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Diane Long Hoeveler

During the month of May 1794, the most popular drama in London, playing nightly to packed houses at Covent Garden, was Henry Siddons's *The Sicilian Romance; or The Apparition of the Cliff*, loosely based on Ann Radcliffe's second novel, published in 1790. One of the more interesting changes in the play concerns the villain of the Siddons piece, who keeps his inconvenient wife chained to solid stone in a rocky cave in the forest, a place he visits only to feed her and blame her for inflicting wounds of guilt on his heart. Although the Gothic villain would later metamorphose into the Byronic hero consumed by unspeakable guilt over illicit sins, the villain of the Siddons drama is a bit more prosaic. He simply desires to marry a younger and more beautiful woman, one who will further improve his social and political status, because his first wife, the mother of his children, has become redundant. The young woman he desires, whom we would recognize as a future trophy wife, is pursued from castle to convent to cavern, aided by the hero, the villain's son-turned-outlaw. As the above synopsis makes obvious, female Gothic novels like Radcliffe's *Sicilian Romance* provided the subject matter, techniques, and melodramatic formulae that, first on the stage in England, later on the French stage, and much later in the Hollywood "women in jeopardy" films such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, have continued to promulgate the primal Gothic tradition of "good" or femininity triumphing over "evil" or masculinity.

The typical female Gothic novel presents a blameless female victim triumphing through a variety of passive-aggressive strategies over a male-created system of oppression and corruption. The melodrama that

suffuses these works is explicable only if we understand that, as Paula Backscheider has recently demonstrated, a generally hyperbolic sentimentalism was saturating the British literary scene at the time, informing the Gothic melodramas that were such standard fare during the popular theater season.¹ But melodrama, as Peter Brooks has demonstrated, is also characterized by a series of moves or postures that made it particularly attractive to middle-class women. Specifically, Brooks lists as crucial to melodrama the tendency toward depicting intense, excessive representations of life that tend to strip away the facade of manners to reveal the primal conflicts at work, leading to moments of intense confrontation. These symbolic dramatizations rely on what Brooks lists as the standard features of melodrama: hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, masked relationships and disguised identities, abductions, slow-acting poisons, secret societies, and mysterious parentage. In short, melodrama is a version of the female Gothic, while the female Gothic provides the undergirding for feminism as an ideology bent on depicting women as the innocent victims of a corrupt and evil patriarchal system.

If husbands can routinely chain their wives to stone walls and feed them the way one feeds a forsaken pet that will not die, then what sort of action is required from women to protect and defend themselves against such abuse? Demure, docile behavior is hardly adequate protection against a lustful, raving patriarch gone berserk. According to Brooks, the Gothic novel can be understood as standing most clearly in reaction to desacralization and the pretensions of rationalism.² Like melodrama, the female Gothic text represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms. For the Enlightenment mentality, there was no longer a clear transcendent value to which one could be reconciled. There was, rather, a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear. And who was in a better position to purge the new bourgeois world of all traces of aristocratic corruption than the female Gothic heroine? Such a woman—professionally virginal, innocent, and good—assumed virtual religious significance because, within the discourse system, so much was at stake. Making the world safe for the middle class was not without its perils. Gothic feminism was born when women realized that they had a formidable external enemy—the lustful, greedy patriarch—in addition to their own worst internal enemy—their consciousness of their own sexual difference, perceived as a weakness.

