*Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) are not usually seen as related works, except insofar as both are famous nineteenth-century literary puzzles, with Shelley’s plaintive speculation about where she got so “hideous an idea” finding its counterpart in the position of Heathcliff’s creator as a sort of mystery woman of literature. Still, if both Brontë and Shelley wrote enigmatic, curiously unprecedented novels, their works are puzzling in different ways: Shelley’s is an enigmatic fantasy of metaphysical horror, Brontë’s an enigmatic romance of metaphysical passion. Shelley produced an allusive, Romantic, and “masculine” text in which the fates of subordinate female characters seem entirely dependent upon the actions of ostensibly male heroes or anti-heroes. Brontë produced a more realistic narrative in which “the perdurable voice of the country,” as Mark Schorer describes Nelly Dean, introduces us to a world where men battle for the favors of apparently high-spirited and independent women.

Despite these dissimilarities, however, *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights* are alike in a number of crucial ways. For one thing, both works are enigmatic, puzzling, even in some sense generically problematical. Moreover, in each case the mystery of the novel is associated with what seem to be its metaphysical intentions, intentions around which much critical controversy has collected. For these two “popular” novels — one a thriller, the other a romance — have convinced many readers that their charismatic surfaces conceal (far more than they reveal) complex ontological depths, elaborate structures of allusion, fierce though shadowy moral ambitions. And this point in particular is demonstrated by a simpler characteristic both works have in common. Both make use of what in connection with *Frankenstein* we called an evidentiary narrative technique, a Romantic story-telling method that emphasizes the ironic disjunctions between different perspectives on the same events as well as the ironic tensions that inhere in the relationship between surface drama and concealed authorial intention. In fact, in its use of such a technique, *Wuthering Heights* might be a deliberate copy of *Frankenstein*. Not only do the stories of both novels emerge through concentric circles of narration, both works contain significant digressions. Catherine Earnshaw’s diary, Isabella’s letter, Zillah’s narrative, and Heathcliff’s confidences to Nelly function in *Wuthering Heights* much as Alphonse Frankenstein’s letter, Justine’s narrative, and Safie’s history do in Frankenstein.

Their common concern with evidence, especially with written evidence, suggests still another way in which *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein* are alike: more than most novels, both are consciously literary works, at times almost obsessively concerned with books and with reading as not only a symbolic but a dramatic — plotforwarding. — activity. Can this be because, like Shelley, Brontë was something of a literary heiress? The idea is an odd one to consider, because the four Brontë children, scribbling in Yorkshire’s remote West Riding, seem as trapped on the periphery of nineteenthcentury literary culture as Mary Shelley was embedded in its Godwinian and Byronic center. Nevertheless, peripheral though they were, the Brontës had literary parents just as Mary Shelley did: the Reverend Patrick Brontë was in his youth the author of several books of poetry, a novel, and a collection of sermons, and Maria Bran well, the girl he married, apparently also had some literary abilities. And of course, besides having obscure literary parents Emily Brontë had literary siblings, though they too were in most of her own lifetime almost as unknown as their parents.

Is it coincidental that the author of *Wuthering Heights* was the sister of the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*? Did the parents, especially the father, bequeath a frustrated drive toward literary success to their children? These are interesting though unanswerable questions, but they imply a point that is crucial in any consideration of the Brontës, just as it was important in thinking about Mary Shelley: it was the habit in the Brontë family, as in the Wollstonecraft-Godwin Shelley family, to approach reality through the mediating agency of books, to read one’s relatives, and to feel related to one’s reading. Thus the transformation of three lonely yet ambitious Yorkshire governesses into the magisterially androgynous trio of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell was a communal act, an assertion of family identity. And significantly, even the games these writers played as children prepared them for such a literary mode of self-definition. As most Brontë admirers know, the four young inhabitants of Haworth Parsonage began producing extended narratives at an early age, and these eventually led to the authorship of a large library of miniature books which constitutes perhaps the most famous juvenilia in English. Though in subject matter these works are divided into two groups — one, the history of the imaginary kingdom of Gondal, written by Emily and Anne, and the other, stories of the equally imaginary land of Angria, written by Charlotte and Branwell — all four children read and discussed all the tales, and even served as models for characters in many. Thus the Brontës’ deepest feelings of kinship appear to have been expressed first in literary collaboration and private childish attempts at fictionalizing each other, and then, later, in the public collaboration the sisters undertook with the ill-fated collection of poetry that was their first “real” publication. Finally Charlotte, the last survivor of these prodigious siblings, memorialized her lost sisters in print, both in fiction and in non-fiction (Shirley, for instance, mythologizes Emily). Given the traditions of her family, it was no doubt inevitable that, for her, writing — not only novelwriting but the writing of prefaces to “family” works — would replace tombstone-raising, hymn-singing, maybe even weeping.

