

## Usurping the Female

In constituting nature as female—"I pursued nature to her hiding places" (49)—Victor Frankenstein participates in a gendered construction of the universe whose negative ramifications are everywhere apparent in the novel. The uninhibited scientific penetration and technological exploitation of female nature is only one dimension of a patriarchal encoding of the female as passive and possessable, the willing receptacle of male desire. The destruction of the female implicit in Frankenstein's usurpation of the natural mode of human reproduction symbolically erupts in his nightmare following the animation of his creature, in which his bride-to-be is transformed in his arms into the corpse of his dead mother—"a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" (53). By stealing the female's control over reproduction, Frankenstein has eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power. Indeed, for the simple purpose of human survival, Frankenstein has eliminated the necessity to have females at all. One of the deepest horrors of this novel is Frankenstein's implicit goal of creating a society for men only: his creature is male; he refuses to create a female; there is no reason that the race of immortal beings he hoped to propagate should not be exclusively male.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Shelley, doubtless inspired by her mother's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, specifically portrays the consequences of a social construction of gender which values men over women. Victor Frankenstein's nineteenth-century Genevan society is founded on a rigid division of sex-roles: the man inhabits the public sphere, the woman is relegated to the private or domestic sphere.<sup>2</sup> The men in Frankenstein's world all work outside the home, as public servants



(Alphonse Frankenstein), as scientists (Victor), as merchants (Cervial and his father), or as explorers (Walton). The women are confined to the home, Elizabeth, for instance, is not permitted to travel with Victor and "regretted that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience and cultivating her understanding" (151). Inside the home, women are either kept as a kind of pet (Victor "loved to tend" on Elizabeth "as I should on a favorite animal" [30]) or they work as housewives, child-care providers, and nurses (Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, Margaret Saville), or servants (Justine Moritz).

As a consequence of this sexual division of labor, masculine work is segregated from the domestic realm. Hence intellectual activity is divorced from emotional activity. Victor Frankenstein cannot do scientific research and think lovingly of Elizabeth and his family at the same time. His obsession with his experiment has caused him to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time" (50). It is this separation of masculine work from the domestic affections that causes Frankenstein's downfall. Because Frankenstein cannot work and love at the same time, he fails to feel empathy for the creature he is constructing, callously making him eight feet tall simply because "the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed" (49). He then fails to love or feel any parental responsibility for the freak he has created. And he remains so self-absorbed that he cannot imagine his monster might threaten someone other than himself when he swears to be with Victor "on his wedding-night."

This separation of the sphere of public (masculine) power from the sphere of private (feminine) affection also causes the destruction of many of the women in the novel, as Kate Ellis has observed.<sup>3</sup> Caroline Beaufort dies unnecessarily because she cannot restrain herself from attending her favorite Elizabeth before she has fully recovered from smallpox. She thus incarnates a patriarchal ideal of female devotion and self-sacrifice (this suggestion is strengthened in the 1831 revisions where she deliberately risks her life to save Elizabeth). She is a woman who is devoted to her father in wealth and in poverty, who nurses him until his death, and then marries her father's best friend to whom she is equally devoted.

The division of public man from private woman also means that women cannot function effectively in the public realm. Despite her innocence of the crime for which she is accused, Justine Moritz is executed for the murder of William Frankenstein (and is even half-persuaded by her male confessor that she is responsible for William's death). And Elizabeth, fully convinced of Justine's innocence, is unable to save her. The impassioned defense she gives of Justine arouses public

Utopias of the Female

approbation of Elizabeth's generosity but does nothing to help Justine "on whom the public indignation was turned with renewed violence charging her with the blackest ingratitude" (80). Nor can Elizabeth save herself on her wedding night. Both these deaths are of course directly attributable to Victor Frankenstein's egotistical concern for his own suffering (the creature will attack only him) and his own reputation (people would think him mad if he told them his own monster had killed his brother).

