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Glutting the Maw of Death: 
Suicide and Procreation in *Frankenstein* 

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When Milton expressed the hope that “fit audience” would be found for his greatest poem, he did not have in mind the Godwins and the Shelles. Nevertheless, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* draws something from every book of *Paradise Lost*, especially from Book Ten, which describes Adam’s complaint against (and reconciliation with) his Creator. Mary Shelley’s clearest borrowing, of course, is the epigraph to the novel’s first edition (1818):

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?—

Although *Frankenstein* has been studied many times for Miltonic echoes and “influences,” little has been said about the full context in which Adam’s complaint appears. And yet that context contains a debate over procreation and suicide—issues to which Mary Shelley was particularly sensitive and which became major themes in her first novel. After reviewing the dominance of these themes in Mary’s life and in *Frankenstein*, I will focus on an echo, in the monster’s very first speech, of Eve’s despairing proposal to Adam that the two of them forego procreation, either through sexual abstinence or through mutual self-destruction (Book 10: lines 967-1006). This crucial moment in *Paradise Lost*, I shall argue, offers a significant parallel to Victor’s decision not to create a female companion for the monster, a decision widely considered the novel’s turning-point. In Milton’s portrait of a suicidal Eve we find a juxtaposition of procreation and suicide which Mary Shelley reworked into her own account of Eros and Thanatos converging.

It has been virtually established by now that one of the deepest concerns of *Frankenstein* is procreation. Victor’s creation of the monster is seen as displacing woman’s natural child-bearing role, and upon this resonant image of male monstrosity critics have built a wide variety of gender-related interpretations. The novel is commonly read as a critique of male egotism: in by-passing the woman’s procreative role, Victor reveals his fear of female sexual autonomy and his own ambivalent femininity. The many dead and
missing mothers in the book further reflect his unnatural project and may also suggest Mary's feelings of loss and guilt with regard to her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who succumbed to puerperal fever in 1797, ten days after giving birth to Mary.4

Though not as frequently discussed as procreation, suicide is also a major motif in Frankenstein, and one of the book's achievements is its varied depiction of self-destructive wishes and acts. In fact, the book is an imaginative contribution to the heated debate over the morality and psychology of suicide which was carried on throughout the eighteenth century.5 Roughly speaking, that period saw the emergence of various secular standpoints that challenged religious dogma. A variety of rationalist, skeptical, libertine, and utilitarian thinkers came to question the view maintained by most Christian authorities (following St. Augustine, City of God, Book I) that suicide was an absolute sin. At stake in the debate was more than suicide per se, for suicide raised not only specifically religious questions—did a person's life belong to God or to that person?—but also the deepest questions about the limits of individual freedom, the importance of personal happiness, and the claims of a socially-based morality.6

While Frankenstein addresses these matters in its own striking way, it is uncertain how much direct familiarity Mary Shelley had with positions on suicide already advanced by others. Aside from the books of Godwin (discussed below), Mary had read—prior to the completion of Frankenstein—such popular works as Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther, Montesquieu's Persian Letters, and Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse.7 Goethe's story of the sensitive, suicidal outcast, of course, forms part of the monster's education in Frankenstein. In Montesquieu's work, Letter LXXIV ("In Defence of Self-Murder") partly anticipates Hume's famous essay "Of Suicide" in its argument that self-destruction offends neither society nor "the Order of Providence."8 And Rousseau's highly influential novel (Part III, letter 21) presents the view that killing oneself is no sin against God and is constrained only by our duty to others. Though Mary cannot be said to have immersed herself in the polemical documents belonging to the suicide debate, she was evidently conversant with the general lines of argument. In any case, it seems most likely that her thoughts and feelings about suicide owed less to her reading than to her personal experiences and her reflections upon them.

Although there is, of course, no simple connection between Mary's life and her novel's analysis of suicidal states of mind, I believe it is clear that death and suicide—often in association with pregnancy, legitimate or illegitimate—figured importantly in her pre-Frankenstein history and in her imagination. The young Mary Godwin, after all, had a consuming interest in her mother's life. Whether from listening to William Godwin himself or from reading Mary Wollstonecraft's published correspondence or from reading her father's Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1798), Mary Godwin would have known that her mother had twice
attempted suicide in 1795 during her unhappy involvement with Gilbert Imlay. In her first suicide attempt, Mary Wollstonecraft took an overdose of laudanum (late spring of 1795); in the second, she jumped from Putney Bridge into the Thames (October 1795).9 The first attempt is apparently described in Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel, the posthumously published The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria, which Mary Godwin read in 1814. The book concludes, significantly, with a superscribed passage in which Maria, suddenly presented with her lost baby daughter, vomits up the laudanum she had just taken to kill herself and then cries “The conflict is over!—I will live for my child!”10 Such knowledge of her mother’s life and work must have given Mary Godwin occasion to ponder, if only abstractly, the meaning of suicide and its possible relations to motherhood. Offspring could be a kind of counterweight to suicide, providing meaning, stability, and human connectedness.11

