Sibling Revelry in Mary Shelley’s
Frankenstein

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The nineteenth century’s well-known fixation on the family has generally been dealt with by critics in terms of the parent-child relationship, with remarkably little attention given to the sibling bond. Yet, to a great extent, that century’s obsession with the family, particularly in England, proves to be an anxiety about the horizontal line of the family axis, and, most specifically, about sisters as they relate to each other and to their male siblings. This is in part because the daughter/sister figure had come to be a repository of paradigmatic innocence and virtue whose protection served to justify many of the other, perhaps less morally exemplary, features of the newly industrialized British society. There was a large cultural stake in maintaining and closely surveilling a certain kind of feminine passivity and self-sacrifice. The moral space occupied by the sister’s selfless love and servitude became the inner sanctum of nineteenth-century family life as represented in the literature of the period. The process of disciplining her behavior and will often developed in terms of her relation to her siblings, and particularly to her brother—that apprentice paterfamilias. Not only in the conduct manuals, but in much of the fiction of that century do we see feminine desire as thoroughly mediated and determined by the desire of the male sibling, whose desire in turn reflects the vicissitudes, vagaries, and conceits of social power in nineteenth-century industrial society.

Mary Shelley is an early member of a group of nineteenth-century women novelists who became concerned with the role

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of the sister in the family, and specifically with the intense attachment between sister and brother. The Romantic poets had, of course, already shocked and outraged an earlier reading public with invocations of incestuous sibling desire. Coleridge’s Osorio has been said to inaugurate this brother-sister theme with brother telling sister: “I lisped thy name ere I had learned my mother’s.”2 In contrast to its treatment in the later nineteenth century, the Romantics thrust the sibling topic upon their audience in an openly provocative manner, as (male) Romantic poets very often portrayed the brother-sister bond as unambiguously incestuous. From Manfred’s Astarte to Laon’s Cythna, sisters are nearly always rendered as mirror images of the narcissistic poet/brother. But as the Victorian world draws near, and bourgeois ideals triumph over Romantic ones, the family becomes more and more the touchstone of all moral worth, and the hermetic seal around brother-sister relations becomes ever tighter, producing a horror of childhood sexuality, but also a much more ambivalent treatment of the sibling bond. The topic of incest, therefore, becomes particularly charged. Yet the Romantic poets’ incestuous rendering of the brother-sister bond was in an important sense not nearly as seditious as was Mary Shelley’s more elliptical account of it, and her text obliquely anticipates a theme which later nineteenth-century authors such as Emily Brontë and George Eliot would more explicitly explore. The Romantic valorization of the sibling bond, as well as the exaltation of shared childhood memories, remains central; yet Frankenstein performs a major revision of a chief Romantic tenet: male narcissism is no longer valorized, but is monstrously punished.

Frankenstein, then, can be read as a novelistic commentary on, and reaction to, the male Romantic poet’s compulsion to rend(er) sisters. Those sisters must remain utterly passive; active, they become monstrous. In fact, even passive they are “monsters” in the etymological sense (monstrare = to show), as they become mere objects of a voyeuristic gaze. In allowing their brothers’ desire to mediate theirs, they must will themselves to become the passive objects of their brothers’ desire. And yet, for Romantic poets, sisters become objects of a narcissistic erotic desire, perhaps because their passivity allows the poet’s desired sister to serve as a mirror of himself. Nonetheless, these poets fear something in their desire; they fear the very sororal desire which they try to elicit. To call it forth in an incestuous relationship is to release it from the social constraints that discipline it. Once
released it can become dangerous, sometimes deadly. These brother poets do not worry about "immorality," or about public condemnation. On the surface, they have great contempt for the structures of conventionality which this feminine desire can undermine. But perhaps they sense that in some way their own power of domination is linked to and parasitic upon those very structures of propriety they detest, and which the release of feminine desire threatens. If this is a correct account, then Mary Shelley has recorded the dangers of sororal desire faithfully if elliptically. The consequences of the liberation of sororal desire from its chamber are symbolically (and, in some ways, prophetically) disastrous for the nineteenth-century family structure and for the society that required as its foundation such a system of strictly disciplined familial hierarchies, roles, and identities.