Mary Shelley underlines the mutual deprivation inherent in a family and social structure based on rigid and hierarchical gender-divisions by portraying an alternative social organization in the novel: the De Lacey family. The political situation of the De Lacey family, exiled from their native France by the manipulations of an ungrateful Turkish merchant and a draconian legal system, points up the injustice that prevails in a nation where masculine views of competition and chauvinism reign. Mary Shelley's political attack on a society founded on patriarchy and the unequal distribution of power and possessions is conveyed not only through the manifest injustice of Justine's execution and of France's treatment first of the alien Turkish merchant and then of the De Lacey family, but also through the readings in political history that she assigns to the creature. From Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans* and from Volney's *Ruins, or A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, the creature learns both of masculine virtue and of masculine cruelty and injustice. "I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; . . . I learned that the possessions most esteemed . . . were, high and unsullied descent united with riches." He then asks incredulously, "Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?" (115). Implicit in Mary Shelley's attack on the injustice of patriarchal political systems is the suggestion that the separation from the public realm of feminine affections and compassion has caused much of this social evil. Had Elizabeth Lavenza's plea for mercy for Justine, based on her intuitively correct knowledge of Justine's character, been heeded, Justine would not have been wrongly murdered by the courts. As Elizabeth exclaims:

how I hate [the] shews and mockeries [of this world]! when one creature is murdered, another is immediately deprived of life in a slow torturing manner; then the executioners, their hands yet reeking with the blood of innocence, believe that they have done a great deed. They call this *retribution*. Hateful name! when that word is pronounced, I know greater and more horrid punishments are going to be inflicted than the gloomiest tyrant has ever invented to satiate his utmost revenge. (83)



In contrast to this pattern of gender inequality and political injustice, as I suggested earlier, the De Lacey family represents an alternative ideology: a vision of the polis-as-egalitarian-family, of a society based on justice, gender equality, and mutual affection. Felix willingly sacrifices his own welfare to ensure that justice is done to the Turkish merchant. In the impoverished De Lacey household, all work is shared equally in an atmosphere of rational companionship, mutual concern, and love. As their symbolic names suggest, Felix embodies happiness, Agatha goodness. They are then joined by Safie (*sophia* or wisdom). Safie, the daughter of the Turkish merchant, is appalled both by her father's betrayal of Felix and by the Islamic oppression of women he endorses. She has therefore fled from Turkey to Switzerland, seeking Felix. Having reached the De Lacey household, she promptly becomes Felix's beloved companion and is taught to read and write French. Safie, whose Christian mother instructed her "to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet" (119), is the incarnation of Mary Wollstonecraft in the novel. Wollstonecraft too travelled alone through Europe and Scandinavia. More important, she advocated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that women be educated to be the "companions" of men and be permitted to participate in the public realm by voting, working outside the home, and holding political office.

But what is lost in the novel is this alternative female role-model of an independent, well-educated, loving companion, as well as this alternative bourgeois family structure based on sexual equality and mutual affection, perhaps because the De Lacey family lacks the mother who might have been able to welcome the pleading, pitiable creature. When Safie flees with the De Lacey family, we as readers are deprived of the novel's only alternative to a rigidly patriarchal construction of gender and the family; so too Mary Shelley herself was deprived of a feminist role-model and a supportive family when her mother died and was subsequently denounced in the popular British press as a harlot, atheist, and anarchist. Safie's disappearance from the novel reflects Mary Shelley's own predicament. Like Frankenstein's creature, she has no positive prototype she can imitate, no place in history. That unique phenomenon envisioned by Mary Wollstonecraft, the wife as the lifelong intellectual equal and companion of her husband, did not exist in the world of nineteenth-century Europe experienced by Mary Shelley.

The doctrine of the separate spheres which Victor Frankenstein endorses encodes a particular attitude to female sexuality which Mary Shelley subtly exposes in her novel. This attitude is manifested most vividly in Victor's response to the creature's request for a female

companion, an Eve to comfort and embrace him. After hearing his creature's autobiographical account of his sufferings and aspirations, Frankenstein is moved by an awakened conscience to do justice towards his Adam, promising to create a female creature on condition that both leave forever the neighborhood of mankind. After numerous delays, Frankenstein finally gathers the necessary instruments and materials together into an isolated cottage on one of the Orkney Islands off Scotland. There he proceeds to create a female being. Once again Frankenstein becomes ill: "my heart often sickened at the work of my hands. . . . my spirits became unequal; I grew restless and nervous" (162).

