of education and architecture, Eliot makes the nature and intensity of her ambition even clearer. Indeed, in its expression of a will to be “as Gods” this passage seems almost like a direct prose translation of Eve’s musings in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*.

“I should learn everything then [married to Casaubon],” she said to herself... “It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. ... I should learn to see the truth by the same {217} light as great men have seen it by. ... I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England” [6]

Though this Eve may not yet have eaten the apple, her desire to be both “good” and “wise,” together with her longing for “a grand life here—now,” suggest that she may soon succumb to a passion for such “intellectual food.” That the food is also associated in her mind with freedom makes the point most strongly of all. When Dorothea fantasizes about the benefits of a marriage with Casaubon, Eliot remarks that “the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.” [7] For clearly this aspiring scholar imagines Casaubon a connubial guide to whom secret studies would soon make her equal, “for inferior who is free?”

Interestingly, as a guide along the grandest path Casaubon seems at first more archangel than Adam, and even more idealized Milton than archangel. Certainly Eliot's epigraph to chapter 3 of *Middlemarch* ("Say, goddess, what ensued, when Raphael, / The affable ...") portrays the guide of Dorothea's dreams as affable archangel, heavenly narrator, "winged messenger," and Dorothea herself as an admiring Eve waiting to be instructed, while other passages show him metamorphosing into a sort of God: "he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor two penny mirror." [8] And as both instructing angel and Godlike master of the masculine intellectual spheres, this dream-Casaubon would come close, as Dorothea's daughterly speech implies, to being a sort of reincarnated Milton.

Behind the dream-Casaubon, however, lurks the real Casaubon, a point Eliot's irony stresses from the scholar's first appearance in *Middlemarch*, just as—the Miltonic parallels continually invite us to make this connection—the "real" Milton dwelt behind the carefully constructed dream image of the celestial bard. Indeed, Eliot's real Casaubon, as opposed to Dorothea's idealized Casaubon, is in certain respects closer to the real author of *Paradise Lost* than his dream image is to the Miltonic epic speaker. Like Milton, after all, Casaubon is a master of the classics and theology, those "provinces of masculine knowledge ... from which all truth could be seen more {218} truly." Like Milton's, too, his intellectual ambition is vast, ontological, almost overweening. In a sense, in fact, Casaubon's ambition is identical with Milton's, for just as Milton's aim was to justify the ways of God to man by learnedly retelling the central myth of Western culture, so Casaubon's goal is to "reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety" by producing a "key to all mythologies." [9] It is not at all unreasonable of Dorothea, therefore, to hope that as a dutiful daughter-wife-pupil she might be to Casaubon as Milton's daughters were to Milton, and that her virtuous example would criticize, by implication, the vices of her seventeenth-century precursors.

If the passionate reality of Dorothea comments upon the negative history of Milton's daughters, however, the dull reality of Casaubon comments even more forcefully upon history's images of Milton. For Casaubon as the forger of a key to all myths is of course a ludicrous caricature of Milton as sublime justifier of sublimity. Bonily selfrighteous, pedantic, humorless, he dwindles in the course of *Middlemarch* from heavenly scholar to tiresome Dryasdust to willful corpse oppressing Dorothea even from beyond the grave, and in his carefully articulated dissolution he is more like Milton's Satan, minus the Byronic glamour, than he is like Milton. But his repudiation of the guilty flesh, his barely disguised contempt for Dorothea's femininity, his tyranny, and his dogmatism make him the parodic shadow of the Miltonic misogynist and (at the same time) an early version of Virginia Woolf's red-faced, ferocious "Professor von X. engaged in writing his monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*." [10] Uneasily wed to such a man, ambitious Dorothea inevitably metamorphoses into the archetypal wretched woman Blake characterized as Milton's wailing six-fold Emanation, his three wives and three daughters gathered into a single grieving shape. That she herself had defined the paradigm of Milton's daughters more hopefully is no doubt an irony Eliot fully intended.

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If the story of Milton's daughters was so useful to both Eliot and her protagonist, ambiguous iconography and all, it is even more useful now for critics seeking to understand the relationship between {219} women and the cluster of misogynistic themes Milton's work brought together so brilliantly. Since the appearance of *Paradise Lost*—even, in a sense, before—all women writers have been to some extent Milton's daughters, continually wondering what their relationship to his patriarchal poetry ought to be and continually brooding upon alternative modes of daughterhood very much like those Dorothea describes. Margaret of Newcastle, for instance, seems to be trying to explain Milton's cosmos to herself in the following passage:

... although nature has not made women so strong of body and so clear of understanding as the ablest of men, yet she has made them fairer, softer, slenderer... . [and] has laid in tender affections, as love, piety, charity, clemency, patience, humility, and the like, which makes them nearest to resemble angels, which are the most perfect of all her works, where men by their ambitions, extortion, fury, and cruelty resemble the devil. But some women are like devils too when they are possessed with those evils, and the best of men ... are like to gods. [11]

Similarly, Anne Finch's "How are we fal'n, fal'n by mistaken rules, / And Education's more than Nature's fools?" defines the Miltonic problem of the fall as a specifically female dilemma. [12] And the Elizabethan "Jane Anger," like Milton's "naughty" daughters, inveighs against the patriarchal oppression of a proto-Miltonic cosmology in which "the gods, knowing that the minds of mankind would be aspiring, and having thoroughly viewed the wonderful virtues wherewith women are enriched, least they should provoke us to pride, and so confound us with Lucifer, they bestowed the supremacy over us to man." [13] Even before Milton had thought about women, it seems, women had thought of Milton.

Following the rise of Romanticism, however, with its simultaneous canonization of Milton and Satan, women writers have been undeniably Milton's daughters. More important, they have even more obviously claimed for themselves precisely the options Eliot has Dorothea explain to Casaubon: on the one hand, the option of apparently docile submission to male myths, of being "proud to minister to such a father," and on the other hand the option of secret study aimed toward the achievement of equality. In a large, metaphorical sense, these two courses of action probably define categories {220} in which almost all writing by women can be subsumed. More narrowly—but still metaphorically—these two alternative patterns describe the main critical responses nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers have made specifically to their readings, or misreadings, of *Paradise Lost*.

We shall argue here that the first alternative is the one Mary Shelley chooses in *Frankenstein*: to take the male culture myth of *Paradise Lost* at its full value—on its own terms, including all the analogies and parallels it implies—and rewrite it so as to clarify its meaning. The way of Milton's more ardently submissive daughters, it is the choice of the woman writer who, like Dorothea, strives to minister to such a father by understanding exactly what he is telling her about herself and what, therefore, he wants of her. But again, like Dorothea's ministrations, this apparently docile way of coping with Miltonic misogyny may conceal fantasies of equality that occasionally erupt in monstrous images of rage, as we shall see in considering *Frankenstein*.

Such guarded fury comes closer (though not completely) to the surface in the writing of women who choose the second alternative of Milton's daughters, the alternative of rewriting *Paradise Lost* so as to make it a more accurate mirror of female experience. This way of coping with Miltonic patriarchy is the *modus operandi* chosen by, for instance, Emily Brontë (in *Wuthering Heights* and elsewhere), and it is the way of the imaginary daughter who studies Greek and Latin in secret—the woman, that is, who teaches herself the language of myth, the tongue of power, so that she can reinvent herself and her own experience while seeming innocently to read to her illustrious father. We shall see that, resolutely closing their Goethe, these women often passionately reopen their Byron, using Romantic modes and manners to enact subversively feminist reinterpretations of *Paradise Lost*. Thus, though the woman writer who chooses this means of coping with her difficult heritage may express her anger more openly, she too produces a palimpsestic or encoded artwork, concealing female secrets within male-devised genres and conventions. Not only *Wuthering Heights* but more recently such female—even feminist—myths as Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* are works by women who have chosen this alternative. But of course the connection of such re-visions of *Paradise Lost* to the patriarchal poetry that fathered them becomes increasingly {221} figurative in the twentieth century, an era whose women have had an unusually developed female tradition from which they can draw strength in their secret study of Milton's language. It is in earlier, lonelier works, in novels like *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*, that we can see the female imagination expressing its anxieties about *Paradise Lost* most overtly. And *Frankenstein* in particular is a fictionalized rendition of the meaning of *Paradise Lost* to women.