There are two strata of discourse in Shelley's *Frankenstein* in terms of which sister-brother dynamics can be analyzed: a literal and a figurative level. The first I will call "sororal desire bound," the second "sororal desire unbound." At the literal level, sororal desire conforms to rigorous social expectations about sisters. There the sister is docile, passive, and in a position of unquestioned servitude to the brother. Specifically, this first layer of discourse involves a family's gift of a young girl to their son—a girl who is to be the sister-possession and lover of the son—and the determination of her desire and its imprisonment in the familial vault. At this level the sister's desire cannot even be said to be frustrated, for its existence is scarcely acknowledged: it must be entirely determined by the (br)other's desire and therefore is a creation of it. It must sacrifice itself to him, to his desire for knowledge, and to the advancement of the natural sciences.

At the figurative level of discourse, a concatenation of overladen images, metaphors, similes, and metonymies offers us a story of feminine desire confined within the family, now displaced from the tangentially artificial sister, Elizabeth Lavenza, onto a purely artificial creature who is the figure of the destructive power of suppressed feminine desire. This desire takes on a monstrous life of its own, and in its fantastic unchaining destroys identities and confounds roles, creating not only familial but social disintegration, and by metaphoric extension, generating an entire world of folly. This second layer of discourse concerns the creation of monsters, and the cataclysmic consequences for the guilty family (and for the social world
built upon those families) of the unchaining of desire that was imprisoned in the first layer of discourse. In this second layer, the sister’s desire spills across the page in a great flood, destroying that which contained it, obliterating the lines of demarcation that established social definitions—those very lines that created the family itself, that crypt of feminine desire.

The idea of a second stratum of discourse in which these seditious undercurrents can be found presupposes the possibility of reading Frankenstein’s monster as the embodiment of specifically feminine energies. So the question must be posed: Can the monster plausibly be read as the embodiment of feminine energies? A number of critics apparently think so. Margaret Homans suggests that the creature has “female attributes”; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that it is “a creature of the second sex”; Gordon Hirsch claims that “the monster was a lady”; U. C. Knoepflmacher asserts that “the monster . . . initially displays feminine qualities”; Paul A. Cantor and Michael Valdez Moses describe the creature as leading an existence “that in terms of gender is profoundly indeterminate . . . at many points it is cast in a role that in the nineteenth century would have been viewed as feminine”; and Mary Poovey says that, because the creature is “the victim of both the symbolic and the literal . . . it is doubly like a woman in patriarchal society—forced to be a symbol of (and vehicle for) someone else’s desire, yet exposed (and exiled) as the deadly essence of passion itself.” It is precisely this “deadly essence,” whether erupting in the form of a monstrously animated being or simply manifested as an object to be shown (monstrare), which operates outside the accepted bounds of social discipline in Shelley’s text. Perhaps one of the most explicit links between monstrosity and women was made as early as the seventeenth century by an author who claimed that “an Impudent woman is lookt on as a kind of Monster; a thing diverted and distorted from its proper form.” Then if the monster is indeed a lady, what lady? And what does she want? The lady, as found in the first register of the novel, is Elizabeth, the sister-lover of Victor. Elizabeth is the perfectly passive sister (as her adoptive mother before her was the perfectly passive wife), waiting demurely at home for Victor’s return, scarcely ever acting on her own initiative, and ineffective on the one occasion when she does so. Her repressed desire, an ontology of rebellion, is recorded in the second register of the novel. Sisters are threatened in the first level of discourse, but it is they who threaten in the second—sisters, those beings most deeply embedded in the family circle who, in breaking loose (or even
in pulling at their stays) rupture the tenuous bonds which hold fast the domestic unit.

