Anxiety of Female Authorship: Identity and Gender in Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

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**ABSTRACT**

While female writers dominated the publishing of English prose fiction in the 18th century, the tradition of the English novel was widely accredited to male authors. Some later literary mechanisms, such as the female gothic and frame narratives, allowed female writers to critique the socialization of women in literature while appearing to concede to the patriarchal structures. This paper argues that Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* use the gothic paradigm and frame narratives to portray the psychological harm to female identity and women’s growing distrust of language to convey feminine desires in a patriarchal structure.

Gothic fiction’s association with the supernatural often damages the genre’s reputation because its play and oscillation between “the earthly laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural” (Hogle 2002, 2) imply that it is not firmly positioned in reality and thus does not warrant scholarly analysis. However, since the late twentieth century, many scholars have successfully argued for the legitimacy of the gothic genre. According to Jerrold E. Hogle (2002, 2), gothic fiction takes place in “an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space,” in which secrets from the past haunt the characters either psychologically or physically. These hauntings take on many forms, but essentially the gothic novel forces the characters and by extension the audience, to face the repressed crimes or conflicts within a society (Hogle 2002).

Although his focus is on poetry, Harold Bloom’s (1997) theory of anxiety of influence similarly argues for the prominent influence of the past on the present. Bloom (1997, 5) analyzes the relationship between poets as they face inevitable influences on their work, and he claims that poetic history should be “held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.” Fundamentally, Bloom’s anxiety of influence theory argues that poetic history
consists of “strong action and inevitable reaction” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, xiii) and that these influences cause poets to experience anxiety in writing, or “the fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before him and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings” (46). Thus, the poet’s goal, however unconscious, is to “engage in heroic warfare with his ‘precursor’” and therefore “create a place for himself in literary tradition by somehow invalidating his poetic father” (47). The need to destroy the precursor and the attempt to mimic or correct the precursor’s work, however, leads to inevitable influence on the poet. Bloom’s (1997) theory demonstrates the poet’s reliance on the precursor for meaning and explores the nature of their interactions.

Bloom’s (1997) meditation on poetry has also been reinterpreted to analyze women writers and the emergence of the gothic paradigm. Previous scholars have argued that the anxiety between the female author and male precursor illustrates how women attempted to create places for themselves within literary tradition as a reaction to the established patriarchal systems (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 7). Diana Wallace (2013, 1) writes, “from the late eighteenth century, women writers, aware of their exclusion from traditional historical narratives, have used Gothic historical fiction as a mode of historiography which can simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolize their exclusion”. Women writers have largely been excluded from literary history, and the literary canon and feminist critics have only insisted upon research over the last fifty years. Paula R. Backscheider (2000, 1) stresses the importance for scholarly research about early women writers, saying, “Students of the eighteenth-century novel must now ask if the early women writers should be treated as a rival or counter tradition or, apparently most difficult of all, as an integral part of the history of the ‘rise’ of the English novel”. As Backscheider argues, eighteenth-century male authors such as Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding are celebrated for producing “individualized masterpieces of social observation and psychological depth” (2000, 1) which paved the way for the tradition of the modern novel.

Backscheider’s (2000) ideas build upon Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s (1979) feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 49) use Harold Bloom’s work to further theorize that female authors faced a unique strain of anxiety: the anxiety of authorship, or “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her”. The following essay will use Judith Butler’s theories to question this approach on gender and identity; first, however, it is imperative to examine how Gilbert and Gubar’s (1979) influential text analyzes female authors’ fear of literary autonomy, how the perceived generative or male literary power causes psychological damage, and how they transcend these literary confinements. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argued that female authors were trapped within a
literary structure, which as Edward Said observed, is embedded with “genealogical connections” under which “is the imagery of succession, of paternity, or hierarchy” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 5). Gilbert and Gubar’s (1979) work made known the image of the madwoman as a covert feminist figure in which “madness signified anger and therefore, by extension, protest” (Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 2). Critics argue that Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley are two such female writers whose work exhibits the effects of writing within a patriarchal structure and tradition.

In Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), sisters Julia and Emilia live confined in an ancient castle near the straits of Messina. When their father, Ferdinand, the fifth marquis of Mazzini, returns to the island, they witness mysterious lights and sounds from the neglected southern tower of the castle. During this time, Julia falls in love with Count Hippolitus de Verea, and when her father proposes a marriage of alliance to the vile Duke of Luovo, she runs away with Hippolitus. However, during their escape, the marquis’ men seemingly kill Hippolitus, leaving Julia to flee from her father and a life condemned to a loveless and unhappy marriage. As this study will show, Radcliffe’s (2008) heroine usurps the established patriarchal structures, symbolized by her father and the church, in her longing for a more equal companionate marriage, which makes this text optimistic. However, Radcliffe’s (2008) solution of a companionate marriage also illustrates how, as Christiane Makward argues, “women are resigning themselves to silence, and to nonspeech. The speech of the other will then swallow them up, will speak for them, and instead of them” (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 1998, 2). Even though there is love in a companionate marriage, which suggests the limited privilege of choosing a husband, wives are still subject to power and domination in their marriages. Thus, the optimistic view of companionate marriage fails to completely free women from patriarchal authority and allow them to express their experience. This motivated later women writers, such as Mary Shelley, to correct the failures of literary tradition. Both *A Sicilian Romance* and *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) use the gothic paradigm and frame narratives, a literary technique in which an introductory narrative is used to highlight a second muted narrative is used to depict the psychological harm to female identity and women’s growing distrust of language’s ability to convey feminine desires that are caused by a patriarchal structure. However, Radcliffe’s (2008) use of the gothic paradigm to portray this psychological harm is more straightforward in its expression of female desire, demonstrated by the ways in which the heroine usurps the established systems and its use of one unified narrative compared to the several narratives in *Frankenstein*.

As opposed to Radcliffe, Mary Shelley (1992) uses the gothic paradigm and frame narratives to parody gender norms and identity. Judith Butler (2004, 120) characterizes gender “as a form of psychic mime that is the subject’s melancholic
response to the lost identifications it mimetically incorporates”. That is to say that seemingly intrinsic ideas about gender are actually enforced through acts of repetition. However, Butler (2004) then identifies how troublesome identifications, by not conforming to social standards, undermine the validity of the power that these gender identities claim to hold. In this same way, Frankenstein’s obscure treatment of feminine desire and identity illustrates how “the utterly constructed status of the so-called original” only “constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition” (130). In Frankenstein, an explorer named Walton encounters Victor Frankenstein and learns of his endeavor to create and animate a creature constructed from corpses. Frankenstein recounts his tale to Walton and describes how, upon his success, Frankenstein felt horror and disgust at the “monster” he brings to life. The monster, who is rejected by his maker for his grotesqueness and is denied human companionship, retaliates against Frankenstein by murdering his loved ones. As this author will argue below, Shelley uses the monster, which was created in the image of Frankenstein, to parody the male “claim to originality” (130).

Building on Gilbert and Gubar (1979), by using Butler (2004), one can see the importance of Shelley’s (1992) response to her forbearers. While these two female authors shared a desire to create a space for themselves in the literary tradition, they approached this task differently. Radcliffe (2008) offers an optimistic view of companionate marriage as a method of usurping the patriarchal structure in A Sicilian Romance but fails to accurately express the female experience. Shelley (1992) emphasizes how the exclusion of women writers from literary tradition signifies their classification as secondary or less valuable than male authors, who were prioritized for being authentic or original. While Radcliffe (2008) offers an optimistic view of companionate marriage, Shelley (1992) uses the monster in Frankenstein to illustrate the constructedness of gender and identity by masculinizing the female experience. The monster is an example of a “troublesome identification” (Butler 2004, 120) because he refuses (and is physically unable) to mimic Frankenstein and establish identity. Thus, the monster disrupts the notion of “singular and stable” (120) gender identities. By distorting the portrayal of gender, Shelley, according to Butler (2004, 128) demonstrates how “the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable.” The monster demonstrates that gender or identity is not determined by sex, which questions the validity of a structure that derives its power from the performative constitution of gender. As Butler (2004, 128) observes, this inversion disrupts “the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term.” By responding to her gothic forbearers, as Bloom (1997) and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) suggest, Shelley’s Frankenstein highlights the failure of A Sicilian Romance and the patriarchal literary tradition by acknowledging the illusory nature of identity and disrupting the patriarchal structure’s claim to power and authenticity.
Ann Radcliffe is often referred to as one of the founders of the gothic tradition whose work was widely popular and influential to later generations of writers after the publication of her third novel in 1791. However, as Janet Todd (1989, 255) notes, Radcliffe’s conservative views of authorship support the traditional perception of a woman writer whose writing “could serve as an extension of her domestic social role.” Radcliffe’s view of writing as an extension of her social duty is based on the assignment of “the gothic to women writers as one of their appropriate provinces” as Betty Rizzo (2000, 102) argued in “Renegotiating the Gothic.” Radcliffe’s work not only represents her interactions with the precursory patriarchal literary tradition but also reflects how the social construction of femininity and gender roles in literature creates and enforces female identity. Feminist critics have explored the split identities of the traditional woman whose femininity was constructed by patriarchal cultural norms and “women’s subjective experience of gendered identity” (Guest 2000, 46). It has been argued that literary mechanisms, such as the female gothic, actually allowed female writers to critique the socialization of women in literature while appearing to concede to the patriarchal structures. Thus, Radcliffe’s (2008) work reflects the precursors’ traditional ideas of femininity while subverting those same ideas.