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Many critics have noticed that *Frankenstein* (1818) is one of the key Romantic "readings" of *Paradise Lost*. [14] Significantly, however, as a woman's reading it is most especially the story of hell: hell as a dark parody of heaven, hell's creations as monstrous imitations of heaven's creations, and hellish femaleness as a grotesque parody of heavenly maleness. But of course the divagations of the parody merely return to and reinforce the fearful reality of the original. For by parodying *Paradise Lost* in what may have begun as a secret, barely conscious attempt to subvert Milton, Shelley ended up telling, too, the central story of *Paradise Lost*, the tale of "what misery th' inabstinence of Eve / Shall bring on men."

Mary Shelley herself claims to have been continually asked "how I ... came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea" as that of *Frankenstein*, but it is really not surprising that she should have formulated her anxieties about femaleness in such highly literary terms. For of course the nineteen-year-old girl who wrote *Frankenstein* was no ordinary nineteen-year-old but one of England's most notable literary heiresses. Indeed, as "the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity," and the wife of a third, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was the daughter and later the wife of some of Milton's keenest critics, so that Harold Bloom's useful conceit about the family romance of English literature is simply an accurate description of the reality of her life. [15]

In acknowledgment of this web of literary/familial relationships, critics have traditionally studied *Frankenstein* as an interesting example of Romantic myth-making, a work ancillary to such established Promethean masterpieces as Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and Byron's Manfred. ("Like almost everything else about [Mary's] life," one such critic remarks, *Frankenstein* "is an instance of genius observed {222} and admired but not shared." [16] Recently, however, a number of writers have noticed the connection between Mary Shelley's "waking dream" of monster-manufacture and her own experience of awakening sexuality, in particular the "horror

story of Maternity” which accompanied her precipitous entrance into what Ellen Moers calls “teen-age motherhood.” [17] Clearly they are articulating an increasingly uneasy sense that, despite its male protagonist and its underpinning of “masculine” philosophy, *Frankenstein* is somehow a “woman’s book,” if only because its author was caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time she wrote the novel.

In making their case for the work as female fantasy, though, critics like Moers have tended to evade the problems posed by what we must define as *Frankenstein*’s literariness. Yet, despite the weaknesses in those traditional readings of the novel that overlook its intensely sexual materials, it is still undeniably true that Mary Shelley’s “ghost story,” growing from a Keatsian (or Coleridgean) waking dream, is a Romantic novel about—among other things—Romanticism, as, well as a book about books and perhaps, too, about the writers of books. Any theorist of the novel’s femaleness and of its significance as, in Moers’s phrase, a “birth myth” must therefore confront this self-conscious literariness. For as was only natural in “the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity,” Mary Shelley explained her sexuality to herself in the context of her reading and its powerfully felt implications.

For this orphaned literary heiress, highly charged connections between femaleness and literariness must have been established early, and established specifically in relation to the controversial figure of her dead mother. As we shall see, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin read her mother’s writings over and over again as she was growing up. Perhaps more important, she undoubtedly read most of the reviews of her mother’s Posthumous Works, reviews in which Mary Wollstonecraft was attacked as a “philosophical wanton” and a monster, while her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was called “A scripture, archly fram’d for propagating w[hore]s.” [18] But in any case, to the “philosophical wanton’s” daughter, all reading about (or of) her mother’s work must have been painful, given her knowledge that that passionate feminist writer had died in giving life to her, to bestow upon Wollstonecraft’s death from complications of childbirth the {223} melodramatic cast it probably had for the girl herself. That Mary Shelley was conscious, moreover, of a strangely intimate relationship between her feelings toward her dead mother, her romance with a living poet, and her own sense of vocation as a reader and writer is made perfectly clear by her habit of “taking her books to Mary Wollstonecraft’s grave in St. Pancras’ Churchyard, there,” as Muriel Spark puts it, “to pursue her studies in an atmosphere of communion with a mind greater than the second Mrs. Godwin’s [and] to meet Shelley in secret.” [19]

Her mother’s grave: the setting seems an unusually grim, even ghoulish locale for reading, writing, or lovemaking. Yet, to a girl with Mary Shelley’s background, literary activities, like sexual ones, must have been primarily extensions of the elaborate, gothic psychodrama of her family history. If her famous diary is largely a compendium of her reading lists and Shelley’s that fact does not, therefore, suggest unusual reticence on her part. Rather, it emphasizes the point that for Mary, even more than for most writers, reading a book was often an emotional as well as an intellectual event of considerable magnitude. Especially because she never knew her mother, and because her father seemed so definitively to reject her after her youthful elopement, her principal mode of self-definition—certainly in the early years of her life with Shelley, when she was writing *Frankenstein*—was through reading, and to a lesser extent through writing.

Endlessly studying her mother’s works and her father’s, Mary Shelley may be said to have “read” her family and to have been related to her reading, for books appear to have functioned as her surrogate parents, pages and words standing in for flesh and blood. That much of her reading was undertaken in Shelley’s company, moreover, may also help explain some of this obsessiveness, for Mary’s literary inheritance was obviously involved in her very literary romance and marriage. In the years just before she wrote *Frankenstein*, for instance, and those when she was engaged in composing the novel (1816-17), she studied her parents’ writings, alone or together with Shelley, like a scholarly detective seeking clues to the significance of some cryptic text. [20]

To be sure, this investigation of the mysteries of literary genealogy was done in a larger context. In these same years, Mary Shelley {224} recorded innumerable readings of contemporary gothic novels, as well as a program of study in English, French, and German literature that would do credit to a modern graduate student. But especially, in 1815, 1816, and 1817, she read the works of Milton: *Paradise Lost* (twice), *Paradise Regained*, *Comus*, *Areopagetica*, *Lycidas*. And what makes the extent of this reading particularly impressive is the fact that in these years, her seventeenth to her twenty-first, Mary Shelley was almost continuously pregnant, “confined,” or nursing. At the same time, it is precisely the coincidence of all these disparate activities—her family studies, her initiation into adult sexuality, and her literary self-education—that makes her vision of *Paradise Lost* so significant. For her developing sense of herself as a literary creature and/or creator seems to have been inseparable from her emerging self-definition as daughter, mistress, wife, and mother. Thus she cast her birth myth—her myth of origins—in precisely those cosmogenic terms to which her parents, her husband, and indeed her whole literary culture continually alluded: the terms of *Paradise Lost*, which (as she indicates even on the title page of

her novel), she saw as preceding, paralleling, and commenting upon the Greek cosmogony of the Prometheus play her husband had just translated. It is as a female fantasy of sex and reading, then, a gothic psychodrama reflecting Mary Shelley's own sense of what we might call bibliogenesis, that *Frankenstein* is a version of the misogynistic story implicit in *Paradise Lost*.