The novel's opening and closing frames indicate that the horizontal brother-sister axis is the most illuminating perspective from which to view the family, or families, within Shelley's text. The novel is framed by letters from (the apparently unmarried) Robert Walton to his "dear sister," Mrs. Margaret Saville. (A striking fact about Margaret [Walton] Saville is that she and her "creator" share the same initials.) In his letters, Walton describes his dangerous expedition to discover the elusive Northwest Passage. In the nine-month period which these letters cover (nine months and one day, to be exact—the gestation period between the time he first puts pen to paper and the moment he discovers the monster in his stateroom), Robert has no regrets concerning the perils to which he submits himself and his men (several of whom die), but he does complain at length about his lack of fellowship. "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine. You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans." In fact, Walton desires a sibling—and he briefly finds one in Victor Frankenstein. He enthusiastically declares to Margaret: "I begin to love him as a brother . . . I have found a man who . . . I should have been happy to have possessed as the brother of my heart" (p. 23). Ultimately Walton loses his would-be brother, who rejects his fraternal overtures. Victor thanks Robert for his offer of friendship, but asks, "Can any man be to me as Clerval was; or any woman another Elizabeth?" (p. 156). A new friend, even where the attachment seems strong, may be given over to suspicions, while "a sister or a brother can never, unless indeed such symptoms have been shewn early, suspect the other of fraud or false dealing" (p. 156). But Victor Frankenstein already has had surrogate siblings. His childhood friend, Clerval, is cast in the role of brother; his playmate and, finally, dead virgin wife is cast in the role of ("more than") sister. Robert Walton's wish for a brother must go unfulfilled. But whether its object is achieved or not, sibling desire, expressed in a series of unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, letters from a brother to his sister, frames the whole of the text.

Victor Frankenstein is, for the first four years of his life, an only child, and doted on as such, until Caroline and Alphonse Frankenstein "take charge of the infant Elizabeth, the only child
of [Alphonse's] deceased sister" (p. 27). Caroline, impressed by Elizabeth's beauty and "gentle and affectionate disposition," and in her "desire to bind as closely as possible the ties of domestic love," determines that her adopted daughter shall one day marry Victor. Elizabeth Lavenza, who becomes the "favourite" (p. 32) of Caroline, becomes Alphonse's "more than daughter" (p. 146), while Victor "love[s] to tend on her, as [he] should on a favourite animal" (p. 28). They spend their childhood in perfect harmony, and it is a foregone conclusion that they will eventually marry, or enter into "union," as the marriage relation is called throughout the book. (Indeed, we are told that there was never any "disunion" between them as children [p. 28].) On her deathbed, Caroline Frankensteins joins the hands of the two playmates and says, "My children . . . my firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect of your union. This expectation will now be the consolation of your father. Elizabeth, my love, you must supply my place to your younger cousins" (pp. 32-3).

Elizabeth has by now been appointed sister, mother, and wife to Victor. (In the 1831 edition, Walton's sister too has played the role of mother to Walton. He writes to her, thanking her for "my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage" [p. 19].) Even Victor's father, in his last year, recognizes the possibility of some incongruity between at least two of these roles. He says to Victor, "I confess, my son, that I have always looked forward to your marriage with your cousin as the tie of our domestic comfort . . . But . . . [y]ou, perhaps, regard her as your sister, without any wish that she might become your wife" (p. 112). Victor responds: "My dear father, reassure yourself. I love my cousin tenderly and sincerely. I never saw any woman who excited, as Elizabeth does, my warmest admiration and affection. My future hopes and prospects are entirely bound up in the expectation of our union" (p. 112). Victor's private emotions, besieged as they are at the moment by the monster's demands that Victor create a monstrous Eve, are quite different: "Alas! To me the idea of an immediate union with my cousin was one of horror and dismay" (p. 112). Ostensibly this horror is provoked by Victor's being at the moment too deeply mired in his guilty project to be worthy of a union with such purity, but in this book the word "horror" taps a deeper current; it adumbrates the emotions he will feel in his final union with his murdered sister—the fear and simultaneous thrill of incest—a union that is the coalescence with his monster and with death. Elizabeth,
too, is concerned about the conflict between their impending union and their sibling(-like) relationship. She writes to Victor, in yet another letter between siblings:

You well know, Victor, that our union had been the favourite plan of your parents ever since our infancy. We were told this when young, and taught to look forward to it as an event that would certainly take place. We were affectionate playfellows during childhood, and, I believe, dear and valued friends to one another as we grew older. But as brother and sister often entertain a lively affection towards each other without desiring a more intimate union, may not such also be our case? Tell me, dearest Victor. Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—Do you not love another?

(p. 138)

If in this context the thought of the sibling bond produces horror in Victor and concern in Elizabeth, it is, to the contrary, the sibling bond which becomes the monster’s model of ideality. The monster’s first prolonged contact with the human race is a voyeuristic one in which he observes an old, blind man and his adult children, Agatha and Felix. In spite of their dire poverty, the relationship between the two siblings is as close to a utopian, egalitarian female/male bond as we see in the novel. They live and work together in a perfectly harmonious rhythm—an equilibrium found nowhere else in the book.

