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The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy

THE QUESTION OF WHICH VERSION OF *FRANKENSTEIN* ONE SEES AS THE better novel, the 1818 or the 1831 edition, depends to a great extent on whether the 1831 text is perceived as a recantation of 1818 or as a sharpening of the original novel's focus. Recent scholarship has tended to privilege the 1818 text as the version of *Frankenstein* which both contains Mary Shelley's most "stable and coherent"¹ statement of her own beliefs and best reveals the novel's implication in the ideological formations of its time. The most influential recent accounts of the 1831 Introduction have depicted it as candid to a fault, an obsequious concession to the social codes that distinguish the proper lady from the woman writer,² while the revisions added in the 1831 edition are now generally seen as a disavowal of the radical thrust of the original novel. Marilyn Butler's judgment that the 1831 revisions have "neutered or at best over-freighted with inessential additions" an "urgent, unusual, brilliantly-imagined earlier book" and Anne Mellor's contention that the 1831 text "cannot do justice to Mary

1. Anne K. Mellor, "Choosing a Text of *Frankenstein* to Teach," in *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein*, ed. Stephen Behrendt (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990) 37.

2. Gilbert and Gubar call it "anxious" and "deferential," Mary Poovey sees Shelley "eager to disavow" the "audacity of what now seems to her like blasphemy," Susan Wolfson finds an "almost embarrassed tone that reflects commitment to codes of female modesty" and Anne Mellor reads the essay as an "apology" and a "defensive" confession of Mary Shelley's "deep-seated conviction of literary inadequacy" and, in particular, of her acquiescence in "Percy's opinion of her inferior literary abilities." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 227, 233; Mary Poovey *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 137–38; Susan Wolfson, "Feminist Inquiry and *Frankenstein*" in *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein* 58; Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 55–56, 69.

Shelley's powerful originating vision" are representative of an emerging consensus which has resulted in the supplanting of the 1831 edition by the 1818 text in most recent editions of the novel.³

The argument that the 1831 *Frankenstein* represents a deliberate attempt on Mary Shelley's part to make a disturbing book more palatable for a conventional readership has the unfortunate effect of seeming to confirm the legend, inspired by Trelawney, that Mary Shelley became the "slave of convention" in the years after Percy's death.⁴ I want to propose in this essay that both the 1831 Introduction and the most significant revisions to *Frankenstein* tell a very different story: that they constitute Mary Shelley's oblique but systematic interpretation of her own most famous novel and of her place in the literary history of her period. While the Introduction addresses, and wittily deflects, the questions "so very frequently asked"⁵ by those who were more curious about the superficially scandalous circumstances of the book's composition than they were interested in its substance, the most extensive and significant additions to the 1831 version of *Frankenstein* revisit and deepen the knottiest moral paradoxes adumbrated in the 1818 novel.

Mary Shelley's declaration at the outset of the 1831 Introduction that she has become "more willing to comply" with her publishers' "wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story" because this question has been "so very frequently asked me" (360), bears at least a moment's notice. The seeming tractability of the author's "willing[ness]

3. Marilyn Butler, "Frankenstein and Radical Science" in *Frankenstein: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1996) 304; Mellor, "Choosing a Text" 166. At least six paperback editions of the 1818 text were published in the 1990's. The 1818 text appears in *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (Oxford UP, 1990), and in paperbacks issued by Woodstock Books, 1993; Oxford UP, 1994, ed. Marilyn Butler; Broadview Press, 1994, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf; Washington Square Press, 1995, ed. Anne K. Mellor and Teresa Reyes; and in a Norton Critical Edition, 1996, ed. J. Paul Hunter. Only the Broadview and Butler's Oxford UP edition contain the 1831 revisions in appendices.

4. The quote from Trelawney is cited by Emily Sunstein in *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1989), who speaks of the misleading "Trelawnean cloud" hovering over the reception of Mary Shelley's works (7). I am very much in sympathy with the view of Mary Shelley's character offered by Sunstein in her biography and by Betty Bennett in her editor's Introduction to *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), where Bennett contends that the full record of Mary Shelley's later letters dispels "the notion that she sought only conventional society after Shelley's death" (xxi).

5. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough: Broadview Literary Texts, 1994) 360. This edition prints the 1818 version of *Frankenstein* with the 1831 emendations in an appendix. Further references to *Frankenstein* will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically. References to the 1831 emendations to the novel will be cited as "1831 F."

to comply” masks a potential irony; the fact that a question has been “so very frequently asked” and left unanswered over a thirteen year period suggests both the persistence of the questioners and the relative disinterest, if not active resistance, of the person “so very frequently asked.” The rhetorical diffidence of the entire Introduction, I want to suggest, has been consistently misread, or underread, because readers have underestimated its capacity for irony and have too readily assumed that the Introduction honors the distinction between the fictional text of *Frankenstein* and its own presumptive status as a non-fictional comment on that text. Rather than offering the facts about “the origin of the story,” the 1831 Introduction deliberately constructs an accompanying fable to *Frankenstein*, one which offers a gateway into the paradoxes of the original novel.

Considering the mass of literary, political and personal background material out of which this highly allusive novel is woven, the degree of speculation that necessarily attends any source study of *Frankenstein* indicates just how little the initial promise of the 1831 Introduction to clarify the “origin of the story” is ever really fulfilled. Despite the public interest in Mary Shelley’s early personal life and in her political views which resulted from her radical parentage and her association with Percy Shelley and Byron, the Introduction offers no clarification of the novel’s political sympathies, not even to acknowledge any awareness of the convention, common from the 1790’s, of using the image of a monster who has escaped the control of his creator to caricature both Jacobinism and Godwin’s political writings,⁶ and it concludes by presenting the novel as a product of “happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart” (365), thus seeming to foreclose any connection between the horror story of *Frankenstein* and the death of Mary Shelley’s first child in infancy one year before the novel was begun or with the suicides of Fanny Godwin and Harriet Westbrook Shelley during its composition.