A dangerous species of thought for women developed at this time and in concert with the sentimentality of Samuel Richardson and the hyperbolic Gothic and melodramatic stage productions of the era. This

ideology graphically educated its audience in the lessons of victimization.³ According to this powerful and socially coded formula, victims earned their special status and rights through no action of their own but through their sufferings and persecutions at the hands of a patriarchal oppressor and tyrant. One would be rewarded not for anything one did but for what one passively suffered. According to this paradigm, women developed a type of behavior now recognized as passive aggression; they were almost willing victims not because they were masochists but because they expected a substantial return on their investment in suffering. Whereas Richardson's *Clarissa* found herself earning a crown in heaven for suffering rape by Lovelace, the women in female Gothic texts were interested in more earthly rewards. The lesson that Gothic feminism teaches is that the meek shall inherit the Gothic earth; the female Gothic heroine always triumphs in the end because melodramas are constructed to suit this version of poetic justice. The God we call Justice always intervenes and justice always rectifies, validates, and rewards suffering. Terrible events can occur, but the day of reckoning invariably arrives for Gothic villains. This ideology fostered a form of passivity in women, a fatalism that the mainstream feminist would be loathe to recognize today. Yet Gothic feminism undergirds the special pleading of contemporary women who see themselves even today as victims of an amorphous and transhistorical patriarchy. When the contemporary feminist theorist Naomi Wolf identifies what she calls "victim feminism"—characterized by a loathing of the female body and a reification of victimization as the only route to power—we can hardly be faulted for hearing the echo of Mary Shelley's literary visions.⁴

As the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley was destined to be an overdetermined personality. A heavy intellectual burden rested on her slight shoulders, and for the most part she fulfilled that expectation not only by marrying extravagantly but by writing well. In fact, her union with Percy Shelley may have been her greatest literary performance—her real and imagined victimization on his account, first as wife, then as widow, being only slightly less painful than the sufferings experienced by her fictional heroines. And although her husband's presence haunts all of her works, the real heroes or hero-villains of Mary's life were always her parents, who also recur obsessively in various mutated forms in everything she wrote. Mary Wollstonecraft may have left us only two inadequately realized fictions and two vindications, but she also left us Mary Shelley, in many ways destined to complete and fulfill her mother's aborted philosophical and literary visions.⁵ If Wollstonecraft failed to understand the

full implications of her suggestions for women—that they effectively “masculinize” themselves and shun “feminine” values as weak and debilitating—her daughter understood all too well the consequences of such behavior for both men and women. Mary’s major work, *Frankenstein* (1818), stands paradoxically as the Gothic embodiment of the critique of Gothic feminism. If Wollstonecraft could barely imagine a brave new world for women inhabited by sensitive Henrys, Mary Shelley puts her fictional women into that world and reveals that the sensitive male hero is a mad egotist intent on usurping feminine values and destroying all forms of life in his despotic quest for phallic mastery. Her other two works most clearly in the Gothic mode, *Mathilda* (1819) and the short story “The Mortal Immortal” (1833), also critique the female Gothic formulae as they had evolved by the time she was writing. For instance, *Mathilda* rewrites *Frankenstein*, turning the prior text inside out, revealing the incestuous core of the Gothic feminist fantasy as she experienced it. Everyone in Mary Shelley’s corpus is a victim, but her female characters are the victims of victims and thus doubly pathetic and weak.

We do not think of Mary Shelley as a feminist by contemporary standards, nor did she think of herself as one. She once stated: “If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever befriended women when oppressed—at every risk I have defended and supported victims to the social system. But I do not make a boast.” But she understood all too well what her mother failed to grasp—that woman’s protection was in her studied pose of difference and weakness. In fact, she went so far as to observe that “the sex of our [woman’s] material mechanism makes us quite different creatures [from men]—better though weaker.”⁶ But Mary’s notion of the social system—the legal, financial, class, religious, and educational superstructure that undergirded nineteenth-century British culture—was finally codified and symbolized by her in the patriarchal bourgeois family. Her fathers are not simply demigods of the family hearth, they are representatives of a larger, oppressive, patriarchal system. They inherit and bequeath wealth because they represent and embody that lucre themselves, in their very persons.⁷ The body of the male in Mary Shelley’s fiction is always a commodity of worth, an object to be valued, reconstructed, reassembled, and salvaged, while the bodies of the women in her texts are always devalued, compromised, flawed, and inherently worthless.

