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A Woman Alone and Writing: Anti-Ideology and Artistic Irony in Writings of Mary Shelley

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A Woman Alone and Writing: Anti-ideology and
Artistic Irony in Writings of Mary Shelley
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BY

Delores Archambault

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Abstract

This study focuses upon the letters, journals and selected fiction of Mary Shelley and reveals that Shelley engages in the processes of anti-ideology and artistic irony to help her explore gender identity. To show her consistent use of these processes, I juxtapose excerpts from her letters and journals with excerpts from her fiction. The fiction selections are narrowed to three: *Frankenstein*, *Mathilda* and *The Last Man*. In addition, I examine her writing and her use of anti-ideology and artistic irony relative to the influences of her significant others: her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, her father William Godwin and her husband Percy Shelley. In doing so, I also consider the influences of Mary Wollstonecraft's and William Godwin's ideologies.

I find that using the processes of anti-ideology to question gender construction and identity does not ultimately work for Shelley since her creative imagination cannot effectively escape the influence of masculine constructions about gender. My study reveals that these masculine constructions are firmly rooted within Shelley's imagination and, as a result, they appear throughout Shelley's journals and letters and in her characterization, plot and figures of speech. Because the masculine constructions about gender identity so heavily influence Shelley's creativity, the anti-ideological questioning process and the artistic irony processes of creation and de-creation do not succeed for Shelley.

Dedicated to
Marie Rose Bushur Byrum

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Finally, I thank my daughter, Kelly Marie Archaimbault, for her uplifting presence and sometimes encouraging comments such as, "Get a life!!!"

Contents

	Introduction	1
Chapter 1.	The Central Problem	4
Chapter 2.	Daughter of the Father	14
Chapter 3.	The Other Women	23
Chapter 4.	Who Are Nature	39
Chapter 5.	The Female Experimentalist	45
Chapter 6.	What to Do With the Male	49
Chapter 7.	The Woman Alone and Writing	62
	Works Cited	72
	Works Consulted	74

Introduction

In this study of letters, journals and selected fiction of Mary Shelley, I expose contradictions and seemingly paradoxical situations apparent throughout Shelley's writing. Further examination shows that, in composing her ideas, Shelley engaged in anti-ideology and artistic irony, as defined by L. J. Swingle in *The Obstinate Questionings of English Romantics* and Anne Mellor in *English Romantic Irony*. Employing processes involved in anti-ideology and artistic irony, Shelley questions the gender roles of the established social system. To that extent--the extent of questioning--anti-ideology works for Shelley. As a whole, however, the anti-ideological process fails for Shelley in that she never effectively creates an alternative system, which should be an outcome of the process. My study reveals that, for Shelley, the anti-ideological process fails because her creative imagination is polluted by the masculine influences of her father William Godwin, her husband Percy Shelley and nineteenth-century societal norms. Even though her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's works and philosophy do influence Shelley's own developing Romantic ideology, Wollstonecraft's influence is never strong enough to help Shelley move beyond the constraints of the male-dominated society. In fact, Wollstonecraft never effectively employed her own philosophy in her personal life nor did she create any fictional models for Shelley to emulate.

Contradictions and seemingly paradoxical situations occur in Shelley's writing because she cannot come to terms with any comfortable system of belief; she cannot, so to speak, find a solid enough middle ground between two systems of thought, a middle ground that allows even a brief reconciliation between the system in place and the system forming. Though she occasionally creates characters who move beyond gender constructions, such as Mathilda of *Mathilda*, Evadne of *The Last Man* or Safie of *Frankenstein*, she does not give them

any real power to change the established system nor does she create social situations that might allow them to exist as dynamic feminine selves working within the established system. They are unfinished examples of possibility, unable to overcome the barriers that the established system has erected to contain and control the feminine gender. As a consequence, feminine identities continue under the dictates of the masculine-constructed world, just as the artist Shelley's own imagination creates within the perimeters of that world.

One reason that Shelley's imagination and writing and thus her characters do not move beyond masculine constructions has much to do with her use of language. Shelley continues to apply traditional metaphors and figures of speech to both the masculine and feminine genders. As a result, Shelley's imagination is constricted by the system of thought and the language that defines the system, and that familiar system with its language gets in the way of her artistic creativity; she is relying, that is to say, upon traditional metaphors and figures of speech that actually strengthen traditional gender constructions and, therefore, she cannot effectively forge new gender constructions. In addition, problems with creativity and imagination confront Shelley when the new constructions too severely contradict the familiar and accepted language and norms, and conflicts ensue that she cannot resolve. Such unresolved gender identity conflicts appear in Shelley's writing as paradoxical situations; for instance, the feminine is identified as both angelic and earthy, and as both fierce natured and gentle natured, at one in the same time. Likewise, the masculine gender, metaphorically cast with god-like characteristics, never effectively lives up to the images of godliness that Shelley applies.

What my study reveals then is that Mary Shelley employs anti-ideological processes and artistic irony in order to develop a feminine Romantic gender identity. Unlike the masculine Romantic writer's constructions of identity that challenge prevailing ideology, however, the anti-ideological processes never render a separate identifiable or even a dynamic system of belief with regard to

the feminine identity. Instead, Shelley's fictional characters only test the system, never moving beyond the system and the language that controls the artist who creates them. As a result, my study shows that, for Mary Shelley, using the processes of anti-ideology and artistic irony fails because the process does not assist her in producing new systems of thought with regard to both feminine and masculine gender identities.

One system eats another up, and this
Much as old Saturn ate his progeny;
For when his pious consort gave him stones
In lieu of sons, of these he made no bones.

But System doth reverse the Titan's breakfast,
And eats parents, albeit the digestion
Is difficult. Pray tell me, can you make fast,
After due search, your faith to any question?
(William Blake, Canto 14; quoted in Swingle 34)

1

The Central Problem

This study began as an effort to identify a decisive representation of nineteenth-century feminine Romantic ideology. By focusing upon the life, selected fiction, journals and letters of Mary Shelley,¹ I had hoped to pinpoint a feminine Romantic system of belief to which Shelley adhered. Aspects of such a system of belief might then be construed to represent an evolving feminine Romantic ideology to which contemporary women writers may have adhered as well.

Mary Shelley's life and writing warrant such a study. Born in 1797 to prominent intellectuals--radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and radical philosopher William Godwin--and married at the age of nineteen to radical poet Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley's life and writings would seem to exemplify the feminine Romantic intellectual--a woman born, nurtured and married into environments filled with personalities who appear to have been themselves struggling to develop and define a system of belief, a Romantic ideology. Shelley herself seems to have lived, at least for a time, her own and her husband's convictions. In 1814, at the age of seventeen, she eloped with Percy, while he

¹ To avoid confusion, I always use the name Mary Shelley or more often simply Shelley when referring to the author, rather than any variations of her name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley. When speaking of Percy Shelley along with Mary, I sometimes shorten their names to simply Percy and Mary.

was still married to Harriet. Together they traveled about Europe, taking as their companion Mary's younger half-sister Jane (later called Claire). Claire became involved with Lord Byron and bore him a daughter, Allegra (who died at age five) (Smith 10-11; Sparks 20-22).² All these actions were major infractions of propriety that prompted a social opprobrium toward the young Romantics.

We might surmise that these infractions were experiments, test cases of social reaction, a testing of a new system of belief against the established system, for Percy and Mary understood the "resulting evils" their unconventional living arrangement would arouse. Three years before Percy's involvement with Mary, he had read an anti-Jacobin novel about which he wrote to friend Elizabeth Hitchener, "It is useless to attempt by singular examples to renovate the face of society, until reasoning has made so comprehensive a change as to emancipate the experimentalist from the resulting evils" (qtd. in St Clair 322). At that earlier date, Percy felt the renovation of societal attitudes inconceivable without reasoned and comprehensive changes, unless one wished to succumb to the resulting evils, the social opprobrium. Despite his conviction, three years later he stood ready with his new love Mary Godwin to test the established system and thus test the validity of his earlier claim by a "singular example."

Since it is Mary Shelley, as representative of evolving feminine Romantic ideology, who is the focus here, we might then ask, did Mary herself have specific renovations in mind? How did she intend to overturn convention if indeed she did? In what ways did the idealism of Percy coupled with Mary's exposure and study of Wollstonecraft's feminism and Godwin's philosophy affect Mary Shelley's own developing feminine ideology?³ Overall, Shelley's

² Throughout this study, citations are inserted only for information particular to a critic's opinion or findings and not generally considered common knowledge among Mary Shelley scholars; nearly all sources that deal specifically with Mary Shelley cover the general aspects of her life and works.

³ In her *Journal* Volume I, Mary Shelley notes that Percy and she read, or re-read, all the works of Wollstonecraft and Godwin, as well as a prodigious number of other philosophical and literary texts,

writing confronts the problems inherent in renovating society, and aspects of both her father's and mother's opinions surface throughout most of her fiction. However, specific pieces of Shelley's published works--*Frankenstein* (1819, 1831), *Mathilda* (1819) and *The Last Man* (1826) were here selected for study because Shelley's fiction, from 1819 to 1826, represents writing that might be thought of in the traditional Romantic self-expressive sense, an out-pouring of ideas, emotions and feelings.⁴ During this period, Mary suffered tragedies of illness, suicides and death within her immediate and extended family; she and Percy lost three children to disease, and Mary miscarried their fifth child shortly before Percy drowned in 1822. In addition, during this time of her life, as opposed to her later years, Shelley may have been less concerned with self-censorship; after 1826 she became more cautious, adulterating or even obliterating contentious themes to ward off critical attacks that might jeopardize the inheritance of her only surviving child, who became heir to the Shelley estates upon Harriet's son's death in 1826. Self-censorship, as Mary Poovey points out in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, seems to have muffled Shelley's feminine Romantic voice and resulted in less overtly expressive fiction after 1826 (116-118). These three works, then, studied in conjunction with her letters and journals, reveal Shelley's overt struggle to manipulate and challenge convention and her effort to come to terms with a feminine Romantic ideology.

The operative words here become *feminine struggle* not feminine ideology, since what Shelley's writing actually reveals is not at all an identifiable--let alone decisive--representation of feminine Romantic ideology. What is revealed is a continuous, dynamic struggle that posits no solid system of belief with regard to the feminine situation. Within her fiction Shelley sometimes deals with

among them such philosophers as Locke, Burke, Kant, Rousseau, Plato, and so forth. Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert compile all the Shelleys' reading lists at the end of Volume II.

⁴ I use "traditional" to mean Romanticism in the sense that M. H. Abrams systematically articulates in his 1953 study *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*; for instance, he says the "orientation is now toward the artist, the focus of attention is upon the relation of the elements of the work to his state of mind" (47).

characters and circumstances that test the established system, but she maps out no firm boundaries that contain an impregnable ideal. At times she fits the conservative mold, as Katherine Powers and Johanna Smith make clear in their criticisms, as when she follows a more conservative philosophy (that her aging father increasingly adopted) and she shudders at the thought of revolution (*LMS* I:49), or as when she bids Percy to forgive her feminine expression and “acquit [her] of having a masculine understanding” of political issues (*LMS* I: 53). At other times, however, as with Evadne’s character in *The Last Man* and the narrative circumstances of Safie in *Frankenstein*, she breaks the conventional mold, which Joyce Zonana points out, “challenges patriarchal law, theology, science--and even narration” (181). As with these examples, contradictions surface throughout Shelley’s writing, making it impossible to define her system of thought. What her writing adheres to and expresses most clearly, then, is a feminine process rather than a feminine Romantic ideology.⁵

L. J. Swingle in *The Obstinate Questionings of English Romanticism* maintains that the Romantics engaged in a process in which they attempted to find answers to questions about existence, being and becoming, and the mind’s interpretations

⁵ On page twelve of Johanna Smith’s “Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts” of *Frankenstein: Complete and Authoritative Text*, Smith quotes Mary Shelley’s letter to Percy as reading, “the worst possible human passion *revolution*.” That phrase actually reads, “the worst possible human passion *revenge*.” Since I use Betty T. Bennett’s 1980 compilation, as does Smith, I cannot account for the misquote, but the difference in word meaning seems to be great enough to surmise that, in this instance, Shelley’s intent may have been misconstrued. In addition, in the same “Introduction,” Smith embeds a quote of Shelley’s November 11, 1830 letter as reading that “she rejoices that ‘the stains’ of the French Revolution had been ‘wash[ed] off’ by France’s July Revolution” (12). This letter extends Shelley’s congratulations to General Lafayette for heading the *radical* movement overthrowing Charles X in favor of Louis Philippe. Shelley writes that France has now “redeemed herself in the eyes of the world--washing off the stains of her last attempt in the sublime achievements of July.” Some lines down she says, “I *rejoice* that the Cause to which Shelley’s life was devoted, is crowned with triumph” (my italics) (Bennett 118). The letter seems to contradict Smith’s intention to prove that Shelley was not “long a Jacobin” (12). Shelley *does* advocate revolution, though not through terrorism, for she rejoices when it has been done with “moderation and heroism.” However, Smith does cite passages from Shelley’s *Journal* that support Smith’s claim that “such conservative statements suggest that Mary Shelley failed to live up to her parent’s political radicalism.” These contradictory aspects of Shelley’s opinions support my thesis. However, I would argue, as I show below, against the contention that the scattered statements Shelley makes against radical measures in England and France show her to be a conservative by any significant measure.

As for Katherine Powers, she makes a case showing that aspects of Shelley’s fiction rely on the philosophical theories of Godwin.

of the objective world. Through this theoretical process, Romanticism is seen as “fundamentally a questioning rather than an ideological phenomenon” (11). While Romantic writing does contain ideology, says Swingle, it functions in a “sort of dramatic context that requires us to think about artistic ends that extend beyond and militate against dogmatic expression”; custom and convention become Blake’s “mind-forged manacles” (34). Breaking free of systems of thought allows for the forming of new systems that in turn deserve their own probing questions. Only when the mind adheres exclusively to one system of thought does it cease to grow; in fact, it ceases to create and stops “being,” for being and becoming are bound up with the process of questioning, of not knowing. This state of existence, as Swingle notes, is what Michael Cooke calls the “acts of inclusions,” in which one commits to no one system of thought since doing so chains the mind (34). Freedom comes out of committing to all possibilities, resulting in a chaotic tension, a tension that flows through all Romantic works to some degree, and a tension that was already evident in eighteenth-century literature. (*Tristram Shandy* serves as one conspicuous eighteenth-century example.) It should be noted that various Romantic writers experienced this attitude at varying degrees of intensity and at different times; none, asserts Swingle, exhibited a consistent tendency toward such intense instability of thought throughout his or her entire career (34).