Disgusted by his enterprise, Frankenstein finally determines to stop his work, rationalizing his decision to deprive his creature of a female companion in terms that repay careful examination. Here is Frankenstein's meditation:

I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighborhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.

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

What does Victor Frankenstein truly fear, that causes him to end his creation of a female? First, he is afraid of an independent female will, afraid that his female creature will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature. Like Rousseau's natural man, she might refuse to comply with a social contract made before her birth by another person. She might assert her own integrity and the revolutionary right to determine her own existence. Moreover, those



uninhibited female desires might be sadistic. Frankenstein imagines a female “ten thousand times” more evil than her mate, who would “delight” in murder for its own sake. Third, he fears that his female creature will be more ugly than his male creature, so much so that even the male will turn from her in disgust. Fourth, he fears that she will prefer to mate with ordinary males. Implicit here is Frankenstein’s horror that, given the gigantic strength of this female, she would have the power to seize and even rape the male she might choose. And finally, he is afraid of her reproductive powers, her capacity to generate an entire race of similar creatures. What Victor Frankenstein truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary), and to propagate at will can appear only monstrously ugly to Victor Frankenstein, for she defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful husbands.

Horrified by this image of uninhibited female sexuality, Victor Frankenstein violently reasserts a male control over the female body, penetrating and mutilating the female creature at his feet in an image which suggests a violent rape: “trembling with passion, [I] tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged” (164). The morning after, when he returns to the scene, “the remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (167). However he has rationalized his decision to murder the female creature, Frankenstein’s “passion” is here revealed as a fusion of fear, lust, and hostility, a desire to control and even destroy female sexuality.

Frankenstein’s fear of female sexuality is endemic to a patriarchal construction of gender. Uninhibited female sexual experience threatens the foundation of patriarchal power: the establishment of patrilineal kinship networks together with the conveying of both property and prestige by inheritance entailed upon a male line. Percy Shelley’s struggles with his father and the Chancery Court had made Mary acutely aware of the patriarchal system of entail. And Shelley’s failure to gain legal guardianship of his children by Harriet Westbrook Shelley—even after her death in December 1816, the Court had refused to grant custody to Percy Shelley, awarding lanthe and Charles Shelley to foster parents instead—further sharpened her awareness of the lengths to which a patriarchal legal system would go to prevent and punish illegitimate sexual liaisons. In her depiction of the patriarchal society of Geneva, Mary portrayed the consequences of such systematic social and legal suppression of sexual desire. All the women in her novel are sexually repressed, even *seless*. Caroline Beaufort is a devoted

daughter and chaste wife. Elizabeth Lavenza’s relationship with her fiance Victor is that of a sister. And even Saife suffers from this social control of sexuality: she permits Felix to kiss her, but only on the hand.

In this context, the murder of Elizabeth Lavenza on her wedding night becomes doubly significant. As several critics have noted, the scene of her death is based on a painting Mary Shelley knew well, Henry Fuseli’s famous “The Nightmare” (Plate VIII, bottom). The corpse of Elizabeth lies in the very attitude in which Fuseli placed his succubus-ridden woman: “She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair.” (193) Fuseli’s woman is an image of female erotic desire, both lusting for and frightened of the incubus (the night marra, or spirit) that rides upon her, brought to her bed-chamber by the stallion that leers at her from the foot of her bed. Both the presence of this incubus and the woman’s posture of open sexual acceptance leave Fuseli’s intentions in no doubt.<sup>4</sup> Invoking this image, Mary Shelley alerts us to what Victor fears most: his bride’s sexuality. Significantly, Elizabeth would not have been killed had Victor not sent her into their wedding-bedroom *alone*. Returning to the body of the murdered Elizabeth, Victor “embraced her with ardour; but the deadly languor and coldness of the limbs told me, that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth whom I had loved and cherished” (193). Victor most ardently desires his bride when he knows she is dead. The conflation with his earlier dream, when he thought to embrace the living Elizabeth but instead held in his arms the corpse of his mother, signals Victor’s most profound erotic desire, a necrophiliac and incestuous desire to possess the dead female, the lost mother.