The views of suicide published by her father—to whom the first edition of Frankenstein was dedicated—would certainly have been known to Mary. In his Memoirs and in his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice he argued that we do not think clearly during episodes of self-destructive anguish; we forget that the anguish may pass and that we may, in the future, enjoy periods of “tranquillity and pleasure.”12 He made no moral judgments but expressed deep sympathy and spoke of rational chances for happiness. Mary would probably have known that Godwin considered her mother to be “a female Werter,”13 that alienated man of feeling whose sensitivities lead him at last to suicide. And from Godwin’s own example, Mary would have learned the lesson that was to aid her later in life—that writing was one way to deal with bereavement.14

The other principal male in Mary’s life was, of course, Percy Shelley, who also must have influenced her thoughts about self-destruction. Not only in his philosophical opinions but also in his behavior, Percy manifested a deep fascination with death, with suicide, and with suicidal gestures as tokens of authentic feeling and as weapons in a contest of wills. During his tempestuous courtship of Mary Godwin in July of 1814, Percy proposed that they commit suicide together; some days afterward he took an overdose of laudanum and had to be revived.15

While Mary was in the midst of composing Frankenstein, there occurred the suicides of her half-sister, Fanny (Imlay) Godwin, and of Harriet Shelley, Percy’s deserted wife. Both deaths may be seen in part as acts of vengeance directed at Mary herself. Fanny was found dead of an overdose of laudanum on October 10, 1816. Her painfully self-effacing suicide note read:

I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavoring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed as. . . .
According to the newspaper report, the signature "appeared to have been torn off and burned." According to the newspaper report, the signature "appeared to have been torn off and burned." On December 10, 1816, two months after the suicide of Fanny, the body of Harriet Shelley, Percy's wife, was found—a suicide—in the Serpentine River. She had been missing from her rented lodgings, where she had lived under the name "Harriet Smith," for about one month. At the time of her death she was in an advanced state of pregnancy. Sorting out the motives of a "successful" suicide, of course, is a notoriously uncertain business—even when far more evidence is available than we have concerning the deaths of Fanny and Harriet. Nevertheless, it seems clear that both women felt themselves to be outcasts as a result of procreative activity. Fanny was illegitimate—of "unfortunate" birth—and had perhaps felt rejected when Percy fell in love with her half-sister Mary Godwin. Harriet's shameful pregnancy may have contributed to her suicide. And the methods of suicide chosen by Fanny and Harriet express—according to Freud, at least—unconscious wishes for pregnancy and childbirth, respectively. More even than Fanny's suicide, with its aggressive overtones, the death of Harriet fits the classic pattern of the revenge-suicide. Harriet made no effort to conceal either her suicidal thoughts or her rage at Percy's desertion. Just before her death, she wrote a letter to her sister Eliza which expresses the wish that Ianthe, her daughter by Percy, should remain in Eliza's custody and which includes a direct address to "My dear Bysshe":

Do not refuse my last request. I never could refuse you & if you had never left me I might have lived, but as it is I freely forgive you & may you enjoy that happiness which you have deprived me of.

The explicit written record of Mary's reaction to the suicides is virtually blank. In her extant letters, the only (indirect) mention of Fanny's suicide occurs in the very letter where we would expect to find—but do not—a reference to Harriet's newly discovered suicide. Mary's journal is no more revealing. Whatever her own response to the suicide of Fanny, it was surely complicated by the reaction of her father Godwin: afraid of possible scandal, he refused to identify or to claim Fanny's body, which was buried in a pauper's grave, and he falsely claimed that Fanny had died of fever. If Mary herself ever entertained thoughts of suicide, such treatment of her half-sister must have given her pause.

Percy left an equally unrevealing written record, and scholars have long speculated about his reaction to the suicide of his wife. Nevertheless, we know from modern clinical studies that survivors of suicide (sometimes referred to as "survivor-victims") think and behave in ways that constitute a recognizable syndrome. They are frequently beset by guilt and by the need to deny that guilt; they often engage in mutual reproach and self-justifying explanations of the dead person's motives. The survivors of Harriet's
suicide certainly fit this pattern, and the quarrels they began have been carried on by biographers ever since. Harriet’s champions blamed Percy, primarily for his adulterous affair with Mary Godwin (who became Mary Shelley a mere three weeks after Harriet’s body was discovered). Percy and his defenders cast aspersions on Harriet and on her sister Eliza.27 Although Mary sided with Percy’s attempt to gain custody of his children, his defensive coldness toward Harriet’s death—as well as his fascination with death generally—may have affected the story Mary was composing, especially its portrait of Victor Frankenstein, which is widely recognized as a partial representation of Percy.