Swingle cautions, however, that some scholars who adhere to the theories of Romanticism promulgated in studies such as M. H. Abrams’ *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) take issue with this theory since it asks them to “discover questions where [they] had always perceived answers,” but he maintains that in order to understand fully the Romantics’ intentions, the scholar must let go of presuppositions about Romantic ideology—for instance, theoretical emphasis upon the Romantics’ preoccupation with the imagination and nature—since these “interfere with the scholar’s perception of the works” (8; 10-11; 13).

Swingle's assertions certainly prove true in the case of Mary Shelley; Shelley's works are more comprehensible if the critic views her works as having been composed with the use anti-ideology, thereby standing the conventionally accepted M. H. Abrams' approach on its head: That is to say, applying anti-ideology to Shelley's writing provides answers for Shelley scholars where before there had been questions. Her perplexing contradictions and paradoxes then become understandable since she engages in consistent skepticism. In *English Romantic Irony* Anne Mellor describes the anti-ideological process as a "fundamentally chaotic" vision of existence that the writer constructs. "Romantic irony," the term applied to the chaotic process, "is a way of thinking about the world that embraces change and process for their own sakes" (4). Mellor cites this process as composed of philosophical and artistic irony, and she credits Friedrich von Schlegel with first articulating it. In dealing with ontological aspects of philosophical irony, Schlegel emphasizes *becoming*, since he posits that reality is not made up of being or matter. In addition, humans, with their finite perceptions, cannot comprehend infinite chaos, so becoming continues; if humans *did* comprehend infinite chaos, becoming would end and existence would cease. Existence then becomes a continual action of building and demolishing systems or of "creation and de-creation," as Mellor terms it--chaos, system, chaos, system, *ad infinitum*. Human participation in the infinite process of becoming, of creation and de-creation, artistic irony, is the only route to genuine freedom. Every person seeks both order and coherence as well as chaos and freedom (4; 8; 14). The relationship between the two pairs is metaphorical, since the intellect that finds a relationship or a middle ground between two seemingly incongruous thoughts has engaged in creation and is freed, at least for a time.

What makes this theory especially appealing to apply to Mary Shelley's work is that such a theory allows paradox; it permits two contradictory suppositions to stand side by side, each considered equally valid. Shelley

employs such contradictions throughout her works. While the critics Joyce Zonana and Mary Poovey perceive a basis for a feminist centrality that challenges patriarchy within Shelley's works, Johanna Smith with as much validity as Zonana and Poovey uncovers a backlash and an adherence to conventional social structures and doctrines. Though Anne Mellor sees in Shelley a clear line of adherence to Wollstonecraft's radical feminism, Katherine Powers detects conservative reactionary tendencies.

The central problem for Mary Shelley, that stands out as significantly more difficult for the nineteenth-century feminine writer than for the masculine and for feminine participation in the artistic process, is questioning the established system and moving from that system of thought on to another in which skepticism provides continual liberation; Shelley has problems with creating a suitable middle ground from which to evaluate her skepticism, one in which she feels comfortable to sustain a critique of the conceived values. She is ambivalent in her task, because she never becomes comfortable with a feminine identity that is independent and authentic without reliance upon masculine constructs to define it. Shelley's ambivalence seems to sprout from received notions of humanity as essentially a male construction, which Simone de Beauvoir first articulated in her book *The Second Sex*, and from the difficulty of constructing an independent feminine paradigm, which today's feminists still recognize as a problem for feminine identity construction: It is the tendency of the patriarchal society to consider the feminine gender as the Other. This Otherness Beauvoir explains as a "fundamental category of human thought" that breaks down into the emerging synthesis of cultures due to wars, trading and the like, but that does not break down between the sexes because the males are never submissive enough to accept the Otherness of women; she remains the "peculiar" sexual body, so to speak.

Women therefore get stuck. They are not granted a reciprocity of their claims to validity as, say, one culture might be forced to grant to another.

"Humanity is male," says Simone de Beauvoir, "and man defines woman not in herself but relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xvi). He is the essential, and she is the inessential. Simone de Beauvoir questions--and spends the better part of the rest of her book formulating answers--from where derives the submissiveness of the women in letting the Otherness of their situations continue? Why does woman not propel herself beyond the inessential? Why does she not demand a redefinition of her *self*? Because, it seems, a conflict arises within the woman between her "fundamental aspirations" or her ego--regarded as essential to herself--and "the compulsions of the situation," her situation as the inessential, a self-conception continually reinforced through a masculine controlled and dominated society.

The central problem in Mary Shelley's creative process, then, is that she never escapes regarding herself as the Other, the inessential. Social conditioning becomes her "mind-forged manacle." Instead of the questioning process propelling her forward, she spins. The anti-ideological process, instead of leading to a systematic self-liberation, leads to a self-perpetuating questioning of her own capacity as a creative writer. Why might this diffidence arise from a skeptical process given to liberating the self from old conceptual concepts? One reason is that the masculine Romantics who informed her Romanticism--predominantly Percy Shelley and William Godwin--saw themselves, their maleness, as essential. They tested the validity of their philosophy, truth and social constructs relative to their male perspective; the male perspective served as the touchstone of authenticity. Simone de Beauvoir aptly describes this masculine stance: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" (143). Though we may today discredit the predicate portion of the first clause--that the world is the work of men--we can surmise that Mary

Shelley would have agreed, since Shelley was brought up on and continued to consume a steady intellectual diet of masculine fare.⁶

In addition to these familial influences, Shelley encountered problems with her mother's philosophy. Though Shelley may have understood Wollstonecraft's need to affirm the rational capacity of women and her desire for women to cast aside their bodily selves for the rational mind, Wollstonecraft's own life and fiction contradict her philosophy--or at least she does not advance her philosophy by example--and her fiction fails to construct an alternative essential Otherness for women.⁷ Because Shelley, again, like all women, was a victim of massive masculine social conditioning, her writing shows her to be stuck between wanting to move beyond the patriarchal constructed system of thought and feeling herself incapable of doing so, since, ironically, she defines femininity in terms of the very system that she is trying to change.

We see the tension of Shelley's struggle in redefining the feminine throughout her works. When she, for example, ventures to create a female character such as Evadne, who defies traditional patriarchal roles, she confronts the sticky problem of what to do with her. And, while Safie certainly does occupy a central position within the text of *Frankenstein*, Shelley embeds her within the narrative, making her "safe," as Zonana asserts, but also muffling her voice. Equally perplexing for Shelley is what to do with the male: If he is no longer the essential *one*, then what has he become? To find answers to these questions, Shelley engages in artistic irony; she creates and de-creates one in the

⁶ Anne Mellor points out in her work *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) that Romantic critics have been guilty of seeing Romanticism through the male perspective, regardless of the method of literary interpretation adhered to, since such criticism relies almost exclusively upon the writings of six male poets. It is interesting then to speculate that Romantic scholarship has possibly advocated an essentialness to masculine Romantic writings and an inessentialness to feminine Romantic writings, thus making Simone de Beauvoir's claim pertinent to modern scholarship as well.

⁷ Ironically, Simone de Beauvoir has been criticized as having the same shortcoming as Wollstonecraft; that is that none of her fiction characterizes women as essentially strong, forceful and capable human beings. Jean Leighton in her book *Simone de Beauvoir on Woman* complains that "Simone de Beauvoir presents herself as in some ways the model of her ideal woman in the autobiography, and yet all the feminine characters in her novels, even those modeled rather closely on the author, fall short of this ideal" (20).

same time, but if we acknowledge artistic irony as her process, we must remember that creation is dependent upon de-creation. Her de-creation process does not fully succeed; she never significantly de-creates the old system so that she may build a new; she does not find a middle ground with which she feels comfortable; instead, she swerves back and forth between the one and the other, never stepping far beyond the established masculine system or redefining the feminine by any meaningful length. She is a timorous swimmer, anxiously dipping her toes into the tepid water, apprehensive and jittery about plunging in.

What ultimately surfaces in Shelley's writing, then, is a *limited* redefinition of the feminine self, contradicting the masculine ideal feminine. However, the results of her struggle, though scarcely productive in constructing alternative systems of thought, produces some rewards, since her participation in the anti-ideological process raises significant questions about masculine and feminine gender identity.

Yet I would not call *them*
Voices of warning that announce to us
Only the inevitable. As the sun,
Ere it is risen, sometimes paints its image
In the atmosphere--so often do the spirits
Of great events stride on before the events,
and in to-day already walks to-morrow.
Coleridge's Translation of Schiller's Wallenstein
(qtd. in *The Last Man* 192)

2

Daughter of the Father

Mary Shelley's life and writing would seem to represent the feminine quintessential Romantic, since she was born to radical thinkers and raised in a household that welcomed stimulating intellectual conversation and study. Her marriage to Percy Shelley extended that intellectual environment. She comments on that environment in an 1824 journal entry in which she reminisces about the earlier days: "Seeing Coleridge last night reminded me forcibly of past times: his beautiful descriptions reminded me of Shelley's conversations. Such was the intercourse I once daily enjoyed" (*JMS* II: 474). The predominant place of male intellectuals in her life, however, may have had a detrimental effect and may be a significant reason why Shelley's participation in Romantic anti-ideological questioning does not lead her far beyond patriarchal systems of thought. Wollstonecraft's influence, confined as it was to written words, while significant, simply could not have had the impact as that of Mary Shelley's father or husband.

In fact, Mary Shelley was greatly attached to her father. This attachment is perhaps not surprising, since Mary Shelley's mother Mary Wollstonecraft died shortly after Mary was born, and William Godwin was left to raise Mary as well

as Wollstonecraft's young daughter Fanny. Although Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont (Mrs. Godwin) a short time after Wollstonecraft's death, we may discount Mrs. Godwin as having effectively taken the place of a mother, since Mary seems to have intensely disliked her. In a letter dated September 1817, Mary tells Percy to "Give my love to Godwin---when Mrs. G. is not by or you must give it to her too and I do not love her" (LMS I: 47). In addition, critics believe the references made in other letters to an "odious woman" and "a filthy woman" refer to Mrs. Godwin (LMS I: 34, 161). In fact, perhaps because of her revulsion toward Mrs. Godwin, Shelley seems to have had an "excessive attachment" to her father. She admits to her friend Maria Gisborne in 1834, that Mrs. Godwin had "discovered long before my excessive romantic attachment to my father" (LMS, II: 215). In a letter to Jane Williams in 1822, Shelley refers to Godwin as her "God" (Nitchie 83). As Katherine Powers points out in *The Influence of William Godwin on the Novels of Mary Shelley*, Mary's Shelley's relationship with her father William Godwin influenced her developing Romantic philosophy, and aspects of his philosophy show up in Shelley's novel. In fact, Powers constructs several parallels between characters and situations in Godwin's and Mary Shelley's novels.

After Mary develops affections for Percy Shelley, however, it is he who seems to have dominated her intellectually. Mary often expresses a dependence upon Percy's "superior" mind, and she allowed him to make numerous revisions to the text of *Frankenstein*--though not always for the better. In the preface, Shelley explains that the story derived from the conversations of "two other friends" (Byron and Percy) with whom she remained the "devout but nearly silent listener," thus giving the two men some credit for the creation of the plot (22,24). When she wrote tragedy, "Shelley used to urge me, which produced his own." That his helping her "produced his own" may be an adroit but self-effacing way to acknowledge a reciprocal influence on Percy, yet she later admits to having "the woman's love of looking up and being guided, and

being willing to do any thing if any one supported and brought [her] forward." She could not "put [herself] forward unless led" (*JMS* 555). In an 1824 letter she complains to Jefferson Hogg that Jane Williams, with whom she lived at the time, and she were "poor and protectorless." While Jane's company comforted her, if Jane had "during the last twenty years cultivated her mind while living with a person superior to herself what would she not have become" (*LMS* I; 449)? Mary Shelley clearly expresses the notion of the superiority of the masculine mind to be professor as well as protector, whether that male be father, husband or friend. Anne Mellor suggests that the notion of the dependent woman derived from the long-held belief that modesty reflected purity and virginity--an attribute in women, since women were considered property. The pure, modest woman represented a property asset that evidenced the male's control over the female body and mind (*Mary Shelley* 22).

In addition to such social constraints, as a writer, Shelley faced antagonists in the form of publishers and audience, and her effort to appease their concerns may have contributed to her overt expressions of male superiority. Though her fiction seldom depicts characters who overstep the bounds of patriarchal propriety, when she does venture a bold theme, such as *Mathilda's* theme of father-daughter incest, she found herself unable to publish. Godwin, for instance, refused to publish *Mathilda*, calling it "detestable and disgusting" even though he, like other Romantics, dealt with the theme: Lord Byron's *Manfred*, Leigh Hunt's *Story of Rumini*, Percy Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (revised to make it more palatable), and Godwin's own *St. Leon* (*St Clair* 432; *Nitchie* xi; *Aaron* 16).¹ Her father-in-law, Timothy Shelley, held back inheritance money, insisting that she not publish the 1831 version of *Frankenstein* under the Shelley name (*LMS* 1:521n). Considering these circumstances, it seems reasonable to conclude that Mary Shelley may have touted Percy's input and his superior mind as a means to get her work published and still receive financial support. At times--

¹ The full text of *Mathilda* was not published until 1959. Elizabeth Nitchie edited the text.

though they are few--Shelley writes her exasperation with the system into the lines of her fictional characters. Such is the case with Mathilda as she describes her relationship with Woodville (purported to be an elaborate description of Percy). "I am a farce to play to him," she complains, "but to me this is all dreary reality: he takes all the profit and I bear all the burthen" (65).

