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The Deceptive Other: Mary Shelley's Critique of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*

*Frankenstein* (1818) is highly conscious of the Orient and Orientalist discourse. Robert Walton and Henry Clerval both want to get to the Orient in a commercial and/or military capacity; Safie runs away from her father so that she need not return to an Oriental harem. Structurally, Shelley modeled her novel on earlier Orientalist fictions: on “Alastor,” Percy Shelley’s only major publicly printed poem to date, as well as on Sidney Owenson’s *The Missionary*. *Frankenstein* shares many preoccupations with Shelley’s poem, especially the themes of the “epipsychidion,” the denial of the mother, the allegorical journey, the crisis of differentiation, the dream-maiden, the wasting away and ultimate death of the protagonist.

This article begins by reviewing references to Oriental narratives in the text, the Oriental and Orientalist works which we know Mary Shelley to have read, the Orientalist poems Byron and Percy Shelley were writing in 1816 and 1817, Mary Shelley’s personal connections to East India House, and the Oriental ambitions of Robert Walton and Henry Clerval. Having established these important links to British power in India and the novel’s dialogue with other romantic Orientalist narratives, I examine the thematic elements and plot devices which link Caroline Beaufort to the dream-maiden of “Alastor,” to the crisis of

1. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. James Rieger (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1974). All quotes are from this edition, which includes both the “Introduction to the Third Edition” and a collation of the texts of the 1818 and 1831 editions. Although I am aware that my references to the author as “Mary Shelley” are sometimes anachronistic (she did not marry Percy Shelley until 29 December 1816, six months after the famous ghost story contest which led to the writing of the novel), this anachronism is preferable to both the inevitable confusion with the married name of her mother (also Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin) and to the confusion which would result by references to her both as Mary Godwin and Mary Shelley.
differentiation, to Death, to the Sultana Valide,\(^2\) and to the frozen yet moving seas so important to the novel. Next, I speculate upon the ways Victor Frankenstein's unnamed creature physically resembles both Orientals and Orientalist discourse. Finally, I discuss Safie and her unnamed father and mother, the only specifically "Oriental" personages within the narrative.

I

*Frankenstein* is obsessed with the impact of Oriental texts upon western minds, and particularly upon the education of the generation born at the end of the eighteenth century. Victor Frankenstein, for example, who has read *The Arabian Nights*, compares himself to Sindbad. The creature learns history, and particularly the effeminacy and degeneration of the civilizations of the East from Volney's *Ruins of Empires*. He imbibes a sense of the fragility of Western civilization (and particularly of "republics"), the necessity of protecting it from the onslaught of Oriental hordes, and the corrosive influence of Oriental manners and luxuries from Plutarch's *Lives*.\(^3\)

Mary Shelley had read or re-read these texts during the first years of her relationship with Percy Shelley. She had also avidly read Sidney Owenson's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale*. She read *Robinson Crusoe*, whose opening movement recounts the hero's adventures as a slave in Barbary. She also read Southey's and Landor's imitations of "Hindu" epics. Percy Shelley had completed "Alastor"; Byron had published *Hebrew Melodies* as well as the *Oriental Tales*. By the time Mary began working on *Frankenstein*, both Byron and Percy Shelley had begun works (respectively, *Manfred* and *Laon and Cythna*) modeled partially upon a tale embedded in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, a tale of brother-sister incest between two Zoroastrians; *Manfred* retains the name of Montesquieu's heroine, Astarte.

2. The "Sultana Valide" was the Ottoman equivalent of a European Empress Dowager or Queen Mother. In Western literature, she is traditionally a character more evil than Snow White's Wicked Stepmother, and seems to have been created as a negative image of the Virgin Mary. Far from being concerned with preserving the lives of her offspring, she often gleefully murders her own children. For a brilliant analysis of how the Sultana Valide functions as the devouring, Phallic Mother at the heart of Montesquieu, see Alain Grosrichard, *Structure du Serail* (Paris: Seuil, 1979). With relatively minor adaptations, his explication holds equally for the wicked Sowdanesse of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" or for the mother of Beckford's *Vathek*.

Perhaps more important was Mary’s frequent childhood contact with Charles Lamb, a Servant of the East India Company. As Anne Mellor points out, William Godwin frequently took Mary to dinners with the Lambs. Charles Lamb frequently visited the Godwins until Godwin’s second wife drove “me and some more old cronies . . . from [the] house.” Lamb’s greatest intimacy with Godwin coincided not merely with Mary’s formative years, but also with the tenure of the Wellesleys in India—it must have seemed as if every ship returning from India brought word of another military success. Although Lamb’s dislike for his clerical position in India House is notorious, one cannot avoid thinking that he became the Godwin circle’s principal informant for the latest news from the East. The fact of British power in India and the seemingly inextricable ties with the East India Company’s commercial concerns became part of Mary’s intellectual heritage. By looking at the careers of Robert Walton, Henry Clerval, and Safie, as well as at the physical make-up of Frankenstein’s creature, we can see how this heritage becomes an integral part of the texture of Mary’s first novel. This treatment of Western dominance of the Orient is pervasive but subtle; only Spivak and Mellor have hinted at the novel’s anti-imperialistic concerns. No one has yet placed Frankenstein within the specific historical situation of the early nineteenth century.

In 1980, A. D. Harvey pointed out that “it appears that [Walton] is trying not merely to reach the North Pole . . . but to reach the Pacific via the North Pole.” Despite this, it has been and continues to be a critical cliche that Walton’s goal is the North Pole. Robert Walton’s journey does follow a North–South axis; Walton writes to London from St. Petersburgh, Archangel, and then the Arctic Sea. This trajectory

apparently contrasts with that of "Alastor," whose Poet travels through Greece, the Middle East and the Caucasus to Kashmir. During his journey, he dreams of a beautiful woman. Like a succubus, this emanated dream-woman drains him of his life principle (semen, strength, will to live); the Poet, unable ever to find her again, wastes away and dies.

_Frankenstein_ both imitates and inverts the plot of "Alastor." Both poem and novel are framed narratives.9 "Alastor" begins with an invocation by a narrator to the Great Mother; the narrative proper follows this invocation and is "framed" by it. In _Frankenstein_, Robert Walton meets Victor as the latter painfully pursues a creature (also the realization of his dreams) who has destroyed the woman the hero has incestuously married (his first cousin). After Elizabeth's death and Victor's consequent inability to consummate his relationship with a "more than sister" who symbolically and physically resembles his mother, he journeys north, wastes away, and finally dies in a boat floating on an icy and symbolically feminine sea. Like one of Harold Bloom's strong poets, however, Mary insists upon misreading and correcting Percy's plot. Percy indicates that the lack of an adequate mother, or the failure of a real one, ultimately results in the Poet's search for the impossible, idealized feminine principle and in his eventual death. Victor, however, destroys himself precisely because he has fled the sphere of the feminine, the domestic hearth presided over first by his mother, then by his cousin. By refusing to write home, he metaphorically denies his family; he repeats this denial by destroying the creature's unfinished mate. Mary Shelley translates10 Percy's poem: Victor, who more strongly resembles the "Alastor" Poet than he does Percy, must expiate his crimes. This expiation occurs, not in a luxurious, feminine Orient, but over the frozen body of the "feminine principle" he has hubristically tried to do without.