The vividness of the “account of the origin” of *Frankenstein* which the 1831 Introduction does provide, the description of the “ghost story” contest which fortuitously overlapped with the conversations between Byron and Shelley concerning “the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated” (364), served for an earlier generation of critics to explain away the strange and unfulfilled brilliance of *Frankenstein* as a “lucky accident”⁷ that ensued from this nineteen year old woman’s familiarity with two

6. Lee Sterrenburg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*” in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. George C. Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979) 161.

7. M. K. Joseph, Editor’s Introduction to *Frankenstein* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) v.

poetic geniuses. Both this dismissive narrative and the later perception of Mary Shelley's anxiety and sense of inferiority in the face of "her models, almost all masculine, [who] are both intimidating and potentially judgmental of her audacious foray into their domain" (Poovey 139–40) might seem to be borne out by the hyperbolic praise accorded in the 1831 Introduction to Byron and Percy Shelley, but the stylistic range of the Introduction offers another, richer possibility. The glowing testimonials to these famous poets are repeatedly undermined by the immediate descent into a lower stylistic register where the rhetorical contrast and the dry wit of the plainer prose are apt to make the more elevated phrases seem not just conventional but too neatly formulaic. From a nearly worshipful description of Byron's poetic powers ensues a far more banal observation about the rain, although there is no obvious connection between the two:

Lord Byron, who was writing the third canto of *Childe Harold*, was the only one among us who put his thoughts upon paper. These, as he brought them successively to us, clothed in all the light and harmony of poetry, seemed to stamp as divine the glories of heaven and earth, whose influences we partook with him.

But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. (361)

In other words, all the "glories of heaven and earth" evoked by Byron's poetry cannot overcome Mary Shelley's memory that it rained a lot that summer.

This in itself might not seem like a deliberate deflation of Byronic glory were it not that the same effect is immediately recreated, in a more elaborate form, in a diverting account of the failures of all three of Mary Shelley's competitors in the ghost story contest. The report of Byron's, Percy Shelley's and Polidori's efforts in the ghost story competition casts Polidori as the obvious buffoon in comparison to Byron and Percy Shelley, but the praise lavished on Percy's poetic talent rings hollow at the end of the story where, for all of Percy's genius, he turns out to be incapable of fulfilling the rhetorical challenge of imagining "a story to rival those which had excited us to the task" (363), and the only successful participant in the contest reappears in terms as unobtrusive as the rainy day that counterpointed Byron's divine poetic powers:

"We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron; and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of *Mazeppa*. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious

verse that adorns our language, than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget—something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her, and was obliged to despatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their uncongenial task.

I busied myself *to think of a story* . . . (362–63; MWS's emphasis)

The stylistic shifts in this passage are clearly demarcated. It begins on the high side; not “we agreed,” but “his proposition was acceded to.” Of the “four of us,” the “noble author” will properly claim the first place, and Byron’s partial success (“a fragment”) is politely acknowledged. The level of the diction rises considerably during the description of the second genius, Shelley, and it drops sharply when we come to “Poor Polidori,” whose ineptness is the stuff of low comedy registered in an extremely chatty style. The reinflation of the prose when the passage returns to “the illustrious poets” does not obscure the bottom line of the narrative: neither Byron nor Shelley successfully wrote a ghost story. Mary Shelley connects this failure to a stylistic issue; they were “annoyed by the platitude of prose,” a difficulty that was overcome by the only member of the company who was able to think in plain prose terms: “I busied myself *to think of a story*.” Thanks to Anne Mellor’s meticulous comparative study of Mary Shelley’s original manuscript of *Frankenstein* with the revisions added by Percy, we can see that the more elevated diction here (“the radiance of brilliant imagery” etc.) reflects Percy’s, rather than Mary Shelley’s, habitual written style. When Mary Shelley wrote “a long time passed” in the original manuscript of *Frankenstein*, Percy revised it into “a considerable period elapsed”; Mary Shelley’s “we were all equal” became, after Percy’s help, “neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other,” and the text of *Frankenstein* contains hundreds of such emendations.⁸

The clichéd rhetoric, bordering on fulsomeness, with which Percy Shelley and Byron are indiscriminately praised, where the “radiance of brilliant imagery” and “the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language” (referring to Shelley) comes from the same phrasebook as “his thoughts upon paper . . . clothed in all the light and harmony of

8. Mellor estimates an average of five to six such emendations per manuscript page (*Shelley* 59).

poetry, seemed to stamp as divine the glories of heaven and earth" (referring to Byron) indicate nothing so simple as an unconscious hostility towards Percy Shelley or Byron. The sheer conventionality of the praise serves a double purpose: initially, its opacity enables Mary Shelley to address "the question, so very frequently asked me—'How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea'" as a public figure, an author commenting upon other authors of her acquaintance, rather than as the intimate companion of a pair of legendary poets; and secondly, the critical distance afforded by the slight satiric edge of the overblown prose allows Mary Shelley to make the difference between her own storytelling abilities and the poetic imaginations of Byron and Shelley an ambiguous hierarchy, and not one that automatically privileges the "illustrious poets."⁹