At the core of all of Mary Shelley’s works, however, is the residue of what Freud has labeled in “*A Child Is Being Beaten*” (1919) as variations on the beating fantasy that children generally experience between the ages of five and fifteen. In these repeated scenarios of desire and repression a girl will typically move through three psychological

positions. In the first and third positions, her stance is sadistic and voyeuristic—"another child is being beaten and I am observing the act"—but in the second psychic position her posture is masochistic, erotic, and deeply repressed: "I am the child being beaten by my father." For the boy, the psychic transformation is less complex due to the elimination of one stage. For him, the first position, "I am loved (or beaten) by my father," is transformed into the conscious fantasy "I am being beaten by my mother." According to Freud, the roots of the phallic mother (the all-powerful mother in possession of the father's phallus) can be located precisely in this early fantasy,⁸ but for Mary Shelley, the psychic terrain is complicated by the fact that she, as a woman writer, typically seeks to elide gender by assuming the position of a male protagonist. The basic beating fantasies we see throughout her works—the attacks the "creature" makes on various members of Victor Frankenstein's family, the incestuous attack on Mathilda by her father, the attack on the body of the idealized female icon in "The Mortal Immortal"—all represent variations on the beating fantasy, expressing the child's ambivalence and impotence when confronted with the power and mystery of the parental figures.

Why does incest hover so blatantly over Mary (not to mention Percy) Shelley's Gothic works in ways that do not occur quite so self-consciously in the works of other female Gothic writers? Why are her heroines always defined and self-identified as daughters first, wives second, mothers only briefly? Why would she send the text of *Mathilda*, a shockingly graphic (for its time) portrayal of a father's incestuous love for his daughter, to her own father? And why would she then be surprised when he failed to arrange for its publication?⁹ Writing on the very margins of her unconscious obsessions, Mary Shelley played the role of dutiful daughter to the end, leaving the ashes of Percy in Rome and having herself buried with her parents and son in England. In many ways, Percy was as ephemeral a presence in her life as she was in his. It would appear from a reading of their letters and journals that both of them were playacting at love with ideal objects of their own imaginary creation. Unfortunately, as Mary learned too late, the real loves in both their lives were their parents, both real and imagined.

"The Mortal Immortal: A Tale" (1833),¹⁰ one of the many short stories Mary wrote for money in her later life, plays in its oxymoronic title with ambiguity and impossibility, suggesting that there may be a way to make mortals immortal, just as Mary desperately wanted to believe that there may be a way to equalize women with men. Note, however, that the fear and loathing of the female body that activated *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda* recur as dominant motifs in a majority of Mary's short stories, not simply

in this one. *Frankenstein* punished every female body in that text, scarring and disfiguring all female attempts to rewrite the generative body as sacred and whole. It replaced the maternal womb with chemical and alchemical artifice, only to blast masculine attempts at procreation as futile and destructive. In *Mathilda*, the male principle once again would appear to be the only effectual parent; but, as in the earlier work, the father produces his progeny only to consume it, feeding on his daughter as a vampire feeds on victims in order to sustain a perverse form of death-in-life.

"The Mortal Immortal" situates the reader within the same psychic terrain, and, like the other works, it plays with variations of beating fantasies, with sometimes the male protagonist as victim, sometimes the female. But we begin this narrative initially within the frame of legendary discourse, this time of the Wandering Jew. We learn early in the text that the narrator defines himself in negative terms, in terms of what he is not. He tells us that he is not the Jew because he is infinitely younger, being only 323 years old (TMI, 314). "The Mortal Immortal" actually reads as if it were inspired not by that particular old legend but by E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" or "The Devil's Elixirs," the latter reviewed in *Blackwood's* in 1824 (16:55-67). Mary Shelley does not record in her journal having read "The Sandman" in either a French or Italian translation, and her knowledge of German was certainly not strong enough for her to have read it in the original, but the tale was well-known in England by 1833, the year she wrote and published "The Mortal Immortal."¹¹