Although we may think the "Alastor" Poet travels West to East and that both Walton and Frankenstein travel South to North, in neither case is this strictly accurate. The Poet also moves from North to South, especially if one postulates that the "cold hearth" he leaves is somewhere in England. Victor Frankenstein's journey has a west-to-east component even stronger than the Poet's north-south one; his final journey takes him northeast through Russia and "Tartary" into the Arctic Ocean.

	note 10. Here, I use this term in its mathematical sense. In geometry, a translation is achieved by a rotation of the coordinate system upon which any particular figure is mapped. In other words, I am claiming that Mary substitutes the North-South axis for Percy's East-West one.
(Later, I will expand upon the novel’s predilection for traditional geographical terminology.) Walton’s journey has an even stronger west-east component.

As I noted earlier, critics have often drawn attention to Walton’s fantasy of finding a temporal paradise at the northern pole:

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible; its broad disk just skirting the horizon and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There—for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators—there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. Its productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? (9–10)

Walton expects, under the “masculine” Enlightenment sun, to find a country even more wonderful than Percy’s Kashmir. Moreover, his sea-journey resembles the Poet’s land-journey, in that both reach their Paradise after passing a “seat” of “snow and frost.”11

Walton’s fantasies, unrealistic as they seem today, were not unique.12 His dream of the warm land indicates that, like Victor, he is a devotee of “exploded systems.” While Victor studies the works of Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century alchemist, Walton reads travel literature. He seems particularly to have enjoyed the account of John Wood, an Englishman who explored the Icy Sea13 in 1676. Wood claims to have “heard a Dutchman relate that he had been under the pole itself, and that it was as warm there as it was at Amsterdam in summer time.”14 Unlike

11. India’s land borders, after all, are protected by nearly impassable mountains.
12. In a footnote, Marc Rubinstein draws attention to an article published in June 1818, in the Edinburgh Review, which discusses similar theories of the warm land at the Pole. This issue of the magazine, however, appeared three months after Frankenstein was published; it also deals primarily with attempts to find the Northwest Passage, particularly one made in 1817. Marc A. Rubinstein, “‘My Accursed Origin’: The Search for the Mother in Frankenstein,” Studies in Romanticism 15 (1976): 165–94.
13. Throughout this paper, I will use contemporary terminology and spellings for placenames. These contemporary names will play a significant role in the development of my argument.
Walton, Wood did not hope to discover land near the pole; rather, he believed that the open sea might be free from ice. Wood hoped to find a quick and relatively disease-free route to the Orient; before setting out, he wrote to Charles II that, if such a route could be found, the King could “send out Men of War to Japan . . . and force them to trade” (Wood 145).

Walton, of course, hopes to return; in that sense, London is his ultimate goal. As in many romantic poems, his voyage is circular. But his return journey will not retrace his steps: he hopes to circumnavigate the globe, or at least the African-Eurasian landmass. He asks his sister, “Shall I meet you again, after having traversed immense seas, and returned by the most southern cape of Africa or America?” (15). The question indicates Walton’s uncertainty of ever seeing Margaret Saville again. But its ambiguous construction allows his sister to choose his return route. Should Margaret choose the southern cape of America, Walton will have approached both the extreme northern and southern points of the globe, as well as the western and eastern ones. But while north and south have magnetic demarcations and an equatorial line separating them, west and east merge. Walton hopes to reach the “North Pacific Ocean” (11). Like the “Alastor” Poet, Walton wishes to reach India; he merely hopes to reach the East a different way.

Coincidentally, there was an eighteenth century Lieutenant Walton who was involved in Arctic exploration. Peter the Great of Russia and his successors supported voyages of exploration along the northern and eastern coasts of Asia and into the Arctic Ocean, then called the Icy Sea or the Frozen Sea. An expedition led by a Captain Spangberg in the St. Michael of Archangel left Kamtschatka on May 22, 1739. Spangberg’s mission was to find Japan; at that time, no Europeans knew the relative positions of Japan and Kamtschatka. Walton joined this expedition near the Kurili Islands. Walton’s ship, the Hope, was separated from the other ships on June 14th; he continued independently, casting anchor before an unspecified Japanese town or city on June 19. Walton exchanged gifts

15. See Gerhard Friedrich Mueller, Voyages et découverte faites par les Russes le long des cotes de la Mer Glaciale & sur l'Ocean Oriental, tant vers le Japon que vers l'Amerique, traduit de l'Allemand de Mr. G. P. Muller (sic), par C. G. F. Dumas (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1766) 221-239. The English translation appeared as Voyages from Asia to America (London: T. Jefferies, 1761; New York: Da Capo Press, 1967). As I indicate later in the text, this Lieutenant Walton in the employ of the Tsar of Russia was an obscure personage. James Burney, A Chronological History of North-eastern Voyages of Discovery (London: John Murray, 1819), indicates that his first name was “William”; both the English and French translations of his source call him only “Lieutenant Walton.” I do not know where Burney found the name "William."
and engaged in small-scale trade for several days; the Japanese particularly desired Russian cloth and clothing. Gerhard Friedrich Mueller relates that the Japanese were “every where desirous of intercourse with the Russians,” until, on June 23, a man with “a sabre at his side and a pistol in his hand . . . interdicted the Japanese from having farther commerce with the strangers” (Mueller, Voyages 30–32). Walton returned to Ochotsk on August 21, and disappeared from history.

Lieutenant Walton was an obscure figure even in the eighteenth century. Until Fanny Burney’s brother James published A Chronological History of North-Eastern Voyages of Discovery; and of the Early Eastern Navigations of the Russians (1819), most standard accounts of Arctic exploration mention neither Spangberg or Walton. Only Mueller’s work (Burney’s source), translated in 1761 as Voyage from Asia to America to Complete the Discoveries of the North West Coast of America; to which is Prefixed a Summary of the Voyages of the Russians on the Frozen-Sea, provides an English-language account of Spangberg’s and Walton’s discoveries.

While I cannot determine whether Mary Shelley knew Mueller’s book, the parallels between the historical Lieutenant Walton and the fictional Robert Walton, as well as Robert Walton’s pointed references to travel literature are suggestive. In indicating that he “has read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the pole” (11), Robert Walton paraphrases the title of the English translation of Mueller’s book. In an awkward second-person address foreshadowing the much-commented upon introduction of Justine Moritz, Robert Walton tells his sister, “You may remember, that a history of all the voyages made for the purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas’s library . . . These volumes were my study day and night” (11).

Moreover, the parallels between the two Waltons’ voyages are also striking. Although Mueller does not mention Lt. Walton’s nationality, this very English name appears in a context littered with difficult German and “uncouth” Russian spellings, perhaps providing the germ for


17. “Do you not remember Justine Moritz? . . . Justine was a great favorite of yours” (60).
Mary’s account of Robert Walton, the sole Englishman among a crew of Russians. Both Waltons are associated with the word “Archangel”: Robert, with the White Sea port; the Lieutenant, with Spangberg’s ship. Both travel partly by land. Robert’s datings of letters “17—” do not preclude an early-eighteenth-century date, something close to William’s 1739 journey. Most importantly, both Waltons hope to find an efficient sea-route to the Orient and to establish trade there.