Mary Shelley had even more reason than most authors to deflect Colburn and Bentley's "wish that I might furnish them with some account of the origin of the story," a request which, in its plainest form, is the most common and banal question that authors have to suffer: "Where do you get your ideas?" As Mary Shelley rephrases that question into the more lurid form in which it has been "so very frequently asked me" over the years, she signals her understanding of who is really being sought through this question: not the Mary Shelley of 1831, the author whose work is being reprinted as part of the Standard Novels, but the Mary Shelley of 1816, the "young girl" who, according to the rumor mill of her time, had been sold by her atheist father to an atheist poet whom she had estranged from his lawful wife.¹⁰ The "young girl" from whom Mary Shelley distances herself is not a younger, more audacious self, but the fictive figure constructed in the public imagination out of Mary Godwin's role in a famous scandal involving atheism, adultery, an abandoned wife, illegitimate children, and suicide among the artistic and aristocratic elite. The commercial value of a retrospective personal statement from the intimate companion of Percy Shelley and Byron, and the author of the most sensational literary work to emerge from the notorious Diodati ménage, would be undeniable, but the perfect conventionality and unassailable propriety with which Mary Shelley describes Byron and Percy Shelley tells Mary Shelley's readers only the best of what they already know and believe about the "illustrious poets."

9. The argument I am making about the 1831 Introduction is similar to that made by Mary Favret about Mary Shelley's notes to her edition of Percy Shelley's poems in "Mary Shelley's Sympathy and Irony: The Editor and her Corpus," *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor and Esther H. Schor (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 17–38.

10. *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* 1.4.

The exorbitant descriptions of Byron and especially of Percy Shelley also have a critical function as they enable Mary Shelley to express her characteristically oblique reservations about the excesses of romantic conceptions of authorship, and to distinguish her own authorial activity from the more self-absorbed productions of Percy Shelley and Byron. When the initial promise of the Introduction to “furnish . . . some account of the origin of the story” finds its simplest and most colloquial expression in the declaration that “Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase” (363), the allusion is not gratuitous; the ambiguous relation between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote functions as a model for Mary Shelley’s own authorial position as the plainspoken Sancho to Byron and Percy Shelley. Percy’s participation in the ghost story contest has more than a touch of the quixotic to it; in Mary Shelley’s telling, he has far more than enough talent to accomplish the task, but the loftiness of his aims renders him incapable of harnessing that ability to a realistic sense of purpose:

Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language, than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life.

The equivocation in this sentence turns on the inflection of its middle phrase, “than to invent the machinery of a story”; from a Percyan height, such mundane details as “the machinery of a story” only constrain the soaring flight of imagination, just as Victor Frankenstein discovers the technical difficulties that questions of machinery pose to his own great plan when “the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed” (82). Percy’s decision to write about his own childhood would translate, in Sanchean phrase, into something like, “He’s so smart he can’t write about anything but himself.”

The critique of romantic authorship in its Percyan incarnation takes a more serious turn when the Introduction takes up the question of exactly how “Every thing must have a beginning” and contends that “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself” (363). This is an unequivocal contradiction of one of Percy Shelley’s favorite proverbs, the quotation from Tasso that “None merits the name of creator but God and the poet.”¹¹ Even poets, Mary Shelley

11. Percy Shelley quotes this proverb both in “On Life” and “A Defense of Poetry” (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers [New York: Norton, 1977] 475 and 506).

demurs, do not have godlike powers of creation. This critique becomes even more pointed in Mary Shelley's reflective comment on the dream, or vision, that allegedly inspired her to begin the novel:

I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. (364)

Where Percy exults in a metaphor that offers the prospect of mimicking the divine act of creation, Mary Shelley describes that very prospect as inevitably "frightful," and her novel unfolds the consequences of an exclusive focus on visionary ends and a corresponding carelessness about mere details.

Although the report of this "waking dream," as Mary Shelley calls it, has generally been presumed to be a factual account of "the origin of the story," there are a number of reasons why it would be prudent to doubt the actual occurrence of this famous nightmare vision. There is no extant journal for June 1816 and no documented reference to this waking dream before it appears in the 1831 Introduction. The shifting point of view within the dream, which slides from Mary Shelley's perception of the creator kneeling beside his creation to that of the creator himself awakening to see the nightmare figure standing beside his bed, introduces a literary device that is commonly employed to subvert realism. When this "pale student of unhallowed arts," or any fictional character, awakens to find a supernatural being standing at his bedside, our confinement within his perception makes it impossible for us to know whether we are meant to believe he has really awakened or if he is dreaming this impossible event. The story of the "waking dream" nicely complements *Frankenstein* and brilliantly fulfills the contractual obligation to provide "some account of the origin of the story," but its placement within an essay that is blithely unreliable about everything that could be documented, including the factual misrepresentation that "I have changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances" (366) makes it impossible to know whether Victor's two views of the creature on the night of his animation, once before and once after his dream in which Elizabeth turns into the deceased Caroline Frankenstein, are the fictional representation of a real "waking dream" of June 1816 or if the central story of the 1831 Introduction is an invented tale which mimics the most famous scene of the 1818 novel.