That both literary activity and literary evidence were so important to the Brontës may be traced to another problem they shared with Mary Shelley. Like the anxious creator of Frankenstein, the authors of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane* Eyre, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* lost their mother when they were very young. Like Shelley, indeed, Emily and Anne Brontë were too young when their mother died even to know much about her except through the evidence of older survivors and perhaps through some documents. Just as Frankenstein, with its emphasis on orphans and beggars, is a motherless book, so all the Brontë novels betray intense feelings of motherlessness, orphanhood, destitution. And in particular the problems of literary orphanhood seem to lead in *Wuthering Heights*, as in *Frankenstein*, not only to a concern with surviving evidence but also to a fascination with the question of origins. Thus if all women writers, metaphorical orphans in patriarchal culture, seek literary answers to the questions “How are we fal’n, / Fal’n by mistaken rules ...?” motherless orphans like Mary Shelley and Emily Brontë almost seem to seek literal answers to that question, so passionately do their novels enact distinctive female literary obsessions.

Finally, that such a psychodramatic enactment is going on in both *Wuthering Heights* and Frankenstein suggests a similarity between the two novels which brings us back to the tension between dramatic surfaces and metaphysical depths with which we began this discussion. For just as one of *Frankenstein*’s most puzzling traits is the symbolic ambiguity or fluidity its characters display when they are studied closely, so one of *Wuthering Heights*’s key elements is what Leo Bersani calls its “ontological slipperiness.” In fact, because it is a metaphysical romance (just as *Frankenstein* is a metaphysical thriller) *Wuthering Heights* seems at times to be about forces or beings rather than people, which is no doubt one reason why some critics have thought it generically problematical, maybe not a novel at all but instead an extended exemplum, or a “prosified” verse drama. And just as all the characters in Frankenstein are in a sense the same two characters, so “everyone [in *Wuthering Heights*] is finally related to everyone else and, in a sense, repeated in everyone else,” as if the novel, like an illustration of Freud’s “Das Unheimlische,” were about “the danger of being haunted by alien versions of the self.” But when it is created by a woman in the misogynistic context of Western literary culture, this sort of anxiously philosophical, problem-solving, myth-making narrative must — so it seems — inevitably come to grips with the countervailing stories told by patriarchal poetry, and specifically by Milton’s patriarchal poetry.

[…]

Because Emily Brontë was looking oppositely not only for heaven (and hell) but for her own female origins, *Wuthering Heights* is one of the few authentic instances of novelistic myth-making, myth-making in the functional sense of problem-solving. Where writers from Charlotte Brontë and Henry James to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf have used mythic material to give point and structure to their novels, Emily Brontë uses the novel form to give substance — plausibility, really — to her myth. It is urgent that she do so because, as we shall see, the feminist cogency of this myth derives not only from its daring corrections of Milton but also from the fact that it is a distinctively nineteenth-century answer to the question of origins: it is the myth of how culture came about, and specifically of how nineteenth-century society occurred, the tale of where tea-tables, sofas, crinolines, and parsonages like the one at Haworth came from.

Because it is so ambitious a myth, *Wuthering Heights* has the puzzling self-containment of a mystery in the old sense of that word — the sense of mystery plays and Eleusinian mysteries. Locked in by Lockwood’s uncomprehending narrative, Nelly Dean’s story, with its baffling duplication of names, places, events, seems endlessly to reenact itself, like some ritual that must be cyclically repeated in order to sustain (as well as explain) both nature and culture. At the same time, because it is so prosaic a myth — a myth about crinolines! — *Wuthering Heights* is not in the least portentous or self-consciously “mythic.” On the contrary, like all true rituals and myths, Brontë’s “cuckoo’s tale” turns a practical, casual, humorous face to its audience. For as Levi-Straus’s observations suggest, true believers gossip by the prayer wheel, since that modern reverence which enjoins solemnity is simply the foster child of modern skepticism.

Thus *Wuthering Heights* is in one sense an elaborate gloss on the Byronic Romanticism and incest fantasy of *Manfred*, written, as Ratchford suggested, from a consciously female perspective. Heathcliff’s passionate invocations of Catherine (“Come in! ... hear me” [chap. 3] or “Be with me always — take any form — drive me mad” [chap. 16]) almost exactly echo Manfred’s famous speech to Astarte (“Hear me, hear me ... speak to me! Though it be in wrath ...”). […]