Like Walton, Clerval is fascinated by and hopes to make his fortune in the East. This perhaps help to explain the almost instantaneous affinity Walton feels towards Frankenstein, and which the dying man seems to return. Victor and Henry, of course, are complementary characters. The ease with which they travel indicates that, like any eighteenth-century or Regency gentleman, they have mastered Italian, French, and English; their tenures at Ingolstadt suggest fluency in German as well. In fact, their implied knowledge conforms precisely to Chesterfield’s standards. But beyond accomplishments characteristic of their wealth and status, their interests diverge. Frankenstein specializes in chemistry and biology. Clerval is an “orientalist” (64). Like Schlegel, he is “self-instruct[ed]” in “Persian, Greek, and Arabic.” Victor clearly perceives himself as inhabiting a separate sphere from his friend: he can escape from the anxieties of his own labors into the feminine realms inhabited by Orientals:

I felt great relief in being the fellow-pupil with my friend, and found not only instruction but consolation in the works of the orientalists. Their melancholy is soothing, and their joy elevating to a degree I never experienced in studying the authors of any other country. When you read their writings, life appears to consist in a warm sun and garden of roses,—in the smiles and frowns of a fair enemy, and the fire that consumes your own heart. How different from the manly and heroical poetry of Greece and Rome. (64, my emphases)

Clerval symbolically inhabits this feminine realm; as he maternally nurses Victor back to health, he repeats the domesticating gesture of Voltaire, Ridley, Southey, Landor, and other earlier writers of fictions

18. Walton hires his crew when he reaches Archangel. While this does not preclude Germans or sailors from Baltic nations being in Archangel to join his crew, it is highly unlikely that there would be many English speakers among them.

19. Robert travels from St. Petersburgh to Archangel by post; Mueller argues that the northern-most cape of Asia had not yet been successfully rounded, and that the Russians characteristically disassembled their ships and carted them across the Tschuktzki Peninsula to the Pacific.
about the Orient: "in imitation of the Persian and Arabic writers, he invented tales of wonderful fancy and passion" (66).

Among the many and sometimes detailed changes made for the 1831 Edition of the novel, recent commentary (facilitated by James Rieger's edition) has focused primarily upon the changes in Alphonse's character and upon Elizabeth's transformation from paternal cross-cousin to unrelated foundling. A third group of changes makes Henry Clerval less sympathetic by linking him far more strongly to Walton's ambitions and to British trade and empire-building in India.

The first revision deals with the roles Clerval used to create for himself, Victor, and Elizabeth. Already in 1818, Clerval's childhood fantasies centered on chivalry. The three children used to "act plays composed by [Clerval] out of [his] favourite books" (30). His favorite characters are from 'romance' languages or English legend: Amadis of Gaul (recently translated by Southey) and Ariosto's Orlando, or Robin Hood and St. George. The 1831 Henry retains these childhood interests, but the specificity of his favorites disappears. Robin Hood and St. George are submerged in the generic heroes "of the Round Table of King Arthur"; Amadis and Orlando are replaced by the "heroes of Roncesvalles," who according to French legend (but not according to Ariosto), had died by treachery in a rear-guard Pyrenees action which helped preserve Carolingian Europe from the Saracen threat. Even more importantly, a third category of heroes appears: "the chivalrous train who shed their blood to redeem the holy sepulchre from the hands of the infidels" (237). From this disputed territory, and from a marriage between the two historical 'heathen' groups (Arabs) who had endangered Christian travelers to this Holy Land, the novel's central embedded narrative, that of Safie and her family, will emerge.

The second major revision concerns old Clerval's rationale for initially refusing his son permission to accompany Victor to the University at Ingolstadt. In 1818, M. Clerval wanted Henry to "become a partner with him in business," believing that "learning was superfluous in the commerce of ordinary life." Henry agrees about the "ornamental" nature of scholarship, its superfluity to trade, but argues that "a man might be a very good trader, and yet possess a cultivated understanding" (39). In 1831, however, characterization and argumentation change radically. Far from being a common-sensical merchant, M. Clerval is now "a narrow-minded trader, [who] saw idleness and ruin in the aspirations and ambition of his son." Old Clerval, now as despotic as any Oriental despot, "debar[s]" Clerval from a "liberal" education (240).

In both 1818 and 1831, Henry eventually attains permission to attend the University. However, in 1831, Mary implies that Old Clerval relents
partly in response to the spectacular recent successes of the British in India. As Mellor notes, Clerval still studies Persian and Arabic (the most important commercial languages in the area bounded by the India Ocean), but has replaced Hebrew with “Sanscrit” (Mellor 175). While the 1831 Victor still utilizes his friend’s studies for their therapeutic escape value, for the use-value of the Orient to the mentally-disturbed European, he does not “attempt a critical knowledge of their dialects, for I did not contemplate making any other use of them than temporary amusement. I read merely to understand their meaning, and they well repaid my labours”(244). Clerval, however, has found a practical use for these studies; like any of the future Servants of the East India Company studying at Hawkeshead, Henry makes himself a “complete master of the oriental languages.” The 1831 Henry succeeds, at least in his own mind, in updating the heroic lays of the Crusades he had delighted in as a child. “Resolved to pursue no inglorious career,” as an adult, he once again “turned his eyes toward the East, as affording scope for his spirit of enterprise” (243-44). Had Clerval lived, he might have risen to prominence under the Wellesleys, or become one of many Francophones training the armies of native powers.

II

For some time, critics have been aware how Victor’s desire for his mother operates within the novel’s economies of desire and of violence. U. C. Knoepflmacher notes that Caroline’s death lies behind Victor’s initial “dream”: that a corpse may be reanimated.20 In the next few pages, I will discuss her connections to Death, to the Sultana Valide, to the creature, and to the crisis of differentiation.

The novel links Caroline iconographically with death. Her story springs almost causally from her proximity to death: “Her father died in her arms, leaving her an orphan and a beggar. This last blow overcame her; and she knelt by Beaufort’s coffin, weeping bitterly, when my father entered the chamber . . . Two years after this event Caroline became his wife” (28).21 Caroline herself dies when Victor is seventeen,


21. Two odd facts about this scene. First, it is not Beaufort’s death, but his utter bankruptcy which is the “last blow” for his daughter—she does not seem to discover her penury, or at least to react to it, until after the coffin has been procured. Second, this Beaufort and Victor fill the maternal grandfather-grandson roles which Derrida discusses vis-a-vis Freud-Ernst.
due to a suicidal, but more importantly, irrationally misplaced act of “maternal” instinct towards Elizabeth (37). Equally important, however, is the exemplary representation of the virginal Caroline with the dead father which Victor confronts in “domestic” life; she resembles both the Blessed Virgin Mary and Owenson’s Luxima. We “see” this representation only after Caroline’s death, after she has ceased to embody her story; we never learn the date of her portrait’s “execution,” but only that it was painted at Victor’s father’s “desire:”

It was an historical subject . . . and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity (73).

The strangely misnamed “historical” painting freeze...
her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel (53).

In this dream, Mary broaches the question of differentiation, a question she raised before (I will return to these earlier instances shortly), but which only becomes a crisis from this moment.

Before analyzing the complex structure of the second "sentence" of the dream, we need first to recall its immediate context. Victor has just "given birth" in a more secretive, shame-ridden way than any unwed mother possibly could. Ellen Moers quotes from Dr. Benjamin Spock's description of how "disappointing-looking" a newborn is, with its "misshapen" head, the "touch of jaundice" that may be visible, the "black hair . . . which may come far down on the forehead" (Moers 77). The obvious signs of a live-birth, the opening of "the dull yellow eye" and the "convulsive motion" of its limbs spark Victor, for the first time, to see what he has assembled and to report that (moral) vision to us, and then to flee and to seek "forgetfulness." Victor achieves this, but at the price of the horrifying dream. This dream condenses three distinct scenes into a single sentence, and retrospectively transforms preceding questions of differentiation into crisis.