Such fictional situations that criticize the male role, however, are few. Much more prevalent is an obeisant attitude toward men. The masculine intellectual environment may have played a role in shaping this attitude as well. In *Romanticism and Gender* Mellor notes that masculine Romantic ideology advocated freeing the social constraints from both men and women, including the yoke of marriage. Despite this seemingly liberalizing notion, women were not granted independence of thought. Meena Alexander in *Women in Romanticism* examines Percy's "Alastor" and "Epipsychidion." Like Mellor, Alexander finds that Percy Shelley's "ideal feminine" does not represent a feminine vision independent of masculine creativity but is only a "play on his own imagination, a figuration of intense desire" (24). The Romantic male poet's vision of femininity then causes problems for women in "remaking femininity" since the male conceives and puts forth notions of femininity from his own imagination; the knowledge of her being is not drawn from (and here Alexander quotes Wollstonecraft) "woman's 'original source'" (24). Mellor discusses Percy Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* as another example. In the poem, Cythna only gains power and position after she has "been taught from childhood by Laon;" only after she "has evolved an intelligence and will similar to his own" (28). Mellor contends that "neither [Percy] Shelley nor any of the Romantic poets ever imagined a utopia where women existed as independent, autonomous, different-but equally powerful and respected authors and legislators of the world" (28). It seems very likely that Mary Shelley, enamored as she was with the masculine Romantic intellects that surrounded her daily and fed her imagination, had trouble imagining such a utopia as well.

The instances in Mary Shelley's fiction that reveal her infatuation, if you will, with the masculine intellect are numerous. Female characters are almost exclusively guided and educated by males, with man as instructor and woman as pupil/child. The inclination to assign the role of teacher almost exclusively to the male character may derive from Shelley's motherless background. Mother plays a limited role in Shelley's fiction, as she did in Shelley's own life. Her fictional mothers generally die in childbirth or some time within the character's childhood, or else circumstances make their absence necessary: In *Frankenstein*, for instance, Elizabeth's mother "had died on giving birth" (40); Victor's motherless mother, Caroline Beaufort, succumbs to scarlet fever when he is but seventeen (47); "Perpetual fretting" throws Justine's odious mother--whom Justine, by the way, had not lived with for some years--"into a decline" and she dies "on the first approach of cold weather" (65); Robert Walton, the first narrator, had spent the best years of his youth under his sister's "feminine fosterage" (29). Victor Frankenstein's creature, of course, has no "female" mother.

The characters of *Mathilda* and *The Last Man* suffer as much: Mathilda's own father had but a "weak mother"; his wife, Diana--thought to be a representation of Wollstonecraft (Nitchie 81)--"lost her mother when very young"; Diana then dies giving birth to Mathilda; Poor Adrian and Idris have, like Justine, an odious mother, the Countess of Windsor, who in this case lives a full life, away from her children for most of it, while Lionel's and Perdita's mother dies when they are very young.

Mary Poovey suggests that the experiences of Shelley's struggle with her imagination reflect the contradictions of social ideology (xv). While nineteenth-century society expected responsible adult mothering of the children, society at the same time consigned mother to the role of dependent. This subordinate role keeps the woman in what Wollstonecraft had termed "a perpetual state of childhood" (qtd. in Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 198). As a result, Shelley's fiction

implies that the relationships between men and women foster situations in which women never effectively experience independent intellectual growth and, therefore, dependent upon the male intellect, they remain stuck, stagnant.

Another interesting aspect in Shelley's fiction with regard to the teacher/pupil, father/child relationship between the sexes is that women characters often become romantically involved with men who act as father figures--mature, superior in intellect, sometimes "godly." Anne Mellor asserts that father/daughter relationships reflect *all* male/female relationships. Women were urged, says Mellor, to marry father figures (*Mary Shelley* 25, 198). Oftentimes the men are plenty old enough to be the character's fathers, and, as in the case of Mathilda, her lone sexual partner actually is her father. Always these father figures are the source of inspiration and enlightenment for a naive, ignorant female, who desires "to be supported and brought forward" as Mary Shelley commented in her journal (555).

Mathilda is one such character whose father inspires and enlightens. Mathilda's image of her father offers her a haven from despair (he had left her in the care of his odious step-sister). She longs for his return, reading again and again his few letters. Finally, when she reaches the ripe age of sixteen, he returns and all changes from "dull uniformity to the brightest scene of joy and delight" (14). They are then "forever together" (14). He tells her of his travels and impresses her with his worldliness and knowledge. Like Diana's relationship with her father, Mathilda relies upon him to educate her not only about the world, but also about relationships. As a result of their closeness and companionship, Mathilda's father begins to confuse his relationship with his wife with that of his with his daughter: "Diana died to give her birth; her mother's spirit was transferred into her frame, and she ought to be as Diana to me" (40); with that logic, he rationalizes away his guilt about having had sexual

intercourse with Mathilda.² In this instance, the scenario reverses: The child becomes the adult, taking the place of her mother. One explanation for this reversal seems to be that the identity differences between mother and child had become blurred due to the continual representation of women as children. If, then, the mother, Diana, is considered a child, why cannot the child, Mathilda, be considered an adult? Shelley recognizes the ease with which even incest is possible in this blurring of female adult/child into the inessential other.

Several other of Shelley's characters exemplify a father/child, teacher/pupil relationship between males and females. Mathilda's only other significant male, Woodville, tells Mathilda that he helped his former love Elinor become "more lovely and wise under [his] lessons" (57). In this instance the lover plays the role of both father and professor, educating his lover/daughter female.

In the same manner as Elinor, Lucy Clayton, a minor character in *The Last Man*, had her mind "cultivated by a former lover" (254). A similar situation occurs with Lionel and Perdita's father, who marries the daughter of "a lowly cottage-girl" (7), whom he introduces to courtly manners. (The speaker intimates that the two children were fortunate to have inherited his "peculiar disposition" (9)). The relationship between Perdita's daughter, Clara, and her father Raymond (thought to represent Lord Byron) offers yet another example. Raymond abandons Clara and her mother for his ambitious escapades in Greece. Though she had been "heretofore mirthful," she lapses into a quiet depression and watches daily for the arrival of letters. Later, at fourteen, "the remembrance of her father whom she idolized, and her respect for me [Lionel] and Adrian,

² In her article "The Return of the Repressed," Jane Aaron intimates that incest in *Mathilda* does not include the act of sexual intercourse, that Mathilda's father engaged in "incestuous passion" and that led him to commit suicide rather than "act on his desires" (15). The metaphorical language reveals otherwise: Mathilda "sunk on the ground" and her father continued his "violence" of speech and movement "clasping his hands with frantic gesture: Now I have dashed from the top of the rock to the bottom! Now I have precipitated myself down the fearful chasm!" He is "burnt up with fever," and, a few minutes later exclaims: "I can no longer sustain myself; surely this is death that is coming. Let me lay my head near your heart; let me die in your arms" (31)! I read "die" as double entendre for orgasm. The rest of the metaphors speak, pretty clearly, for themselves.

implanted a high sense of duty in her heart" (280). Perdita, herself, admits to having been "a poor, uneducated, unbefriended, mountain girl, raised from nothingness by him [Raymond]" (103).

Victor Frankenstein's father "came like a protecting spirit" to the orphaned Caroline Beaufort, and although "there was considerable difference" between their ages (he was her father's friend), they were a devoted couple.

Shelley's novels consistently establish women as children relative to men, in marriage or in the family (Poovey, *Mary Shelley* 200). Her consistency in such relational portrayals reinforces my contention that Shelley could find no alternative perspective, no escape from male domination of women within the Romantic imagination. Her fawning relationship with her husband Percy Shelley and her intimate respect for her father, William Godwin, reinforced her perception that the feminine gender remains in a perpetual state of childhood. By the same token, the Romantic imagination, instilled with the implicit assumption of masculine power and superiority, affected her perception of men's characters as well as women's.

This casting of man as instructor and woman as pupil reveals two possible problems for Shelley's creativity. First, the feminine identity under the tutelage of masculine dominance can never be essentially feminine, for, to quote Wollstonecraft again, the woman is not then instructed by the "original source." Secondly, if woman never learns what it is to be essentially feminine, then her identity can never be authentic; she remains a compilation of the masculine imagination projected second-hand through the feminine.

As a consequence, the characters and situations within Mary Shelley's fiction exemplify no significant demolishing of the patriarchal system of thought and, therefore, no building up of an authentic feminine identity. It may at this point seem reasonable to go so far as to assume that Shelley actually believed the masculine mind superior to the feminine, despite her intellectual upbringing and the literary and philosophical influence of her mother. Even though

Wollstonecraft had recognized and articulated the problems that woman's education had upon the feminine gender identity, and even though Shelley was aware of her mother's opinions, the overriding masculine influence kept most of Shelley's feminine characters under the masculine yoke. What saves us from closing the book with this conclusion is that a few of Shelley's female characters contradict patriarchal constructs of feminine identity and behavior.

The Other Women

Mary Shelley does set forth contradictions to the established system of thought that may result from her critical assessment of her mother's actions and her mother's theories concerning feminine rationality and the body. Shelley may have had problems with Wollstonecraft's failure to demonstrate creatively her philosophy either in her own life or in her fiction. While Wollstonecraft badgered established systems of thought, her fiction and her early personal emotional problems--that is, her lack of rationality in her affair with Gilbert Imlay--did not reinforce her contention that women should assert their rational minds.

Though Wollstonecraft wrote, for example, that "love, from its very nature, must be transitory," and that "the passions are necessary auxiliaries to reason," she had not easily overcome her passion for Gilbert Imlay. In fact, she had been so emotionally distraught at his rejection of her that she attempted suicide, revealing what she would later term the "'paradox of passion'" (Poovey 64; qtd. in Smith 6). William St Clair, who offers a lengthy study and commentary on Wollstonecraft's life in his book *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, asserts that sexual frustration caused Wollstonecraft "intense discomfort" and interfered with her rational judgment and thus prompted her behavior with regard to Imlay (182-3). If that claim is true, then Wollstonecraft had not lived her philosophy. While determined to prove the rational capacities of the feminine mind, she succumbed to the tyranny of her body and emotions. When Imlay rejected her, she sought release from her emotions through death (Guall 129-130).

In contrast to her actions, Wollstonecraft's non-fiction outlined her theories about the feminine predicament in a patriarchal society. Her major work, *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792, presents many of her key

ideas. Throughout that work Wollstonecraft affirms the rational capacity of women. Johanna M. Smith, in the introduction to a case study of *Frankenstein*, says that *Rights of Women* challenged the traditional definition of women as gentle, docile and the “weaker vessel” (5). Anne Mellor in *Romanticism and Gender* reasons further that, while *The Rights of Women* challenged the notion of women as weak, gentle or docile, characterizing women as such did not advance images of women as strong and defiant. According to Mellor, Wollstonecraft intended a later work, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Women*, 1798, as a novel of sensibility, and the overt thrust of her works remains on the male subjugation of women (38, 96). Her characterization, then, depicts that subjugation. Mellor asserts that such characterization actually defeats its purpose, since depicting male subjugation of women tended to reinforce its acceptability. A better characterization might have been portraying a strong, defiant woman. For instance, Mellor says that, as a sensibility novel, *Maria* stereotypes women as non-aggressive, “non-sexual” beings, and, as a result, reinforces the image of women as physically and intellectually weak (38). *Maria* is depicted as the passive victim of a patriarchal society, a victim too weak to fight against her husband’s tyranny. Her only retribution is her letter to her daughter, whom she hopes will understand the wretchedness of her existence and perhaps live to challenge the wrongs of women. Wollstonecraft, then, displays no viable “grand principle of action” within her fiction as she does in her philosophical treatises. Instead, in effect, she portrays women as what they *appear to be* rather than as what they might be.

Both Mellor and Smith agree that Wollstonecraft’s writing affected Mary Shelley’s fiction, but to what extent? Does Shelley’s fiction also define women as non-aggressive, non-sexual beings? Most of the time, it seems. We have already observed that she supposed women as needing to be “supported and brought forward” by men, and we can see in the following excerpts that she presents women as objects, as “admired” fragile images. Both Mary Shelley’s

and Mary Wollstonecraft's fiction characterize subservient women. Exposing women's situations and the follies of women's education had been the intent of Wollstonecraft's fiction, and it is possible that Shelley believed that she followed her mother's example of exposing the feminine situation. Rather than presenting women as complex beings, most of Shelley's characterizations project the feminine as a virtuous, delicate, innocent ideal. Most of her metaphors depict female characters as angelic, fair and celestial peace-lovers: "fairer than a pictured cherub"; "a complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink"; "pale and fair" with "golden hair cluster on her temples. . . like one of Guido's saints"; "sweet Perdita"; or "sweet orphan." Most women appear in Mary Shelley's fiction as *sweet, fair, pale, angelic, delicate, heavenly, goddess-like*.

In characterizing the feminine as angelic, Shelley follows a metaphorical method (Renaissance poetry, for example) that reflects a masculine pre-occupation with the female body, which stands for and identifies the whole woman. For example, Elinor of *Mathilda*, Woodville's deceased love, is described almost exclusively in terms of her appearance. She shone as "the brightest vision that ever came upon the earth"; something about her overpowered him, "as if it were a celestial creature that deigned to mingle with [him] in intercourse more sweet than man had ever before enjoyed" (62). Her looks, however, seem to subvert the importance of her wisdom:

She was a young heiress of exquisite beauty. . . . Elinor had not the genius of Woodville but she was generous and noble, and exalted by her youth and the love that she every where excited above the knowledge of aught but virtue and excellence. She was lovely; her manners were frank and simple; her deep blue eyes swam in a lustre which could only be given by sensibility joined to wisdom.

(56)

That Elinor has a mind is evidenced by the lustre of her "deep blue eyes," but her intellect somehow derives from angelic benevolence and "exquisite beauty."