Turning now to the novel, we may observe first how persistent is Victor’s tendency toward suicidal urges and ideation. Critics generally agree that his desire to defeat death—to deny his own place in the natural scheme of things—stems in part from a longing for his own dead mother and is inherently suicidal.28 Upon discovering “the secret” of life, he brings forth a monster whom he soon comes to consider “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” (72)—an explicit statement of the doppelganger theme that has become a commonplace of Frankenstein criticism. It is curiously apt that Plutarch’s Lives, one of the monster’s formative books, makes doubling—the “paralleling” of life-stories, often of a virtuous man and a vicious man—its organizing principle.29 And suicide is almost a structural necessity in doppelganger stories: in disposing of his unwelcome double, the protagonist necessarily destroys some essential part of himself.30 This feature of double tales, interestingly, is consistent with psychological studies which suggest that suicide often proceeds from confusion about the self, from a contradictory fantasy of killing oneself and living on.31 Between the two of them, Victor and the monster play out Karl Menninger’s well known “triad” of suicidal motives—the wish to kill others, the wish to be punished, and the wish simply to perish.32

Early in the book Victor speaks of himself as one of the dead (48)—by implication, our mortality (from which he would free us) places us already among the dead—and this image occurs repeatedly in the course of his various trance-like swoons and illnesses. Numerous times he expresses an overt longing for death: when Justine is executed (87), when he consents to the monster’s demand for a mate (145), when he throws into the sea the body-parts that were to have composed that mate (169), and when he beholds Clerval’s murdered body (174, 179). Although cleared of suspicion for Clerval’s murder, he still suffers “paroxysms of anguish and despair” and must be guarded constantly to be kept from committing suicide (180). One crux in the novel is Victor’s utter incomprehension of the monster’s threat—“I will be with you on your wedding-night” (166). It is at once obvious to the reader that the monster intends to kill Elizabeth, but Victor imagines the implied death-threat as being directed against himself. Critics have seen Victor’s “blindness” as caused by his sexual anxiety, his fear of
women, and his desire for the death of Elizabeth, who bears inadvertent responsibility for the death of his own mother. Without denying these readings, we may also understand Victor's blindness as further proof of his fixation upon his own wished-for death. And when Elizabeth is killed, Victor repeats that wish (193).

Yet, for all of Victor's talk about suicide, the only figure who commits the act is the monster. Though his death is not portrayed within the novel, I cannot agree with those who—possibly influenced by the persistence of the Frankenstein "myth" in later literature and film—claim that the monster perhaps does not kill himself "after" the book's conclusion. He has made good on his promises and threats throughout the book. After what we have seen him suffer, and after his own passionately imagined description of his fiery death, a further account of the actual deed (presumably by Walton) would have been anti-climactic. And the fact that we do not witness the monster's death does not diminish the book's forceful presentation of suicidal emotions and motives. The death foretold by the monster illustrates that suicide is the consequence of an isolated, unnatural life—a life brought into being by the wrong kind of procreation.

Like Victor, the monster carries thoughts of suicide with him almost from the start. So long as he has hopes that Victor will create a female companion for him, he is determined to cling to life (95). But as he relates the history of his own education, we see that he has already glimpsed the possibility of suicide as an escape from his anguish. The fullest picture he gets of suicide comes from reading Goethe's Sorrows of Werther. Yet although the book throws "so many lights . . . upon what had hitherto been to me obscure subjects" (123), death and suicide are not among the illuminated topics:

The disquisitions upon death and suicide were calculated to fill me with wonder. I did not pretend to enter into the merits of the case, yet I inclined towards the opinions of the hero, whose extinction I wept, without precisely understanding it. (124)

Just as he ultimately rejects the comparisons between himself and Milton's Adam and Satan, he is forced to recognize that he also differs from the characters in Werther. Unlike them, "I was dependent on none, and related to none. 'The path of my departure was free;' and there was none to lament my annihilation" (124). It is precisely because of his isolation that, when Victor dashes his hopes for a mate, the creature can only turn his rage outward—he destroys Victor's loved ones, thus making his creator's life as desolate as his own. By contrast, Werther can achieve revenge by killing himself (with Albert's pistol). Werther's suicide—both spiteful and pathetic—leaves Albert in dismay and Lotte in misery; Werther dies in a shower of kisses from the old bailiff and his sons. But the monster knows that, aside from bringing gladness and relief to his enemy, his own suicide
would affect no one. So long as Victor lives and suffers, the monster is “satisfied” (200), but when his creator dies, the monster loses his only reason for living. The suicide he foretells to Walton—“I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames” (221) is more than an act of self-punishment. Rebuffed by the entire world, the monster hopes to annihilate that world.34

It may be noted, finally, that suicidal urges in the novel are not restricted to the two chief antagonists. Mary Thornburg argues that the book’s women embody a masochistic, helpless femininity which contributes to their own destruction.35 And the narrator Walton, in certain respects an overreacher like Victor, has willingly placed himself in the path of death:

I am surrounded by mountains of ice, which admit of no escape, and threaten every moment to crush my vessel. . . . We may survive; and if we do not, I will repeat the lessons of my Seneca, and die with a good heart. (210)

The reference to Seneca is ambiguous. While it clearly suggests that Walton intends to face death bravely, it may also hint at Seneca’s frequently repeated teaching that suicide was an acceptable alternative to pointless suffering or dishonor (a teaching Seneca ultimately enacted himself).36 To “repeat the lessons” of Seneca could mean to kill oneself.