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It would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of *Frankenstein*'s title page, with its allusive subtitle ("The Modern Prometheus") and carefully pointed Miltonic epigraph ("Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"). But our first really serious clue to the highly literary nature of this history of a creature born outside history is its author's use of an unusually evidentiary technique for conveying the stories of her monster and his maker. Like a literary jigsaw puzzle, a collection of apparently random documents from whose juxtaposition the scholar-detective must infer a meaning, *Frankenstein* consists of three "concentric circles" of narration (Walton's letters, Victor Frankenstein's recital to Walton, and the monster's speech to Frankenstein), within which are embedded pockets of digression containing {225} other miniature narratives (Frankenstein's mother's story, Elizabeth Lavenza's and Justine's stories, Felix's and Agatha's story, Safie's story), etc. [21] As we have noted, reading and assembling documentary evidence, examining it, analyzing it and researching it comprised for Shelley a crucial if voyeuristic method of exploring origins, explaining identity, understanding sexuality. Even more obviously, it was a way of researching and analyzing an emotionally unintelligible text, like *Paradise Lost*. In a sense, then, even before *Paradise Lost* as a central item on the monster's reading list becomes a literal event in *Frankenstein*, the novel's literary structure prepares us to confront Milton's patriarchal epic, both as a sort of research problem and as the framework for a complex system of allusions.

The book's dramatic situations are equally resonant. Like Mary Shelley, who was a puzzled but studious Miltonist, this novel's key characters—Walton, Frankenstein, and the monster—are obsessed with problem-solving. "I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited," exclaims the young explorer, Walton, as he embarks like a child "on an expedition of discovery up his native river" (2, letter 1). "While my companions contemplated ... the magnificent appearance of things," declares Frankenstein, the scientist of sexual ontology, "I delighted in investigating their causes" (22, chap. 2). "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come?" (113-15, chap. 15) the monster reports wondering, describing endless speculations cast in Miltonic terms. All three, like Shelley herself, appear to be trying to understand their presence in a fallen world, and trying at the same time to define the nature of the lost paradise that must have existed before the fall. But unlike Adam, all three characters seem to have fallen not merely from Eden but from the earth, fallen directly into hell, like Sin, Satan, and—by implication—Eve. Thus their questionings are in some sense female, for they belong in that line of literary women's questionings of the fall into gender which goes back at least to Anne Finch's plaintive "How are we fal'n?" and forward to Sylvia Plath's horrified "I have fallen very far!" [22]

From the first, however, *Frankenstein* answers such neo-Miltonic questions mainly through explicit or implicit allusions to Milton, retelling the story of the fall not so much to protest against it as to clarify its meaning. The parallels between those two Promethean {226} overreachers Walton and Frankenstein, for instance, have always been clear to readers. But that both characters can, therefore, be described (the way Walton describes Frankenstein) as "fallen angels" is not as frequently remarked. Yet Frankenstein himself is perceptive enough to ask Walton "Do you share my madness?" at just the moment when the young explorer remarks Satanically that "One man's life or death were but a small price to pay ... for the dominion I [wish to] acquire" (13, letter 4). Plainly one fallen angel can recognize another. Alienated from his crew and chronically friendless, Walton tells his sister that he longs for a friend "on the wide ocean," and what he discovers in Victor Frankenstein is the fellowship of hell.

In fact, like the many other secondary narratives Mary Shelley offers in her novel, Walton's story is itself an alternative version of the myth of origins presented in *Paradise Lost*. Writing his ambitious letters home from St. Petersburg [sic], Archangel, and points north, Walton moves like Satan away from the sanctity and sanity represented by his sister, his crew, and the allegorical names of the places he leaves. Like Satan, too, he seems at least in part to be exploring the frozen frontiers of hell in order to attempt a return to heaven, for the "country of eternal light" he envisions at the Pole (1, letter 1) has much in common with Milton's celestial "Fountain of Light" (PL 3. 375), [23] Again, like Satan's (and Eve's) aspirations, his ambition has violated a patriarchal decree: his father's "dying injunction" had forbidden him "to embark on a seafaring life." Moreover, even the icy hell where Walton encounters Frankenstein and the monster is Miltonic, for all three of these diabolical wanderers must learn, like the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost*, that "Beyond this flood a frozen Continent / Lies dark and wild

... / Thither by harpyfooted Furies hal'd, / At certain revolutions all the damn'd / Are brought ... From Beds of raging Fire to starve in Ice" (PL 2. 587600).

Finally, another of Walton's revelations illuminates not only the likeness of his ambitions to Satan's but also the similarity of his anxieties to those of his female author. Speaking of his childhood, he reminds his sister that, because poetry had "lifted [my soul] to heaven," he had become a poet and "for one year lived in a paradise of my own creation." Then he adds ominously that "You are wellacquainted with my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment" {227} (2-3, letter 1). But of course, as she confesses in her introduction to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, too, had spent her childhood in "waking dreams" of literature; later, both she and her poet-husband hoped she would prove herself "worthy of [her] parentage and enroll [herself] on the page of fame" (xii). In a sense, then, given the Miltonic context in which Walton's story of poetic failure is set, it seems possible that one of the anxious fantasies his narrative helps Mary Shelley covertly examine is the fearful tale of a female fall from a lost paradise of art, speech, and autonomy into a hell of sexuality, silence, and filthy materiality, "A Universe of death, which God by curse / Created evil, for evil only good, / Where all life dies, death lives, and Nature breeds, / Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things" (PL 2. 622-25).

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Walton and his new friend Victor Frankenstein have considerably more in common than a Byronic (or Monk Lewis-ish) Satanism. For one thing, both are orphans, as Frankenstein's monster is and as it turns out all the major and almost all the minor characters in *Frankenstein* are, from Caroline Beaufort and Elizabeth Lavenza to Justine, Felix, Agatha, and Safie. Victor Frankenstein has not always been an orphan, though, and Shelley devotes much space to an account of his family history. Family histories, in fact, especially those of orphans, appear to fascinate her, and wherever she can include one in the narrative she does so with an obsessiveness suggesting that through the disastrous tale of the child who becomes "an orphan and a beggar" she is once more recounting the story of the fall, the expulsion from paradise, and the confrontation of hell. For Milton's Adam and Eve, after all, began as motherless orphans reared (like Shelley herself) by a stern but kindly father-god, and ended as beggars rejected by God (as she was by *Godwin* when she eloped). Thus Caroline Beaufort's father dies leaving her "an orphan and a beggar," and Elizabeth Lavenza also becomes "an orphan and a beggar"—the phrase is repeated (18, 20, chap. 1)—with the disappearance of her father into an Austrian dungeon. And though both girls are rescued by Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor's father, the early alienation from the patriarchal chain-of-being signalled by their orphanhood prefigures the hellish fate in store for them and their family. Later, {228} motherless Safie and fatherless Justine enact similarly ominous anxiety fantasies about the fall of woman into orphanhood and beggary.

Beyond their orphanhood, however, a universal sense of guilt links such diverse figures as Justine, Felix, and Elizabeth, just as it will eventually link Victor, Walton, and the monster. Justine, for instance, irrationally confesses to the murder of little William, though she knows perfectly well she is innocent. Even more irrationally, Elizabeth is reported by Alphonse Frankenstein to have exclaimed "Oh, God! I have murdered my darling child!" after her first sight of the corpse of little William (57, chap. 7). Victor, too, long before he knows that the monster is actually his brother's killer, decides that his "creature" has killed William and that therefore he, the creator, is the "true murderer": "the mere presence of the idea," he notes, is "an irresistible proof of the fact" (60, chap. 7). Complicity in the murder of the child William is, it seems, another crucial component of the Original Sin shared by prominent members of the Frankenstein family.