In *Frankenstein*, Victor's mother is shown "gratitude and worship" and "reverence for her virtues" (39). Elizabeth sheds "radiance from her looks," and all who regard her find themselves with a "passionate and almost reverential attachment" (41). She "shone like a shrine-dedicated lamp in our peaceful home," and she belongs to his family: "her smile, her soft voice, the sweet glance of her celestial eyes" (43). Likewise, one glance at Justine dissipates ill-humor. Virtually every female character in *Frankenstein* is described metaphorically in "celestial" terms.

The Last Man follows the pattern. Throughout the entire novel, Idris remains serene, disturbing no one, a shelved vessel. Her sole *raison d'être* centers around her children. Her "charming countenance" is full of

perfect goodness and frankness; candour sat upon her brow, simplicity in her eyes, heavenly benignity in her smile. Her tall slim figure bent gracefully as a poplar to the breezy west, and her gait, goddess-like, was as that of a winged angel new alit from heaven's high floor; the pearly fairness of her complexion was stained by a pure suffusion; her voice resembled the low, subdued tenor of a flute. (35-36)

Even her dying is subtle. Lionel returns to the carriage to find her fallen from the seat to the bottom of the carriage. She lies quietly, with "her head, its long hair pendent, with one arm, hung over the side" (258). Lionel admits that "he praised her, the idol of my heart's dear worship, the admired type of feminine perfection" (262).

The last line is telling. Idris represents "the admired type of feminine perfection." She exists, as Anne Mellor points out, for others but never for herself; she does not seem to desire a life of her own (Introduction xii). After the deaths of her sons, she has no cause to continue and, therefore, she dies.

This *type* of woman, according to the narrator, while not described as the optimum type of woman, reflects the *admired* type, and, we might add, the "traditional" selfless, dependent type. We get the sense that Shelley hopes

Idris's character elicits compassion and maybe commiseration. However, Idris's character, again, as Mellor says, lacks roundness; she is, like so many others, if you will, a bore, yet she occupies a substantial portion of the novel. In fact two male characters of *The Last Man*, Adrian and the narrator Lionel, representations of Percy and Mary respectively, seem the only truly complex characters who continue throughout the novel. That Lionel represents Mary Shelley but appears as a male character suggests that Shelley's imagination considered a certain *type* appropriate for females and a certain *type* appropriate for males, even though the voice behind the narrator is herself, a woman. Shelley's portrayal of Idris and other women characters accommodates an accepted prototype that women, she may be suggesting, ought to emulate. Depicting women with descriptors of appearance rather than of mind does not advance Wollstonecraft's theory of women as rational; such depictions, in fact, seem to reinforce those assumptions that Wollstonecraft argued against—that women are defined in terms of body, rather than mind. Relying on such metaphors simply reinforces traditional gender assumptions about feminine identity.

The fact that *not all* of Shelley's virtuous women characters fit this angelic mold reveals her attempt to break that mold. One reason for her doing so may be, as Paul Youngquist asserts in his study *"Frankenstein: The Mother, the Daughter, and the Monster,"* that Shelley lacked "her mother's confidence that sex can be overcome" (120), and Youngquist here refers to passion rather than gender. Shelley, unlike Wollstonecraft, expresses humans in terms of the body; she cannot, however, refer to the masculine and feminine bodies in like terms, since, as she writes to Maria Gisborne, "the sex of our [female] material mechanism makes us quite different creatures," an assumption, as Simone de Beauvoir points out, which suggests that a difference in anatomy affects all aspects of identity, an idea rooted in culture rather than science (*LMS* 2:246; Beauvoir 4-5). Even though Shelley sees women as "quite different creatures," she at times loosens the hold of traditional stereotypes by having some

characters act in ways traditionally associated with the masculine gender. The manner in which Shelley does this may have offended nineteenth-century sensibilities, and the problem of audience reaction might account for her limiting alternative feminine characterizations to but a few.

L. J. Swingle comments on Shelley's presentation of "creatures" in *Frankenstein*, and his analysis helps explain how cultural identity strongly impacts upon one's reaction to other "creatures," different from one's own. Swingle says that the novel concerned "how discovering truth and pronouncing moral judgment become highly problematic when different *species* are at issue," and that the novel also concerned "the limits of our human circle, our *species*" (my italics) (136). Swingle stretches the term *species* to mean the characteristics or personal identity of one person as opposed to another, those perceptions of the world that make each person different from every other person (rather like in *Tristram Shandy* where every character rides his or her own hobbyhorse). If we apply Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that the masculine gendered world labels the feminine as the Other, we see how problematic is understanding the motives of not only males and females as groups (or creatures, as Mary Shelley referred to the female gender) but of individual males and females, and we see how problematic it is for the woman to understand her own identity. Swingle goes further and pulls the reader's moral interpretation of the *species* into the problematic issue (as Shelley does when she concerns herself with audience) and offers an apt example if we remember Lydia of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose behavior with Wickham, her sister Elizabeth intimates, is shameful, to which Lydia quips, "La! You are so strange" (qtd. 159)! Elizabeth cannot comprehend her reaction and, perhaps, neither can many readers. Another instance that illustrates further Swingle's diversity in point of view is found in Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven" in which the young girl refuses to concede that the dead sibling no longer exists, much to the consternation of the speaker.

Shelley's Mathilda is one of the few characters in whom Shelley attempts to expose (applying Swingle's term) another *feminine species*, one that evolves beyond the capacity of angelic metaphors to describe. Shelley moves beyond the literary tradition of portraying women as sexless and superficial and deals with sexual passion and emotions, which, as we know, cost Shelley *Mathilda's* publication.

The first time Mathilda's father sees her, she appears the stereotypical angel. Mathilda, as narrator, describes her image as her father saw her:

Dressed in white, covered only by my tartan rachan, my hair streaming on my shoulders, and shooting across with greater speed than it could be supposed I could give to a boat, my father has often told me that I looked more like a spirit than a human maid. (14)

This celestial image of Mathilda lasts up until her father violates her, after which, she becomes a woman of the earth:

I was a solitary spot among mountains shut in on all sides by steep black precipices; where no ray of heat could penetrate; and from which there was no outlet to sunnier fields. (54)

Her father's violation of her has broken the celestial mold. As a result, she withdraws inside herself; she lives alone within herself, for herself. She declares, "In solitude I shall be myself" (49).

Mathilda feels that she cannot give herself to another man because of her shame of the sexual act, and she admits that she loves her father and desires him. Even Woodville, whom she admires and may even love, cannot take her father's place. He has much to offer: "He was younger, less worn, more passionless," but "in no degree reminded [her] of him" (60). She chooses her father, as distasteful as that may be, because, it seems, she cannot commit herself to another man, even the admirable Woodville; she sees herself as physically bound to her father, as in matrimony. As a daughter, she is the property of her father,

whose jealous sexual desire for her will not allow him to accept giving her to another man; as a result, as her father's lover, she remains his property. She cannot become Woodville's property, because she has been "branded," so to speak, by her father. The tragedies of Mathilda's story are not only her mental anguish, her rejection of Woodville and her subsequent self-exile and suicide, but also that Mathilda unquestionably accepts her identity as branded property--for life. Many questions then arise: As readers, as other species, do we vicariously empathize (if indeed we can empathize at all) with Mathilda's torment? or do we blame her father for not controlling his passions? Do we blame Mathilda, as she does herself, for allowing her beauty to work up her father's sexual desires? Do we blame society for shaming their love? Do we, should we set blame at all?

One conclusion we can draw pretty clearly is that forces of passion and the sexual body figure prominently in *Mathilda*, and that, in this instance, Shelley does not follow her mother in the traditional portrayal of women but acknowledges the physical body. Though some of Shelley's character portrayals indicate that she agreed with Wollstonecraft that the body interferes with the mind's rational capacity, her Romantic imagination found it difficult to get beyond the masculine influence; furthermore, Shelley seems to have questioned Wollstonecraft's assertion that the feminine body ought to be ignored so that the feminine rational mind might be genuinely established as comparable to the masculine; in fact, Shelley shows that Mathilda's father cannot ignore his passions either, even if we were to assume that Mathilda tempted him. In addition, Mathilda acknowledges her love for her father despite his violation of her. Ironically, living her life in solitude allows her to be her feminine self.

Mathilda's denouement does not tidy up the feminine problem of identity, however. Shelley had difficulty eradicating the patriarchal presumption that equated feminine passion with evil. As a consequence, she never sincerely undermines the established system of thought and, as a result, she bulks at redefining the feminine self and relegates Mathilda to the periphery of society, a

superfluous woman. Meena Alexander in her book *Women in Romanticism* maintains that the concept of women based upon the masculine perception of the ideal feminine kept women in their place, making them appear physically and intellectually weak (38). Mathilda does not resist this perception; she unobtrusively melds with her surroundings, becoming invisible. She accepts her place; she cannot fathom living within society; she thinks she can *be* herself only if she is *by* herself. The character of Mathilda cannot fit in, nor can she undo the damage done to her. In a quandary of questions, Shelley lets loose of the middle ground, and Mathilda slips back into established constructs.

Another character about whom Shelley's fiction raises questions is Evadne of *The Last Man*. Evadne, however, refuses to subtly accept things that she thinks she can change; and she fights, literally, like a warrior. Princess Evadne is introduced in the novel as a "sprightly and clever Greek girl"; she is beautiful and writes with "a sweetness of expression" in her letters, and, aptly, perhaps, she is "a foreigner," *aptly* because that characteristic may have made her unconventional behavior more palatable to nineteenth-century audiences (22-23). In demeanor she is not benevolent, virtuous, angelic or fair. Shelley writes no flowery description of her body; in fact, unlike most of Shelley's other women characters, Evadne's appearance is not dealt with in any significant way. One reason may be that, if a woman's appearance and demeanor are ignored, as Wollstonecraft had reasoned, she is free to be herself and is identified as something other than her appearance, as mind and soul, perhaps. However, Evadne does display a head-strong, independent personality. Adrian becomes "her lover," but she does not take him seriously, even though his being the son of the Countess makes him an attractive catch, and even though "his life was swallowed up in the existence of his beloved" (23); Evadne toys with his affections. The intimation of the narrator seems to be that Evadne considered Adrian entertainment, but she does not intend to marry him; she intends to let her emotions dictate her choice, rather than rationalizing about material gain.

Furthermore, Shelley does not portray Evadne as sweet or angelic, since sweet, angelic women suppress and ignore the passions of the body. She appears “masculine-like” and aggressive. Her superior talent as a “male” architect had attracted Raymond’s attention and brought him to see her (Raymond supposed her works to be those of a man) (83). Evadne does not rationalize about her feelings for Raymond; she calls their relationship destiny:

Raymond was loved by Evadne. Overpowered by her new sensations, she did not pause to examine them, or to regulate her conduct by any sentiments except the tyrannical one which suddenly usurped the empire of her heart. (31)

Putting Raymond’s name first in the sentence above makes Evadne the passive one, but the passiveness that Shelley intends seems to have more to do with the impact that the passions have upon her than that Raymond has upon her. She is overpowered and cannot regulate her conduct. In other words, Shelley seems to relieve herself of guilt; passion is the true culprit; Evadne is not responsible for her actions. This exoneration may account for Evadne’s acting guiltless. She wants Raymond as much as he wants her, and she does not concern herself that Raymond has a wife and family. Though his attentions distract him from his work and his family, she freely pursues him.

Raymond’s wife Perdita, on the other hand, cannot *afford* to allow Evadne space within her marital territory; doing so would threaten her own precarious position, a position Mellor says is *relational* to the male and which, as a result, denies Perdita a complete self. Her very survival depends upon male acceptance. Domestic women like Perdita “must depend on and serve men.” While her role contributes to the survival of the conventional family, Shelley shows in this situation that Perdita’s situation, as Mellor points out, “oppresses and even destroys the women who practice it” (*TLM*, Introduction xii). Shelley expresses her views about the state of married women in an 1822 letter to Jane Williams. Here she discusses the actions of a mutual acquaintance: “I hate and

despise the intrigues of married women, nor in my opinion can the chains which custom throws upon them justify them in conducting themselves with deceit & falsehood--it may render them pardonable--but despicable at the same time. Truth is the only thing of any worth (to me now) in ones [sic] intercourse with one's fellows--& where there is not that, vice must follow" (*LMS I*: 264). Perdita ponders her situation but refrains from employing "the intrigues of married women" in order that she might make more secure her marriage, nor does she challenge Raymond to tell her the truth. Her opting to do neither may seem odd, but, if Perdita cannot function as Raymond's sole object of affection, she has lost one half of her self-worth, one-half her identity, that of wife; she then functions only as mother. Perhaps, then, if she ignores the relationship between Raymond and the other woman, she will manage ultimately to keep her place as wife. Perdita's predicament reflects both women's social and marital predicament as well as Shelley's struggle with the feminine literary imagination. Perdita, trapped as she is in her role as wife and mother, can only grieve that her husband's mind and body are with another woman, but she does not actively do anything about it; she cannot afford to jeopardize her precarious place within the structure of marriage; therefore, she passively awaits the outcome, demonstrating feminine submissiveness and powerlessness. Considering Perdita's situation, we are left with the questions about which roles if any ought to change: the role of wife, the role of husband? Evadne and Raymond, as we know, cannot fight passion, so should they succumb? Should they fight? What of Perdita? What alternatives might Shelley have created for Perdita if Perdita were no longer the wife of Raymond? What options might Shelley have considered permissible?

Though Raymond gives up, Evadne, the defiant other woman, fights against the system to usurp power by rebelling against established strictures, rather than passively acquiescing and hoping for the best, as Perdita does. While doing so, Evadne displays no regret nor shame; nor does she reason that,

perhaps, she *should* feel shame. It is Raymond who decides to break off his relationship with Evadne. Evadne's aggression never relents, even when she knows he has given up. Disguised in armor, she impersonates a soldier and marches out to battle alongside Raymond. Wounded, she dies in Raymond's arms, calling herself his "victim" (131). He buries her in a warrior's shroud. Her manner of dying and her burial as a warrior symbolizes her lost battle for her warrior *self*. She has fought the system and she has lost.