Melanie Klein has taught us that an infant generally "splits" its mother into a "good" and "bad" breast. Muriel Spark has suggested reading Victor and Clerval as "splitting" Percy Shelley in this way. Although Marc Rubinstein (see note 12) and others read this dream as manifesting the incestuous nature of Victor's desire for his mother and for his cousin, no one has yet noted that the three figures in the dream—Elizabeth, the newly-dead mother, the buried and decomposing mother—are identical and linked to the dream-maiden and to the Great Mother in "Alastor." In the next few paragraphs, I will attempt precisely that, before linking this dream to the crisis of differentiation which concerned both Shelleys and to the illusory promise of Orientalist discourse.

Victor's dream is the first Chapter IV passage which clearly was neither part of Mary's nightmare nor the "transcript of [its] grim terrors" (228). This dream within a waking dream replicates the Chinese-box narrative structure and the framing devices of "Alastor." Mary Shelley, however, achieves the same narrative result (the decay and death of the protagonist) by inverting the dream and rewriting its gender roles. The "Alastor" Poet reaches the pinnacle of pleasure with his "epipsychidion" in a dream; in Frankenstein, Victor sees his epipsychidion wither, seemingly as the result of his Manfred-like touch. The Poet ages prematurely and

dies because of the dream. Victor, too, ages prematurely and dies in a
pursuit; however, his death springs from the destruction of his emotional
dream of domesticity by his intellectual "dream" of creation. The Poet
dies, seemingly unaware of the crisis of differentiation or of the return
of the repressed; Victor’s dream provides unmistakable signs that Victor,
too, refuses to recognize this crisis.

As Rubinstein points out, the dream responds partly to Victor’s un-
resolved Oedipal feelings for his mother, partly to the incestuous and
ambivalent feelings to his cross-cousin. The dreamwork condenses the
differing objects of these similar emotional “complexes” showing, in
reverse, how feelings for the mother flow or “melt” into feelings for
the cousin-bride. In other words, the dream suggests the identity of
Caroline and Elizabeth in both the logical and psychological senses. As
Fielding claims as a characteristic of the novel, the dreamwork “passes
over without comment”25 large stretches of time, eliding the period
between the marital “embrace” and the death of the (middle-aged)
mother. In a third time-frame, a shroud (a death-veil reminiscent of
veils in “Alastor”) “envelops” the mother’s “form.” Victor touches or
sees only the phallic worms crawling in that shroud.

Blood is taboo here. The predominantly male figures of romantic
poetry suffer greatly: they go to war, travel immense distances, waste
away or die violently, but rarely bleed. Caroline Beaufort dies of scarlet
fever; her father “sickens” and, ten months later, dies in her arms in a
kind of retro-birth. Victor dies of exposure and exhaustion. Alphonse
“waste[s] in wretchedness” after Elizabeth’s death (196). The creature,
telling how he came to be wounded by gunshot, does not mention
bleeding. One horrifying thing about him is how his skin scarcely covers
“the arteries beneath”; another, his “straight black lips,” reappear in
Victor’s dream when, upon being kissed, Elizabeth’s lips become black-
ish-blue, “livid . . . with the hue of death” (136, 137). Even in his
wildest rages, the creature does not shed blood. He strangles William,
Clerval, and Elizabeth; by planting Caroline’s portrait on Justine, he
causes her to be hanged. The method of execution, which remains
obscure in the 1818 text, is clarified in 1831: Justine “perished on the
scaffold as a murderess!” (246). The female whom Victor dismembers
is also apparently bloodless. Her “remains,” which Victor has “scattered
on the floor,” merely need to be “put in a basket”; only Victor’s “chem-
ical apparatus” needs cleaning (168, 169). Most importantly, by stran-

25. Henry Fielding, The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling (New York: Random House,
n.d.) 41.
gling Elizabeth on her wedding night, the creature prevents Victor from shedding Elizabeth's hymeneal blood.

Instead of shedding blood, the creature leaves a "black mark" upon each victim's throat, a mark simultaneously his signature (by which Victor knows whom he has killed) and his impress (the symbol by which he indicates that so many pounds of flesh have become his—even Justine, the hanged victim, bears this mark). This imprint suggests affinity among the victims; these pieces of once-quick flesh become objects of exchange, tokens of anguish. In fact, they interchange among each other in both Victor's and his creature's minds. These brands of co-ownership by the creature and by Death highlight questions of differentiation already present. My discussion of Victor's dream (which opened this apparent digression) showed the attempts of Victor's unconscious to point out the crisis to him. The dream only condenses and intensifies information already available to both Victor and the reader. For Victor has already, in his narrative, indicated the ways in which the three chief, premeditated victims (Justine, Elizabeth, Henry) of the creature resemble each other by resembling Caroline Beaufort. Caroline, herself "adopted" by Alphonse Frankenstein before marrying him, begins a series of "elective affinities" on her deathbed, saying to Elizabeth, "you must supply my place to your younger cousins" (38). Justine also comes under Caroline's spell, consciously and successfully striving to become like her adopted mother and unlike her biological mother (the cruel, fickle and superstitious Madame Moritz). Elizabeth comments upon Justine's efforts and upon how this new image outlives its original: "[Justine] thought [Caroline] the model of all excellence, and endeavored to imitate her phraseology and manners, so that even now she often reminds me of her" (61). While visiting the falsely accused Justine in jail, Elizabeth indicates an affinity bordering on identification, calling Justine "my playfellow, my companion, my more than sister" (82).26 Fittingly, the creature "frames" Justine by hiding the stolen image of the mother she so resembles among her clothes. Oddly enough, Henry Clerval also resembles the dead mother. Caroline dies after nursing Elizabeth through scarlet fever; Henry nurses Victor through his four-month "nervous fever" (57). During Victor's delirium, we must assume that Henry performs tasks identical to those once performed by Victor's mother: changing his soiled clothes and bedsheets, feeding him by hand. Even Alphonse resembles the other-worldly mother, cousin, servant, and friend; when Alphonse visits after Clerval's death, Victor says "the

26. This description of Justine also echoes Victor's description of Elizabeth.
appearance of my father was to me like that of my good angel, and I gradually recovered my health” (178).

The beautiful dead mother is linked to the unhappy creature in several ways. I noted that Victor’s desire to undo his mother’s death inspires his desire to reanimate a corpse: Caroline’s death indirectly causes the creature’s existence. After the creature first quickens, Victor dreams that Elizabeth transforms into Caroline’s corpse; when he opens his eyes, he sees the creature looking at him with its “speculative eyes.” Her body provides the novel’s “foundation,” becoming both the Glacial Sea upon which Victor relates his story to Walton and the glacier upon which the creature relates his story to Victor.27 The following paragraphs explore these resonances and link them, through yet another pun, to the Deceptive Other and to the crisis of differentiation.

Mary Shelley does not use the name “mer de glace.” But since Marc Rubinstein first discussed the pun upon “mère de glace,” the wordplay has found a significant place in criticism of the novel. After noting the homophony, critics often connect the ice-mother thematically to Frankenstein’s failure to nurture his creature, or psychobiographically to Mary Wollstonecraft’s death and the emotional coldness of Godwin’s second wife. This, however, does not touch upon the structural importance of the sea of ice, nor does it exhaust the thematic and homophonic possibilities.