At the same time, the likenesses among all these characters—the common alienation, the shared guilt, the orphanhood and beggary— imply relationships of redundancy between them like the solipsistic relationships among artfully placed mirrors. What reinforces our sense of this hellish solipsism is the barely disguised incest at the heart of a number of the marriages and romances the novel describes. Most notably, Victor Frankenstein is slated to marry his "more than sister" Elizabeth Lavenza, whom he confesses to having always considered "a possession of my own" (21, chap. 1). But the mysterious Mrs. Saville, to whom Walton's letters are addressed, is apparently in some sense his more than sister, just as Caroline Beaufort was clearly a "more than" wife, in fact a daughter, to her father's friend Alphonse Frankenstein. Even relationless Justine appears to have a metaphorically incestuous relationship with the Frankensteins, since as their servant she becomes their possession and more than sister, while the female monster Victor half-constructs in Scotland will be a more than sister as well as a mate to the monster, since both have the same parent/creator.

Certainly at least some of this incest-obsession in *Frankenstein* is, as Ellen Moers remarks, the "standard" sensational matter of Romantic {229} novels. [24] Some of it, too, even without the conventions of the gothic thriller, would be a natural subject for an impressionable young woman who had just spent several months in the company of the famously incestuous author of *Manfred*. [25] Nevertheless, the streak of incest that darkens *Frankenstein* probably owes as much to the book's Miltonic framework as it does to Mary Shelley's own life and

times. In the Edenic cosiness of their childhood, for instance, Victor and Elizabeth are incestuous as Adam and Eve are, literally incestuous because they have the same creator, and figuratively so because Elizabeth is Victor's pretty plaything, the image of an angelic soul or "epipsyche" created from his own soul just as Eve is created from Adam's rib. Similarly, the incestuous relationships of Satan and Sin, and by implication of Satan and Eve, are mirrored in the incest fantasies of *Frankenstein*, including the disguised but intensely sexual waking dream in which Victor Frankenstein in effect couples with his monster by applying "the instruments of life" to its body and inducing a shudder of response (42, chap. 5). For Milton, and therefore for Mary Shelley, who was trying to understand Milton, incest was an inescapable metaphor for the solipsistic fever of selfawareness that Matthew Arnold was later to call "the dialogue of the mind with itself." [26]

If Victor Frankenstein can be likened to both Adam and Satan, however, who or what is he *really*? Here we are obliged to confront both the moral ambiguity and the symbolic slipperiness which are at the heart of all the characterizations in *Frankenstein*. In fact, it is probably these continual and complex reallocations of meaning, among characters whose histories echo and re-echo each other, that have been so bewildering to critics. Like figures in a dream, all the people in *Frankenstein* have different bodies and somehow, horribly, the same face, or worse—the same two faces. For this reason, as Muriel Spark notes, even the book's subtitle "The Modern Prometheus" is ambiguous, "for though at first Frankenstein is himself the Prometheus, the vital fire-endowing protagonist, the Monster, as soon as he is created, takes on [a different aspect of] the role." [27] Moreover, if we postulate that Mary Shelley is more concerned with Milton than she is with Aeschylus, the intertwining of meanings grows even more confusing, as the monster himself several times points out to Frankenstein, noting "I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather {230} the fallen angel," (84, chap. 10), then adding elsewhere that "God, in pity, made man beautiful ... after His own image ; but my form is a filthy type of yours... . Satan had his companions ... but I am solitary and abhorred" (115, chap. 15). In other words, not only do Frankenstein and his monster both in one way or another enact the story of Prometheus, each is at one time or another like God (Victor as creator, the monster as his creator's "Master"), like Adam (Victor as innocent child, the monster as primordial "creature"), and like Satan (Victor as tormented overreacher, the monster as vengeful fiend).

What is the reason for this continual duplication and reduplication of roles? Most obviously, perhaps, the dreamlike shifting of fantasy figures from part to part, costume to costume, tells us that we are in fact dealing with the psychodrama or waking dream that Shelley herself suspected she had written. Beyond this, however, we would argue that the fluidity of the narrative's symbolic scheme reinforces in another way the crucial significance of the Miltonic skeleton around which Mary Shelley's hideous progeny took shape. For it becomes increasingly clear as one reads *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost* in mind that because the novel's author is such an inveterate student of literature, families, and sexuality, and because she is using her novel as a tool to help her make sense of her reading, *Frankenstein* is ultimately a mock *Paradise Lost* in which both Victor and his monster, together with a number of secondary characters, play all the neo-biblical parts over and over again—all except, it seems at first, the part of Eve. Not just the striking omission of any obvious Eve-figure from this "woman's book" about Milton, but also the barely concealed sexual components of the story as well as our earlier analysis of Milton's bogey should tell us, however, that for Mary Shelley the part of Eve is all the parts.

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On the surface, Victor seems at first more Adamic than Satanic or Eve-like. His Edenic childhood is an interlude of prelapsarian innocence in which, like Adam, he is sheltered by his benevolent father as a sensitive plant might be "sheltered by the gardener, from every rougher wind" (19-20, chap. 1). When cherubic Elizabeth Lavenza joins the family, she seems as "heaven-sent" as Milton's {231}

Eve, as much Victor's "possession" as Adam's rib is Adam's. Moreover, though he is evidently forbidden almost nothing ("My parents [were not] tyrants ... but the agents and creators of many delights"), Victor hints to Walton that his deific father, like Adam's and Walton's, did on one occasion arbitrarily forbid him to pursue his interest in arcane knowledge. Indeed, like Eve and Satan, Victor blames his own fall at least in part on his father's apparent arbitrariness. "If... my father had taken the pains to explain to me that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded. ... It is even possible that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (24-25, chap. 2). And soon after asserting this he even associates an incident in which a tree is struck by Jovian thunder bolts with his feelings about his forbidden studies.

As his researches into the "secrets of nature" become more feverish, however, and as his ambition "to explore unknown powers" grows more intense, Victor begins to metamorphose from Adam to Satan, becoming "as Gods" in his capacity of "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter," laboring like a guilty artist to complete his false creation. Finally, in his conversations with Walton he echoes Milton's fallen angel, and Marlowe's, in his frequently reiterated confession that "I bore a hell within me which nothing could extinguish" (72, chap. 8).

Indeed, as the “true murderer” of innocence, here cast in the form of the child William, Victor perceives himself as a diabolical creator whose mind has involuntarily “let loose” a monstrous and “filthy demon” in much the same way that Milton’s Satan’s swelled head produced Sin, the disgusting monster he “let loose” upon the world. Watching a “noble war in the sky” that seems almost like an intentional reminder that we are participating in a critical rearrangement of most of the elements of *Paradise Lost*, he explains that “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind ... nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (61, chap. 7).

Even while it is the final sign and seal of Victor’s transformation from Adam to Satan, however, it is perhaps the Sin-ful murder of the child William that is our first overt clue to the real nature of the bewilderingly disguised set of identity shifts and parallels Mary Shelley incorporated into *Frankenstein*. For as we saw earlier, not just Victor and the monster but also Elizabeth and Justine insist {232} upon responsibility for the monster’s misdeed. Feeling “as if I had been guilty of a crime” (41, chap. 4) even before one had been committed, Victor responds to the news of William’s death with the same self-accusations that torment the two orphans. And, significantly, for all three—as well as for the monster and little William himself—one focal point of both crime and guilt is an image of that other beautiful orphan, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein. Passing from hand to hand, pocket to pocket, the smiling miniature of Victor’s “angel mother” seems a token of some secret fellowship in sin, as does Victor’s post-creation nightmare of transforming a lovely, living Elizabeth, with a single magical kiss, into “the corpse of my dead mother” enveloped in a shroud made more horrible by “grave- worms crawling in the folds of the flannel” (42, chap. 5). Though it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized, femaleness—the gender definition of mothers and daughters, orphans and beggars, monsters and false creators—is at the heart of this apparently masculine book.