The elegant evasiveness of the 1831 Introduction can only be maintained through the construction of a rhetorical tour de force which keeps its

readers sufficiently entertained not to notice that the question they have “so very frequently asked” Mary Shelley is never really being answered. The opening of the second paragraph of the Introduction certainly seems to begin to address the question in a direct and predictable way:

It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing. As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given to me for recreation, was to “write stories.” (360)

The allusion to Wollstonecraft and Godwin invokes the familial context in which the British public is used to thinking about Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, and the immediate transition from the invocation of her parentage to the description of her early life certainly seems to imply that the groundwork for the precocious success of *Frankenstein* was prepared by Mary Shelley’s childhood training in a literary household. The rest of the paragraph contradicts this story. It says that the origin of *Frankenstein* does not derive from Mary Shelley’s early “scribble[ings]” but from something even more ephemeral and private, her childhood daydreams:

Still I had a dearer pleasure than this, which was the formation of castles in the air—the indulging in waking dreams. . . . My dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings. In the latter I was a close imitator—rather doing as others had done, than putting down suggestions of my own mind. What I wrote was intended at least for one other eye . . . but my dreams were all my own. (360)

The distinction between Mary Shelley’s purely imitative childhood writings and her more “fantastic” and original “waking dreams” suggests that the novel owes its origin not to her first scribbles but to these secret fantasies, and when the later part of the Introduction tells us that the origin of *Frankenstein* is “a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream” (365), it seems to confirm that the composition of the novel originates in these solitary imaginings. But this very distinction between the public nature of her writings, “intended at least for one other eye” and the private quality of these “waking dreams,” which were “all my own,” also cautions us that this Introduction is not likely to give an explicit answer to the question of “How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea.” These “waking dreams” are not public property: “I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free” (360). “Where do you get your ideas” is not only an inane, but, the author has informed us, an impolite question. This reserved and courteous figure does not just say “no” when she is asked to

bare her soul before the British reading public, but neither does she open her private life for public viewing.

The next paragraph of the Introduction moves off to Scotland in order to restate the distinction between the author's imitative adolescent writings ("I wrote then—but in a most common-place style") and her "true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination," but it makes no mention of why Mary Godwin spent so much time in Scotland. The oblique, impersonal 1818 Dedication (retained in 1831) to "the Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, &c" suggests that Godwin's self-absorption contributes to the portrait of Victor Frankenstein, but the 1831 Introduction never mentions Godwin's name, and it gives no inkling that Mary Shelley's periods of adolescent exile in Scotland had anything to do with Godwin's convenience in establishing his new household after his remarriage to Mary Jane Clairmont.

The opening paragraphs of the 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein* quickly become, without warning, a brief narrative of Mary Shelley's entire (including prenatal) life, but the transition from Scotland to Switzerland, and the most famous events in the life of the "young girl" Mary Godwin, are bypassed in terms laconic in the extreme: "After this my life became busier," and "Travelling, and the cares of a family, occupied my time" (361). The withholding of comment on the period of her life that had become so notorious and "so very frequently" inquired about is more firm than anxious in its deflection of public scrutiny. It has become something of a commonplace to connect the statement in the 1831 Introduction where Mary Shelley declares that she is "very averse to bringing myself forward in print" to a journal entry of 1838 where she wrote of her "inability to put myself forward" and protested that she did not "merit the heavy accusations cast upon me for not putting myself forward—I cannot do that—it is against my nature—as well cast me from a precipice and rail at me for not flying."¹² But in another passage within the same journal entry, Mary Shelley derides those who have criticized her withdrawal from public life, Trelawney and his associates, the self-styled Philosophic Radicals, and she writes that in comparison to "my Parents and Shelley," "My accusers—after such as these—appear to me mere drivellers" (*Journals* 553). Mary Shelley's disdain for public opinion was not entirely a defensive posture; it was to a large degree founded on her own firm sense of her own worth and her own values.

When Mary Shelley places herself in the lineage of "my Parents and

12. *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 555, 559.

Shelley” in the Introduction, she produces one of the quietest but most definitive moments of self-representation in the entire essay:

My husband, however, was from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage, and enrol myself on the page of fame. He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which even on my own part I cared for then, though since I have become infinitely indifferent to it. (361)

The rhetorical choices in this passage are precise; to be “infinitely indifferent” shades off from the more familiar phrases “completely indifferent” or “absolutely indifferent” to become both more alliteratively elegant and more emphatic, and the noticeable originality of the phrase stands out from its immediate context. Someone who writes of being “infinitely indifferent” cannot be oblivious to the tiredness of the metaphor “the page of fame.” The reach toward an elevated, literary style collapses into cliché, but the next sentence declares the triviality of such merely artistic aspirations. It does so with some panache, however, and it is just as Mary Shelley herself emerges from the shadow of her parents and her husband that the passage acquires a style of its own. When one looks back from “though since I have become infinitely indifferent to it” to “which even on my own part I cared for then,” even that plain phrase takes on an abyssal quality something like Wordsworth’s retrospective sense “of myself / And of some other Being” (1805 *Prelude* 2.32–33).

Mary and Percy joined Byron in Switzerland in the summer of 1816, the rainy summer noted in the sixth paragraph of the Introduction, following the description of Byron’s glorious verse. If the reader still remembers that this Introduction has pledged to furnish “some account of the origin of the story,” the sixth paragraph seems to get off to a promising start when the author tells us that, confined to the house by the rain, she began reading “ghost stories, translated from the German into French.” She then offers a one sentence summary of a story titled the “History of the Inconstant Lover,” and a one hundred and forty three word synopsis of another, unnamed story which Rieger has identified as “Les Portraits de Famille” (361–62). While Rieger dutifully notes that “Despite her assertion that these stories remain ‘fresh in my mind,’ Mrs. Shelley does not recall them accurately,”¹³ I would suggest that the more important point here is the complete irrelevance, and not the inaccuracy, of these plot summaries. Neither the “History of the Inconstant Lover” nor “Les Portraits de Famille” have any obvious connection with “the origin of the story” of

13. James Rieger, ed. *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974) 224.

Frankenstein. To go from here and solemnly point out, as Rieger does, that “There is no evidence that Polidori ever planned such a story” as the one described by Mary Shelley, and to take issue with her report of how many days elapsed between the initiation of the ghost story contest and the beginning of the composition of *Frankenstein* (Rieger 225–26) is comparable to disagreeing with John Ray’s analysis of *Lolita*.