The pun mer/mère raises the obvious question, “Who is the mother?” As Mary Favret points out, the creature is technically a bastard; in another sense, Mary Shelley is “motherless” as well.28 The pun suggests that the mother is present. In this interview, Victor and creature do parody the Scriptural act by walking upon water. Like Percy and Mary vowing love over Wollstonecraft’s grave, they argue over the mother’s body. The French phrase mère de glace is ambiguous: it can also be translated as “mother of ice.” In her Journal entry for March 19, 1815, Mary describes herself in this way: “Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived.”29

The creature tells Frankenstein his history on the Mer de glace, which moves ever so slowly; a frozen feminine element encroaching upon the land. In the starkest structural terms, one male tells his story to another

27. Mère de glace, Mer de glace, and mer de glace.
upon a sea/mother who threatens both to freeze them and to freeze them in place. This is precisely the structure of the outer narration: Frankenstein tells Walton his story while the ice floes (flows) threaten to freeze Walton's ship in place. Rubinstein notes this parallel, but does not comment upon the fact that, even in the early nineteenth century, the Arctic Ocean was generally called the Icy Sea, the Frozen Sea, or the Glacial Sea, nor that this Sea was famous for its mountains of ice. The glacier scene structurally repeats that of Walton's journey: Walton/Frankenstein, having strenuously journeyed over a cold/frozen (in both cases, sterile) female element, unexpectedly encounters Frankenstein/creature, who tells him a story. In both cases, the story concerns the birth of the "hideous progeny"; but for Frankenstein, recognizing the subject precedes and produces narration; for Walton, narration precedes recognizing the subject. Walton has "seen" the creature before hearing the story, but can only identify him after having heard it. The creature boards the ship after Frankenstein's death: his "recognized" presence follows the narration which produces that very presence, but also allows Walton retrospectively to identify and give meaning to the huge shape he had seen earlier. Frankenstein, who recounts the story actively to Walton over the sea of ice, passively hears the story from the creature over the mer de glace.

Frankenstein's position in these structures is thus reversed or inverted. The story he hears over one sea of ice, he retells over another. In fact, we can never escape from this sea/mother; at the end of the text, we see the creature disappear into the distance, but we are left in the Arctic. We can only hypothesize about Walton's fate. But "mer" is not the only word which puns. "Glace," usually glossed as "frozen," can also be translated "mirror," a sense which its English cognate still retains: the seas on which Victor and the creature tell their stories are also mirrors. They recall the liquid water in which the creature first saw his reflection—only they have been frozen, made rigid. The image one sees in this mirror will not waver or retreat at the touch; rather, contact with this mirror burns. One travels upon it, forgetting even that it is a mirror; when one encounters the Other upon it, one forgets that the Other is but a reflection of the Self, a reflection and even a creation of one's own desires. These stories, told and retold (duplicated) over the sea of mirrors, display a crisis of differentiation similar to that in "Alastor." In both poem and novel, the crisis is clearly related to the sexual problem of turning away from the Other: the Poet's narcissism, his enthrallment to the image of his own soul, kills him; Frankenstein's desire to marry the "more than sister" who turns into the mother's corpse "produces" the child which then kills all that he had held dear, and indirectly causes his own death.
The creature thrives in this climate of mirrors; his constitution adapts especially well to the cold. He is most often and most terribly seen by the reflected light of the moon—by Victor, on the nights of his creation and of Elizabeth’s murder, and by Walton, on the night following Victor Frankenstein’s death (216). Characters read their own fears into him. He reflects Victor’s repressed rage at the objects of his Oedipal anger (at the brother who replaces him), of his incestuous desire (the more-than-sister), and possibly even of his homosexual feelings towards Clerval.30 Despite the creature’s reverence for old De Lacey, Felix “sees” him attacking the man he may secretly blame for the family’s downward mobility, and whom he may hate for his burdensome blindness. He at first seems condemned to, but later embraces, the fate of acting out the self-hatred of those who see him.

This mirroring of desire and this deflection of self-hatred seem to have been part of the very “conception” of the novel; at least since 1831, when Mary Shelley first decided publicly to explain how she “came to think of, to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea,” we cannot conclude otherwise (222). As Albert LaValley points out, we cannot avoid bringing stage- and cinema-flavored expectations to the novel;31 but here Mary Shelley has scooped us. In the most frequently reprinted text (1831), we first encounter the creature, not in Chapter iv, but in the Introduction. Mary Shelley describes how she saw the “pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together”; how she saw that same student waken from a sleep (no dreams are mentioned) to behold: “behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes” (228).

In this Introduction, we find yet another set of frames. Shelley describes her past self watching Victor Frankenstein wake to see his creature looking at him. She then asks the reader to identify with her looking at her former self and the dream-characters; the word “behold” fluctuates oddly between a command to the reader and a description of the acts of both the young Mary and the pale student. This ambiguous “behold”

30. Byron and Polidori, neither of whom it seems went out of their way to disguise homosexual desires, were constant companions of Mary and Percy Shelley during the summer of 1816. Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in Eighteenth Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), brilliantly and painstakingly reconstructs Byron’s homosexual matrix. One should particularly note the resemblance between the novel’s nomenclature and that of the nineteenth-century penal code. The creature, who is not and cannot be named and is also a crime against nature, shares these traits with the “unnatural act,” which also “cannot be named.”
introduces redundancy: “yellow, watery, but speculative eyes” which “look” upon their creator (228). These eyes look at Victor with looking, with beholding.\textsuperscript{32} They are also reflective, “speculums.” They turn back upon Frankenstein the gaze with which he looks at them, the gaze which brought them into being. It is hard to believe that Mary Shelley, who had worked so hard at her Latin under Percy’s tutelage could, in 1831, have unself-consciously written a clause which contains the three synonyms “behold,” “look,” and “speculative.” Rather, she seems to draw attention to that Other which mirrors our desire; to the Other of our desire, who must simultaneously be like and unlike us; and to the destructiveness of that illusion. Frankenstein’s creature is the ultimate dream-maiden, the “epipsychidion” who forces us (and perhaps even Percy Shelley) to confront the constructed nature of our desire.

This is the creature at the end of the romantic Orientalist Narrative—the male Sultana Valide whose desire and destructive appetites are insatiable. Like the Phallic Mother, the creature has no Other, no one to define “it” self against or to rival. The pursuit of the dead mother, of the dead mother tongue, circles back upon itself. For the beautiful Caroline Beaufort is always accompanied by the horrifying, devouring Sultana Valide, and always turns into that phallic, death-dealing Mother. In the next few pages, I first “look” at the creature, then examine the creature, desire, and the crisis of differentiation from the creature’s viewpoint—not from that of the observer—and then strengthen the creature’s links to the gender-determined discourse of Orientalism.

\section*{III}

Critics have often pondered the creature’s physical appearance. Mellor shows that Shelley based her description at least in part upon popular personifications of the French Revolution, especially “Le Peuple: Mangeur des Rois.” Mellor draws convincing parallels between the popular, Herculean figure and the creature’s size and strength, as well as between the constructive and destructive capacities of both.\textsuperscript{33} Such arguments,

\textsuperscript{32} From the Latin “spectare,” “specere.”

\textsuperscript{33} See Mellor, especially the chapter entitled “Promethean Politics.” See also Lee Sterrenberg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in \textit{Frankenstein},” in Levine and Knoepflmacher \textit{143–71}, for an alternative reading of the monster’s size. Incidentally, while the creature’s eight-foot frame is still intimidating, it cannot produce the same terror to those of us who have grown accustomed to basketball players and professional wrestlers who approach, and occasionally succeed, seven feet in height. Average height in 1818 was several inches shorter than today; forty years later, Abraham Lincoln was considered a giant at six-foot four. One needs to imagine a creature ten feet tall in order to grasp the inhuman eight of Frankenstein’s hideous progeny.
while convincing in a general way, fail to take into account some of the specific details of Frankenstein’s retrospective description of his creature:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath, his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips.