Like the Hoffmann tale, "The Mortal Immortal" is told by a naive narrator attempting to decode the scientific experiments of a quasi crank and supposed quack, Cornelius Agrippa, the famous German alchemist whose assistant supposedly "raised the foul fiend during his master's absence, and was destroyed by him" (TMI, 314). A deep fear of death and its association with the father's phallic power motivate Hoffmann's "Sandman," while they occur in more muted form in the Shelley tale. The invocation of the name of Cornelius Agrippa, the association of Agrippa and Satan, both of whom figured so prominently in *Frankenstein* as the inspiration of Victor's dabbling in reanimating the base metal of the human body, suggest that masculine, scientific, and phallic powers are as dangerous as they are crucial to the development of human civilization. Once again, the human body is the obsessive focus of this tale, as it was in the two earlier Gothic works by Mary Shelley. Now, however, the issues are not only clear but very clearly delineated: the female body is decayed and fraudulent; it is a pale and inadequate copy of the prior and superior male body. The tale is predicated on the decline

of the body of the beautiful Bertha, whose fading is contrasted to the continuing phallic power of the immortal Winzy, her body rotting while his flourishes over the course of their marriage.

Mary Shelley constructs her tale over the body of Bertha, but before she gets to Bertha, the narrator, Winzy, introduces the reader to his own desperate state of mind. He is a man who has lived for 323 years and fears that he may indeed be immortal. He is a man who feels "the weight of never-ending time—the tedious passage of the still-succeeding hours" (TMI, 314). Traditionally read as a slightly veiled autobiographical statement expressing Mary Shelley's own repugnance at having survived her husband, parents, and three of her children, the fear of time in this text actually expresses a fear of death, a terror about the nonexistence of an afterlife.¹² Life at least prolongs the uncertainty that there may indeed be an afterlife where one will be reunited with the souls of one's beloveds. Death will bring the final and unequivocal answer, and that is something that Mary Shelley was as unprepared to face in 1833 as she was in 1818.

Like a fairy tale, this short fiction begins with the poor, young assistant—"very much in love"—working for the notorious "alchemist" Cornelius Agrippa, who keeps killing all of his assistants because of the inhuman demands he makes on them. One need not search far to see Winzy as the victim of a beating fantasy at the hands of this father substitute. Thwarted in his efforts to persuade his recently orphaned childhood sweetheart Bertha to live "beneath [his] paternal roof," Winzy suffers greatly when Bertha goes off to live with "the old lady of the near castle, rich, childless, and solitary" (TMI, 315). Rather than have a child herself, this wealthy woman "buys" (or, as we might more euphemistically say, "adopts") a beautiful adult woman and then tries to barter her off to the highest bidder. Bertha is dramatic and self-dramatizing. She begins to dress in "silk," pose in her "marble palace" (TMI, 315), and generally amuse herself by taunting and tormenting the frustrated Winzy. Bertha wants Winzy to prove his love by accepting the risky job of working for Agrippa: "You pretend to love, and you fear to face the Devil for my sake!" (TMI, 315). Accepting a "purse of gold" from Agrippa makes Winzy feel "as if Satan himself tempted me" (TMI, 315). Bertha wants to put her would-be lover through a test, and she can think of no better one than to subject him to the ultimate evil father, the ultimate beater. No simple coquette, Bertha specializes rather in psychic and emotional abuse of her lover, continually subjecting him to anxiety and jealousy: "Bertha fancied that love and security were enemies, and her pleasure was to divide them in my bosom" (TMI, 316). Notice, however, that everything

Bertha metes out to Winzy is later delivered to her. She plays the role of Gothic villainess and later Gothic victim in this work.