It is by observing them that the monster “gained knowledge, of brother, sister, and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds” (p. 90). Felix’s and Agatha’s love for one another mediates the monster’s own incipient desire, and in the next sentence he asks that fatal question: “But where were my friends and relations?” And what is it, in effect, that the monster demands of Victor? He asks for a friend, a companion—in Walton’s language again—a sibling. And indeed, issuing forth from the same father, it would be not only a sibling, but a sister—as Eve was to Adam, given life by that other Father creator. We see, then, that in the first register of discourse, the sibling relationship is idealized and is represented as a paradigmatic union of love, in stark contrast to the view of that relation posited in the second register.

Within the unfolding of the novel’s family drama across the axis of the sibling bond, Shelley deals with parents circumspectly. The diachronic family must be destroyed in order to
expose the synchronic crux of the family—not how the young learn from the old, but how the horizontal crosscut, brothers and sisters, holds the family together and threatens its existence at the same moment. She does this most deftly with mothers, dispatching them in short order. Margaret and Robert have no mother; Elizabeth's mother dies in childbirth; Justine Moritz's mother dies early, as does Safie's. Fathers fare scarcely better. The vertical lines of the family axis are pared off, leaving only that line connecting siblings as the plane on which the action develops. The world presented here is a world of children, a world of brothers and sisters. Although on this otherwise empty stage only siblings remain, theirs is not a sexless world; the sexuality, however, does not appear where we might expect it.

Rather than manifesting itself at the literal level—the level I am calling "sororal desire bound"—desire in *Frankenstein* appears displaced onto images related to activities and events which in themselves are seemingly nonsexual. The true story of familial desire in the novel must be read not from the actual family relations but from these laden images. The most obvious of these overdetermined images whose trail leads to annihilation has to do with Victor's passion for scientific inquiry and discovery. It has long been recognized that Victor's scientific curiosity is a form of sublimated sexual curiosity. His "ardent desire" (p. 34) to know the physical secrets of the world is a desire for sexual knowledge—indeed, knowledge of female sexuality. When Victor agrees to create a partner for the monster, he needs to travel to England to talk to a philosopher there who has "knowledge . . . which was material to [his] success" (p. 111). Victor clearly knows how to make a successful monster—he has just done so. What kind of knowledge would he lack in his quest to make another? Shelley does not tell us, but the deduction is simple: what Victor lacks is the knowledge of female sexual anatomy.

In *Frankenstein*, science emerges from a fear of the feminine and a consequent desire to displace and domesticate the power of parturition. Much of Victor's disastrous project stems from his fear of incest and his desire for it—his dread of union with Elizabeth. Although his most "ardent" desire—the thought which gives him "paradisaical dreams of love and joy" (p. 139)—is that of their pending marriage, only after Elizabeth is actually dead does Victor at last rush "towards her, and embrace her with ardour" (p. 144). Similarly, Victor is first enticed to create a
female monster, but then tears her incomplete torso asunder because “she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate . . . she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation” (p. 122)—that is, she might refuse to let her essence precede her existence. “[O]ne 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” (pp. 122–3). If this is his concern, why does it never occur to Victor simply to render the creature sterile? His fear is a fear of the feminine, of its desire, its sexuality, and its own kind of reason which will not abide by patriarchal contracts made in its name. At the literal level of discourse, the object of Victor’s quest is something of which he is ignorant. He needs to know about female genitality in order to create a sexual partner for the (male) monster. He abandons his quest when he foresees its destructive physical consequences. At the figurative level, however, he abandons his quest simply because he already knows (and therefore dreads) that which he seeks: sororal desire. He has already produced it, and has discovered to his horror that it cannot be confined.

Just as images of sexuality and parturition are systematically displaced in this novel, so too is the idea of feminine desire. We are never allowed to locate it with precision; it is certainly not to be found in Caroline’s otherworldly demeanor, nor in Elizabeth’s passivity and ineffectuality (though perhaps glimpses of it are revealed in Safie’s resistance to “the law of the father”). But feminine desire spills over onto the landscape of the novel, erasing all surveyor’s markings and creating a symbolic deterioration of identity boundaries. It does so with its own logic of destruction and creation, generating a tide whose ebb and flow erodes the distinctions between individuals and displaces identities, ultimately effacing the familial definitions that discipline and contain sororal desire. We are first made aware of this process in Frankenstein’s dream. The dream occurs when Frankenstein attempts to sleep immediately after having created the monster.