We can trace at least some of the horror which the creature inspires to his color. His “yellow skin” physically links him to scores of millions of Bengalis, whom the British rulers called “niggers.” Like the creature’s, their “lustrous black, and flowing” hair and “pearly white” teeth strongly contrast with each other and with their “yellow” complexion.

Moreover, by 1818, the inhabitants of Bengal had suffered several generations of misrule. The British zemindar system strongly resembled Anglo-Irish absenteeism: farmers were economically discouraged from improving their land. Government contract holders, concerned only with reaping immediate profits before their biennial or annual leases were again auctioned off, impoverished once-fertile land. Worse, even the most wastrel native ruler would, by encouraging the arts or the luxury trades, have allowed some money to filter back into the local economy. The British, however, did not just ship their profits back to England. In order to gain a trade monopoly, they broke the native merchant classes and systematically destroyed Indian cottage industry. Even the hardest-pressed native rulers maintained the state system of irrigation; by 1800, after four decades of Company rule, the irrigation canals of Bengal were in hopeless disrepair. The soil of Bengal, over-worked and inadequately watered, could no longer support the Bengali millions; in 1770, perhaps as many as ten million died of famine in Bengal alone. Millions of Indians, who, like Frankenstein’s creation, had “yellow skin [which] scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries

34. Gandhi would turn the spinning wheel and homespun goods into powerful symbols during his long campaign for Indian independence.
beneath," could have watched the “Alastor” Poet as he walked unsee-
ingly by, and smiled at him with the thin, “straight black lips” of famine.

I suggested that the creature has no true “Other.” According to Lacan, the initiation into language and the creation of self-definition follows the mirror stage, the ability to recognize the image of one’s self as Other. According to feminist thinkers, men traditionally define themselves in opposition to women. Edward Said has shown that the West has achieved self-definition by positing, even creating, the Orient as Other. The creature exists outside all of these categories. A species unto himself, an impossible system of one term, he can have meaning for us but can achieve no self-definition. His efforts to identify with the human race or with individual humans are predestined to fail. The paucity, or more correctly, the unity of the signifying term precludes the creation of meaning-for-himself. Hence, he insists upon the creation of a mate.

Claude Levi-Strauss has taught us that “meaning” is neither indepen-
dent of structure nor precedes it. For both Levi-Strauss and Paul Ricoeur, individual signs must first be recognized as part of a “bundle of rela-
tions.”35 Only after having described the rules which determine or “ex-
plain” this system can one “interpret” any particular sign, sentence or narrative. Psychoanalytic discussions which focus upon the ways in which Victor and his creature are each other’s Other or which hinge upon the ways the creature strives for recognition and/or acceptance by Victor fail to account for these important and elementary distinctions. The creature, biologically and morphologically male, is still an “it.” “It” lacks the capacity to reproduce, hence social gender. Gothic novels (such as Otranto, The Italian, The Monk, or Melmoth the Wanderer) often create dramatic and erotic tension by the possibility of the demon figure raping the heroine. This is simply not the case in Frankenstein, where despite what one might say about Victor’s ambivalent feelings towards women in the novel, the creature intends to destroy, not to rape, Elizabeth. Mostly, he intends to reduce Victor to his own undifferentiated state. That he identifies with, rather than exhibits any sexual desire for, Agatha De Lacey and Safie reinforces this point (see Knoepflmacher 88–119).36

35. This argument is largely derived from Paul Ricoeur, “What is a Text? Explanation and Interpretation,” rpt. in David M. Rasmussen, Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosoph-

36. Knoepflmacher particularly notes the creature’s absolute identification with Agatha: “Significantly, the ugly Monster and the beautiful Agatha respond identically to the ‘sweet mournful air.’ Indeed, when the Monster later kneels at De Lacey’s feet, it hopes to win the same recognition earlier accorded to De Lacey’s kneeling daughter” (98). Gilbert and Gubar, on the other hand, argue that the creature indeed indulges in fantasies of rape.
The Creature's desire for a companion, could just as well be met by the creation of another male or by a sterile female, as Mellor points out. This possibility never enters the mind of the creature, of Victor Frankenstein, or of Mary Shelley herself. Yet the social worlds the creature literally or imaginatively sees clearly associate "wholeness" and happiness with gender differentiation: even in Paradise, Adam is unhappy before the creation of Eve, while Milton's Hell conspicuously lacks female demons.

Also at stake here is the possibility of biological reproduction. The creature attempts to blackmail Victor into making, not another creature, but an Other creature. From this female Other, the creature will gain companionship, confirmation of masculinity, and a transformation from an "it" into a "he." Throughout his narrative, the creature draws attention to his inability fully to identify with any of the roles presented to him. He finds himself fluctuating uneasily among Agatha De Lacey, who responds in an identical way to music; Safie, who also has wandered without a guide through the forests, and who unwittingly helps him to learn to speak and to read; Paradise Lost's Adam, who wakens sui generis in the created world; Satan, who rebels against his Creator; Eve, whose initiation into language succeeds, in classic Lacanian manner, upon seeing her reflection in the water. Whereas the creature self-consciously draws Victor's attention to the parallels between his (the creature's) condition and those of Adam's and Satan's, the parallels between the creature and Safie, Agatha De Lacey and Eve are even more significant because the creature seems unconscious of them. He insists upon a female companion at least partly because of his "negative capability," his "monstrous" inability to fit already existing categories. By having a female Other against which to define himself, the creature can become a second Adam, the father of a new race, sharing both Adam's painful exile from his original home, but also the joys and "graces" of domestic life. He can thus dissociate himself from Satan, who, with his all-male companions in Pandemonium, knows only exile and pain. Moreover, he can more successfully repress his own "feminine" attributes by displacing them onto the biological female.

They draw particular attention to a passage interpolated into the 1831 edition, in which the creature taunts the sleeping Justine: "Awake, fairest, thy lover is near!" (251). This ten-line addition to the text, however, does not significantly affect my argument concerning the nature of the creature's desire. The creature experiences "a thrill of terror" and runs off before Justine should open her eyes.

37. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (New York: Penguin, 1970), discusses the similarities between the "dirty" and the "monstrous." She defines "dirt" as "things out of place," and a "monster" as anything which does not fit already existing categories.

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Yet the creature’s identity-crisis stems from a more fundamental cause. Like all of us, he achieves cultural identity through acquaintance with and internalization of a contradictory Western Culture, that melange of Greek and Semitic texts. He learns the glorification of feeling, the impossibility of satisfying desire, the ambivalent emotions toward a noble rival, and even a justification for suicide from *Werther*; he learns the nobility of patriotic self-sacrifice from Plutarch’s *Lives*; he learns the sublimity of a creator at war with his creatures from *Paradise Lost*. He stumbles upon, as few of us do, the intimate details of his generation, confronting the guilt and horror of the creative act Victor suppresses both from his memory and his narrative through the cathartic act of his journal. Moreover, he learns that, like the demon in *Mark*, he is Legion, an agglomeration of parts sewn inorganically together, a whole impossibly and incongruously greater than the sum of its parts.

If Victor stitches him together from body parts robbed from sepulchres, how could he possibly be eight feet tall? If he is a reanimated corpse, how does this corpse grow? He has no memory of the past identities his parts may have had. Physically human, his biological links to a multitude of immediate biological predecessors (instead of merely two) and his generative debt to the unhallowed creative act of a human male and electricity—and the O.E.D. indicates that chemistry had already appropriated the term “generator” for a machine producing electricity—paradoxically separate him from all human beings.