Shelley expresses ambivalence about the future in that Evadne's death reflects a failure of the imagination to break with the past and to establish a feminine identity independent of the masculine definition. Evadne's last words explain that she "sold herself in death, with the sole condition that thou [Raymond] shouldst follow me" (131), which may be considered a small triumph for Evadne, since she may ultimately be with Raymond after death. However, in the physical world, she must not be with Raymond because doing so breaches sacred matrimonial territory. In a sense, Raymond also loses, since he loves both Perdita and Evadne. Perdita cannot concede to his relationship with Evadne, since, as noted earlier, Perdita's status as wife and mother proscribes her behavior.

What, then, are the options? If Shelley has Raymond take two wives, she has adopted the middle-eastern tribal tradition of harem, which--as Joyce Zonana explains in "They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale"-- Mary Shelley found as unacceptable as Wollstonecraft, who saw the harem as an "Egyptian bondage" that served as "the philosophical foundation for the misogyny and the gendered assignment of power that [Wollstonecraft saw] operating in the West as much as if not more so than in the East" (173); so Shelley would not advance the feminine situation with the harem. Another outcome might be for Raymond to leave Perdita for Evadne, but if he does, Perdita's security is threatened, and, besides, he admits the conflict of his affections for both women. With no conceivable

solutions, Evadne unobtrusively dangles for several chapters, her situation unresolved.

Finally, Shelley has Raymond decide to break off his relationship with Evadne, but then Shelley is confronted with the problem of what to do with Evadne; her independent character has made her an aberration; she, like Mathilda, becomes a superfluous being, existing on the fringe of a society that has no place for her. A workable solution might have been to re-vamp society's constructs, from family to notions of feminine and masculine gender roles-- something that setting the story in 2100 would have allowed Shelley to do-- and/or allow free love. However, Shelley may have had serious problems with free love if we consider the masculine Romantic notions she likely encountered. Anne Mellor notes that Blake, Godwin and Percy Shelley "wished to eliminate the yoke of marriage for both men and women," but Mellor asks, "whose interests does free love serve?" The Romantic poetic and philosophical role of the "free" woman is "but to love." And as Mellor shows in her continued discussion of Percy's *The Revolt of Islam*, too frequently the independent, *different* woman is defined in the poetry as "an evil to be eradicated or overcome" (*Romanticism* 28).

Then, too, Shelley considered the sensibilities of her audience. She could not afford not to; she had to think of her son and her father. These considerations surely burdened Shelley's freedom of imagination and limited her options further; no viable outcome for Evadne other than death works within the boundaries of the restrictions. Though Shelley has written Evadne and Mathilda more complex personalities, she, like patriarchal society, makes no allowances for their situations. Her viable options seem to be that Evadne and Mathilda must live in isolation and, to dramatize their predicament further, must concede the ultimate surrender; they must die.

Evadne's character may have been a means for Shelley to work through some of the conflicts within her own mind. Evadne, Raymond and Perdita's

stories parallel a combination of events in her own life. For instance, she may have been trying to work through her own sense of guilt for having attracted Percy while he remained married to Harriet and for Harriet's subsequent suicide, shouldering the blame for Percy's actions, much as Perdita blamed herself for Raymond's preoccupation with Evadne. She may have felt herself the model for Perdita, since Percy was rumored to have had affairs while Mary was pregnant or ill from child bearing. She may have modeled Evadne after Claire, who relentlessly pursued the affections of Lord Byron (Raymond), though unlike Raymond and Evadne, Lord Byron did not seem to love Claire. More importantly to our focus here, Shelley may have presented Evadne as a representation of future feminine sexual independence. Evadne's demise shows that Shelley saw no triumph of reason over passion, the mind over the body, even by the year 2100, nor did she fathom any significant changes in gender constructions.

The tragedies of Shelley's personal life, mixed, as they were, with Wollstonecraft's philosophy, demonstrated that the physical world challenges the rational mind. A strong character with a reasoning mind ought to triumph over physical and emotional passions, or so both her parents asserted, but Shelley's fiction shows that the social bridle restraining passion also harnesses freedom, especially feminine freedom, and the masculine Romantic ideas for change, such as free love, offered far more satisfaction for the man than for the woman.

One other example of a defiant feminine character deserves our attention, though this time passion does not seem to factor into the situation, which may be a telling point. In *Frankenstein*, Safie's story is intriguing in that Shelley seems to have so cleverly disguised her intent that no patriarchal sensibilities ought to have been offended. Safie is centered in the text, making her the focal point on the one hand and sheltering her from outside influences, so to speak, on the other; she is protected and projected one in the same time. Her story is brief but

complex and seems to be, as Joyce Zonana makes a case for in "They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale," a reflection of Wollstonecraft's feminist influence; in any case, the mother of Safie receives praise for being a bit of a rebel.

Safie, a young Arab girl, "spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother," a Christian Arab and slave whose beauty attracted the attentions of an influential Arab who married her. But Safie's mother never abandoned her Christian faith, and she instructed Safie "in the tenets of her religion and taught [her] to aspire to the highest powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to female followers of Mahomet" (108). Her mother soon dies, but "her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of returning to Asia, where she would "occupy herself with infantile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and noble emulation for virtue" (108). Safie shows strength in slipping from the religiously reinforced straight jacket binding her gender. With help from another woman, her loyal servant, she escapes her father's dominance. Her mother's ideas had moved her imagination away from Islam, and she journeys to the Christian world, where "women were allowed to take a rank in society" (109). That she would have "a rank" and a home with her beloved Felix spurs her to defy her Arab father and gain independence.

Unlike most of Shelley's female characters, in this particular case, mother, the "original source," is the dominant familial influence on the daughter; mother lives long enough to instruct Safie and teach her to resist patriarchal constructs that would bind her mind and her body to the male, and Safie turns her back upon her father, literally escaping him and his influence. While it is true that Felix is important to Safie--she loves him--the relationship shows a reciprocity of equal love and admiration. In effect, Safie represents a woman who shakes off the patriarchal ties and comes to her own sense of being.

One of the most interesting aspects of Safie's characterization is that her story is told completely through letters whose content reaches the reader

through a circuitous route. Safie has written of her plight to her lover Felix; those correspondences, it is implied, were discovered by the creature who copied them; Victor Frankenstein ended up with the letters and shared them with Walton who then relates their contents to the readers through his letters to his sister, Mrs. Saville. Zonana suggests that Shelley centers Safie's narrative to insulate Safie, symbolically keeping her narrative free of masculine gender bias; Safie's own first-person narration remains silent, representing a resistance, on Shelley's part, to "acts of appropriation" and an assertion of the independent value of the body which, rather than weakening authority, "asserts the integrity of the female experience" (179-180). Safie's silence then surfaces as a defiant resistance to patriarchal strictures, so that Safie, paradoxically, through silence, becomes more vocal.

Who Are Nature?

Mary Shelley portrays feminine independence and aggression by using metaphors that compare women to nature, but, even as she explores the use of aspects of nature as metaphor for the feminine, she is also imprisoned in the masculine conditioning of those metaphors. For instance, she employs nature figuratively as a force of feminine indifferent aggression, while at the same time, she uses nature as a metaphor for a gentle, submissive, sublime feminine character.

Shelley follows the Romantic tradition in using nature in figures of speech, metaphor and simile, to reflect gentle, feminine aspects. Remember Idris, for instance, "bent gracefully as a poplar." Sweet Perdita is described in a quote from Wordsworth's poetry:

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye,
Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky. (36)

Here, borrowing from Wordsworth, Shelley metaphorically presents Perdita as a paradoxical image: a dark violet, half hidden, and a fair star, visibly shining. Perdita becomes a mixed metaphor, of the earth and above the earth, earthy and celestial. Mellor contends that, in this sense, women are identified like nature, like a paradox, self-contradictory, that is, having contradictory qualities at one in the same time: "vicious and base and virtuous and magnificent" (*Mary Shelley* 117). Although women may not actually possess such qualities, or they may possess only one or the other, nevertheless, because of cultural assumptions that are reinforced through such figures of speech, women are perceived as having dual characters and are thus viewed as duplicitous beings and not to be trusted.

Like the writers of her time, Shelley employs these paradoxical images of women since she follows literary tradition and uses metaphorical images of nature to reflect women as they are perceived: beautiful, gentle, metaphysical (angels)--the masculine's ideal woman--and, at the same time, the earthy woman, associated with the workings of the body, creators of life and destroyers of life. Such portrayals clarify neither feminine identity nor the characteristics of being female; rather, such portrayals confuse and distort feminine identity. Mary Shelley, as an artist writing nature metaphorically as representation for women's characters and identity, reveals herself as insecure about the feminine Romantic writer's role as de-creator and creator in the application of artistic irony and unsure of feminine identity. As a result, nearly all her female characters are shown to suffer psychologically from uncertainty and insecurity.

Let us consider what Mary Shelley does with Mathilda. At first Mathilda is depicted as an innocent, the "offspring of love, the child of the woods, the nursling of Nature's bright self" (47). She is a bright and shining illumination, who, as a child, communes with nature and "bore an individual attachment to every tree. . . every animal." She is like a spirit in the woods, pure and loving. She nurses birds back to health and saves hares and rabbits from dogs (9). She "passed hours on the steep brow of a mountain" and "gathered flower after flower." She loves "a serene sky amidst these verdant woods," along with rain, and beautiful clouds (10). Consider, though, how her encounter with physical passion changes her looks. After her physical relationship with her father, she becomes "a solitary spot among mountains" where no "ray of heat could penetrate," dark and alone (54). Like Perdita, she is portrayed as two contradictory beings: at first, she is unspoiled innocence; then, she is unredeemably spoiled as a victim of incest, a pollution of earth "herself."

We see a more delineated presentation of nature in *The Last Man*, where nature erupts as the plague. Jane Aaron labels the plague as passive aggression of the heretofore "passive" female "return of the repressed," the retaliation of the

female upon the male-dominated world (17-18), or, if you will, Mathilda and Evadne getting revenge for their suffering. Overall, Shelley's portrayal of nature, especially in her fiction but also in her journals and letters, suggests an entity of indifferent temperament, one that at once metes out equal sums of passiveness and aggression. Shelley comments upon this paradox in her letter to Maria Gisborne a few weeks after Percy's death: These were, she says, "the last miserable months of [her] disastrous life." She describes her foreboding in contrast to the placid beauty of the bay:

I used to patrol the terrace, oppressed with wretchedness, yet gazing on the most beautiful scene in the world. This Gulph. . . was far the most beautiful--the two horns of the bay (so to express myself) were wood covered promontories crowned with castles. . . --trees covered the hills that enclosed this bay & then beautiful groups were picturesquely contrasted with the rocks the castle on the town--the sea lay far extended in front while to the west we saw the promontory and islands which formed one of the extreme boundaries of the Gulph--to see the sun set upon this scene, the stars shine and the moon rise was a sight of wondrous beauty, but to me it added only to my wretchedness. (II; 246)

Nature does not reflect Shelley's own gloomy mood; it remains detached. Nature goes on being nature, despite her own state of mind. In a journal entry she again expresses the indifference of nature and how it puzzles her. After a futile attempt to find the bodies of Percy Shelley and Edward Williams, her party is "obliged to cross our little bay in a boat--San Arenzo was illuminated for a fiesta--what a scene--the roaring sea--the scirocco wind--the lights of the town towards which we rowed--& our own desolate hearts" (I; 249). Nature appears as a force, a roaring sea, a scirocco wind, the shining stars and rising moon, yet the scene itself is innocuous in that it remains unaffected by her own distress. She expects, having been conditioned by the masculine

conception of a feminine ideal, that her own moods ought to be echoed from the natural world, but no such emotional comfort is forthcoming despite her demand for it. The river sucks down Percy Shelley and flows on.

Perdita's quandary mimics Shelley's. Raymond's attentions to Evadne upset Perdita. She looks upon a vase of flowers, "rare and lovely plants; even now all aghast as she was, she observed their brilliant colours and starry shapes." Perdita's remonstrance to these "divine infoliations of the spirit of beauty" echoes the sentiments of Shelley as she looked out over the bay. "Ye droop not, neither do ye mourn; the despair that clasps my heart has not spread contagion over you!--Why am I not a partner of your insensibility, and sharer in your calm" (96)!

Shelley has raised some critical questions concerning the femininity of nature. If nature truly is a woman, why does she maintain indifference to human suffering? Why does she not mother, selflessly, as Idris or Perdita? Perdita grapples with the paradox, lamenting Raymond's capture in Greece. Again, it echoes the tone of Shelley's letter:

The very beauty of the Grecian climate, during the season of spring, added torture to her sensations. The unexampled loveliness of the flower-clad earth--the genial sunshine and grateful shade--the melody of the birds--the majesty of the woods. . . the combination of all that was exciting and voluptuous in this transcending land, by inspiring a quicker spirit of life and an added sensitiveness to every articulation of her frame, only gave edge to the poignancy of her grief. (122).

Nature exists independently, unconcerned, insensitive to those around. In effect, nature does not seem to reflect the accepted perception of the feminine as caring, sensitive and dependent. The plague erupts and begins to destroy the human race without apology; at the same time, it covers the dead with its verdant body, making the earth appear a pleasant and inviting place for those who survive. In this sense, nature deceives; she is not as she appears to be, not

to be trusted. In a masculine dominated world, she is woman and woman is she; since she cannot be trusted, she is unfit to rule morally; she is obliged to hand over her powers to man, or else man must conquer her by force.

Other scenes from *The Last Man* expose further portrayals of nature as feminine and the power of such portrayals to distort and confuse the way women are perceived. The approach of spring ought to bring apprehension and despair since warm weather worsens the plague. Yet Shelley describes nature as "laughing and scattering her green lap flowers, and fruits and sparkling waters" so that "all looked as in former years, heart-cheering and fair" (198), seemingly oblivious to the destruction about to ensue. With the advancing summer and with "the sun's potent rays, plague shot her unerring shafts over the earth" (199). Feminine nature has shown herself as two-faced and in doing so has managed to deceive humankind, exposing a face of joy on the one side only to turn her head and reveal a grotesque evil visage on the other.