Having surveyed the prominence of suicide in Mary’s early life and in her first novel, we may now turn to Paradise Lost, a major text in the Godwin household, in Percy’s poetic development, and in the monster’s moral education. It is early in Book Ten that Adam and Eve, having eaten the forbidden fruit, hear God’s judgments upon them (Book 10: lines 193-208). Both are punished by being made mortal—a grim reality which Milton renders throughout Book Ten by heavily stressing the traditional idea of Death-the-devourer. In addition, Eve receives a judgment affecting all future procreation, and Adam is told he must work to eat. The several hundred lines that follow are dominated by images of sadistic oral consumption.37 Now that Man has fallen, a fallen Nature turns hostile to Man and to itself:

Beast now with Beast gan war, and Fowl with Fowl,
And Fish with Fish; to graze the Herb all leaving,
Devour’d each other;
(Book 10: lines 710-12)

Adam admits that he deserves punishment (Book 10: lines 725-27), but he knows that God’s anger will extend as well to future generations: “All that I eat or drink, or shall beget/ Is propagated curse” (Book 10: lines 728-29). Whether in eating, to preserve his own life, or in procreating, he is simply keeping alive the effects of his sin.
Less than ten lines later, he begins the complaint against his Maker that Mary Shelley used as her epigraph. Like Adam, Victor Frankenstein worries that “future ages” may curse him. Having agreed to create a female companion for the monster, he is forced to stop work by the reflection that

one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I the right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? . . . I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price perhaps of the existence of the whole human race. (163)

While critics have noted that Victor’s fear of future curses resembles Adam’s, they have virtually ignored the full context of Adam’s speech and have therefore missed the true extent of the parallel between Victor’s situation and that of our first parents. As Adam and Eve struggle to understand the consequences of their disobedience, Eve proposes a way around her husband’s fear: they should simply cut short the human race. If they find it “hard and difficult” to abstain from “Love’s due Rites, Nuptial embraces sweet” (Book 10: lines 993-94)—in Victor’s terms, to restrain their thirst for “sympathies”—they should commit suicide: “Let us seek Death, or he not found, supply/With our own hands his Office on ourselves” (Book 10: lines 1001-2). Milton prepares this startling revision of the Genesis story in at least two ways that have a bearing on Frankenstein. The first is the mention of suicide in the description of the Limbo of Vanity (Book 3: lines 416-509), where it is specifically linked with glory-seeking and monstrosity. After Sin fills the works of men with vanity, the Limbo of Vanity will contain “all who [like Victor] in vain things/Built thir fond hopes of Glory or lasting fame” (Book 3: lines 448-49) and “All th’ unaccomplisht works of Nature’s hand,/ Abortive, monstrous, or unkindly mixt” (Book 3: lines 455-56). In addition, Limbo will contain suicides like Empedocles “who to be deem’d/A God, leap’d fondly into Aetna flames” (Book 3: lines 469-70)—an end that may remind us of the monster’s own. Secondly, Eve leads up to her despairing proposal in terms that echo throughout Frankenstein:
If care of our descent perplex us most,
Which must be born to certain woe, devour'd
By Death at last, and miserable it is
To be to others cause of misery,
Our own begott'n, and of our Loins to bring
Into this cursed World a woeful Race,
That after wretched Life must be at last
Food for so foul a Monster, in thy power
It lies, yet ere Conception to prevent
The Race unblest, to being yet unbegot.
Childless thou art, Childless remain: So Death
Shall be deceiv'd his glut, and with us two
Be forc'd to satisfy his Rav'nous Maw.

(Book 10: lines 979-91; emphasis added)

Although the image of death as a mouth, or as possessing a mouth, is a literary commonplace that turns up a number of times in *Paradise Lost*, this is the only passage where we find all three of the terms *glut*, *maw*, and *death* employed together. What is particularly noteworthy is that these are precisely the terms used by the monster when he orders Victor to create the female in the first place. Following an initial disappearance of two years, the creature returns to confront his maker:

> Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends. (94; emphasis added)

Although the monster delays making his “conditions” explicit until he has finished his tale (“My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects. This being you must create” [140]), this early reminder of Eve is most appropriate. In making his threat, of course, the monster implicitly equates himself with the figure of devouring Death, an equation both fitting and ironic: fitting because the creature is himself a re-animated patchwork of *corpses*, ironic because he is a re-animated corpse—the maw of death was unable to keep him down.