**IV**

*Frankenstein* is obsessed with English knowledge of, power over, and uneasy relationship with the Orient. The text responds to Percy’s earlier myth of travel into the East, “Alastor”; Robert Walton seeks the warm land near the North Pole on his way to the Pacific Ocean; Safie reverses the “Alastor” Poet’s journey; even the gentle Clerval studies Sanskrit, wishing to join the East India Company as it subjugates India. It is difficult not to search for Orientalist analogues for the creature himself.

Two suggestive possibilities exist. As Jerome McGann has argued in detail recently, English romantic writing was profoundly affected by the new Higher Criticism. In the “Bible of Hell” and in the “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Blake and Coleridge reflect disturbing Continental, and especially German, thinking about the Bible, incorporating this new understanding of the composite and redacted Scriptures, of multiple

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texts which have been sewn together and whose seams can still be seen, into the very structure of major works. McGann fails to highlight, however, the role which British power in India played in the development of this new knowledge about admittedly Oriental (because Semitic) texts. Although Coleridge directly, and Blake indirectly, learned Higher Critical tenets from Germans, Schwab shows that British discoveries and translations of ancient Indian religious texts coeval with or even preceding the Bible reinforced critical and historical study of Biblical texts. Victor Frankenstein's creature (in his composite nature which cannot be separated into its original components) and Frankenstein itself (which uses multiple embedded narratives and monstrously mixes travelogue, journal, epistle, educational treatise, and bildungsroman) share and continue this concern.

But Victor's and Mary's "hideous progeny" is also analogous to Orientalist discourse itself. As Said describes it, Orientalism "is a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts, and the Biblical lands."39 Orientalism shares Victor's preoccupation with reviving the mother, with returning the West to its mother ("langues mères"). Moreover, it created the Other for the West in a way strikingly analogous to and precisely contemporaneous with Mary Shelley's novel: "the Orient was reconstructed, reassembled, crafted, in short, born out of the Orientalists' efforts" (Said 87; my emphasis). Said claims that "Orientalism . . . was an exclusively male province" (Said 207); Orientalists' relationship to the discourse "born" of them parallels, quite literally, that of Victor Frankenstein to his unnamed creature. Said speaks of Orientalists as if they were involved in the same effort to bring life to the dead mother as was Victor Frankenstein: "To reconstruct a dead or lost Oriental language meant ultimately to reconstruct a dead or neglected Orient" (Said 123). Said does not innocently place his temporal point of departure, "the last third of the eighteenth century" (Said 22), at the same moment Foucault finds an epistemological discontinuity in the discourses of criminology and of biology; in an extended simile, he compares the thought processes of a Schwabian linguist and a Foucaultian anatomist:

Both linguists and anatomist purport to be speaking about matters not directly obtainable or observable in nature; a skeleton and a detailed line of muscle, as much as a paradigm constituted by the

linguists out of a purely hypothetical proto-Semitic or proto-Indo-European, are similarly products of the laboratory and of the library. (Said 142)

Moreover, the Orientalist approached his work and the Oriental male in precisely the same way as does Victor Frankenstein:

Orientalism . . . encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world. . . . The Oriental male was considered in isolation from the total community in which he lived and which many Orientalists . . . have viewed with something resembling contempt and fear. (Said 207; my emphasis)

My excerpts, admittedly drawn from widely-separated areas of Said’s text, foreground the probably unconscious parallels Said draws between Orientalists, Mary Shelley’s novel, and Victor Frankenstein. All three concern themselves with men who “conceive,” “reconstruct,” “assemble,” and “craft” in the absence of women; Orientalism, Frankenstein, and Victor’s unnameable creature are “born” from this “hideous” labor.

V

Having created the male Sultana Valide, it seems as if Mary Shelley could take the logic of the romantic Ideology and of the romantic Orientalist Narrative no further. Robert Walton, on his voyage of discovery which will, if successful, take him to India, has passed Archangel, the last north-eastern European seaport, and has headed into the Arctic Ocean. His options are clear: he and his crew can freeze where they are or return to London. The novel asks us to believe that Walton does turn back, that he ignores Frankenstein’s final Ulysses-like outburst. But the text ends when the creature “springs from the cabin window” and is “lost in darkness and distance” (221). The Walton narrative is relentlessly realistic; if the crew should freeze to death or the ship founder, the text cannot reach Margaret Saville. The novel apparently ends at the midpoint of Walton’s travels, at the end of his voyage out. Walton ceases to write; the failure of his dream, his failure to become like Frankenstein, transforms him into someone as silent and inscrutable as Margaret Saville, to whom he returns home. Neither Walton nor Clerval succeed in reaching the East, in “knowing” it, in gaining power over it. But their failures are not the novel’s last word. As mathematicians know, the opposite of any point on the circumference of a circle is not another point on the circumference, but that circle’s center.

At the very heart of Frankenstein, embedded in the tales successively told by Walton, Victor, and the creature is the idyll of the De Lacey
family, the bourgeois family whose misery and ultimate happiness both depend upon their Oriental connections. This last group of narrative layers recounts the story of the perfidious Turk who "causes" the De Laceys' flight from Paris, of his daughter Safie, and of his deceased wife, the "Christian Arab." When we first encounter Felix, he is mysteriously unhappy. The arrival of the exotic Safie changes the physical and emotional milieu of the cottage, as her presence inspires happiness and her wealth provides material comforts. The novel seems to suggest that this relationship between the European Man and the Oriental Woman can be stable, happy, and fruitful. Yet one wonders about how easily Felix accepts a parasitic relationship, living off Safie's stolen wealth. Moreover, in a novel so immersed in Classical nomenclature, with obsolete geographical terms, and with Plutarch's Lives, the conjunction of Felix and the "sweet Arabian" Safie suggests Roman Imperialism, in the disturbing pun upon "Arabia Felix": the garden-like, southern portion of the Arabian Peninsula.

The oddnesses of this last interpolated story escape attention. Yet this family—the Arab who is not Islamic, and who is "captive in Barbary"; the anomalous position of the Turk in Paris, accompanied by his daughter; the father who, like William Godwin, refuses to allow his daughter to imitate his own practice and theory—is very strange indeed. Great national monopolistic trading companies were characteristic of the eighteenth century: the British East India, West African, and Levant Companies had their counterparts throughout Europe. These companies intended to create spheres of interest and to extract important commercial concessions from weakening Oriental powers. The Directors of the East India Company were still acting upon mercantilist principles (that there was a fixed amount of wealth in the world, and that the power of a nation was directly correlated to the percentage of that wealth which it monopolized) in the early nineteenth century, long after the publication of Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations.40

The Turkish merchant's existence and experiences in Paris, while not impossible, violate the probable. While it may seem absurd to discuss probability in a novel premised upon the artificial creation of life, one should recall how much attention has been paid to the scientific possibility of such a creation, to the "naturalness" or the "inevitability" of the plot after the "birth" of the creature, or upon Mary Shelley's efforts

40. For an excellent Indian viewpoint on the role played by the East India Company in Bengal's economy, see K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, and G. Srinivasachari, Advanced History of India (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1970).
to maintain verisimilitude. Our lack of response can be partially attributed to the effects of two centuries of polemic in English against the evils, and particularly the corruptions of the ancien régime in France. Mary Shelley and her first readers had known of this for three decades; however, they had also eagerly devoured “real” and fictional accounts of the travels of European merchants in the Orient. In fact, the brief account of the Turkish merchant, who for some reason the creature “could not learn, became obnoxious to the government,” his summary trial and condemnation, and the popular belief that “his religion and wealth, rather than the crime alleged against him, had been the cause of his condemnation” (118), reflects in only a slightly distorted way popular accounts such as Sir John Chardin’s Travels in Persia. As she did with “Alastor,” Mary Shelley reverses the terms of these Oriental narratives, having the Turk fall prey to the Christian court.