I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change,
and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror . . . by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created . . . He held up the curtain of the bed . . . a grin wrinkled his cheeks . . . one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me.

(p. 43)

This dream, which on its surface appears to be a dream of masculine incestuous desires for the feminine, will, when the association between the monster and Elizabeth is established, be seen as more accurately interpreted as a release of the feminine, but its release is deadly. In Victor’s dream, Elizabeth becomes his dead mother,¹⁵ who in turn becomes the monster whose grin “wrinkled his cheeks” like the folds in the shroud of his mother’s corpse. The narration of this dream marks the beginning of a systematic slippage of names, characteristics, and identities—an effect of the unleashing of the “monstrous”—that is, of the feminine. And here, the feminine should be understood as feminine desire; for it is feminine self-consciousness that is at stake, and as Shelley’s contemporary G. W. F. Hegel put it, “self-consciousness is Desire in general,”¹⁶ whereby he meant that self-consciousness is an emptiness in pursuit of being, “a tacit pursuit of identity,” a desire for “the expansion of subjectivity which requires the overcoming of otherness, a constant activity of negation,”¹⁷ a negativity mediated by the negativity that tries to discipline it, and in this novel it is the function of the insatiability of feminine desire to consume and destroy this negative otherness.

Frankenstein’s dream proves prophetic: the birth of the monster and the death of the sister coincide in a singular manner. On the night, two and a half years later, when the monster kills Elizabeth and Victor hears her scream, he runs to the bridal chamber, and in the “pale yellow light of the moon” he sees his creature as he had seen it in his dream: “The shutters had been thrown back; and, with a sensation of horror not to be described, I saw at the open window a figure the most hideous and abhorred. A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife” (pp. 144–5). Reality has now entered “dream time,” and identities collapse in upon themselves. Elizabeth had become Victor’s sister by virtue of the mother’s inability to
create a real sister for him; she then becomes Victor’s mother by virtue of Caroline’s death, thus once again, as was the case in the dream, equating the sister with the mother in death. The sister/mother has been replaced by the monster; in fact, if we follow the shifting signifiers here, we see that she becomes the monster, and that the monster becomes her. Just before looking up and seeing the grinning creature at the window, Victor views Elizabeth’s body on her bed, precisely as the monster was before being animated: “She was there, lifeless and inanimate” (p. 144). Once again, time reverses itself, and the monster’s promise to become Elizabeth has been fulfilled. Three times this promise has rung in Victor’s ears: “I shall be with you on your wedding night” (pp. 124, 139). The object of Victor’s incestuous desire, Elizabeth Lavenza, is no longer: there is only death on his wedding bed. But Elizabeth has been replaced by an infernal form of negative vitality. The dream has confirmed the identity—the monster is the sister-cousin-lover-mother. But in this objectification, feminine desire refuses to be determined by Victor’s desire, even if created by it, and it takes on an awful life of its own.

The physical union of Victor and Elizabeth is between a living man and a dead body. After his wife has been murdered, Victor describes how he “hung over her” (p. 117). The phrase “hung over her” (twice repeated in the 1831 edition) is a “pregnant” one, as it hints at a metonymical equation no longer simply between Elizabeth and the monster, but between the monster and Victor, for the time will soon come when the monster will “hang over” Victor’s corpse. Walton relates: “Over him hung a form which I cannot find the words to describe . . . As he hung over the coffin, his face was concealed by long locks of ragged hair” (p. 161). These two related events, in which one figure hangs over the body of another, may be meant to remind the reader of the image that Alphonse Frankenstein encounters when he finally finds his missing friend, M. Beaufort. His friend has just died, and the latter’s daughter, Caroline, “knelt by Beaufort’s coffin weeping bitterly” (p. 27).18