To put this point another way, we might observe that Victor Frankenstein’s most passionate relationships are with men rather than with women. He sees Clerval as “the image of my former self” (155), and his “friend and dearest companion” (181), as his true soul-mate. His description of Clerval’s haunting eyes—“languishing in death, the dark orbs nearly covered by the lids, and the long black lashes that fringed them” (179)—verges on the erotic. Similarly, Walton responds to Frankenstein with an ardor that seems homoerotic. Having desired “the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine” (13), Walton eagerly embraces Frankenstein as “a celestial spirit” (23) whose death leaves him inarticulate with grief. “What can I say,” Walton writes to his sister, “that will enable you to understand the depth of my sorrow?” (216). Finally, Frankenstein dedicates himself to his scientific experiment with a passion that can be described only as sexual. As Mary Shelley originally described



Frankenstein's obsession, "I wished, as it were, to procrastinate my feelings of affection, until the great object of my affection was completed." Frankenstein's homoerotic fixation upon his creature, whose features he had selected as "beautiful" (52) in a parody of Pygmalion and Galatea, was underlined by Mary Shelley in a revision she made in the Thomas copy of *Frankenstein* now in the J. Pierpont Morgan Library. Describing his anxious enslavement to his task, Frankenstein confesses: "my voice became broken, my trembling hands almost refused to accomplish their task; I became as timid as a love-sick girl, and alternate tremor and passionate ardour took the place of wholesome sensation and regulated ambition" (51:31-35). In place of a heterosexual attachment to Elizabeth, Victor Frankenstein has substituted a homosexual obsession with his creature.<sup>6</sup> In his case this fixation is energized by his profound desire to reunite with his dead mother, a desire that can be fulfilled only by Victor's becoming himself a mother.

At every level, Victor Frankenstein is engaged upon a rape of nature, a violent penetration and usurpation of the female's "hiding places," of the womb. Terrified of female sexuality and the power of human reproduction it enables, both he and the patriarchal society he represents use the technologies of science and the laws of the polis to manipulate, control, and repress women. Thinking back on Elizabeth Lavenza strangled on her bridal bier and on Fuselli's image of female erotic desire that she encodes, we can now see that at this level Victor's creature, his monster, realizes his own most potent lust. The monster, like Fuselli's incubus, leers over Elizabeth, imaging Victor's own repressed desire to rape, possess, and destroy the female. Victor's creature here becomes just that, his "creature," the instrument of his most potent desire: to usurp female reproductive power so that only men may rule.

However, in Mary Shelley's feminist novel, Victor Frankenstein's desire is portrayed as horrible, unattainable, and finally self-destructive. For nature is not the passive, inert, or "dead" matter that Frankenstein imagines.<sup>7</sup> Frankenstein assumes that he can violate nature and pursue her to her hiding places with impunity. But nature both resists and revenges herself upon his attempts. During his research, nature denies to Victor Frankenstein both mental and physical health: "my enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety, and I appeared rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines, or any other unwholesome trade, than an artist occupied by his favourite employment. Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree" (51). When his experiment is completed, Victor has a fit that renders him "lifeless" for "a long, long

time" and that marks the onset of a "nervous fever" that confines him for many months (57). Victor continues to be tormented by anxiety attacks, bouts of delirium, periods of distraction, and madness. As soon as he determines to blaspheme against nature a second time, by creating a female human being, nature again punishes him: "the eternal twinkling of the stars weighed upon me, and . . . I listened to every blast of wind, as if it were a dull ugly siren on its way to consume me" (145). His mental illness returns: "Every thought that was devoted to it was an extreme anguish, and every word that I spoke in allusion to it caused my lips to quiver and my heart to palpitate" (156); "my spirits became unequal; I grew restless and nervous" (162). Frankenstein's obsession with destroying his creature finally exposes him to such mental and physical fatigue that he dies at the age of twenty-five.