Because this is so, it eventually becomes clear that though Victor Frankenstein enacts the roles of Adam and Satan like a child trying on costumes, his single most self-defining act transforms him definitively into Eve. For as both Ellen Moers and Marc Rubenstein have pointed out, after much study of the “cause of generation and life,” after locking himself away from ordinary society in the tradition of such agonized mothers as Wollstonecraft’s Maria, Eliot’s Hetty Sorel, and Hardy’s Tess, Victor Frankenstein has a baby. [28] His “pregnancy” and childbirth are obviously manifested by the existence of the paradoxically huge being who emerges from his “workshop of filthy creation,” but even the descriptive language of his creation myth is suggestive: “incredible labours,” “emaciated with confinement,” “a passing trance,” “oppressed by a slow fever,” “nervous to a painful degree,” “exercise and amusement would ... drive away incipient disease,” “the instruments of life” (39-41, chap. 4), etc. And, like Eve’s fall into guilty knowledge and painful maternity, Victor’s entrance into what Blake would call the realm of “generation” is marked by a recognition of the necessary interdependence of those complementary opposites, sex and death: “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death,” he observes (36, chap. 4), and in his isolated workshop of filthy creation—filthy because obscenely sexual [29]—he collects and arranges materials furnished by {233} “the dissecting room and the slaughterhouse.” Pursuing “nature to her hiding places” as Eve does in eating the apple, he learns that “the tremendous secrets of the human frame” are the interlocked secrets of sex and death, although, again like Eve, in his first mad pursuit of knowledge he knows not “eating death.” But that his actual orgasmic animation of his monster-child takes place “on a dreary night in November,” month of All Souls, short days, and the year’s last slide toward death, merely reinforces the Miltonic and Blakean nature of his act of generation.

Even while Victor Frankenstein’s self-defining procreation dramatically transforms him into an Eve-figure, however, our recognition of its implications reflects backward upon our sense of Victor-as-Satan and our earlier vision of Victor-as-Adam. Victor as Satan, we now realize, was never really the masculine, Byronic Satan of the first book of *Paradise Lost*, but always, instead, the curiously female, outcast Satan who gave birth to Sin. In his Eve-like pride (“I was surprised ... that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret” [37, chap. 4]), this Victor-Satan becomes “dizzy” with his creative powers, so that his monstrous pregnancy, bookishly and solipsistically conceived, reenacts as a terrible bibliogenesis the moment when, in Milton’s version, Satan “dizzy swum / In darkness, while [his] head flames thick and fast / Threw forth, till on the left side op’ning wide” and Sin, Death’s mother-to-be, appeared like “a Sign / Portentous” {PL 2: 753-61}. Because he has conceived—or, rather, misconceived—his monstrous offspring by brooding upon the wrong books, moreover, this Victor-Satan is paradigmatic, like the falsely creative fallen angel, of the female artist, whose anxiety about her own aesthetic activity is expressed, for instance, in Mary Shelley’s deferential introductory phrase about her “hideous progeny,” with its plain implication that in her alienated attic workshop of filthy creation she has given birth to a deformed book, a literary abortion or miscarriage. “How [did] I, then a young girl, [come] to think of and to *dilate* upon so very hideous an idea?” is a key (if disingenuous) question she records. But we should not overlook her word play

upon *dilate*, just as we should not ignore the anxious pun on the word author that is so deeply embedded in *Frankenstein*.

If the adult, Satanic Victor is Eve-like both in his procreation and his anxious creation, even the young, prelapsarian, and Adamic {234} Victor is—to risk a pun—curiously female, that is, Eve-like. Innocent and guided by silken threads like a Blakeian lamb in a Godwinian garden, he is consumed by “a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature,” a longing which—expressed in his explorations of “vaults and charnelhouses,” his guilty observations of “the unhallowed damp of the grave,” and his passion to understand “the structure of the human frame”—recalls the criminal female curiosity that led Psyche to lose love by gazing upon its secret face, Eve to insist upon consuming “intellectual food,” and Prometheus’s sister-in-law Pandora to open the forbidden box of fleshly ills. But if Victor-Adam is also Victor-Eve, what is the real significance of the episode in which, away at school and cut off from his family, he locks himself into his workshop of filthy creation and gives birth by intellectual parturition to a giant monster? Isn’t it precisely at this point in the novel that he discovers he is not Adam but Eve, not Satan but Sin, not male but female? If so, it seems likely that what this crucial section of *Frankenstein* really enacts is the story of Eve’s discovery not that she must fall but that, having been created female, she is fallen, femaleness and fallenness being essentially synonymous. For what Victor Frankenstein most importantly learns, we must remember, is that he is the “author” of the monster—for him alone is “reserved ... so astonishing a secret”—and thus it is he who is “the true murderer,” he who unleashes Sin and Death upon the world, he who dreams the primal kiss that incestuously kills both “sister” and “mother.” Doomed and filthy, is he not, then, Eve instead of Adam? In fact, may not the story of the fall be, for women, the story of the discovery that one is not innocent and Adam (as one had supposed) but Eve, and fallen? Perhaps this is what Freud’s cruel but metaphorically accurate concept of penis-envy really means: the girl-child’s surprised discovery that she is female, hence fallen, inadequate. Certainly the almost grotesquely anxious self-analysis implicit in Victor Frankenstein’s (and Mary Shelley’s) multiform relationships to Eve, Adam, God, and Satan suggest as much.

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The discovery that one is fallen is in a sense a discovery that one is a monster, a murderer, a being gnawed by “the never-dying worm” (72, chap. 8) and therefore capable of any horror, including but not {235} limited to sex, death, and filthy literary creation. More, the discovery that one is fallen—self-divided, murderous, material—is the discovery that one has released a “vampire” upon the world, “forced to destroy all that [is] dear” (61, chap. 7). For this reason—because *Frankenstein* is a story of woman’s fall told by, as it were, an apparently docile daughter to a censorious “father”—the monster’s narrative is embedded at the heart of the novel like the secret of the fall itself. Indeed, just as Frankenstein’s workshop, with its maddening, riddling answers to cosmic questions is a hidden but commanding attic womb/room where the young artist-scientist murders to dissect and to recreate, so the murderous monster’s single, carefully guarded narrative commands and controls Mary Shelley’s novel. Delivered at the top of Mont Blanc—like the North Pole one of the Shelley family’s metaphors for the indifferently powerful source of creation and destruction—it is the story of deformed Geraldine in “Christabel,” the story of the dead-alive crew in “The Ancient Mariner,” the story of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, and of her degraded double Sin—all secondary or female characters to whom male authors have imperiously denied any chance of self-explanation. [30] At the same time the monster’s narrative is a philosophical meditation on what it means to be born without a “soul” or a history, as well as an exploration of what it feels like to be a “filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s],” a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex. In fact, though it tends to be ignored by critics (and film-makers), whose emphasis has always fallen upon Frankenstein himself as the archetypal mad scientist, the drastic shift in point of view that the nameless monster’s monologue represents probably constitutes *Frankenstein*’s most striking technical *tour de force*, just as the monster’s bitter self-revelations are Mary Shelley’s most impressive and original achievement.* [31]