This portion of Safie’s history is recounted in a flashback, in the chapter following her sudden appearance at the De Lacey cottage. In the half-dozen pages preceding this narrative, Felix refers to her as his “charming” or “sweet Arabian,” and “instructs” her in French from Volney’s Ruins of Empires (111, 112, 114). He claims to have chosen this book because it resembles literature Safie is already familiar with, “because the declamatory style was framed in imitation of the eastern authors” (114). From this book, the creature derives a cursory, and biased, “knowledge of history”; he particularly recalls “the slothful Asiatics,” implicitly contrasting them with “the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians” and “the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans” (115). The masculine attributes of these Westerners, their genius and activity, wars and virtue (war being the male sphere par excellence, and virtue being etymologically derived from “virtu”), are enhanced by the compound epithets. Felix, of course, is supremely unperturbed by the fact that his pupil is herself a “slothful” Asiatic. The missing term from the Asiatic epithet, “deceitful,” is suppressed from the text but supplied by the story of her father’s ingratitude.

When the creature begins to recount Safie’s earlier history (duplicating the order of his own knowledge of it), we see her as unequivocally Oriental: Arabian and presumably Islamic, ignorant of French, she pops

41. Again, see Mellor 88–114, for a splendid exposition of the scientific background of the novel.

42. Of course, Chardin’s account of his difficulties at the court of the Shah of Persia and the intrigues and perfidies of the Minister unconsciously comment upon the dealings of European monarchs (especially England’s King John) with the Jews (John Chardin, Travels in Persia [New York: AMS Press, 1972]).
into the text and the heart of Europe as unexpectedly as the Barbary
pirates who had terrorized and enslaved actual and fictional Europeans.
Yet Mary Shelley inexorably strips away each of these "oriental" traits.
Her father is not an Arab, but a Turk; Felix first sees her in the Turk's
cell, through a "strongly grated window." Felix falls in love with her
"Otherness," with this silent Oriental woman who nevertheless "ex-
presses" herself by "gestures" (118). The reader who can approach the
text at all freshely should feel at least a momentary disquiet over this
daughter of a Turk who is not herself Turkish. This anomaly is only
explained through yet another flashback, which summarizes Safie's early
history and "education."

After the Turk promises Safie's hand in marriage to Felix, Safie enters
into a correspondence with Felix, and relates her story to him. Her
much-regretted mother was not merely an Arab, but also a Christian
who had been "seized and made a slave by the Turks." This Christian
lady, "recommended by her beauty . . . had won the heart of the father
of Safie, who married her" (119). This dead mother, who, as Rubinstein
points out, resembles Mary Wollstonecraft, "instructed her in the tenets
of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect."
Like Mary Shelley, Safie becomes totally unlike her female compatriots,
and as totally unfitted to "harem" life and its "puerile amusements."
Life Safie, Mary also escaped her unbearable life by leaving father and
country and by marrying.

The story of Safie's relationship with her dead mother forms the
innermost layer of the novel's concentric narratives. Having reached that
center, the Turkish harem (also the point most geographically remote
from the novel's major axes of travel), we find that this Oriental family
(in which the mother and father have no names) is the image of Mary
Shelley's own; when we think we have achieved the exotic, the Orient,
we see only the utterly familiar. If, as Rubinstein suggests, the relation-
ship between the Christian Arab and Safie parallels that of Mary Shelley
with her own mother, we should also seek parallels between the Turk
and William Godwin.

The deceitful and manipulative Turk refuses to go through with an
offer which, at any rate, Felix had been "too delicate to accept" (118).
The Turk (as nameless as the creature, as generic as the Orient itself) is
as inconsistent as William Godwin. Though willing to marry a Christian
himself, "he loathed the idea that his daughter should be united to a
Christian" (120). Godwin only married Mary Wollstonecraft when she
was far advanced in pregnancy, compromising his much-publicized anti-
martial stance in fear of public retaliation against the "son" he was so
sure the unborn child would be. Eighteen years later, he virulently
condemned that child for eloping with a married man and putting into practice Godwin's own theories concerning free love. Yet, without at all softening his condemnation, he could badger Percy for economic support, condemning Percy's selfishness after having run through 4,700£. Like William Godwin, the Turk accepts crucial aid from the suitor of his daughter, then forbids both daughter and suitor to imitate the actions of his own youth. In the figure of the Turkish merchant, Mary Shelley depicts the living father who, in a popular figure of the day, has "gone Turk" against the teachings and practice of his own youth.43

This interpretation needs to be integrated with the recently received view which links Mary Shelley most strongly with Walton's silent sister, the mysterious Margaret Saville. The two have identical initials, and Margaret's role as "silent" receiver of the novel parallels Mary Shelley's own as the "devout but nearly silent listener" to the conversations between Byron and Percy. Mary Poovey has drawn attention to the identity between the English pronunciations of "Saville" and "civil," linking Margaret Saville even more strongly to the domestic world which the novel's male over-reachers try so desperately to evade.44 Yet, in French, the language spoken by the Frankensteins, the creature, and the De Laceys, "Saville" is almost homophonous with "Safie." Mary Shelley, Margaret Saville, and Safie become images of one another.

Shelley, Saville, Safie, alike in their motherlessness, become ever harder to differentiate. The Other, the Orient, is unattainable; pursuing it leads to destruction, perhaps even perdition. Walton must turn westward to avoid murdering himself and his crew; Clerval is mercifully cut short before he can enter on a career as sanguine as Clive or Hastings, or the Wellesleys. Safie runs away from her father so that she need not return to the Orient; moreover, the novel successively strips her of her Otherness, showing her to be not-Turkish and not-heathen. Presumably, she will be thoroughly domesticated and Westernized; soon, only a "quaint" or "exotic" accent will "mark" her as Other.

The Other, the Mother at the heart of Frankenstein is the most deceptive Oriental of all. The novel has taken us thousands of miles: to the Frozen Sea, to Switzerland, to the Orkneys, to Paris, and to Turkey, only to deposit us more firmly at home. Having peeled back layer after

43. Interestingly, we never know whether Felix ever actually marries the woman who pursues him, whether Safie's story will duplicate Mary Shelley's "successful" pursuit of Shelley, or Claire Claremont's failure to keep Byron as her lover.

narrative layer, we find only the bourgeois nuclear family in Oriental drag. Mary Shelley's adolescent novel, while critiquing both the romantic Ideology and the political and economic system which both supported and produced it, simultaneously becomes the exemplary work of the "egotistical sublime." In her 1831 Introduction, Shelley asks us to identify with her in looking at and identifying with the "student of unhallowed arts" who looks at and identifies with the creature, who stamps all of his victims with an identical mark, and who tells us the story of Mary Shelley herself. At the heart of her novel, Shelley encounters herself; by identifying with her in the Introduction, the unattainable Oriental mother at the center becomes our own.

Replacing Frankenstein in its political and intellectual context helps us to see the timeliness of this "timeless" tale. Frankenstein critiques both the romantic Ideology and the growth and methods of the British Empire in the East. It is also a hall of mirrors, a cautionary tale of a culture trapped in the mirror stage, and of the destruction that results from a way of seeing which can create only projections of Self.

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