If Cornelius Agrippa as the masculine and phallic aspect of the narrator is identified with the fires of Satan, Bertha as the feminine principle is associated with water and the fountain, "a gently bubbling spring of pure living waters" (TMI, 315). While ordered to work overtime stoking the furnaces of Agrippa, Winzy loses the favor of Bertha, who rejects him in favor of the rich suitor Albert Hoffer. Consumed with frustrated jealousy, Winzy decides to drink the magical elixir that Agrippa is preparing because he has been told that the brew is "a philter to cure love; [if] you would not cease to love your Bertha—beware to drink!" (TMI, 317). But that is precisely what Winzy wants—he wants to be free of his attachment to the feminine, or to put it another way, Mary Shelley wants to be free of her tie to the female body. Once again, her male narrator expresses Mary Shelley's own ambivalence and repugnance toward not only the female body but female sexuality and the chains of love. Listen to these revealing words from Winzy about his state of mind and motivations:

False girl!—false and cruel! . . . Worthless, detested woman! I would not remain unrevenged—she should see Albert expire at her feet—she should die beneath my vengeance. She had smiled in disdain and triumph—she knew my wretchedness and her power. Yet what power had she?—the power of exciting my hate—my utter scorn—my—oh, all but indifference! Could I attain that—could I regard her with careless eyes, transferring my rejected love to one fairer and more true, that were indeed a victory! (TMI, 317)

What power had she indeed? Questioning the source and the power of the female body stands as the central query of Mary Shelley's corpus. The answer she discovers suggests that the female body has only as much power as the male chooses to allot to it. But the focus in this passage is on the male response to the female body, running the gamut from hate to scorn to indifference. Notice the progression of emotions. Only when one reaches indifference is one free of the obsessive hold of the other on one's consciousness. Mary Shelley throughout her works strives to escape just exactly this—the corrosive effect of the passions on her heart and body, seeking the cool indifference, the frigidity, the stark embrace of reason that she represented in the climactic presentation of the Arctic Circle in *Frankenstein*.

Grabbing the elixir and drinking, Winzy declares his intention to be cured "of love—of torture!" He finds himself sinking instead into a "sleep of glory and bliss which bathed [his] soul in paradise during the

remaining hours of that memorable night," only to awake and find his appearance "wonderfully improved" (TMI, 317, 319). When he ventures out to Bertha's neighborhood, he finds himself the amorous object not only of Bertha but also of her rich old protectress, the "old high-born hag," "the old crone." The ugly old woman represents a standard feminine archetype, the double-faced goddess motif that Mary and Percy would have been familiar with through their readings in classical mythology. Blake (in "The Mental Traveller"), Keats (in "Lamia" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"), and Percy himself (in "Prince Athanase") had used the duplicitous female figure. The old hag in this text represents not simply what Bertha will become, a sort of humanized foreshadowing element, but also a version of the phallic mother as class avenger. Now conceiving a lecherous attraction to Winzy, the old hag aggressively pursues him, sending Bertha back to the castle with the peremptory command, "Back to your cage—hawks are abroad!" (TMI, 319). Ironically, the only hawk is the old hag, seeking to feast on her prey, the masculine flesh of Winzy.

But Winzy is now free of the earlier "respect" he had for the old hag's "rank." Now he boldly runs after Bertha, only to discover that he is as much in love with her as ever: "I no longer loved—Oh! no, I adored—worshipped—idolized her!" (TMI, 319). The two triangles operating here—Winzy/Bertha/old hag and Winzy/Bertha/false suitor—place the young lovers in the two varieties of oedipal rivalry that recur throughout Mary Shelley's fiction. The prior and more powerful association for her heroes and heroines is always the paternal and maternal home. The old hag represents the child-consciousness's (re)construction of the father and mother as one potent figure, all-powerful and all-consuming. This father/mother monad has been traditionally understood within psychoanalytical discourse as the phallic mother, the mother with the father's phallus, the fearful composite of maternity with power.¹³ If Ann Radcliffe was finally able by the conclusion of her novels to kill the phallic mother, Mary Shelley is able to flee only temporarily from her. Rather, Bertha decides to reject the old hag's wealth and power and to run away to an alternate maternal abode: "'O Winzy!' she exclaimed, 'take me to your mother's cot.'" But not only does Bertha gain a new mother-figure, Winzy's father also "loved her" and "welcomed her heartily" (TMI, 320). Winzy is not so much gaining a wife as Bertha is gaining new parents. Or, to put it another way, Winzy is not so much gaining a wife as a new sibling.