Like Victor Frankenstein, his author and superficially better self, the monster enacts in turn the roles of Adam and Satan, and even eventually hints at a sort of digression into the role of God. Like Adam, he recalls a time of primordial innocence, his days and nights in “the forest near Ingolstadt,” where he ate berries, learned about heat and cold, and perceived “the boundaries of the radiant roof of light which canopied me” (88, chap. 11). Almost too quickly, however, he metamorphoses into an outcast and Satanic figure, hiding in a shepherd’s hut which seems to him “as exquisite ... a retreat as {236} Pandemonium ... after ... the lake of fire” (90, chap. 11). Later, when he secretly sets up housekeeping behind the De Lacey’s pigpen, his wistful observations of the loving though exiled family and their pastoral abode (“Happy, happy earth! Fit habitation for gods ...” [100, chap. 12]) recall Satan’s mingled jealousy and admiration of that “happy rural seat of various view” where Adam and Eve are emparadised by God and Milton (PL 4. 247). Eventually, burning the cottage and murdering William in demonic rage, he seems to become entirely Satanic: “I, like the arch-fiend, bore a hell within me” (121, chap. 16) ;

“Inflamed by pain, I vowed eternal hatred ... to all mankind” (126, chap. 16). At the same time, in his assertion of power over his “author,” his mental conception of another creature (a female monster), and his implicit dream of founding a new, vegetarian race somewhere in “the vast wilds of South America,” (131, chap. 17), he temporarily enacts the part of a God, a creator, a master, albeit a failed one.

As the monster himself points out, however, each of these Miltonic roles is a Procrustean bed into which he simply cannot fit. Where, for instance, Victor Frankenstein’s childhood really was Edenic, the monster’s anxious infancy is isolated and ignorant, rather than insulated or innocent, so that his groping arrival at self-consciousness—“I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew and could distinguish nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (87-88, chap. 1 1)—is a fiercely subversive parody of Adam’s exuberant “all things smil’d, / With fragrance and with joy my heart o’erflowed. / Myself I then perus’d, and Limb by Limb / Survey’d, and sometimes went, and sometimes ran / With supple joints, as lively vigor led” (PL 8. 265-69). Similarly, the monster’s attempts at speech (“Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (88, chap. 11) parody and subvert Adam’s (“To speak I tri’d, and forthwith spake, / My Tongue obey’d and readily could name / Whate’er I saw” (PL 8. 271-72). And of course the monster’s anxiety and confusion (“What was I? The question again recurred to be answered only with groans” [106, chap. 13]) are a dark version of Adam’s wondering bliss (“who I was, or where, or from what cause, / [I] Knew not... . [But I] feel that I am happier than I know” (PL 8. 270-71, 282). {237}

Similarly, though his uncontrollable rage, his alienation, even his enormous size and superhuman physical strength bring him closer to Satan than he was to Adam, the monster puzzles over discrepancies between his situation and the fallen angel’s. Though he is, for example, “in bulk as huge /As whom the Fables name of monstrous size,/ Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr’d on Jove,” and though, indeed, he is fated to war like Prometheus on Jovean Frankenstein, this demon/monster has fallen from no heaven, exercised no power of choice, and been endowed with no companions in evil. “I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener,” he tells Frankenstein, describing his schooldays in the De Lacey pigpen (113, chap. 15). And, interestingly, his remark might well have been made by Mary Shelley herself, that “devout but nearly silent listener” (xiv) to masculine conversations who, like her hideous progeny, “continually studied and exercised [her] mind upon” such “histories” as *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Werter* [sic] “whilst [her] friends were employed in their ordinary occupations” (112, chap. 15).

In fact, it is his intellectual similarity to his authoress (rather than his “author”) which first suggests that Victor Frankenstein’s male monster may really be a female in disguise. Certainly the books which educate him—*Werter*, *Plutarch’s Lives*, and *Paradise Lost*—are not only books Mary had herself read in 1815, the year before she wrote *Frankenstein*, but they also typify just the literary categories she thought it necessary to study: the contemporary novel of sensibility, the serious history of Western civilization, and the highly cultivated epic poem. As specific works, moreover, each must have seemed to her to embody lessons a female author (or monster) must learn about a male-dominated society. *Werter*’s story, says the monster—and he seems to be speaking for Mary Shelley—taught him about “gentle and domestic manners,” and about “lofty sentiments ... which had for their object something out of self.” It functioned, in other words, as a sort of Romantic conduct book. In addition, it served as an introduction to the virtues of the proto-Byronic “Man of Feeling,” for, admiring *Werter* and never mentioning Lotte, the monster explains to Victor that “I thought *Werter* himself a more divine being than I had ever ... imagined,” adding, in a line whose female {238} irony about male self-dramatization must surely have been intentional, “I wept [his extinction] without precisely understanding it” (113, chap. 15).

If *Werter* introduces the monster to female modes of domesticity and self-abnegation, as well as to the unattainable glamour of male heroism, Plutarch’s *Lives* teaches him all the masculine intricacies of that history which his anomalous birth has denied him. Mary Shelley, excluding herself from the household of the second Mrs. Godwin and studying family as well as literary history on her mother’s grave, must, again, have found in her own experience an appropriate model for the plight of a monster who, as James Rieger notes, is especially characterized by “his unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history.” [32] In terms of the disguised story the novel tells, however, this monster is not unique at all, but representative, as Shelley may have suspected she herself was. For, as Jane Austen has Catherine Morland suggest in *Northanger Abbey*, what is woman but man without a history, at least without the sort of history related in Plutarch’s *Lives*? “History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in,” Catherine declares “... the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all— it is very tiresome” (NA I, chap. 14).

But of course the third and most crucial book referred to in the miniature Bildungsroman of the monster's narrative is *Paradise Lost*, an epic myth of origins which is of major importance to him, as it is to Mary Shelley, precisely because, unlike Plutarch, it does provide him with what appears to be a personal history. And again, even the need for such a history draws Shelley's monster closer not only to the realistically ignorant female defined by Jane Austen but also to the archetypal female defined by John Milton. For, like the monster, like Catherine Morland, and like Mary Shelley herself, Eve is characterized by her "unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history," even though as the "Mother of Mankind" she is fated to "make" history. It is to Adam, after all, that God and His angels grant explanatory visions of past and future. At such moments of high historical colloquy Eve tends to excuse herself with "lowliness Majestic" (before the fall) or (after the fall) she is magically put to sleep, calmed like a frightened animal "with gentle Dreams ... and all her spirits compos'd/To meek submission" {PL 12. 595-96}.

Nevertheless, one of the most notable facts about the monster's {239} ceaselessly anxious study of *Paradise Lost* is his failure even to mention Eve. As an insistently male monster, on the surface of his palimpsestic narrative he appears to be absorbed in Milton's epic only because, as Percy Shelley wrote in the preface to *Frankenstein* that he drafted for his wife, *Paradise Lost* "most especially" conveys "the truth of the elementary principles of human nature," and conveys that truth in the dynamic tensions developed among its male characters, Adam, Satan, and God (xvii). Yet not only the monster's uniquely ahistorical birth, his literary anxieties, and the sense his readings (like Mary's) foster that he must have been parented, if at all, by books; not only all these facts and traits but also his shuddering sense of deformity, his nauseating size, his namelessness, and his orphaned, motherless isolation link him with Eve and with Eve's double, Sin. Indeed, at several points in his impassioned analysis of Milton's story he seems almost on the verge of saying so, as he examines the disjunctions among Adam, Satan, and himself:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guided by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me... . Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him, but I am solitary and abhorred. [114-15, chap. 15]