The diverting account of Byron’s, Shelley’s and Polidori’s failures to complete their ghost stories and the now famous vignettes of the conversations and dreams that led to the composition of *Frankenstein* construct a deeply superficial explanation of the “origin of the story.” The lurid image of “the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together” (364) is truer to the early cinematic adaptations of *Frankenstein* than it is to the literary, political and philosophical complexity of Mary Shelley’s novel. By omitting any mention of such figures as Milton, Rousseau, Godwin or Wollstonecraft, the 1831 Introduction disingenuously suggests that this is not a novel of philosophical reflection on the moral nature of the human creature or the social or political implications of that nature, and it is surely not a revisionary reading of the origin myth of Christianity, while the laconic treatment of Mary Shelley’s turbulent private life asserts that this, too, has no bearing on the “origin of the story.” Yet the graphic image that has inspired the modern sensationalization of *Frankenstein*, the image of the “pale student of unhallowed arts” and his “hideous phantasm” that begins to “show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion” (364) points to an important feature of the novel, the obsessive repetition of a tableau in which one figure attends another who hovers on the border of life and death. As Ellen Moers has pointed out, the terror of this scene reflects the grim presence of the most powerful dream-image that is recorded in Mary Shelley’s journals:

Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it by the fire, & it lived.¹⁴

Whether or not Mary Shelley had a waking nightmare about a “pale student of unhallowed arts” in June of 1816, she most likely did have this nightmare about a real infant a little more than a year earlier, and some version of this scene is enacted thirteen times in the 1818 *Frankenstein* before the scene is recreated in its most vivid and extended form in the 1831 Introduction. The fluidity with which different characters are shuttled through the roles of attending physician and potential victim gives the roles themselves more substance than the characters who inhabit them at any given moment. Both Walton and Clerval “restore” Victor “to life” (91),

14. *Journals of Mary Shelley* 70; cited in Moers 83.

in Walton's case by "restor[ing] him to animation by rubbing him with brandy" (58), but when Victor tries to save Clerval and Elizabeth, he fails in both cases (201, 220).¹⁵ Victor reports that Alphonse Frankenstein also "died in my arms" (222), echoing Caroline's attendance at her father's deathbed ("her father died in her arms" [64]), an event memorialized in her husband's bizarre choice of a painting for the mantlepiece, "an historical subject, painted at my father's desire, [which] represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father" (106). Even the creature gets to play the doctor/attendant's role twice, once benignly, when he attempts to "restore animation" to a nearly drowned young woman (168), and again at the novel's close when Walton discovers a figure "gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions," who "hung over the coffin" containing "the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend" (242). This scene of Victor's bodily remains being observed by his own creature reverses the roles played in the pivotal scenes of the novel, where Victor offers a long, minutely detailed description of his finished creature (86), and later, after his destruction of "the remains of the half-finished creature," claims that this act leaves him with the feeling of having "mangled the living flesh of a human being" (197).

This precarious structure, in which the roles of survivor and victim are always in danger of being reversed, derives, as Moers was the first to note, from the terrifying chiasmus of birthbed/deathbed in Mary Shelley's own life. The volatility of these roles is emphasized by the episode in which the sickness of Elizabeth Lavenza leads to the death of Caroline Frankenstein, and the interchangeability of the positions inhabited by Caroline and Elizabeth is recreated in Victor's dream when "Elizabeth, in the bloom of health" is transformed into "the corpse of my dead mother" (86). Both Moers and, even more extensively, Mellor, have examined the psychological dark side of this dream work, Moers finding in it "the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences" (81), and Mellor the "horrified recognition" on Mary Shelley's part "that she was capable of asserting the final domination of a parent over a child, infanticide" (*Shelley* 88). Without denying the existence in the novel of some form of this death wish (even if only in the terms of "better you than me," with the exacerbation of survivor guilt which would result), I want to point out how the emendation of the Elizabeth/Caroline episode in 1831, as it emphasizes Caroline's altruism rather than any self-serving motive, points to a moral dilemma embedded

15. The Clerval passage closely echoes the dream: "the body . . . was not cold. They put it into a bed, and rubbed it . . . but life was quite gone."

in the novel that is at least as profound as the psychological themes explicated by Moers and Mellor.