Five years of bliss pass quickly, and one day Winzy is called to the bed of the dying Cornelius, who finally explains that his elixir had been not simply "a cure for love" but a cure "for all things—the Elixir of

Immortality" (TMI, 321). Love is here presented as another form of disease, a weakening and debilitating condition that leaves one prey to the ravages of mortality. To be "cured of love" is to be made immortal, impregnable, godlike, because to be human is to embody all the opposite qualities (TMI, 321). Love here is also presented as something that feminizes or weakens the masculine self, but the narrator is hardly a realistic presentation of a male character. His consciousness, his sensibility is feminine. He loves; therefore, he is as vulnerable as Mary Shelley found herself. He seeks to escape the ravages to which the flesh is prone, the never-ending pregnancies that Mary endured for six years, the repeated processions to the cemetery to bury babies. Winzy is the idealized masculine component of Mary Shelley—her reason and her intellect—that she desperately wants to believe will provide a means of escape for her. If she can be like a man—free from the biological curse—she would be like a god, immortal, inhabiting a world of the mind.

But the feminine aspect of Mary Shelley lives in the figure of Bertha, the female body that rots and decays before the saddened eyes of Winzy. Years pass and Bertha is now fifty, while Winzy appears to be her son. The two are "universally shunned" (TMI, 322) by their neighbors, largely because they embody the most pernicious incestuous dream of all—the tabooed love of a mother and son. Winzy has finally married the old crone, much to his dismay. Fleeing to a new country, the two decide to "wear masks," although Bertha's mask is infinitely less successful than Winzy's. Resorting to "rouge, youthful dress, and assumed juvenility of manner," Bertha is a parody of her former self. A desperate caricature of femininity, she has become a "mincing, simpering, jealous old woman." In other words, she has become another phallic mother, guarding her son Winzy with a "jealousy [that] never slept" (TMI, 323). The female body—once so beautiful and perfect—has become a flawed and diseased artifice, a shell fitted over a mass of stinking corruption. The male body, in stark contrast, continues to exist as statuesque and youthful, a perfect emblem of the triumph of masculinity and masculine values over the feminine. The female body has become the target and object of the beating given to it by the ultimate Nobodaddy—life, time, and mortality.

The years pass until Bertha is finally bedridden and paralytic and Winzy functions as her nurse: "I nursed her as a mother might a child" (TMI, 324). The wheel has come full circle. The mother is the child, while the husband/son has become a "mother." All gradations in the family romance have been tried in much the same way that Blake depicted them in "The Mental Traveller." Confined within the bourgeois domicile, the sexes feed on each other parasitically until they have consumed themselves in the process of playing all their gendered and

ungendering roles to a limited audience. When Bertha finally dies, Winzy decides to escape the family romance. He lives alone in melancholy depression, contemplating suicide, until he decides to "put [his] immortality" to the test by journeying to the Arctic Circle. Like Victor Frankenstein, he decides to seek his destruction in the embrace of the "elements of air and water" (TMI, 325). This desire to reconcile opposites, to bathe and immerse himself in mutually exclusive physical elements, represents Mary Shelley's attempt to depict the catastrophic merging of masculine and feminine elements in the human psyche. If men are associated with the realm of air, the intellect, reason, and the mind, then women are identified with water, the physical, and the body and its fluids. Winzy's seeking oblivion in the extremely gender-coded landscape of the Arctic Circle suggests that the apocalypse Mary Shelley imagined for herself and her characters involved an escape from all polarities, or rather a freezing and holding of the two elements in a static situation. We do not know what becomes of Winzy, just as we never know what becomes of the creature at the conclusion of *Frankenstein*.