It is Eve, after all, who languishes helpless and alone, while Adam converses with superior beings, and it is Eve in whom the Satanically bitter gall of envy rises, causing her to eat the apple in the hope of adding "what wants / In Female Sex." It is Eve, moreover, to whom deathly isolation is threatened should Adam reject her, an isolation more terrible even than Satan's alienation from heaven. And finally {240} it is Eve whose body, like her mind, is said by Milton to resemble "less / His Image who made both, and less [to express] / The character of that Dominion giv'n / O'er other Creatures ..." (PL 8. 543-46). In fact, to a sexually anxious reader, Eve's body might, like Sin's, seem "horrid even from [its] very resemblance" to her husband's, a "filthy" or obscene version of the human form divine. [33]

As we argued earlier, women have seen themselves (because they have been seen) as monstrous, vile, degraded creatures, secondcomers, and emblems of filthy materiality, even though they have also been traditionally defined as superior spiritual beings, angels, better halves. "Woman [is] a temple built over a sewer," said the Church father Tertullian, and Milton seems to see Eve as both temple and sewer, echoing that patristic misogyny. [34] Mary Shelley's conscious or unconscious awareness of the monster woman implicit in the angel woman is perhaps clearest in the revisionary scene where her monster, as if taking his cue from Eve in *Paradise Lost* book 4, first catches sight of his own image: "I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers ... but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool. At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification" (98-99, chap. 12). In one sense, this is a corrective to Milton's blindness about Eve. Having been created second, inferior, a mere rib, how could she possibly, this passage implies, have seemed anything but monstrous to herself? In another sense, however, the scene supplements Milton's description of Eve's introduction to herself, for ironically, though her reflection in "the clear / Smooth Lake" is as beautiful as the monster's is ugly, the self-absorption that Eve's confessed passion for her own image signals is plainly meant by Milton to seem morally ugly, a hint of her potential for spiritual

deformity: “There I had fixt / Mine eyes till now, and pin’d with vain desire, / Had not a voice thus warn’d me, What thou seest, / What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself...” (PL 4. 465-68).

The figurative monstrosity of female narcissism is a subtle deformity, however, in comparison with the literal monstrosity many women are taught to see as characteristic of their own bodies. Adrienne Rich’s twentieth-century description of “a woman in the {241} shape of a monster / A monster in the shape of a woman” is merely the latest in a long line of monstrous female self-definitions that includes the fearful images in Djuna Barnes’s *Book of Repulsive Women*, Denise Levertov’s “a white sweating bull of a poet told us / our cunts are ugly” and Sylvia Plath’s “old yellow” self of the poem “In Plaster.” [35] Animal and misshapen, these emblems of self-loathing must have descended at least in part from the distended body of Mary Shelley’s darkly parodic Eve/Sin/Monster, whose enormity betokens not only the enormity of Victor Frankenstein’s crime and Satan’s bulk but also the distentions or deformities of pregnancy and the Swiftian sexual nausea expressed in Lemuel Gulliver’s horrified description of a Brobdignagian breast, a passage Mary Shelley no doubt studied along with the rest of *Gulliver’s Travels* when she read the book in 1816, shortly before beginning *Frankenstein*. [36]

At the same time, just as surely as Eve’s moral deformity is symbolized by the monster’s physical malformation, the monster’s physical ugliness represents his social illegitimacy, his bastardy, his namelessness. Bitchy and dastardly as Shakespeare’s Edmund, whose association with filthy femaleness is established not only by his devotion to the material/maternal goddess Nature but also by his interlocking affairs with those filthy females Goneril and Regan, Mary Shelley’s monster has also been “got” in a “dark and vicious place.” Indeed, in his vile illegitimacy he seems to incarnate that bestial “unnameable” place. And significantly, he is himself as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society, as nameless as unmarried, illegitimately pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin may have felt herself to be at the time she wrote *Frankenstein*.

“This nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good,” Mary commented when she learned that it was the custom at early dramatizations of *Frankenstein* to place a blank line next to the name of the actor who played the part of the monster. [37] But her pleased surprise was disingenuous, for the problem of names and their connection with social legitimacy had been forced into her consciousness all her life. As the sister of illegitimate and therefore nameless Fanny Imlay, for instance, she knew what bastardy meant, and she knew it too as the mother of a premature and illegitimate baby girl who died at the age of two weeks without ever having {242} been given a name. Of course, when Fanny dramatically excised her name from her suicide note Mary learned more about the significance even of insignificant names. And as the stepsister of Mary Jane Clairmont, who defined herself as the “creature” of Lord Byron and changed her name for a while with astonishing frequency (from Mary Jane to Jane to Clara to Claire), Mary knew about the importance of names too. Perhaps most of all, though, Mary’s sense of the fearful significance of legitimate and illegitimate names must have been formed by her awareness that her own name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, was absolutely identical with the name of the mother who had died in giving birth to her. Since this was so, she may have speculated, perhaps her own monstrosity, her murderous illegitimacy, consisted in her being—like Victor Frankenstein’s creation—a reanimation of the dead, a sort of galvanized corpse ironically arisen from what should have been “the cradle of life.”

This implicit fantasy of the reanimation of the dead in the monstrous and nameless body of the living returns us, however, to the matter of the monster’s Satanic, Sin-ful and Eve-like moral deformity. For of course the crimes that the monster commits once he has accepted the world’s definition of him as little more than a namelessly “filthy mass” all reinforce his connection with Milton’s unholy trinity of Sin, Eve/Satan, and Death. The child of two authors (Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley) whose mothers have been stolen away by death, this motherless monster is after all made from dead bodies, from loathsome parts found around cemeteries, so that it seems only “natural” for him to continue the Blakeian cycle of despair his birth began, by bringing further death into the world. And of course he brings death, in the central actions of the novel: death to the childish innocence of little William (whose name is that of Mary Shelley’s father, her half-brother, and her son, so that one can hardly decide to which male relative she may have been alluding) ; death to the faith and truth of allegorically named Justine; death to the legitimate artistry of the Shelleyan poet Clerval; and death to the ladylike selflessness of angelic Elizabeth. Is he acting, in his vile way, for Mary Shelley, whose elegant femininity seemed, in view of her books, so incongruous to the poet Beddoes and to literary Lord Dillon? “She has no business to be a woman by her {243} books,” noted Beddoes. And “your writing and your manners are not in accordance,” Dillon told Mary herself. “I should have thought of you—if I had only read you—that you were a sort of ... Sybil, outpouringly enthusiastic ... but you are cool, quiet and feminine to the last degree... . Explain this to me.” [38]

Could Mary’s coolness have been made possible by the heat of her monster’s rage, the strain of her decorous silence eased by the demonic abandon of her nameless monster’s ritual fire dance around the cottage of his

rejecting “Protectors”? Does Mary’s cadaverous creature want to bring more death into the world because he has failed—like those other awful females, Eve and Sin—to win the compassion of that blind and curiously Miltonic old man, the Godlike musical patriarch De Lacey? Significantly, he is clinging to the blind man’s knees, begging for recognition and help—“Do not you desert me in the hour of trial!”—when Felix, the son of the house, appears like the felicitous hero he is, and, says the monster, “with supernatural force [he] tore me from his father ... in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground and struck me violently with a stick ... my heart sank within me as with bitter sickness” (119, chap. 15). Despite everything we have been told about the monster’s physical vileness, Felix’s rage seems excessive in terms of the novel’s overt story. But as an action in the covert plot—the tale of the blind rejection of women by misogynistic/Miltonic patriarchy—it is inevitable and appropriate. Even more psychologically appropriate is the fact that having been so definitively rejected by a world of fathers, the monster takes his revenge, first by murdering William, a male child who invokes his father’s name (“My papa is a syndic—he is M. Frankenstein—he will punish you”) and then by beginning a doomed search for a maternal, female principle in the harsh society that has created him.