In another scene Lionel scorns nature: "Shall I not then complain? Shall I not curse the murderous engine which has mowed down the children of men, my brethren? Shall I not bestow a malediction on every other of nature's offspring, which dares live and enjoy, while I live and suffer" (334)? How dare nature enjoy while he suffers--what audacity she has, not to serve man but to show him such independent indifference.

If we accept Aaron's pronouncement of the plague as the "return of the repressed" feminine, then the repressed feminine actually contains great strength; she is able to live independently of masculine authority and she thrives. Because of her strength men fear her. Various male characters in *The Last Man* reveal their terror of her power: "I have hung on the wheel of the chariot of the plague; but she drags me along with it, while, like a Juggernaut, she proceeds crushing out the being of all who strew the high road of life" (289). "The stoutest hearts quelled before the savage enmity of nature" (271). Perhaps the greatest terror is that feminine nature reclaims the earth; she crawls over

humankind and covers the carnage and pestilence with her verdant body, hiding the ugliness. Nature as female and plague as female, then, mimic the feminine gender representations, one that creates problems for the writer Mary Shelley since such representations define women as, at once, beautiful and ugly, powerful and weak, benign and vicious, celestial and earthy. The problem for Shelley is that, if nature manifests feminine characteristics and nature has such strength, why cannot her own feminine Romantic imagination break free from its masculine hold?

Shelley's character portrayals, whether angelic or earthy, manifest her ambivalence about resolving the conflicts inherent in portraying women metaphorically. The traditional images of women do not accurately represent the feminine, yet Shelley finds it impossible to let go of those images. In order to change the representation, she must change the metaphor, but she does not seem to know what metaphors to apply; she finds no definition of her *self*, independent of the masculine definition. Her problem shows that her process of artistic irony, surfacing in her fiction, de-creates and creates within the parameters of tenacious patriarchal strictures from which even the fiction of the radical feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft had not escaped.

The Female Experimentalist

As we have seen throughout this study, Shelley's fiction exposes the inadequacies of the Romantic imagination. For the Romantics, political, religious, and economical reforms begin with the subjective individual mind (Guall 128-9), but before reforms can occur we might also consider that the subjective creative mind must become aware of its own inherent gender biases. Getting beyond those biases requires that the mind not only obliterate those assumptions but avoid limiting descriptors as well; that is, it must find more suitable language, more compatible metaphors. The masculine intellect, however, viewing itself as the essential, found little inducement to remove its biases or to change the metaphors. In fact, as Meena Alexander points out, the masculine mind could afford to ignore or even support some assumptions despite their limiting qualities (4). Too many power structures worked against change, and countering those structures required the poet or philosopher, the experimentalist--to once again employ Percy Shelley's term--to insulate themselves "from the resulting evils," imposed externally.

Of course, Mary Shelley dealt with external antagonists. In fact, her writing suggests a manifest antagonism between Romantic philosophy and established society, since society generally viewed the complex, esoteric and unfamiliar with suspicion. Shelley's pessimism about society's acceptance of antithetical philosophical propositions may partly stem from her observance of social reaction to Godwin and Wollstonecraft. Shelley had occasion to observe that, while Wollstonecraft and Godwin mapped out social and political reforms advocating alternative ideology, both suffered political and social disdain. The anti-Jacobin conservatives criticized Godwin's lack of consideration to issues of God--his heavy reliance on human nature and human virtues rather than as a supreme being. Several novelists publishing around the time of Wollstonecraft's

death, 1797, portrayed the perils of being seduced by philosophy. One female novelist wrote a popular parallel to *The Pilgrim's Progress* entitled *The Progress of the Pilgrim Good-Intent in Jacobinical Times* in which Mr. Christian's house has been overrun by advocates of reason. Mrs. Sensibility's free nature prompts her to throw herself at men (St Clair 187-188). Religion, the author implied, kept the social order in check, the political power secure. Society at large, in turn, reacted negatively toward the experimentalists so bold as to publish their thoughts.

Society discouraged female experimentalists especially. Society urged women to be "decorous and domestic," and it possessed sufficient cultural authority to stifle a woman's desire to write, or even desire itself. Women who chose writing anyway found themselves outside accepted gender definition. Godwin admitted that no man could be a great writer if "distracted by domesticity" (St Clair 144). Since domesticity distracted nearly every woman, Godwin seems to have felt women could not be great writers. His own daughter proved that while women could do both, they risk ostracism and abandonment. Since males controlled publishing, delicate, dependent, intellectually inferior women must modestly, delicately express themselves, if they hoped to be heard at all. Some of Shelley's frustration about masculine privilege surfaces now and again in her fiction, such as when Mathilda describes her relationship with Woodville (purported to be an elaborate description of Percy). "I am a farce and play to him," she complains, "but to me this is all dreary reality: he takes all the profit and I bear all the burthen" (65).

The Last Man's ambitious Countess of Windsor, the ex-Queen, symbolizes the established power structure threatened by experimentalists. When her son Adrian proposes egalitarian rule, the Countess reacts, first by isolating her children Adrian and Idris from new ideas, and when that fails, by isolating herself from her children. "It is our nature to wish to continue our systems and thoughts to posterity through our own offspring," the Countess tells Idris (241). Old systems die hard; new ones develop slowly, and even when they do

develop, facets of the old system are woven into their fabric. Since Adrian and Idris did not favor continuing things as they were, the Countess hoped her grandchildren might extend facets of the old system into the future, if only she could influence them enough.

Idris's death serves as a wake up call for the Countess. Only then does she realize the "thorny truth of things, the paltriness and futility of her cherished dreams of birth and power; the overpowering knowledge, that love and life were the true emperors of our mortal state" (262); sensitivity and allegiance to fellow human beings become more important to the Countess than allegiance to the state; emotions override reason and the result is positive. Lionel, once an enemy of the Countess, forgives her earlier shortsightedness, but he realizes that the struggle with old systems is not over. As he lays Idris's body in the Windsor vault, he "felt for a moment the intolerable sense of struggle with, and detestation for, the laws which govern the world" (260).

The Countess herself dies only after "life had naturally spent itself" (302). "She was the last tie binding us to the ancient state of things," Lionel laments. His lamentation does not reflect a disappointment that old ways might be lost, but that the power wielded by the Countess has died with her: "Janus veiled his retrospective face; that which gazed on future generations had long lost its faculty" (303). With the Countess's death, the future hides its eyes; the god opening the past to the future limits the means of transcendence; humankind becomes stuck in its place.

The Countess's situation may reflect Mary Shelley's ambivalence about the future and creating positive change. Audrey Fisch, Anne Mellor and Esther Schor note in *The Other Mary Shelley* that Shelley's letters express her anxiousness about change. She vacillates between new ideas and old, conservatism and radicalism (248). Perhaps, as Johanna Smith has asserted, she could not fathom an acceptable alternative to the structured society. After all, the savage bloodbaths of the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise to power led

Romantics from hope and euphoria to disenchantment and disillusion (St Clair 366). Or, perhaps, social influences and economic circumstances restrained Shelley from taking an overt stance one way or another. The place of women within society represented remnants of an old ordered society, and, according to Mary Poovey, many of Shelley's contemporary female writers thought that "keeping women in check" kept an ordered society (xv; 3). How then could Shelley come to terms with the "thorny truth of things?" Whether radical or conservative she found no comfortable place. Shelley's fiction at least allowed her to explore, albeit always with a concern for the censor. While her letters may occasionally disparage England's "wretched system" (*LMS* I:173), it is in her fiction that she contemplates the result of continued male dominance. She may even have recognized that for positive change to occur, Romantic consciousness must abolish instilled masculine assumptions about the female body and mind and allow women to experience an essential identity, to write their own tales.

What To Do With The Male

After the death of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley's father William Godwin began to adopt various philosophical theories that countered his earlier claims. Katherine M. Powers in *The Influence of William Godwin on the Novels of Mary Shelley* maintains that Mary Shelley's ideas often parallel Godwin's (112). Shelley's ideas, like Godwin's, seem to have alternated between radical and conservative thinking.

Godwin's major work *Political Justice* (1793), which came out a year after Wollstonecraft's publication *Rights of Woman*, sets forth his major radical theories concerning the human predicament and the perfectibility of man. Subsequently, as with *The Enquiry* (1797), discussed above, he spent most of his life defending, revising and refuting his original propositions. *Caleb Williams* followed *Political Justice*, serving as a fictional implementation of Godwin's philosophical views concerning the perfectibility of humankind. Within both *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, Godwin reasons that the rational mind will eventually fashion a perfect world. He diverges from Romantic theory, however, in that he submits to the utilitarian principle that the general good takes precedence over individual desires (Powers 135; Guall 133). Overall, he advocates implementing the use of benevolence in prompting positive change.

The aspect of Godwin's thinking especially pertinent to our study of Shelley's anti-ideology and artistic irony concerns his attitude about passion and emotion. Like Wollstonecraft, he sees emotions as interfering with rational judgment. Katherine Powers briefly discusses the situation of one character in *Caleb Williams* who illustrates Godwin's antipathy for emotions. The character fails to see the ramifications of his actions, which ultimately lead to his downfall (136).

We might just as easily name the character Victor Frankenstein. Victor's use of reason leads him to despair because he fails to consider the feelings of his creation or even his own feelings for the creature. Unlike Victor, Mary recognizes the validity of feelings. Godwin and Mary Shelley part company on the manner of reason; Godwin maintains that the use of *reason* in all matters of judgment, letting experience or experiment be the guide, leads to a state of perfection, while Mary Shelley illustrates reason's shortcomings. For Godwin, one's rational mind can discipline and suppress individual desires; for Shelley, it cannot. At one point in *Political Justice* Godwin terms *reason* the "key to perfectibility" in that, with its use, one can always see "'things as they are'" (qtd. in Powers 66-67). Godwin, however, does not see things as they are, or, at least, as Shelley sees them. Victor cannot sever his mind from his emotions, which leads to his turmoil, even though he recognizes that he ought to let reason be his guide.

While Shelley's fictional portrayals support Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's assumption that emotions and passions interfere with rational judgment, she holds no optimism that the mind can completely "train them away." In addition, she portrays the masculine mind as just as susceptible to passions as the feminine, as when Raymond's agony over Evadne renders him incapable of functioning as a husband and a leader.

To demonstrate the masculine susceptibility to his own assumptions, we should consider the masculine predicament in the same manner as the feminine. First, how does Shelley portray the masculine gender? What metaphors does she apply to the gender?

Following traditional portrayals, Shelley depicts men as god-like, dominant over the feminine angels and over feminine earth itself. These depictions become problematic for her male characters in that they find they cannot function as divine entities nor can they function independent of the female and family. The male needs and desires the traditional family; therefore,

none of the male characters are effective as omnipotent gods, since loss of family leaves them helpless and despairing. Lionel no longer wishes to live after Idris dies; Claire is Adrian's only hope to save the human race from extinction, yet he cannot save her, and he himself drowns trying. In addition, the male characters find that, ultimately, they do not even desire to fill the role of God, as the situations of Raymond, Victor Frankenstein, Adrian, and Merrival illustrate.

Shelley's use of descriptors with regard to the male gender indicate her acceptance of certain cultural assumptions about the *nature* of men, just as in the case of women. The major assumption with regard to men is that they dominate the world and the female, since it is assumed they possess superior intellects. Their superiority, then, privileges their creative imaginations. Such character portrayals, in turn, reflect Shelley's pessimism about continued male dominance. In effect, what covertly surfaces in her writing is a lack of confidence in the masculine Romantic imagination's ability to create a perfect world, since it is duped by inherent but false assumptions about its own abilities.

Shelley's attitude about Godwin and Percy reinforced her acceptance of the male as dominant. She seemed to have inherited what may be thought of as the traditional way of thinking about characteristics of gods. Her fictional god-men manifest these characteristics: creativity, tyranny, compassion, omniscience and immortality.

In *The Last Man*, Raymond exemplifies the tyrannical god. He is temperamental, vacillating in personality and actions. He begins as an ambitious and somewhat overconfident "despot," but ends as a dignified leader. Lionel calls him "full of contradictions" (33). He was "supremely handsome," the idol of women. "He was courteous, honey-tongued--an adept in fascinating arts" (28). He might be fierce one moment and gentle the next (33). He spent much time leading the Greeks in conflicts against the Turks. Among them he is "highly esteemed," a "Grecian hero" (115). "His courage, his devotion to their

cause, made him appear in their eyes almost as one of the ancient deities" (122). Like those deities he is jealous and wrathful when defied.

Like other gods he appears to be immortal. At the battle of Makri he disappears, "no broken ornament or stained trapping betrayed his fate" (117). Sorrow spread over both England and Greece for the loss of their "favorite child of fortune"; like the sun's light blocked by eclipse, "his untimely loss eclipsed the world, and shewed forth the remnant of mankind with diminished lustre" (118). Finally, the Turks release him "up for burial" (123), but under Perdita's care he is, so to speak, resurrected. Though weak, the jubilation of the people "filled him proud with pleasure" (126). "His love of the Greek people, appetite for glory, and hatred of the barbarian government under which he had suffered even to the approach of death, stimulated him" (127). He remains their leader, going alone against the enemy through the gates of Top Kapou, when fear of the enemy causes his followers to lose their faith in him. Lionel hurries his horse "to be at the side of [his] noble, god-like friend" (144) but to no avail.

Lionel relates to Perdita his inability to find Raymond; "deep admiration" carries him away and he "poured forth praises" (147). When he finds Raymond's "mutilated form," his "clod-like" body "no more resembles Raymond than the fallen rain is like the former mansion of cloud in which it climbed the highest skies, and gilded by the sun, attracted all eyes, and satiated the sense by its excess of beauty" (150). Raymond, in effect, disappears. His dying dog at his side provides the best evidence that the disfigured form is truly his. In Athens he is placed beneath a "solitary rock, high and conical, which . . . seemed a nature-hewn pyramid" (151).