Moreover, nature pursues Victor Frankenstein with the very electricity he has stolen. Lightning, thunder, and rain rage around him. The November night on which he steals the "spark of being" from nature is dreary, dismal, and wet: "the rain . . . poured from a black and comfortless sky" (54). He next glimpses his creature during a flash of lightning as a violent storm plays over his head at Plainpalaïs (71). Significantly, the almighty Alps, and in particular Mont Blanc, are represented in this novel as female, as an image of omnipotent fertility.<sup>8</sup> On his wedding day, Victor admires "the beautiful Mont Blanc, and the assemblage of snowy mountains that in vain endeavour to emulate *her*" (190; my italics). Before Frankenstein's first encounter with his creature among the Alps, "the rain poured down in torrents, and thick mists hid the summits of the mountains" (91). Setting sail from the Orkney island where he has destroyed his female creature in order to throw her mangled remains into the sea, Frankenstein wakes to find his skiff threatened by a fierce wind and high waves which portend his own death: "I might be driven into the wide Atlantic, and feel all the tortures of starvation, or be swallowed up in the immeasurable waters that roared and buffeted around me. I . . . felt the torment of a burning thirst; . . . I looked upon the sea, it was to be my grave" (169). Frankenstein ends his life and his pursuit of the monster he has made in the arctic regions, surrounded by the aurora borealis, the electromagnetic field of the North Pole. The atmospheric effects of the novel, which most readers have dismissed as little more than the traditional trappings of Gothic fiction, in fact manifest the power of nature to punish those who transgress her boundaries. The elemental forces that Victor has released pursue him to his hiding places, raging round him like avenging Furies.

Finally, nature prevents Frankenstein from constructing a normal human being. His unnatural method of reproduction produces an



unnatural being. His bride is killed on his wedding night, cutting off his chance to engender his own children. Nature's revenge is absolute: he who violates her sacred hiding places is destroyed.

Mary Shelley's novel thus portrays the penalties of raping nature. But it also celebrates an all-creating nature loved and revered by human beings. Those characters capable of deeply feeling the beauties of nature are rewarded with physical and mental health. Even Frankenstein in his moments of tranquility or youthful innocence can respond powerfully to the glory of nature. As Walton notes, "the starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth" (23). In Clerval's company Victor becomes again "the same happy creature who, a few years ago, loving and beloved by all, had no sorrow or care. When happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations. A serene sky and verdant fields filled me with ecstasy." (65) Clerval's relationship to nature represents one dimension of the moral and political ideology espoused in the novel. Since he "loved with ardour . . . the scenery of external nature" (154), nature endows him with a generous sympathy, a vivid imagination, a sensitive intelligence, and an unbounded capacity for devoted friendship. His death annihilates the possibility that Victor Frankenstein might regain a positive relationship with nature.

Mary Shelley envisions nature as a sacred life-force in which human beings ought to participate in conscious harmony. Elizabeth Lavenza gives voice to this ideal in her choice of profession for Ernest Frankenstein:

I . . . proposed that he should be a farmer. . . . A farmer's is a very healthy happy life; and the least hurtful, or rather the most beneficial profession of any. My uncle [wanted him] educated as an advocate . . . but . . . it is certainly more creditable to cultivate the earth for the sustenance of man, than to be the confidant, and sometimes the accomplice, of his vices. (59)

Nature nurtures those who cultivate her and who work toward the welfare and sustenance of others. Perhaps this is why, of all the members of Frankenstein's family, only Ernest survives. Had Victor Frankenstein's eyes *not* become "insensible to the charms of nature" (50) and the affections of family and friends, he would not have violated Mary Shelley's moral credo:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affection, and to destroy your taste

for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix [e.g. "the beautiful season"], then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. (51)