But the dream of desire is the same at the end of all of Mary Shelley's texts: to escape the body and live in the realm of pure mind. Like her mother, Mary Shelley was a reluctant sensualist. She needed, philosophically, to embrace free love and open marriage, but her disappointments in her philandering husband could not be concealed. Claiming to support free love is easy as long as one does not have a husband who has a history of collecting pretty young things and bringing them home. Finally a deep revulsion toward the female body emerges as clearly in Mary Shelley's works as it does in Wollstonecraft's.

Gothic feminism for Mary Shelley entailed the realization that women would always be life's victims, not simply because social, political, economic, and religious conventions placed them in inferior and infantilizing postures, but because their own bodies cursed them to forever serve the wheel of physical corruption. Being a mother, bringing to life a child who would die, and perhaps would die soon, condemned women to serve a merciless god—the cycle of generation, birth, and death—in a way that men did not. The nightmare haunting Mary Shelley's life was not simply that she caused the death of her mother but that she recapitulated a reversed version of the same tragedy with three of her own children. She experienced her life as a sort of curse to herself and the ones she loved, and why? She understood that her life, her very physical being, fed on her mother's body parasitically, cannibalistically consuming it. Later she watched her children wither, unable to be sustained by her. These recurring nightmares fed her fictions, but they also spoke to a deeper fear that has continually plagued women.

Gothic feminism seeks to escape the female body through a dream of turning weakness into strength. By pretending that one is weak or a passive victim, one camouflages oneself in a hostile terrain, diverting attention from one's real identity. Mary Shelley knew that on some level she was no victim; she knew her strength and intelligence were more than a match for anyone's. But she also sensed danger in that strength, or at least experienced it ambivalently, fearing that it caused the deaths of others. The grotesque freakishness of the creature in *Frankenstein*, made material in the description of "his" oddly assembled body and his continual rejection by everyone he seeks to love, trope Mary Shelley's own sense of herself and all women as diseased, aberrant, and freakish composites of the hopes and dreams of other people. Gothic feminism for Mary Shelley is embodied in the sense of herself and the female body as a void, an empty signifier, a lure into the cycle of painful birth and disappointing death. Railing against the female body—sometimes disguised as male and sometimes blatantly presented as female—is finally the only position that Mary Shelley can take. She can laud the bourgeois family, she can valorize community and what we now label "family values," but she ultimately cannot escape the mortality that gives the lie to everything she seeks to praise. She inhabits a female body, she bleeds and causes bleeding in others, and those unfortunate facts define for her and her fiction the Gothic feminist nightmare in its starkest terms.

Notes

1. See the suggestive discussion of "Gothic Drama and National Crisis" in Paula R. Backscheider, *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 149–234.

2. For the best discussion of the stock tropes of melodrama, see Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 3, 16–17. Brooks acknowledges the importance on his thinking of Eric Bentley's "Melodrama" in *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Athenaeum, 1964), 195–218.

3. The best discussion of the development of sentimentality (also known as "sensibility") as a change in consciousness can be found in Jean Hagstrum's *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On the same subject, also see the valuable collection of essays titled *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. Syndy McMillen Conger (Totowa, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990). On weakness as a central component of sentimentality, see R. W. Brisenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974) and Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986).

4. Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (New York: Random House, 1993), 136–37.

5. The relationship, real and imagined, between Mary Shelley and her dead mother and flawed father is explored most revealingly in William St. Clair's *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (New York: Norton, 1989). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) discusses Mary Shelley's relationship with her mother and its influence on her works (213–47), as does Janet M. Todd's "Frankenstein's Daughter: Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft," *Women and Literature* 4 (1976): 18–27. On the influence of Godwin on her works, see Katherine Powers, *The Influence of William Godwin on the Novels of Mary Shelley* (New York: Arno, 1980), and on Mary's relationship with her father, see U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 88–119. Several recent biographies of Mary Shelley explore the parental influence on her writings. In particular, see Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London: Routledge, 1988); Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989); and Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley* (1951; rpt., London: Constable, 1987).