Despite the encomium that Raymond amasses for his leadership, his human qualities are exposed when he becomes involved with Evadne. He then succumbs to passion, to the dominance of his physical existence. His relationship with Evadne threatens his place as head of his family and as leader of his country. Only by remaining aloof from the temptations of the flesh can he

maintain his exalted position, which, as we have observed, Shelley finds as difficult for the male to resist as for the female. How then can men be God?

We should pause to recall that Shelley based her characters upon people and situations in her own life. While Godwin may have figured in facets of her portrayal of male character, Shelley's admiration for Percy reinforced the contention that men dominate women; Percy's imagination and intellect convinced her that he was, indeed, a kind of god. A conspicuous example of Shelley's admiration for Percy appears in her journal:

I believe that we all live hereafter--if so we will it. But you, my only one, were a spirit caged, an elemental being enshrined in a frail image now shattered. Do they not all in one voice assert the same? (*JMS II*: 437)

The "all" she speaks of are others who knew Percy. Not only Mary Shelley but others thought Percy exhibited traits reserved for divine beings. Harriet de Boinville described him as an "ethereal Being who did not belong to the gross & palpable world" (qtd. in *JMS II*: 237n). To Shelley, he was "the sun of [her] existence--the animating spark" of her life (*JMS II*: 452). That she calls him a "sun" is also pertinent, since in her fiction she follows tradition in referring to the sun as masculine and ruler over the earth, and over women, just as she considered Percy to rule her, protect her and "bring her forward." It is no wonder then that Adrian's Christ-like character is based upon Percy.

Adrian's appearance and mannerisms contrast with Raymond's, but his godliness is no less apparent. Adrian appears Christ-like, rather than like the god of the Old Testament. He was slim, fair complected, with golden hair and "a physiognomy expressive of the excess of sensibility and refinement." Adrian's "sweet benignity" quells Lionel's querulous anger upon their first meeting. "... come home with me," he bids Lionel, "you know who I am?" "Yes," answers Lionel, "I do believe that I know you and that you will pardon my mistakes--my crimes" (17). Lionel is so taken with Adrian's mien that he exclaims, "This is

power, Not to be strong of limb, hard of heart, ferocious and daring; but kind, compassionate, and soft" (19).

For some time Adrian wanders, "far from the haunts of men" and in seclusion contemplates the improvement of his people (30, 32), like the New Testament Jesus Christ who disappears for some eighteen years. Adrian's whereabouts are finally made known to his family and friends, and they find him recovering from a fever but "full of preachings." He espouses optimism about "a most benignant power" that "built up the majestic fabric we inhabit" (53). Surely nature with all its loveliness has some purpose for humankind. "Why should this be," he asks, "if HE were not good" (53). Later, when the plague pounces upon the community, Adrian attends to the sick without regard to his own health, explaining his resistance as a "peculiar liability to infection" (185).

Adrian, in his role as the messiah, has many followers, seems immune to illness and preaches the greatness of God. He has spent years wandering about but comes back to preach his knowledge. At one point, he and his *twelve* disciples (again mimicking Jesus Christ) set sail to spread their message of peace. Unlike the tyrannical Raymond, Adrian reflects a passive god. During the disruptive times of political strife, he desires "a bloodless peace" (216), commanding his troops to sheath their weapons: "As you honour me--as you worship God, in whose image those also are created--as your children and friends are dear to you,--shed not a drop of precious human blood" (217-218). Such butchery he finds crueler than that of the plague's. The warring numbers obey. As the plague's toll mounts, Adrian comes forth to lead a group of about a thousand "into the tenantless realms of the south" (240). But even there they meet with adversity in the form of a prophetic leader, capable of "incalculable mischief, if fanaticism or intolerance guided their efforts." One strong group declared itself the Elect and preached against the others. Adrian, Lionel, and the twelve disciples leave in a small boat for Paris. They arrive to find the female

"angels of mercy," wives, mothers and daughters attempting to thwart the battle. Adrian, on his "white charger," rode into the tumult. The mere sight of him "warmed to affection" the late adversaries. Women "kissed his hands and the edges of his garments"; he appears as "an angel of peace," mimicking, it seems, the title of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace (276-77). The women, more so than the men, press round him and "bestowed on him every sacred denomination and epithet of worship" (277). The two leaders meet. Adrian's opponent breaks into a fire and brimstone speech, proclaiming that God's poison arrows will smite the heart of his enemy; "... you speak of what you do not understand," Adrian cautions, for "... my orisons consist of peace and good will" (278).

The parallels between Jesus Christ and Adrian are obvious. Like Christ, Adrian displays compassion and passiveness. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Christ (Matthew 5:10). Like Christ, called the Prince of Peace, Adrian is termed the angel of peace. He wanders in the wilderness to contemplate god. He recognizes the hostility of his enemies lies in their inability to understand. The plague has no effect upon him and when an assassin's attempt is foiled, Adrian "turns the other cheek," so to speak, and saves the assassin from the vengeful crowd (295).

Shelley's other masculine fictional gods, like Prometheus stealing fire from the sun, rule, save and, also, create. Some of these gods strive to "steal the secrets of nature," and thus, like Prometheus, the secrets animate mankind (*Mary Shelley* 71). Elizabeth turns her celestial eyes on "majestic and wondrous scenes," while Victor Frankenstein investigates "their causes." He says that "the world was to me a secret which I desired to divine" (42). His foray into science might "unveil the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery" (45). He wants to understand secrets of "her," as progenitor of the earth, that might allow him to create. Perhaps, then, as a creator god, he can control nature and be the savior of humankind.

In *The Last Man*, Merrival, the astronomer--possibly a second Percy figure (Poovey 151)--seems unearthly in that his thoughts are always in the heavens. He, like Victor, is a creator god. Merrival is possessed with admiration for astronomical science, just as Victor Frankenstein's desire to create life possesses him. He seems to be, like Victor, striving to understand the secrets of nature and to control her; thus, he might "play god." Raymond admonishes him that "earth is not, nor ever can be heaven, while the seed of hell are natives of her soil," and mankind, he laments, is far from a state of brotherhood. "Not so far as you may suppose," Merrival replies, "the poles that precede slowly, but securely; in a hundred thousand years" earth may "become paradise" (159). He believes, obviously, in perfectibility. Oblivious to the surrounding distress of his family and society and near starvation himself, he "would have given his right hand to have observed a celestial phenomenon" (208). His wife, "a wondrous being," has 'boundless admiration for her husband' yet "tender anxiety" for her starving children (208).

Merrival's task consumes him; he has no time for his wife and children. He finds, however, that he cannot exist nor does he care to exist without the wife and family that he has neglected, but, because of his neglect--which reflects Mary's complaint of Percy's neglect of her and their babies while he pursued his interests--because of his neglect of his family due to his obsession with perfectibility, his wife and children do not survive. Unlike Percy, however, Merrival's losses devastate him. He is disgusted with himself and his science. Perhaps, then, masculine godliness depends upon the female, is reluctantly granted by the female, because she allows him his superiority with her submission; without her, he is a god without power, and, therefore, he fails as a god in the Biblical sense.

Frankenstein presents two other man-gods--though not so explicitly as the above--Victor Frankenstein and Henry Clerval; both, like Merrival, are susceptible to the enlightenment temptations of a knowable, perfectible world.

Victor represents the emotional, passionate god, rather like Raymond's image, while Clerval seems more messianic.

Walton relates Victor's lamentations concerning the alienation and despair of "unfashioned creatures" who depend upon the strength of "one wiser, better, dearer" than themselves. Walton observes the sensibility of his acquaintance:

"Even a broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature. . . Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet, when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures."
(16)

Like the Old Testament God, Victor creates life from lifeless parts. He suffers the torments of his creation's own innocent reasoning. He tries to destroy that creation, but finds the creation destroying him. The creature grieves his own birth: "How often did I imprecate curses on the cause of my being" (121), and "Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live" (117)? Victor, his benevolent creator, has compassion. When the fiend asks him for a wife, he considers that he "ought to render him happy" before he "complained of his wickedness" (92). He felt "what the duties of a creator towards his creature were" (92). He is, like a mythical Prometheus, the creator and savior.

While these god-men, on the one hand, may reflect Mary Shelley's confidence in the masculine gender to rule and protect, since she depicts her male characters with god-like attributes, they also express her lack of faith in their rationality. Raymond strives to be the perfect leader, to steel himself against "intoxicating passion"; specifically, love, "that tyrant" (39). He will become "the tyrant queller," the conqueror of that which once conquered him (39). But when he falls in love with Perdita, he chooses her rather than his kingdom. The people lose confidence in him. At first "his kingdom was the

heart of Perdita, his subjects her thoughts" (65). When Evadne attracts his passions, he becomes confused and again neglects his kingdom. No remedy abates his "illness." "As if seized with a paroxysm of insanity" he "trampled on all ceremony, all order, all duty and gave himself up to license" (106). Raymond gives in to the physical world, acknowledging it as part of his being. Doing so limits his Judeo-Christian Godliness, since God is not of the physical realm. As he gives in to the flesh, the flesh weakens his perfection. While he is, unlike a woman, permitted his license, he must suffer his fall from grace, since his love for Evadne tarnishes his godly image.

Raymond's quandary demonstrates Shelley's lack confidence in rationality and perfection in an irrational and imperfect world. Here Shelley's views diverge from her father's. She presents perfection as unattainable (Powers 113). The powerful passions of the flesh interfere and triumph over one's reason, both the male's and the female's. Raymond's ensuing struggle to retain his godliness leads him to an emotional crisis that interferes with his judgment, and ultimately brings about his demise.

Adrian, too, fails as an omnipotent. Like the tragic hero, his downfall resides in his overconfidence in his own wisdom, and, thus, he, too, brings about his own demise. He decides to go to Greece by sea. Lionel consents, against his own better judgment. A storm breaks their ship apart and separates the last three survivors of the plague, Adrian, Lionel and Clara. Lionel beats back the waves to save the other two, but only Lionel survives. Adrian's error in judgment has cost him his life and the life of the last potential mother of the human race. Like all the man-gods, Adrian lets his confidence in his superiority override his rational judgment.

George Levine, in *The Realistic Imagination*, calls Victor Frankenstein's passions "the true sin--not the theft of fire from heaven--but of seeking idealism, to find and acknowledge passion and love," of which both Victor and his

monster are guilty (30). "Remember, I am thy creature," the monster reminds him, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel" (90).

In some respects, both Victor and his monster fall from grace. Victor speaks of himself as "an archangel who aspired to omnipotence"; where once he "trod heaven in his thoughts" he is now "chained in an eternal hell" (176). And his creation, cast as it was in all its wretchedness into society, confronts the enigmas of social doctrine: a compassionate soul who gets no compassion; a benevolent soul deprived of benevolence. As a result, the creature does not fall from grace but is pushed.

Margaret Guall notes that the Romantics such as Percy Shelley and Byron sometimes designated the fallen angel--Satan--as a victim of a tyrannical god (178). Swingle cites William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as subtly suggesting that "the difference between an angel and a devil was simply a matter of opposed party allegiances, commitment to differing principles of definition concerning truth and falsity" (120). One "party," says Swingle, views another as suspicious, as lacking "right reason" (120-21). Satan might then represent an equally valid God, but one who suffers under the oppression of another. If Mary Shelley had that in mind, then Victor is God the Old Testament tyrant over the creature Satan, who is then the oppressed one, and who is despised for principles not fitting the dominant species, the species of Victor, which does not include the species of the creature. Thus Victor decides that he must annihilate the opposing species, and he reneges on his promise to make a wife for the creature:

Even if they [the creature and his wife] were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the demon 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. (140)

No matter that Victor's and society's reactions toward the creature have forced the creature to retaliate with violence; the creature is blamed entirely for his situation, and the tragedy of his situation is that the sin for which he is condemned is based upon false assumptions, for no one ever sees him for what he truly is: compassionate but lonely, wanting the chance to be a human species, wanting appraisal without consideration of his appearance. Like a woman, he is the inessential, the Other, whose Otherness Victor Frankenstein cannot understand and because he cannot understand it, he fears it. Because he fears the creature, he disdains him and aims either to control or destroy him. Beyond any responsibility he may feel for the creature, Victor cannot tolerate the creature's difference; he cannot tolerate an equally valid "god," of another species.

Victor, as the tyrannical god, flees his creation and then settles on destroying him. The oppressed fights back: "Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives." He is leading Victor to "the everlasting ices of the north," where Victor will feel "the misery of cold and frost" to which he [the creature] is "impassive" (170). The creature's physique mimics that of the serpent that soaks up the warmth when near warmth and the cold when near cold; the environment fashions his nature, his disposition, his principles. Victor fears his knowledge of the creature; as if he had "committed some great crime, the consciousness" haunted him; he had "drawn upon himself a great curse" (138). Because Victor refuses to accept the Otherness of the creature's species, the oppressed retaliates and all those whom Victor loves suffer and die.

Within Shelley's fiction, no man ever fully measures up to that compilation of characteristics which nineteenth-century patriarchal society designated as "manly," but the application of godly characteristics to the male had become so pervasive in Shelley's culture that even the male could not abolish them, had he desired to do so. As a result, in her fiction, Shelley shows that the male as well as those he controls suffer emotionally, physically and

psychologically when they try to accommodate the traditional definition of masculine. Inevitably their inadequacies leave them ashamed and alienated.

What had men become in nineteenth-century culture? Where was their place? Shelley's writing raises questions about the masculine predicament and the problems with adhering to a masculine essentialness at the expense of Others; she shows that such men lose their places in the hierarchy, the chain of being, and, like the women who dare to break with social constructs, they have no authentic definition, so they become superfluous; they recognize the problems inherent in maintaining power and control over Others, but they are loath to abdicate, and the internal conflict their situations arouse renders them ineffective, impotent as gods.