From start to finish, in other words, Eve’s suicidal proposal shadows the monster’s attempt to procure a mate—from the monster’s initial threat against Victor’s loved ones (with its echo of Eve) to Victor’s destruction of the monster’s half-finished companion (accompanied by echoes of Adam). Both in *Paradise Lost* and in *Frankenstein*, the choice is put in terms of procreation or sacrificial self-destruction. Moreover, the choice, in both cases, is made within a matrix of vengeful motives. Eve would, by double-suicide, deny procreation in order to cheat Death’s “Rav’nous Maw”; by accepting death now, she and Adam can prevent future human suffering and death. By choosing suicide and the extinction of the species, they can
spare humankind from “so foul a Monster” as Death and exact a kind of revenge against that Monster.\textsuperscript{39} Similarly, by withholding “those sympathies” (and the procreation which, he assumes, would result), Victor will have “sacrificed” (167) himself and his loved ones, but he will be sparing future generations.

In fact, however, Victor’s reasoning may be little more than rationalization of a vengeful (and self-destructive) provocation against his creature. The monster never once expresses a desire for offspring or even mentions them as a possibility: he understands his own needs in terms of spiritual and sexual companionship. Just as his threat against Victor conjures up the stock figure of Death-the-devourer, emblematic of the equation between eating and murder, he also employs an oral image to convey his benign intentions. Promising that he and his mate will go to “the vast wilds of South America,” the monster stresses his difference from carnivorous humans and from gluttonous Death: “My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” (142). But when Victor destroys the bride-to-be, the monster naturally interprets this act as one more turn of a revenge-cycle that is already in motion, an act requiring a reply in kind (165).\textsuperscript{40}

In Book Ten of Paradise Lost, then, Mary found a fertile cluster of images and ideas that she adapted to her own tale of creation and transgression. In light of her own personal history, it is not surprising that she paid close attention to Milton’s striking departure from Genesis, his portrait of the mother of humankind in the grip of suicidal despair.\textsuperscript{41}

And suicide was to remain a leitmotif in Mary’s life and work through the turbulent years that followed the first publication of Frankenstein. After the death of her son William (June 1819), she may have entertained actual thoughts of killing herself, but they were held in check by the fact that she was again pregnant (with Percy Florence) and by the “inspiration” she experienced while writing Mathilda,\textsuperscript{42} a deeply autobiographical work which presents a full portrait of suicidal longing and may have served at the time to exorcize Mary’s own self-destructive urges.\textsuperscript{43} The drowning of her husband Percy (July 1822) was followed by nearly two years during which Mary suffered guilt and remorse.\textsuperscript{44} The first book she published after his death, The Last Man (1826), describes the annihilation of the human race by plague and contains the suicide of Perdita, who chooses to die rather than be torn from the place where her husband has been buried.\textsuperscript{45}

By 1831, however, when Mary composed a new—and largely fictional—Introduction to her most popular book, the gloom had lifted somewhat. Suicide was neither a personal temptation nor, in writing, an exclusively serious topic. A lighter treatment of suicide turns up, for example, in the way she uses the figure of William Polidori, Byron’s companion and physician, to convey her artistic triumph in the ghost-story contest. She writes that although Byron and her husband “speedily relinquished their un-congenial task,” her one remaining rival stuck with it a bit longer: “Poor
Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady,” but at last “he did not know what to do with her and was obliged to dispatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted” (225). While tombs are standard stuff in Gothic fiction, we may still wonder why Mary should have connected the Capulet tomb to Polidori and to stillborn works of art. Since the Capulet tomb is the scene of literature’s most famous (double) suicide, the association may have been prompted by the memory of Polidori’s own suicide in August 1821. It may even be that Mary remembered from Romeo and Juliet the very themes and stock images we have noted with regard to Frankenstein—suicide, tainted creativity, and the oral conception of Death. But by the time she wrote her Introduction, Mary Shelley had achieved a hard-earned distance from her earlier morbid obsessions and could treat them with irony. Unlike the self-destroyed Polidori and his tomb-bound “terrible idea,” Mary had survived her sorrows and had succeeded in turning Death’s maw and its contents into a lasting and vital work of literature.

NOTES


2. There is no agreement about what Mary Shelley’s borrowings from Paradise Lost might signify. Different readings of the two texts produce (or follow from?) different versions of their respective authors: an orthodox Milton who is implicitly supported by an orthodox Mary Shelley (Leslie Tannebaum, "From Filthy Type to Truth: Miltonic Myth in Frankenstein," Keats-Shelley Journal 26 [1977]: 106); a patriarchal Milton whose misogynist tale is recreated and exposed in Mary Shelley’s “female fantasy of sex and reading” (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination [New Haven: Yale UP, 1979] 224); an ambivalent Milton whose complex poem receives from Mary Shelley a “Romantic,” heretical reading (Stuart Curran, "The Siege of Hateful Contraries: Shelley, Mary Shelley, Byron, and Paradise Lost," Milton and the Line of Vision, ed. Joseph Anthony Wittreich [U of Wisconsin P, 1975] 220), a reading that is "fiercely unspiritual, skeptical, materialistic, even literalistic in its guiding motives" (Kenneth Gross, "Satan and the Romantic Satan: A notebook," Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson [NY: Methuen, 1988] 335); a radical Milton whose epic contains “revolutionary energies” which Mary found and “liberated” (Burton Hatlen, "Milton, Mary Shelley, and