The symbolic confounding of Victor and his creature, a confusion shared by the general public, has frequently been noted.19 Victor himself considers his creation “in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave” (p. 57), and sees the monster’s reprehensible acts as his own: “I murdered her. William, Justine, and Henry—they all died by my hands” (p. 137). Victor is not always this forthcoming. Sometimes he accepts only degrees of responsibility. When he considers
confessing to William’s death, he says that he is “less innocent than . . . Justine” (p. 132), and at one point he asserts flat out, “I was guiltless” (p. 120). Even on his deathbed, he remarks to Walton, “in examining my past conduct . . . I [do not] find it blamable” (p. 160). But it is the figurative fusion of the monster with Elizabeth that initiates the devastating process whereby all distinctions are erased, and that reveals the remarkable system of perpetually moving signs Shelley has devised in her depiction of the symbolic unleashing of the feminine. Nothing remains stable: identities come momentarily into focus, then fade and disappear; no reliable table of signs can be provided. The monster is Victor, but Victor is also his own mother. If we follow the logic of this correspondence, we must also conclude that Victor becomes the more-than-mother of his more-than-sister, Elizabeth. But because Elizabeth has already been designated as Victor’s mother by dint of the dying Caroline’s final performative utterance, then Victor and Elizabeth are evanescently one. And if Victor has given birth to himself as the monster, then, once again, we arrive at the most startling of the equations that can be deduced from this system of sliding signifiers: the monster is a figure for Elizabeth. The monster is also associated with Elizabeth in that it replaces her, both before and after her death, as the object of Victor’s passion, his “ardour.” It is only in her incarnation as monster that she is released from her confinement—the confinement into which the nineteenth-century family had disciplined her. In that figurative mode, her own ardour will, by metaphorical extension, consume itself in the flames of the pyre constructed in the icy wastelands beyond the reach of European civilization’s influence, but only after [s]he has destroyed the family whose secret [s]he was.

This kaleidoscope of composing and decomposing identities, precipitated by the liberating of monstrous sororal desire, continues to revolve in Frankenstein. Victor is metonymically cast into the role of the creature by virtue of his being “restored to life” by Clerval. (Victor reports, “I was lifeless” but Clerval “restored me to life” [p. 46].) This act also transforms Clerval into Victor by placing the former in the role of “animator.” In fact, Victor himself catches a glimpse of the equation when he remarks, “in Clerval I saw the image of my former self” (p. 117). Yet this line, a clear allusion to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” provokes yet another association, for the “image” of Wordsworth’s “former self” was, of course, his sister Dorothy. So Clerval briefly becomes Victor’s sister Elizabeth (and the 1831 version still more explicitly and curiously confirms the equation
“Elizabeth=monster” through Clerval’s “animated glance” [p. 44]). It is not only Clerval who “becomes” Victor by “animating” him; Shelley also endows Walton with this animating agency, thereby putting him too into the position of Victor’s proxy. Walton finds Frankenstein in a “wretched” condition and he “restore[s] him to animation” (p. 22), “restore[s] him to life” (p. 23). Walton repeatedly refers to Victor as the “creature” (pp. 22, 23, 24).

The danger represented by sororal desire can be contained and purified by confining it within the innermost chamber of the nineteenth-century familial edifice. The structure of that family remains invulnerable to external threat as long as certain identities are rigorously maintained, and certain roles are impecably defined and acted out. But Mary Shelley’s fantastic unchaining of that protean force has destroyed those identities and confused those roles, dissolving familial and social adhesives, undermining the reign of reason, and shadowing forth a world of madness. Thus, at the beginning and at the end of the novel we witness two brotherly souls, each abandoning his sister in his pursuit of knowledge, and each admitting, or admitting and fearing, insanity. It is as if the containment of the feminine that is requisite for the maintenance of masculine sanity has instead engendered a fraternal contagion in this text. In fact, the reader of this manuscript (presumably Robert’s sister, Margaret Saville) has only the word of Victor and Robert that the monster, the product of this mad enthusiasm, exists. Or, more precisely, she has only the word of her brother. Shelley’s horrific tale is narrated by a man, a brother narrating to his sister a tale of confinement and liberation, a tale of sororal desire—a desire whose destructive power mesmerizes him, driving him into its flames, while expelling him in the same moment.

NOTES

1Two of the recent exceptions to this are Juliet Flower MacCannell’s Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy (New York: Routledge, 1991), and Helena Michie’s Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).