"I asserted that the world was mad," exclaimed
poor Lee, "and the world said, that I was mad, and
confound them, they outvoted me."
(*Biographis Literaria*, Coleridge)
(qtd. in Swingle 126)

7

The Woman Alone and Writing

Mary Shelley's particular experience as a woman writer and intellectual of the nineteenth century contributed to her literary method of portraying female characters as helpless and dependent, even though her fiction also shows that continued masculine power leads to destruction: emotionally, physically and psychologically. We have seen that, since patriarchal definitions of feminine identity were so firmly rooted within the artist's imagination and language, Shelley found it impossible to be free of the masculine Romantic thinking that informed her art. In order to free her mind of masculine assumptions taken as truths, she needed to obliterate the influences--religion, politics, philosophy, language. Shelley's writing shows that she sees no possibility of that; for her, no thought exists independently of previous thoughts. Even had she lived in complete isolation, as she has her character Mathilda opt to do, she still would not have freed her mind of social dictates. As a consequence, who she is depends upon those who came before her, just as the characters and situations in her fiction depend upon her own experience.

William Godwin used the word "Necessity" as a label for the chain connecting the present to the past, everything to everything, or, more succinctly, historical determinism. Mary Shelley was familiar with Godwin's concept of chains and Necessity; the idea of Necessity had come into fashionable use in theological and scientific debates of the time. Thus Necessity explained how past influences the present and future (St Clair 71; Gaull 134).

However, Godwin's views changed with time, but Mary Shelley maintained belief in Necessity, and, it would seem, with good reason. Swingle in *The Obstinate Questionings* calls attention to Godwin's growing skepticism about adhering too long or too consistently to one system of thought at the expense of other systems of thought. Such is the consequence of the chain of Necessity, but how is one to overcome Necessity's hold and break its chains? Swingle quotes from Godwin's book *The Enquiry*, a book filled with ideas that Godwin admits contradict many of his previous claims in *Political Justice*. As for creating new systems of thought, Godwin speculates that,

here everything is connected, as it were, in an indissoluble chain, and an oversight in one step vitiates all that are to follow. . . . We proceed most safely, when we enter upon each portion of our process, as it were, *de novo* [anew]. . . . there is danger, if we are too exclusively anxious about consistency of system, that we may forget the perpetual attention we owe to experience, the pole-star of truth. (41)

Godwin suspects commitment to any system of thought, since experiences that undermine an established system of thought may be discovered at any time, making adherence to any system open to question and undermining the absoluteness of truth, since, paradoxically, absoluteness is the aspect of truth that gives truth its definition; absolute truths, then, cannot exist, since truth is culturally and temporally bound. Truths can then only be transitory and therefore can never really be truths as *truth* is traditionally defined. Unimpaired identity or identity that has not been "vitiating" by the established system of thought becomes problematic, since one system gives rise to and pollutes the next; therefore, according to Godwin, the only way to be sure of truth is to start fresh, and use "experience" (which seems to mean here *experiment* in the empirical sense), without depending upon the dictates of the previous system.

The sticky problem with this thinking with regard to gender identity, however, is that any experiment is flawed at its outset, since both masculine and feminine experience is propagated and nourished within the dominant masculine culture and, therefore, can never really start fresh; one is never free enough to author his or her own identity, never a lone writer of his or her own story; ²⁰¹⁵ ~~their~~ ^{Godwin's} narratives are dependent upon previous narratives. Is there then any hope for change? Can one ever transcend predeterminers of self? Determined philosophers might find a way out of this morass of relativism but Mary Shelley never succeeded. Her stories have predetermined beginnings and endings; she moves within the middle, but she depends upon the experiences she knows, masculinely constructed truths. She adheres to the thinking of those she admired and who informed her intellect: Godwin, Percy Shelley and other male Romantics with whom she associated. Like Godwin, such Romantic thinkers at first viewed Necessity as a means of assisting man's quest for perfection, but they later thought the doctrine of Necessity limited the present and thus the future, since both hold vestiges of the past and, therefore, can never completely be free of former systems of thought. Former systems, then, undermine Mary Shelley's artistic irony and fuel her skepticism while stifling her creative freedom, since each "new" thought is woven with the masculine conceptions of women as the inessential Other. Her artistic creation is then fashioned from that fabric, already a shroud over Shelley's and women's independent authentic identity.

The words of *The Last Man's* narrator, Lionel Verney, a character portrayal of Mary Shelley herself, illustrate that Shelley was convinced that Necessity cannot be discounted, that a new system of thought can never be free from the influence of its predecessors:

Servant of the Omnipotent! eternal, changeless Necessity!
who with busy fingers sittest ever weaving the indissoluble chain
of events!--I will not murmur at thy acts. If my human mind

cannot acknowledge that all that is, is right; yet since what is must be, I will sit amidst the ruins and smile. Truly we are not born to enjoy, but to submit and to hope. (290-91)

Godwin might assert that, ideally, systems ought to start afresh, but the reality of Necessity is that one thought feeds off another. Lionel's words reflect that resignation, echoing Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* with its emphasis on acceptance; Lionel's attitude is pessimistic about future change, about changes in the system. He calls Necessity changeless and eternal, indicating its power not only to determine but also to limit.

Consequently, Shelley's characters and plots illustrate limitations on feminine power, and she offers only limited hope that tradition might be overturned. Since Necessity limits freedom, does it not reinforce tradition?

A conversation between Lionel and Raymond reflects Shelley's internal conflict with regard to Necessity's limitations upon change, to de-create and create, to engage in, that is, artistic irony, freedom. Raymond surmises that

we are born; we choose neither our parents, nor our station; we are educated by others, or by the world's circumstance, and this cultivation, mingling with our innate disposition, is the soil in which our desires, passions, and motives grow. (47)

He accepts that the past influences one's personality and ambitions, one's identity; the outer world affects the inner world, or, put another way, one's perception, dependent upon the objective outer world, influences one's conception of the world and one's subjective conception of self.

Lionel counters:

There is much truth in what you say, and yet no man ever acts upon this theory. Who, when he makes a choice, says, Thus I choose, because I am necessitated? Does he not on the contrary feel a freedom of will within him, which, though you call it fallacious, still actuates him as he decides? (47)

Although Lionel recognizes the tyranny of Necessity, he notes that most people disregard its presence because personal choice allows them freedom.

Raymond agrees, but then follows with another question:

Exactly so, another link of the breakless chain. Were I now to commit an act which would annihilate my hopes, and pluck the regal garment from my mortal limbs, to clothe them in ordinary weeds, would this, think you, be an act of free-will on my part? (47)

The problem inherent with choice, however, is that the choice itself is a link in the chain since the outer world affects the inner world, and the choices are never without the influence of the outer world; thus Shelley finds herself unable to write a distinct identity or fashion a distinct ideology. Though Lionel does not offer a rebuttal to Raymond, he soon discovers that Raymond's passion for Evadne does indeed pluck the regal garment from Raymond's mortal limbs. The question that arises out of Raymond and Evadne's predicament is not so much whether or not they could control passion but should they? Raymond's desire for Evadne or hers for him does not abate because Necessity dictates that it should, so while Raymond may choose either Evadne or his family, Necessity limits his--or ought we to say, Shelley's--choices.

The feminine predicament comes through as more tragic than the masculine; Evadne's physical, emotional and economic suffering parallel Perdita's and the plague-ridden populace's, but patriarchal mores justify *her* suffering. Her love for Raymond (and his for her) is simply not *right*, according to societal rules; their love threatens property, territory and security; established truths, manifested in property and power and manifested into rules of decorum and propriety, render their relationship unacceptable. However, as a woman, Evadne's options are more limited than Raymond's; Shelley conceives two: seclusion and death.

Mathilda, too, suffers from the effects of established systems. Ashamed of her passion for her father and blaming herself for arousing his sexual desire,

she finds no welcoming place within society. She implores her dead father to understand her predicament:

My father, to be happy both now and when again we meet I must
fly from all this life which is mockery to one like me. In solitude
only shall I be myself; in solitude I shall be thine. (49)

Mathilda exiles herself from society, even though no one but herself knows of her intimacy with her father, exemplifying that the established patriarchal system controls not only the outer world of appearance, but the inner world as well. Since she cannot banish the guilt of her relationship with her father, she “fixed [herself] on a wide solitude” (51). She counts on death as an escape from the constraints of the system.

In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more
pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying
my limbs already enrap in their shroud: is it not my marriage
dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal
mental union we shall never part. (77-78)

Mathilda finds that her earthly experience can never be her own; her *self* is disillusioned; she has no self-ownership; her identity is passive, reflecting the established definitions, and, as a consequence of that reflection, her constructed identity may then be self-deceiving, since she feels that she cannot construct a true identity in a constructed environment that informs and limits the construction of the new identity. Mathilda’s situation leaves her at an impasse and leaves her deserted, much as Shelley’s own situation as a nineteenth-century widowed-woman writer and intellectual leaves her feeling abandoned and powerless to change her situation or society.

Like so many of her characters--Mathilda, the creature, Lionel--Shelley expresses overtly or covertly in fiction and non-fiction her apprehensions about being alone and her fear of dejection. After the death of her son William, Shelley wrote that she “did not cease to wish to die,” but it was not that she was

discontent, but rather “fear that stamped this unveiled feeling” on her (465). Fear, she implies, that Percy might leave her alone. “And now the worst is realized,” she grieves (465). Only death itself could relieve her insecurity and despair of isolation, since she felt she could have no authentic existence independent of her husband. Like Mathilda, Shelley realizes that being alone does not free the mind or allow the female to start a fresh experience unpolluted by former experiences nor does being alone secure one a living, especially for a woman who has already overstepped the bounds of propriety in a society that values feminine conformity and masculine authority.

After Percy’s death, Mary Shelley understood the penalties she and Percy’s challenges to the status quo had aroused. The death of Percy left her without a “Protector,” and relegated her to a life of isolation and despair: “I never, in all my woes, understood the feelings that led to suicide till now,” she writes (*JMS* II: 486). Without her husband, Mary Shelley has no optimism for her future, as she might have if she had been a man, yet ironically she calls herself, “The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me--” (*JMS* II: 476-77). She later writes those emotions into the masculine voice of Lionel Verney, who is the mouthpiece of a near extinct species and a mouthpiece for herself. He compares himself to “that monarch of waste,” Robinson Crusoe, but, at least, “he [Crusoe] could hope, nor hope in vain--the destined vessel at last arrived” (326). For Lionel “still disappointment ushered in the hours” (329) as with Shelley, herself, who had lost all hope: “I hope not,” she laments, “God knows I do not hope--& therefore I pray that I may die” (*JMS* II: 484). Perhaps she creates the masculine narrator Lionel Verney because she does not feel comfortable having a woman speak for the species, and perhaps, because she has so little optimism for her feminine social situation, having Lionel be female may have weakened the narrative voice, made it seem less urgent. A feminine narrator might also have made the book less likely to have been read as

serious literature (at least in the nineteenth century), which, ironically, would also have made the ending even more pessimistic and despairing, since it is only through the publication and the reading of Lionel's story that we know that Lionel and the race never die out--the reader is essential since the reader is the proof of the species's continuation. An additional irony concerning the book's denouement is that Shelley does not seem to consider the bringer of life, the woman, and perhaps even the woman writer, as capable of sustaining the life of the race, which reinforces my contention that Shelley's imagination worked within the parameters of a masculine constructed and controlled society.

Woodville serves as another masculine mouthpiece for Shelley's despairing. Mathilda writes that Woodville "says all hope is dead to him, and I know it is dead to me, so we are both equally fitted for death" (66). That Woodville "says" and Mathilda "knows" reveals the pessimism of the feminine situation as compared to the masculine. That Mathilda "knows" her hope is dead indicates finality, while Woodville "says," which may be interpreted to mean that he may be wrong about his predicament; he may still be able to move on to new relationships, free from the guilt and social opprobrium that stifles Mathilda. Mathilda, and we see, as with Shelley herself, does not comprehend the inherent reason for her predicament and does not know how to change it.

"Was I then a blot on the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned," wonders the creature? "I feared yet did not understand. I admired virtue and good feelings, and loved the gentle manners and amiable qualities of my cottagers; but I was shut out from intercourse with them" (106). Life makes no sense; one as the creature can do "good" and yet be judged as "bad." For the creature, like Mary Shelley, social opprobrium amplifies the inscrutability of existence; situations beyond his power or understanding dictate his life and isolate him. The creature represents Shelley's despair and lack of hope. While all characters of all the fictions studied here express hope at some point, all lose that hope before the novels end. "We know not what all this wide

world means; . . . But we are placed here and bid live and hope," Mathilda writes; "I know not what we are to hope; but there is some good beyond us that we must seek" (69). Mathilda hopes for a better world beyond the visible, free from the confines of appearances. As Shelley's writings indicate, death offers the only means to freedom:

"When the curtain drops on this mortal scene," asks Lionel of Idris, "where, think you, we shall find ourselves?" Idris contemplates then responds:

What a scare-crow, indeed, would death be, if we were merely to cast aside the shadow in which we now walk, and, stepping forth into the unclouded sunshine of knowledge and love, revived with the same companions. . . leaving our fears . . . in the grave. (247).

Earthly suffering and isolation become for her characters and for Shelley an aspect of existence. Swingle points out that a preoccupation with isolation is characteristic of Romantic poetry. Through the isolated character, the artist explores the individual reacting against a world that "out-votes him, testing the power of the one mind to remain free and constitute, as it were, a party to itself alone" (126). Independent authenticity may be possible for the male, but Shelley discovers that the same does not prove true for the female. Lionel's, Mathilda's and the creature's situations are Shelley's own literary experimental test cases. Mathilda's words that "in solitude I shall be myself" echo Shelley's own, but what Shelley's tests reveal is that she is never in solitude. Her solitude is a masculine construction that is dependent upon viewing the feminine as inessential to the anti-ideological stance of creative, authentic selfhood. Mathilda carries the shame of her incestuous relationship with her father, and even though the secret is hers alone, she cannot banish its influence upon her mind. She is confused in her roles as daughter and wife. She is confused by the masculine definition of "herself," yet she does not know how to go about constructing an independent identity.

Shelley, like her characters, cannot ignore gender roles; her existence and her economic welfare depend upon her maintaining those roles, without choice. Though she explores other systems of thought, she is effectively restrained by the system in control, physically, mentally, emotionally. In a real sense, Shelley is never alone and, therefore, she is never "a party unto herself alone," but always constrained by the party that outvotes her--the masculine party.

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