In this connection, it begins to be plain that Eve’s—and the monster’s—motherlessness must have had extraordinary cultural and personal significance for Mary Shelley. “We think back through our mothers if we are women,” wrote Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*. [39] But of course one of the most dramatic emblems of Eve’s alienation from the masculine garden in which she finds herself is her motherlessness. Because she is made in the image of a man who is himself made in the image of a male creator, her unprecedented {244} femininity seems merely a defective masculinity, a deformity like the monster’s inhuman body. [40] In fact, as we saw, the only maternal model in *Paradise Lost* is the terrifying figure of Sin. (That Eve’s punishment for her sin is the doom of agonized maternity—the doom of painfully becoming no longer herself but “Mother of Human Race”—appears therefore to seal the grim parallel.) But all these powerful symbols would be bound to take on personal weight and darkness for Shelley, whose only real “mother” was a tombstone—or a shelf of books—and who, like all orphans, must have feared that she had been deliberately deserted by her dead parent, or that, if she was a monster, then her hidden, underground mother must have been one too.

For all these reasons, then, the monster’s attitude toward the possibility (or impossibility) of finding a mother is unusually conflicted and complex. At first, horrified by what he knows of the only “mother” he has ever had—Victor Frankenstein—he regards his parentage with loathing. Characteristically, he learns the specific details of his “conception” and “birth” (as Mary Shelley may have learned of hers) through reading, for Victor has kept a journal which records “that series of disgusting circumstances” leading “to the production of [the monster’s] ... loathsome person.” [41] Later, however, the ill-fated miniature of Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, Victor’s “angel mother,” momentarily “attract[s]” him. In fact, he claims it is because he is “forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow” that he resolves to implicate Justine in the murder of William. His reproachful explanation is curious, though (“The crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment”), as is the sinister rape fantasy he enacts by the side of the sleeping orphan (“Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes” [127-28, chap. 16]). Clearly feelings of rage, terror, and sexual nausea, as well as idealizing sentiments, accrete for Mary and the monster around the maternal female image, a fact which explains the later climactic wedding-night murder of apparently innocent Elizabeth. In this fierce, Miltonic world, Frankenstein says, the angel woman and the monster woman alike must die, if they are not dead already. And what is to be feared above all else is the reanimation of the dead, specifically of the maternal dead. Perhaps that is why a {245} significant pun is embedded in the crucial birth scene (“It was on a dreary night of November”) that, according to Mary Shelley, rose “unbidden” from her imagination. Looking at the “demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life,” Victor remarks that “A *mummy* again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch” (43, chap. 5). For a similarly horrific (and equally punning) statement of sexual nausea, one would have to go back to Donne’s “Loves Alchymie” with its urgent, misogynistic imperative: “Hope not for minde in women ; at their best / Sweetnesse and wit, they are but/ *Mummy* possesst.”

Interestingly, the literary group at Villa Diodati received a packet of books containing, among other poems, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s recently published “Christabel,” shortly before Mary had her monster-dream and began her ghost story. More influential than “Loves Alchymie”—a poem Mary may or may not have read—“Christabel”’s vision of femaleness must have been embodied for the author of *Frankenstein* not only in the witch Geraldine’s withered side and consequent self-loathing (“Ah! What a stricken look was hers!”) but also in her anxiety about the ghost of Christabel’s dead mother (“Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!”) and in Christabel’s “Woe is me / She died the hour that I was born.” But even without Donne’s puns or Coleridge’s Romanticized male definition of deathly maternity, Mary Shelley would have absorbed a keen sense of the agony of female

sexuality, and specifically of the perils of motherhood, not just from *Paradise Lost* and from her own mother's fearfully exemplary fate but also from Wollstonecraft's almost prophetically anxious writings.

Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman (1797), which Mary read in 1814 (and possibly in 1815) is about, among other "wrongs," Maria's search for her lost child, her fears that "she" (for the fantasied child is a daughter) may have been murdered by her unscrupulous father, and her attempts to reconcile herself to the child's death. In a suicide scene that Wollstonecraft drafted shortly before her own death, as her daughter must have known, Maria swallows laudanum: "her soul was calm ... nothing remained but an eager longing ... to fly ... from this hell of disappointment. Still her eyes closed not... Her murdered child again appeared to her ... [But] 'Surely it is better to die with me, than to enter on life without a mother's care!'" [42] {246} Plainly, Frankenstein's pained ambivalence toward mothers and mummies is in some sense a response to Maria's agonized reaching—from beyond the grave, it may have seemed—toward a daughter. "Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!" It is no wonder if Coleridge's poem gave Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley bad dreams, no wonder if she saw Milton's "Mother of Human Race" as a sorrowful monster.

*

Though *Frankenstein* itself began with a Coleridgean and Miltonic nightmare of filthy creation that reached its nadir in the monster's revelation of filthy femaleness, Mary Shelley, like Victor Frankenstein himself, evidently needed to distance such monstrous secrets. Sinful, motherless Eve and sinned-against, daughterless Maria, both paradigms of woman's helpless alienation in a male society, briefly emerge from the sea of male heroes and villains in which they have almost been lost, but the ice soon closes over their heads again, just as it closes around those two insane figure-skaters, Victor Frankenstein and his hideous offspring. Moving outward from the central "birth myth" to the icy perimeter on which the novel began, we find ourselves caught up once more in Walton's naive polar journey, where Frankenstein and his monster reappear as two embattled grotesques, distant and archetypal figures solipstically drifting away from each other on separate icebergs. In Walton's scheme of things, they look again like God and Adam, Satanically conceived. But now, with our more nearly complete understanding of the bewildered and bewildering perspective Mary Shelley adopted as "Milton's daughter," we see that they were Eve and Eve all along.

Nevertheless, though Shelley did manage to still the monster's suffering and Frankenstein's and her own by transporting all three from the fires of filthy creation back to the ice and silence of the Pole, she was never entirely to abandon the sublimated rage her monster-self enacted, and never to abandon, either, the metaphysical ambitions Frankenstein incarnated. In *The Last Man* she introduced, as Spark points out, "a new, inhuman protagonist," PLAGUE (the name is almost always spelled entirely in capitals), who is characterized as female and who sees to it that "disaster is no longer the property of the individual but of the entire human race." [43] And of {247} course PLAGUE'S story is the one that Mary claims to have found in the Sibyl's cave, a tale of a literally female monster that was merely foreshadowed by the more subdued narrative of "The Modern Prometheus."

Interestingly, PLAGUE'S story ends with a vision of last things, a vision of judgment and of paradise nihilistically restored that balances *Frankenstein's* vision of first things. With all of humanity wiped out by the monster PLAGUE, just as the entire Frankenstein family was destroyed by Victor's monster, Lionel Verney, the narrator, goes to Rome, that cradle of patriarchal civilization whose ruins had seemed so majestically emblematic to both Byron and Shelley. But where Mary's husband had written of the great city in a kind of ecstasy, his widow has her disinherited "last man" wander lawlessly about empty Rome until finally he resolves, finding "parts of a manuscript ... scattered about," that "I also will write a book ... [but] for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote,

DEDICATION
TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD
SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN. [44]

His hostile, ironic, literary gesture illuminates not only his own career but his author's. For the annihilation of history may well be the final revenge of the monster who has been denied a true place in history: the moral is one that Mary Shelley's first hideous progeny, like Milton's Eve, seems to have understood from the beginning.