5Gerhard Joseph describes Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein as "one of the earliest of the Angels in the House who are to become the staple of Victorian woman-worship; in her, if we need such proof, we can see how much the emerging Victorian ideal owes to late-eighteenth-century notions of domestic benevolence" ("Frankenstein's Dream: The Child as Father of the Monster," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 7, 2 [1975]: 97-115, 102). However, it may only be due to her "updating" that Caroline comes to represent such an ideal. Mary Poovey notes that the most extensive revisions between the 1818 and 1831 versions of Shelley's text have to do with Elizabeth, who "becomes much more like the Victorian Angel of the House" (p. 134).

6William Veeder has noted that because "Mary affirms her Wollstonecraft heritage by using the middle initial W, rather than the expectable G for Godwin, she is all the more associated with Margaret, whose maiden name of Walton gives her too the middle initial W." In speculating on why Mary then decides to omit the W from Margaret's name, Veeder suggests that "Only by leaving Robert's unmarried realm behind—without even the trace of a middle initial—can Margaret Saville reach sa ville, that communal state which is the union of male with female and the ideal of *Frankenstein*" ("Gender and Pedagogy: The Questions of *Frankenstein,*" in Behrendt, p. 39). I would argue, rather, that the connection between Mary and Margaret can be traced to the latter's position "outside" the textual frame—removed from the "confines" of the familial frame—and to Mary's desire to place herself in a like position.


8There are sisters aplenty in the novel: Margaret, for whom the entire story is transcribed, but whose voice is never heard; the goodly Agatha, who has been reduced to poverty through her brother's actions and is eventually displaced in his affections by Safie; Justine, the innocent who is sacrificed to patriarchal justice (the padre forces her to confess to a murder she did not commit); and Elizabeth, whose compassionate and articulate voice is heard, but rendered ineffectual and who is also doomed to be martyred on the altar of the knightly quest for scientific glory.

9In the more decidedly "Victorian" 1831 edition of *Frankenstein,* Elizabeth, a foundling rather than a blood relative, is described as Victor's "more than sister" (*Frankenstein* [New York: New American Library, 1965], p. 35). In this rendition, Victor and Elizabeth are raised together as brother and sister,
though she is referred to as "cousin" in a rather feeble attempt to defuse the implications of an incestuous desire between them. In a fascinating and telling revision, Shelley creates a pivotal scene in which Victor describes Elizabeth's presentation to him: "On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully, 'I have a pretty present for my Victor—tomorrow he shall have it.' And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own. We called each other familiarly by the name of cousin. No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me—my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only" (p. 35). Here, one can read Elizabeth as Victor's Maussian "gift." According to Marcel Mauss, one of the earliest structuralists, the exchange of gifts is the most basic social relationship, creating as it does mutual obligations, and the primary gift is that of one's sister. This gift produces political alliance as well as obligation (The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. Ian Cunnison [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967]).

10The fact that it is from observing the sibling bond that the monster learns about "all the various relationships which bind one human being to another" corresponds to the findings of anthropologists such as T. S. Weisner, who claims that "[s]ibling relationships in many Pacific island cultures have been described as a metaphor for how the entire culture should be organized, what cultural ideals are worth pursuing, and the ways in which one's self and one's community should be reproduced. The ethos of siblingship in such societies is hardly distinguishable from ideals of kinship more generally, or from moral values for society. The cultural ideal of love and concern for others, for instance, is expressed in the same ways as are used to describe ideal relations among sibs" ("Comparing Sibling Relationships across Cultures," Sibling Interaction across Cultures: Theoretical and Methodological Issues, ed. Patricia Żukow [New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989], p. 17).

11We know that Robert and Margaret Walton are orphans, raised in the house of an uncle. We are informed of their father's dying words, but there is never so much as a mention of any mother (though we are told that upon the father's death, sister Margaret takes over the maternal duties of raising her brother). Elizabeth's German mother dies in childbirth, and her stepmother, Victor's mother Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, contracts scarlet fever from Elizabeth while nursing her and "calmly" dies, leaving Elizabeth, as we have seen, to play mother to Caroline's children. Justine Moritz's mother, who "through a strange perversity . . . could not endure" her daughter (p. 48), engages in a "perpetual fretting [which] at length threw [her] into a decline" culminating in her death (p. 49). Safie's rebellious Christian-Arab mother gives her daughter good advice (similar to that which Mary Shelley gleans from her [dead] mother's example)—but "[t]his lady died" as well (p. 91). Safie's proxy mother, her attendant, falls "dangerously ill" and, in spite of Safie's "devoted affection," dies (p. 94). If Henry Clerval's mother is alive, she is never mentioned; the mother of Agatha and Felix is similarly concealed. The monster, of course, bemoans the absence of both mother and father. "No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses" (p. 90).