In the 1818 account of Caroline's visit to Elizabeth's sickroom, Caroline is accidentally infected when she visits too soon; believing that "her favourite was recovering," she "entered her chamber long before the danger of infection was past" (72). In the 1831 revision, it is because of a threat to Elizabeth's life that Caroline is drawn to her:

when she heard that the life of her favourite was menaced, she could no longer control her anxiety. She attended her sick bed. . . . Elizabeth was saved, but the consequences of this imprudence were fatal to her preserver. (1831 *F*: 329)

The March 1815 "Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it by the fire, & it lived" manifests not so much a sense of guilt as a feeling of impotence in the desire to rescind the irrevocability of death in a particular case where it seems most intolerable. The appearance of "the corpse of my dead mother in my arms" with "grave-worms crawling in the folds of her flannel" (86) in Victor's dream on the night that he animates the creature indicates that this feeling of kin sympathy, as much as his Promethean striving for glory, motivates his "reflections" that "if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (83). Yet such "reflections" lead, as the 1831 Introduction spells out, to the "frightful" usurpation of "the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world" (364) and to the horror story of *Frankenstein*. While the rationale for preferring the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* rather than that of 1831 is articulated by Poovey, Butler, and most forcefully by Mellor, in the argument that Mary Shelley's 1831 revision of *Frankenstein* betrays the "stable and coherent" vision of the original novel as it "significantly decreased the distance between herself and her protagonist" and, correlatively, decreases "the degree of Frankenstein's responsibility for his actions" ("Choosing a Text" 167, 165, 160), the feeling of kin sympathy which connects Mary Shelley's dream of her lost infant to Victor's dream of his dead mother suggests that the inability to distance oneself from Victor Frankenstein's desire to make "life and death" merely "ideal bounds, which I should first break through" (82) and the "frightful" consequences of acting on that desire derives not from a later emendation of *Frankenstein* but from the insoluble problem at the heart of the original novel. The graphic reenactment of Victor's dream in the 1831 Introduction calls attention to the haunting repetition of this scene throughout the novel, where its immitigable terror resides in its power to draw such a wide range of characters into its predetermined roles. While Mellor argues that Victor Frankenstein

can be identified as “the active author of evil” in the 1818 *Frankenstein* since, in that text, “nature is a nurturing and benevolent life force that punishes only those who transgress against its sacred rights” and thus “Victor Frankenstein has blasphemed against the natural order of things” (*Shelley* 174, 164, 101), even in the 1818 text it is simply nature that kills Caroline Frankenstein, and Victor’s refusal to accept that fact is a manifestation of the most elemental of “domestic affection[s]” (48).

The most significant revisions to *Frankenstein* in 1831, like the author’s Introduction, focus on the moral dilemmas presented by the 1818 novel, whose horror story does not depend solely on the acts of an identifiably evil individual who could easily be distinguished from the rest of humanity but on a systematic slippage that begins in our most altruistic feelings, our “domestic affections,” as they construct the social conventions that deform the creature into a monster; and the lengthiest revision of 1831 meditates on how novels, and particularly romantic novels, tend to strengthen those prejudices. The novel’s presentation of these themes is deepened by two particularly important revisions in the 1831 *Frankenstein*, the first an extension of the creature’s account of his killing of little William, and the second the longest single emendation to the text in 1831, the passage that transforms Elizabeth Lavenza from Victor’s cousin into an adoptee of the Frankenstein family. Contrary to the now familiar story of Mary Shelley’s increasing conservatism in her later years, these revisions indicate that Mary Shelley never compromised her critical view of the social conventions that produce outcasts and scapegoats, and the 1831 *Frankenstein* becomes, in these revisions, both a more honest and powerful self-critique on Mary Shelley’s part and a more subtle challenge to its readers as it questions both the defensibility of our affective preferences and the possibility of separating oneself from participation in the conventions that produce and deform the creature.

In the 1818 version of the killing of little William, the creature’s account of the second part of his double crime, the planting of evidence on Justine, is brief and straightforward in the descriptions of both the act itself and its motivation. Justine passes near the creature and, he reports, “I approached her unperceived, and placed the portrait securely in one of the folds of her dress.” His motive could be called retribution on principle: “Here, I thought, is one of those whose smiles are bestowed on all but me; she shall not escape” (170). In 1831, the act is rendered more melodramatically and the motive more elaborately. The creature finds Justine asleep in a barn and hovers over her, saying “Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes: my beloved, awake!” His motive for placing the blame upon her for the murder of little William is put in terms far more vivid, both in their bitterness and in their malevolence, than those of 1818: “not I, but she

shall suffer: the murder that I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her: be hers the punishment!" (1831 *F*: 346).

The calculated logic of indiscriminate retribution which leads the creature to plant the locket on Justine marks an incremental leap in the moral horror story of *Frankenstein*. Up to this point, terrible things have happened, but they have occurred without deliberate malicious intent. Victor can be faulted both for creating the monster and for abandoning it, but in neither case does he deliberately intend to injure anyone. The assaults perpetrated on the creature are all carried out under a clear and honest impression of self-defense, and even the killing of little William is, in the creature's account, more of an involuntary manslaughter than a murder; after the child "loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart," the creature claims, "I grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet" (170). Placing the locket on Justine is a qualitatively different act. As the creature deliberately calculates causing harm to Justine not in revenge for any particular action on her part but simply because of her implication in a structure of privilege from which he is excluded, this act would be described, in a contemporary Western political vocabulary, as an act of terrorism.

Extending the moment of self-revelation of malignity by the creature in 1831, Mary Shelley offers the deepest entry into this figure's anguished interiority at the same time that she extends the moral dilemmas posed by the novel. In any calculation of individual ethical responsibility, the creature's behavior is manifestly unfair to Justine, but the calculation of individual ethical responsibility is a system that simply does not work for the creature. The intractability of his fate, which is to be permanently excluded from the bonds of human affection, is not the fault of anyone in particular, but is the result of an unspoken but universally recognized social consensus. At the very moment that the reader gets her most intimate look into the creature's despair, she is confronted with his most coldly logical justification of his capacity for ruthlessness.