3 One well known formulation is that of Ellen Moers, who sees the novel as expressing Mary Shelley’s anxieties about childbirth (*Literary Women* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974] 92). Although this view has been criticized—Alan Bewell, for example, regards it as reductive and ahistorical (“An Issue of Monstrous Desire: Frankenstein and Obstetrics,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 [1988]: 105-28)—there is little disagreement that *Frankenstein* is fundamentally concerned with procreation.


6 Crocker 51, 71. Stripped of its scientific trappings, after all, the story of Victor Frankenstein is that of a man who abuses his individual freedom. As Marshall Brown notes, at the heart of *Frankenstein* is a “Rousseauistic concern for the proper relationship of the individual to his community of fellows” (“A Philosophical View of the Gothic Novel,” *Studies in Romanticism* 26 [1987]: 289).

7 These facts are drawn from the annual booklists and daily entries in her journals (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987]; future references to this edition will be abbreviated *Journals*). Goethe’s story is on Mary’s booklist for 1815; she read Montesquieu’s and Rousseau’s epistolary novels in 1816. *Frankenstein* was completed on May 14, 1817.

8 “Life was given me as a Favour; I may consequently give it back when it is no longer so” (Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. John Ozell, 2 vols., Garland Foundations of the Novel [1722; NY: Garland, 1972] 2: 12-16). Mary’s journals name several of Hume’s works specifically—the earliest entry is November 24-29, 1817—but his essay “Of Suicide” is not among them. (On the contorted publication history of this essay, see Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* [Austin: U of Texas P, 1954] 319-35).

9 Godwin edited and published the correspondence in the four-volume *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798). For Wollstonecraft’s own references to the suicide attempts, see letters 168, 170, 197, and 198 in *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1979). Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798; New York: Garland, 1974; future references will be abbreviated *Memoirs*) mentions the first suicide attempt in very cursory fashion, conceding that this part of Wollstonecraft’s story “is involved in considerable obscurity” (127), but the second attempt is described in detail (132-34). According to her journals (519 n4), Mary was apparently reading Godwin’s *Memoirs* on June 3, 1820 (i.e., after the first publication of *Frankenstein*), but she may well have known the book’s contents at an earlier date.

10 Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary, a Fiction and The Wrongs of Woman: or Maria, A Fragment, ed. Gary Kelly (London: Oxford UP 1976) 203. In his discussion of this passage, Kelly writes: “M. W.‘s first attempt at suicide is probably described here. . . . Since M. W. did decide to live for her child Fanny, the scene that follows, perhaps drawn from life, may not be mere tear-jerking”
In her correspondence, Mary Wollstonecraft several times refers to her little daughter Fanny as the only reason she has for living (See, for example, letters, 159 and 162 in Collected Letters). Later in life, Mary Shelley often said the very same thing about her one remaining child, Percy Florence.


On Godwin’s Memoirs as the imaginative product of his mourning for his wife, see Mitzi Myers, “Godwin’s Memoirs of Wollstonecraft: The Shaping of Self and Subject,” Studies in Romanticism 20 (1981): 299-316. The eighteenth-century English translations of Goethe’s Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (1774) included a version by R. Graves (1779) using the spelling Werter. If Mary read Godwin’s journal, she would have known that her parents were reading Werter on the evening before she was born (Eleanor L. Nicholes, “The Death of Mary Wollstonecraft: Excerpts from Godwin’s Journal,” Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1822, ed. Kenneth Neil Cameron. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1961] 1: 188). This appears to be the version of Goethe’s tale that Mary read in 1815 and whose spelling she followed in Frankenstein.

Benjamin Kurtz devotes an entire book to Percy’s conspicuous obsession with death (The Pursuit of Death: A Study of Shelley’s Poetry, 1933 [NY: Octagon, 1971]). On Percy’s own suicide attempt, see Newman Ivey White, Shelley, 2 vols. (NY: Knopf, 1940) 1: 343-45. According to Harriet, however, it was Mary Godwin who had threatened suicide to compel Percy’s love (The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 2 vols., ed. Frederick L. Jones [London: Oxford UP, 1964] 1: 421n; future references to this edition will be abbreviated Letters of PBS), a story later repeated by the unreliable Mrs. Godwin (Richard Holme, Shelley: The Pursuit [NY: Dutton, 1975] 353). In later years we find Percy still preoccupied with self-destruction. Two days after Mary nearly died of a miscarriage (June 1822), Percy wrote to Trelawny in the hope of producing some prussic acid (cyanide): “I need not tell you I have no intention of suicide at present, — but I confess it would be a comfort to me to hold in my possession that golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest” (Letters of PBS 2: 433). A mere three weeks later, Percy was dead indeed. Uncannily, the day before he died he told Marianne Hunt, “If I die tomorrow, I have lived to be older than my father; I am ninety years of age” (White 2: 378).