12We have seen that Margaret and Robert's father dies when they are young. Caroline's father dies in her arms; Justine's father dies before she reaches puberty. When Safie discovers the duplicitous plan of her "treacherous Turk"
father, she renounces him (p. 93). The kindly father of Agatha and Felix is almost too kind, but he is old and blind, and incapable of significant action. Of all the fathers mentioned (or unmentioned) in the text, only Alphonse Frankenstein plays a significant role. Clerval’s Philistine father lurks behind the scenery, but is important only for the narrow-minded injunctions he issues to Clerval.

13"Ardent" and "ardour" are two of Shelley’s favorite terms, appearing thirty-four times in the course of the narrative. They manage to refer to the subtitle of the novel—"The Modern Prometheus"—and to convey more than a hint of sexual passion.

14In Shelley’s text, as in most literature of her day, nature is understood as feminine. "Man’s" relation to nature is that of desiring subject to object of desire. For a brilliant discussion of the dangers inherent in a "scientific method that rest[s] on a gendered definition of nature as female" (p. 89), see Anne K. Mellor, "A Feminist Critique of Science," in Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters, ed. Anne Mellor (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 89–114. It is interesting to note that Victor complains that his father was "not scientific" (p. 39). The elder Frankenstein has penetrated and impregnated a real woman—the daughter of his best friend, i.e., in Walton’s terms, the daughter of his “brother.” It is as if such direct sexuality is a threat to the system of sublimation and displacement that constitutes science.

15There are many more striking parallels between fact and fiction than can—or should—be catalogued here. One or two very intriguing biographical details, however, should not be omitted from this discussion: Percy Shelley’s childhood pen name was Victor; the sister of whom Percy was most fond (some speculate much too fond) was named Elizabeth. In addition, Anne Mellor tells us that Percy “violently accused his mother of having an affair with his sister Elizabeth’s ‘music master’ and of trying to conceal the affair by marrying Elizabeth to him. Percy seems here to have projected onto his innocent friend Edward Fergus Graham his own erotic fantasy: to be the lover of both mother and favorite sister. His efforts to marry Elizabeth to his best friend Hogg can be seen as yet another attempt to close the sexual circle between himself and his sister” (p. 74).


18This scene is replicated later in the book when Victor returns to Geneva from the university and stares at the picture of his mother over the mantelpiece: “It was a historical subject, painted at my father’s desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father” (p. 58).

19See, for example, Masao Miyoshi, who notes “the essential identity between Monster and maker” (The Divided Self: A Perspective on the Literature of the Victorians [New York: New York Univ. Press, 1969], p. 83); Kate Ellis, who contends that the monster is “the part of himself [Victor] cannot or will not bring home” (“Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family,” in Levine and Knoepflmacher, pp. 123–42, 137); Gerhard Joseph, who calls the monster “Frankenstein’s alter ego, his deviant self” (p. 105); Mary K. Patterson Thornburg, who claims “the monster is an opposing, distorted reflection of Victor” (The Monster in the Mirror: Gender and the Sentimental/Gothic Myth in “Frankenstein” [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984], p. 9); and Anne Mellor, who notes “Victor’s identification with his creature is underlined
by the novel's persistent association of both men with the fallen Adam and with Satan" (p. 135).

20Once again, Shelley's 1831 revision—wherein Walton "animate[s] the decaying frame of the stranger" (p. 25)—provides additional striking evidence for these equations.

21In the 1831 edition, Robert Walton calls his own scientific endeavors "mad schemes" (p. 202). Similarly, his erstwhile "brother," Victor, refers to his scientific venture as motivated by "enthusiastic madness" (p. 160). In general, however, rather than confess to being insane, Victor fears that he will be judged so by his fellow humans. When first creating the monster, he fears that his story will be "looked upon . . . as the ravings of insanity" (p. 57). There are innumerable other examples of this pervasive fear of insanity.