The moral horror of this scene overrides the potential humor of the odd fairy tale parody with which the 1831 emendation of this passage begins. When the creature hovers over Justine and says, "Awake, fairest, thy lover is near—he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes: my beloved, awake!" he casts himself as the romantic hero in a well known fairy tale tableau: the prince's discovery of "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood."¹⁶ This exaggerated twisting of an easily recognizable

16. "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" is an eighteenth-century French version of the fairy tale by Charles Perrault. It was sufficiently popular to have undergone several stage adaptations in London during Mary Shelley's childhood.

fairy tale convention is a marker of the instability of all of the fairy tales in *Frankenstein*, and its obvious irony is an extreme example of the novel's persistent deformation of fairy tales and the expectations they create. The 1831 transformation of Elizabeth Lavenza from Victor's cousin into an adoptee of the Frankenstein family, the longest single emendation of the 1818 text, is the most elaborate use of the conventions of the fairy tale as the oblique vehicle through which Mary Shelley examines both her own ugliest prejudices and her participation in structures of privilege, and the passage solicits a similar self-examination from its readers. The revised story of Elizabeth Lavenza's adoption by the Frankensteins has both the plot structure and the rhetoric of a fairy tale. This little girl with "hair [of] the brightest living gold," the "daughter of a Milanese nobleman" who had given his life for "the liberty of his country" seems to have been rescued from poverty and restored to her true station in life as, in fairy tale logic, the signs of her noble birth shine through her dismal circumstances. But the passage that distinguishes this "being heaven-sent" from her more ordinary step-siblings first has to extricate itself from a very different set of sympathies. This is the scene that confronts Caroline Beaufort:

She found a peasant and his wife, hard working, bent down by care and labour, distributing a scanty meal to five hungry babes. Among these there was one which attracted my mother far above all the rest. She appeared of a different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants; this child was thin, and very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold, and, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. . . . none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features. (1831 *F*: 323)

The assertions (in Victor's voice) that the golden-haired Elizabeth is "of a different stock" and "a distinct species" from the "dark-eyed hardy little vagrants" who surround her reflect the Anglo bourgeois bigotry which appears in the 1814 sections of the *History of a Six Weeks Tour* and in Mary Shelley's letters from that period, and which resurfaces in a letter written shortly after Percy's death in which the Genovese are described by Mary Shelley as "wild savages."¹⁷ But the story of the separation of Elizabeth Lavenza from her dark-eyed siblings so that Elizabeth can receive the

17. In *A History of a Six Weeks Tour* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989), Mary Shelley several times refers to Germans of "the Meanest class" as "disgusting" (56, 69). A journal entry of 28 August 1814 speaks of "the horrid and slimy faces of our companions in voyage" (*Journals* 20), while a letter of 15 August 1822 speaks of the Genovese as "wild savages" (*Letters* 1.249).

entitlements that flow naturally from her celestial distinction creates a severe interpretive dilemma in *Frankenstein* because of the obvious similarity between Elizabeth's hardy, unattractive and neglected siblings and the creature doomed by social consensus to be rejected by every human being solely because of his inability to meet minimal standards of acceptability in his physical appearance. The sympathies that draw the reader into an identification with the fate of Elizabeth Lavenza are the same affective preferences that lead to the creature's universal rejection because he exhibits the greatest difference from the conventions of appearance that mark one as an appropriate hero or heroine, as a prince or a princess, in a fairy tale.

The story of Elizabeth Lavenza unsettles the conventions of the fairy tale not only because her adoption leads to her murder rather than to her living happily ever after in the station to which she was born; even at the outset of the story, the very legitimacy of the terms in which Elizabeth is separated from her step-siblings is undermined both by the central narrative of the novel in which her story is placed and by the momentary sympathy engendered for the hardworking, hungry peasant family. Juxtaposing Elizabeth's story of being specially chosen to enjoy material and romantic privileges with the creature's account of being specifically excluded from human companionship and forced to scratch out a meager existence complicates the primacy that seems to be accorded to the romantic narrative of the presentation of Elizabeth to Victor. This problematic romantic narrative quickly eclipses the "peasant and his wife, hard working, bent down by care and labour, distributing a scanty meal to five hungry babes," and even more quickly does "hardy" replace "hungry," assuring us that we have not left these dark-eyed vagrants to a hopeless fate. How long do we dwell on sufferings that are not that bad, and not our fault?

The stakes of the reading of this passage are high; either Mary Shelley's racist and classist prejudices so hardened with time that she included in her revision of her most famous work an unwitting refutation of the sympathy engendered by its central figure, or else in a novel that confronts the question of how difference, or otherness, comes to be perceived as ugliness, the conventional rhetoric of "hair of the brightest living gold" is offered not as a validation of the romantic hierarchy of the fairy tale but as a test of the efficacy of such rhetoric in enabling one to forget the dark-eyed vagrants and their hardworking, poverty-stricken, uninteresting parents. In her 1831 revisions, Mary Shelley ties the end of the Elizabeth/Caroline story to its beginning, deepening its moral complexity at the same time as she tightens its psychology; Caroline's identification with Elizabeth as someone like herself leads to Elizabeth's rescue from poverty, and that same sense of identification impels Caroline into Elizabeth's sickroom in a moment of danger. This single psychological impulse, subjected to moral

terms, can be read either as a self-denying altruism or as an other-denying narcissism.

