

# Usurping the role of females

Literature, Russian Literature



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. 1

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. 2 The men in Frankenstein's world all work outside the home, as public servants {116} (Alphonse Frankenstein), as scientists (Victor), as

merchants (Clerval 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" [3. 3. 4]. 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. 3 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 {117} 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) {118} 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" [12. 24] 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.