Not only does this note link “unfortunate” procreation and suicide, but it also employs the dehumanized ambiguous terms which denote the “being,” the “creature” invented by Victor Frankenstein.

Harriet was apparently well aware of the effects that suicide (threatened or actual) could have on others. According to Percy’s account of their early courtship, Harriet had sent him letters that made a “favorite theme” of suicide; he responded to them as an appeal for rescue through marriage (Letters of PBS 1: 162). Kenneth Neil Cameron offers the fullest discussion of the facts surrounding Harriet’s death (“The Last Days of Harriet Shelley,” Shelley and His Circle: 1773-1822 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970] 4: 769-810).

Margaret Homans believes Fanny’s suicide may have been prompted by the discovery that “she was her mother’s illegitimate child by Gilbert Imlay” (Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986] 111). Janet Todd attributes it partly to Fanny’s “melancholy situation as supernumerary in the Godwin household” (“Frankenstein’s Daughter: Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft,” Women and Literature 4 [Fall 1976]: 26). Maria Gisborne—a mutual friend of Godwin, Mary, and Percy—quotes Godwin as asserting that Fanny was in love with Percy and killed herself because Percy preferred Mary (Journals 139n).

Cameron refutes the theory that Percy Shelley was the father of the baby Harriet was carrying (783-84).

In an essay from 1920, Freud writes: “that the various methods of suicide can represent sexual wish fulfillments has long been known to all analysts. (To poison oneself = to become pregnant; to drown = to bear a child . . .).” (“The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in

21 *Letters of PBS* 1: 520n. For the full text of the letter and a discussion of its history, see Cameron (4:802-10). Percy’s reaction to the letter—like his reaction to the suicide itself—remains a matter of debate. See, for example, Radu Florescu *In Search of Frankenstein* [Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975] 130), Holmes (354), and White (1: 483).

22 Dated 17 December 1816, the letter was written to Percy, who had gone to London to seek custody from the Westbrooks of his two children. Anticipating her impending marriage to Shelley, Mary Godwin speaks of “Poor dear Fanny if she had lived until this moment she would have been saved for my house would then have been a proper assylum [sic] for her” (*The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 3 vols., ed. Betty T. Bennett [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980-88] 1:24; future references to this edition will be abbreviated *Letters of MWS*). I think J. M. Hill is correct to suggest that Mary was probably more affected by the suicide of Fanny than by that of Harriet; although Harriet was “a more significant rival” for Percy’s love than was Fanny, the latter was “a potential rival” for Godwin’s love (J. M. Hill, *Frankenstein and the Physiognomy of Desire*, *American Imago* 32 [1975]: 352, n18).

23 According to modern editors of Mary’s journal, she wrote cautiously, ever aware that her entries might be read or even published by others (*Mary Shelley’s Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1947] viii; *Journals* xv-xvi). Concerning the suicides of Fanny and Harriet, the entries are extremely terse (*Journals* 141, 150). Years later, in 1839, she refers in her journal to “Poor Harriet to whose sad fate I attribute so many of my own heavy sorrows as the atonement claimed by fate for her death” (*Journals* 560); the full entry seems to express both guilt and bitterness at being misunderstood by others in the matter of Harriet’s death.

24 *Journals* 140n.

25 Where some imagine that reaction as “stark guilt” (Rubenstein 189), others see Percy’s “apparent inability to accept responsibility or even express remorse” (Robert M. Ryan, “Mary Shelley’s Christian Monster,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 19 [1988]: 154). According to Cameron, his view “of himself as a selfless and dedicated humanitarian” made it “virtually impossible for him consciously to accept any blame for Harriet’s suicide” (4:799).


27 See his letter of 16 December 1816 to Mary Godwin (*Letters of PBS* 1:521). In a letter to Byron one month later, Percy twice alludes to the suicide of Fanny, which he curiously describes as “a far severer anguish” and a “thing . . . that affected me far more deeply” than the death of Harriet (*Letters of PBS* 1:530). Perhaps because Fanny’s suicide was more pathetic and less wounding (to Percy, at least) than that of Harriet, we find thoughts of the former displacing thoughts of the latter. To this meager written record may be added Percy’s six lines of verse (“Her voice did quiver as we parted”), which are assumed to refer to Fanny, and a single poem (“The cold Earth slept below”) which is generally believed to be about Harriet’s suicide.