As an ecological system of interdependent organisms, nature requires the submission of the individual ego to the welfare of the family and the larger community. Like George Eliot after her, Mary Shelley is profoundly committed to an ethic of cooperation, mutual dependence, and self-sacrifice. The Russian sea-master willingly sacrifices his own desires that his beloved and her lover may marry; Clerval immediately gives up his desire to attend university in order to nurse his dear friend Victor back to health; Elizabeth offers to release her beloved Victor from his engagement should he now love another. Mary Shelley's ethical vision thus falls into that category of moral thinking which Carol Gilligan has recently identified as more typically female than male. According to Gilligan's analysis, where men have tended to identify moral laws as abstract principles which clearly differentiate right from wrong, women have tended to see moral choice as imbedded in an ongoing shared life. As Gilligan contrasts them, a male "ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same" while a female "ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt."<sup>9</sup> Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein have attributed this traditional female morality to the daughter's greater identification with the mother.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the son has learned to assert his separateness from the mother (and the process of mothering), the daughter has learned to represent that gendered role and thus has felt more tightly (and ambivalently) bound to the mother. Less certain of her ego boundaries, the daughter has been more likely to engage in moral thinking which gives priority to the good of the family and the community rather than to the rights of the individual.

Insofar as the family is the basic social unit, it has historically encapsulated the system of morality practiced by the culture at large. The Frankenstein family embodies a masculine ethic of justice, one in which the rights and freedoms of the individual are privileged. Frankenstein pursues his own interests in alchemy and chemistry, cheerfully ignoring his family obligations as he engages "heart and soul" in his research, and is moreover encouraged to leave his family and fiancée for two years ("for a more indulgent and less dictatorial parent did not exist upon earth" [130]). In contrast, the De Lacey family embodies a female ethic of care in which the bonding of the family unit is primary. Felix blames himself most because his self-sacrificing action on behalf of the Turkish merchant involved his family in his suffering. Agatha and Felix perform towards their father "every little office of affection and duty with gentleness; and he rewarded



them by his benevolent smiles" (106). They willingly starve themselves that their father may eat. Safie's arrival particularly delighted Felix but also "diffused gladness through the cottage, dispelling their sorrow as the sun dissipates the morning mists" (112). In portraying the De Lacey's as an archetype of the egalitarian, benevolent, and mutually loving bourgeois family, Mary Shelley clearly displayed her own moral purpose, which Percy Shelley rightly if somewhat vaguely described in his Preface as "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue" (7).

Mary Shelley's grounding of moral virtue in the preservation of familial bonds (against which Frankenstein, in his failure to parent his own child, entirely transgresses) entails an aesthetic credo as well. While such romantic descendants as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde would later argue that aesthetics and morality, art and life, are distinct, Mary Shelley endorsed a neoclassical mimetic aesthetic that exhorted literature to imitate ideal nature and defined the role of the writer as a moral educator. Her novel purposefully identifies moral virtue, based on moderation, self-sacrifice, and domestic affection, with aesthetic beauty. Even in poverty, the blind old man listening to the sweetly singing Agatha is "a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch! who had never beheld aught beautiful before" (103). In contrast, Frankenstein's and Walton's dream of breaking boundaries is explicitly identified as both evil and ugly. As Walton acknowledges, "my day dreams are . . . extended and magnificent; but they want (as the painters call it) *keeping*" (14). "Keeping," in painting, is defined by the OED as "the maintenance of the proper relation between the representation of nearer and more distant objects in a picture; hence in a more general sense, 'the proper subserviency of tone and colour in every part of a picture, so that the general effect is harmonious to the eye'." Walton introduces Mary Shelley's ethical norm as an aesthetic norm. Both in life and in art, her ideal is a balance, a golden mean between conflicting demands, specifically here between large and small objects. In ethical terms, this means that Walton must balance his dreams of geographical discovery and fame against the reality of an already existing set of obligations (to his family, his crew, and the sacredness of nature). Similarly Frankenstein should have better balanced the obligations of great and small, of parent and child, of creator and creature. Frankenstein's failure to maintain proportion or *keeping* is thus at one with his failure to preserve "a calm and peaceful mind" (51). His mistake is thus in Mary Shelley's eyes both a moral and an aesthetic failure, one that appropriately results in the creation of a monster both hideous and evil.