The revised version of the Elizabeth/Caroline story, like the 1831 Introduction, points up the implicit moral conundrums of the most extended fairy tale in *Frankenstein*, the story of Felix and Safie. While Safie and the de Lacey's have seemed to many readers to be the most admirable characters in the novel, the difference between quixotic and Sanchean perspectives on their story emerges in the relation between the romantic tale of Safie and Felix and the subtexts of that story which describe artificial structures of privilege that exist in the best of circumstances, and demonstrate how easily we acquiesce in those structures and forget their victims. Safie and Felix nicely fit the mold of romantic heroine and hero; after their melodramatic struggles against cardboard villains, they seem to deserve both happiness and each other. But in order for Safie to get from Italy, where her evil father has taken her, to Felix in Germany, she needs the help of a stock figure of romantic comedy, the resourceful servant, the Sancho Panza. So, according to the logic of the fairy tale, she has one: "she quitted Italy, with an attendant, a native of Leghorn, but who understood the common language of Turkey, and departed for Germany" (154). Once Safie gets reasonably close to the De Lacey's in Germany, there is no more need for this servant, so, in another repetition of the deathbed scene, she dies:

[Safie] arrived in safety at a town about twenty leagues from the cottage of De Lacey, when her attendant fell dangerously ill. Safie nursed her with the most devoted attention; but the poor girl died.
(154)

The dead servant, like the hardy dark eyed vagrants, is barely a bump in the road in the romantic narrative; nobody's fault, not very interesting, quickly replaced: "she [Safie] fell into good hands. . . . the woman of the house in which they had lived took care that Safie should arrive in safety at the cottage of her lover" (154).

If it still seems possible that this dead servant and the dark-eyed vagrants are merely stylistic flourishes, notes of pathos that serve as counterpoints to grand romantic narratives, then it should also be remembered that this unnamed servant is not the only sacrifice to Safie's star turn as the romantic heroine. Familiarity with the novel makes it easy to forget that Agatha De Lacey is introduced simply as a "young girl" (135) and the "companion" to Felix, and Agatha's arrival at the identity of "sister," and nothing more than that, occurs as a result of a two-stage process whose subtext reaches deeply into both Mary Shelley's life and her reading. In the initial description of Agatha, Mary Shelley restricts herself to the terms of the creature's

knowledge, withholding any description other than "the girl" (used four times), "the young girl" (twice) or "the young woman" (four times). Throughout this period, Felix is called "the youth" (eight times) or "the young man" (six times), and the phrases "the young girl and her companion" (137), "the young man and his companion" (138), and "the youth and his companion" (140) all suggest, at first, that the two are husband and wife rather than sister and brother. Only when the creature begins to acquire language is Agatha named "sister" (140) (though not "daughter"), and her romantic potential is silently forgotten when Safie arrives with a "musical voice" and a "countenance of angelic beauty and expression" (144) and slides into the narrative position vacated by Agatha as the true romantic companion for Felix. Having read Mary Wollstonecraft's description of the common fate of unmarried sisters,¹⁸ Mary Shelley could not be oblivious to the precarious position in which Agatha de Lacey has found herself, and the unfortunately intimate opportunity which Mary Shelley had for observing the reactions of Harriet Westbrook Shelley, Fanny Imlay Godwin and Claire Clairmont to being relegated to the ancillary role of the sister¹⁹ as a result of Percy Shelley's romantic preference for her made the fair-haired Mary Shelley all too aware of the unsatisfactoriness of losing out on the role of being rescued by the handsome poet.

Of course, Mary Shelley's fairy tale elopement eventually turned out about as badly as Elizabeth Lavenza's upwardly mobile adoption, but as *Frankenstein* relentlessly shows, not only do characters in fairy tales not always live happily ever after, there may not even be any particular reason why they deserve to do so. The assumption by some people of the roles of heroes and heroines of romantic stories means that their rivals, as they are excluded from those roles, can only play ancillary roles to the lives of the privileged few. When happiness depends upon receiving the love that accrues to romantic identity, and conventions decree that romantic heroines fit definable patterns, either exotically glamorous or blond and thin, this is a tough verdict for "dark-eyed hardy little vagrants," let alone those who recoil at their own reflections. *Frankenstein* does not willingly sacrifice the Sancho Panzas of the world, but it does narrate the grim story of the consequences of their exclusion from the realms of privilege. *Frankenstein* turns from a story of a fairy tale going awry through bad luck, mixed motives, misunderstandings and lack of foresight to a story of deliberate

18. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1988) 65–66.

19. In a letter to a friend, Harriet Shelley reported that Percy Shelley told her that Mary (then Godwin) had proposed that the three of them live together, "I [Harriet] as his sister, she as his wife" (*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Oxford: Clarendon, 1964] 1.421).

mayhem when one creature comes to the conclusion that he will never be loved, and so he sees no reason to live and no reason why anyone else should have it any better. The 1831 Introduction and revisions to the novel highlight Mary Shelley's ironic critique of our willingness to accept the fictional cover that novels provide in order to indulge our identifications with figures of privilege, especially if those figures are clothed in romance, to overlook the dispossessions that their privileges entail, and to do so even as we read a novel whose central figure is a victim of those conventional preferences. In the oneiric relays of *Frankenstein*, the creature's punishment of Justine, Elizabeth's favorite dependent, carries out the revenge of the dark-eyed little vagrants on Caroline Frankenstein, even though this is manifestly unfair to Justine. As the story of Elizabeth Lavenza and her dark-eyed step-siblings reaches into and knits together the stories of Justine, Agatha, Safie, and Safie's unnamed servant, the 1831 revisions to *Frankenstein* elaborate the warning that we cannot safely exonerate ourselves from responsibility for the exclusions that arise from structures of social privilege just because those decisions are not our fault.

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