29 Although Plutarch tells the stories of many famous suicides, the monster sees Plutarch’s heroes as contrasts to Goethe’s Werther: “I learned from Werter’s imaginings despondency and gloom, but Plutarch taught me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages” (124). Of the heroes specifically named by the monster—Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus (125)—only the last commits suicide (by self-starvation). Interestingly, the “benevolent” and “rational” Lycurgus is named in Godwin’s discussion of suicide (*Enquiry* 178) as an example of the kind of suicide Durkheim would later label “altruistic.”
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32 Karl Menninger, Man Against Himself (NY: Harcourt, 1938) 17-80.


34 His suicide has also been seen as an act of parodic self-sacrifice (U. C. Knoepfelmacher, “Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters,” Endurance 107), an act of obedience to the will of his creator (Judith Wilt, Ghosts of the Gothic (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 71), and an act of blazing self-assertion (Massey 132). According to Wahl, one component of aggressive suicide is the idea that “to kill oneself is to kill everything that there is, the world and other persons” (29).


36 For a list of Seneca’s defenses of suicide, see Anna Lydia Motto, Guide to the Thought of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Amsterdam: Haklertz, 1970) 206-07. Percy read Seneca’s works in 1815 (Journals 92).

37 After Adam’s fall, the poem stresses Death’s voracity (Book 10: lines 267-68, 601-09). In a digression, Milton describes—again, in oral terms—how God spoils Satan’s triumphant return to Hell (Book 10: lines 546-47, 565-56). Then God employs a series of violent oral images to predict the Son’s final victory (Book 10: lines 629-37).

38 Though he says nothing about Eve’s suicidal proposal, Fred V. Randal also sees this confrontation, with its choice between procreation and sterility, in Miltonic terms (“Frankenstein, Feminism, and the Intertextuality of Mountains,” Studies in Romanticism 24 [1985]: 526-27).

39 The debate between Adam and Eve may be seen as a debate over means: Eve would get revenge by racial suicide, Adam by procreation which will bring forth the “Seed” that “shall bruise/The Serpent’s head” (Book 10: lines 1031-32). Stuart Curran suggestively comments that Adam’s vengeful perspective is “irreparably fallen even as it struggles to rise” (224).

40 Victor’s crucial destruction of the “monstress” has been analyzed from a wide variety of standpoints. For some readers, Victor in this episode is a stand-in for Mary (Hill 340; Knoepfelmacher 107; Rubenstein 193). Feminist critics have emphasized Victor’s fear of a sexualized, incestuous mother-figure and his fear of female sexual autonomy in general. Those who see a homosexual bond between Victor and his creature argue that the monster does not truly want a female partner and that Victor wants no female to compromise his bond with the creature. But a number of readers condemn Victor’s failure to provide his monster with a loving partner (Tannenbaum 110; Hatlen 37; Irving H. Buchen, “Frankenstein and the Alchemy of Creation and Evolution,” Wordsworth Circle 8 [1977]: 111).

41 The argument offered here, which traces Frankenstein’s handling of procreation and suicide to Book Ten of Paradise Lost, may be seen as supporting Sandra Gilbert’s claim that Mary Shelley’s story “is a fictionalized rendition of the meaning of Paradise Lost to women” (Gilbert and Gubar 221). In Gilbert’s view, Victor and the monster are both versions of the silenced and suppressed figure of Milton’s Eve: Victor has Eve’s criminal curiosity, longs to give birth to a new race, but discovers that he is fallen (Gilbert and Gubar 234). The monster, in turn, embodies Eve’s isolation, her fear of isolation, and her sense of her own deformity (Gilbert and Gubar 239-41). To this list of traits we may add Eve’s death-wish.

42 Journals 442.


44 On Mary’s wishes for death, see Journals (435, 452, 475, 478, 488). She says, occasionally with a tinge of resentment, that the existence of Percy Florence forces her to go on living (Journals 433, 454-55), an idea repeated even more frequently in her letters (Letters of MWS 1: 243, 252, 261, 287, 291, 300, 305, 317, 327). Despite her overt wishes for death, however, she explicitly refused to choose active suicide. In a letter of 15 October 1822, she says, referring to her son Percy Florence, that “Percy wd go too, only then I shd no longer be chained to time but shd depart—without self violence (which I wd never use) I know that I shd then die” (Letters of MWS 1: 283).


46 The tomb is insistently associated with oral imagery. Juliet fears she will suffocate “in the vault/To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in” (Romeo and Juliet, ed. Brian Gibbons [London: Methuen, 1980] Act 4, sc. 3, lines 33-34); she wonders whether she will awake amid “loathsome smells” and be driven by “hideous fears”—perhaps like Victor—to “madly play with my forefathers’ joints” (4.3.51). And Romeo, forcing open the gates of the tomb to lie with Juliet, delivers this apostrophe:

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,  
Gorg’d with the dearest morsel of the earth,  
Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,  
And in despite I’ll cram thee with more food.  (5.3.45-48)