6. The full text of Mary's well-known journal confession reads:

With regard to "the good Cause"—the cause of the advancement of freedom & knowledge—of the Rights of Woman, &c.—I am not a person of opinions. . . . Some [people] have a passion for reforming the world:—others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it. . . . I was nursed and fed with a love of glory. To be something great and good was the precept given me by my Father: Shelley reiterated it. Alone & poor, I could only be something by joining a party— & there was much in me—the woman's love of looking up & being guided, & being willing to do anything if any one supported & brought me forward, which would have made me a good partizan—but Shelley died & I was alone. . . . If I have never written to vindicate the Rights of women, I have ever befriended women when oppressed. (21 October 1838) (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987] 2:553–54)

The second Shelley quotation is taken from her letter of 11 June 1835 (*Selected Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995], 257).

7. Analyzing fathers and mothers in Mary Shelley's fiction has been a persistent focus in the literary criticism of her work. A useful overview of the critical history on this topic can be found in Jane Blumberg, *Mary Shelley's Early Novels: 'This Child of Imagination and Misery'* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993). See also Marc A. Rubinstein, "My Accursed Origin": The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in Romanticism* 15 (1976): 165–94; James B. Carson, "Bringing the Author Forward: *Frankenstein* through Mary Shelley's Letters," *Criticism* 30 (1988): 431–53; and Kate Ellis, "Mary Shelley's Embattled Garden," in *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 181–206.

8. See Sigmund Freud, "'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:175–204. The fullest attempt to apply the beating fantasy motif to

female Gothic fiction can be found in Michelle Massé, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). In particular, see her chapter "'A Woman Is Being Beaten' and Its Vicissitudes," 40–106.

9. Mary Shelley sent the manuscript of *Mathilda* to Godwin via their mutual friend Maria Gisborne in May 1820. After almost two years of fruitless inquiry, she finally concluded that Godwin would not help see the manuscript into publication, so she began trying to recover it. She never succeeded, and the novella was not published until Elizabeth Nitchie prepared an edition for press in 1959 (*Mathilda* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959]). Terence Harpold explores the incestuous core and motivation of *Mathilda* in his article "'Did you get Mathilda from Papa?': Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," *Studies in Romanticism* 28 (1989): 49–67. Harpold concludes that the novel "represents a fantasy of seduction," and that the submission of the novel to Godwin "signals Mary's effort to engage him in the seduction fantasy, but to acknowledge the authority of his desire in the primal scene which determines her understanding of herself and her relations with each of her parents" (64).

10. All quotations from "The Mortal Immortal" are taken from text reprinted in *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. Betty Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 314–26, hereafter cited in the text as TMI. The first printing of "The Mortal Immortal" was in *The Keepsake* (1834), 71–87.

11. Although I have been unable to document Mary Shelley's reading of the Hoffmann tale through her own record of her readings in the journal, I believe she may at least have been familiar with the story's rough plotlines through the text's circulation in British literary circles by 1833. E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" is itself a seminal literary source in psychoanalytic discourse systems. Freud developed his theory of the uncanny while reading the story, and it has inspired a number of French feminist meditations on "the phallic gaze," most notably Hélène Cixous's fruitful "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's 'The Uncanny,'" *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 525–48. An overview of the psychoanalytic history of the Hoffmann story can be found in Sarah Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), while its status within the Romantic tradition is examined by Marianne Thalmann, *The Literary Sign Language of German Romanticism*, trans. Harold Basilius (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972).

12. Like *Mathilda* and the other novels besides *Frankenstein*, the short stories of Mary Shelley are now the focus of critical interest. For a very different reading of the female body in this text, see Sonia Hofkosh, "Disfiguring Economies: Mary Shelley's Short Stories" in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 204–19.

13. For useful overviews and summaries of the theoretical and psychoanalytical background on the phallic mother, see Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Dana Birksted-Breen, ed., *The Gender Conundrum: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Femininity and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1993).