According to Miles (2000, 44), Gilbert and Gubar argue that the social oppression of women is evident in the female gothic paradigm in which women writers were devoted to expressing “the inexpressible in female experience”. They claim that the gothic paradigm allows women writers to express their own subjective female experience while contending to the patriarchal structure (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Robert Miles (2000) argues that Radcliffe’s work serves as a representation of her own repressed female desires. He writes, “Radcliffe and her heroines are one, but not in any cryptic, biographical sense. Her heroines are the expression, the need itself in action, of Radcliffe’s requirement to create room for herself in the world” (Miles 2000, 46). While Radcliffe may have viewed her writing as an extension of her social duty, her work came to represent the standard plot of the female gothic that presented education as a method for women to usurp the patriarchal structure (Rizzo 2000, 62). In A Sicilian Romance, Ferdinand, the fifth marquis of Mazzini is a ruthless and tyrannical leader, and his only attention towards his daughters, Emilia and Julia, is focused on their education. Radcliffe (2008, 4) writes “[the marquis] paid an annual visit to the castle of Mazzinni,” but stayed “only to give such general directions concerning the education of his daughters, as his pride, rather than his affection, seemed to dictate”. Education balances out Julia’s “extreme sensibility [that] subjected her to frequent uneasiness” (4). Thus, Radcliffe (2008) uses the gothic genre to write female characters that went against gender norms. In particular, Julia goes against the established systems in her desire and pursuit of a companionate marriage with Hippolitus; she disobeys her father’s order to marry the Duke of Luovo, who was “a character very similar to that of the marquis” and
“delighted in simple undisguised tyranny” and would have been a much more lucrative marriage alliance (57).

Julia's sensibility also indicates an awareness of her identity in a patriarchal structure when "she found it possible to be unhappy, though loved by Hippolitus" (Radcliffe 2008, 24). This moment, in which Julia is aware of her own unhappiness, indicates an understanding that she should and is expected to be happy with a domestic role. Julia's realization of her subordinate and hopeless position in the monastery further suggests a lack of female satisfaction. Radcliffe (2008) writes:

> When madame related the particulars of the conference, Julia presaged from it only misery, and giving herself up for lost – she burst into tears. She severely deplored the confidence she had been induced to yield; for she now saw herself in the power of a man, stern and unfeeling in his nature: and from whom, if he thought it fit to betray her, she had no means of escaping. But she concealed the anguish of her heart; and to console madame, affected to hope where she could only despair. (128)

In this scene, Julia acknowledges not only her loss of confidence in the situation but also her unhappiness with having to yield it. She recognizes her position in the power of a man who is stern, unfeeling, and temperamental. Thus, Radcliffe (2008) presents Julia as a victim of patriarchal power.

Diane Long Hoeveler (1998, 6) argues that Radcliffe purposefully conveys her heroines as victims, or more precisely, conveys "women who ostensibly appear to be conforming to their acceptable roles within the patriarchy but who actually subvert the father’s power at every possible occasion and then retreat to studied postures of conformity whenever they risk exposure to public censure". Radcliffe was in a position to write such heroines because, as previously noted, of the assignment of the gothic to women writers. Betty Rizzo (2000, 102-3) elaborates on how “what appeared to be, then, an acquiescence to the patriarchal assignment of reason to men and sensibility to women was in actuality the sturdy rebuttal, in which men often concurred, that both genders should strive to develop and express both intellect and the passions”. Because Radcliffe’s (2008) heroines are justified in their moments of perceived nonconformity, they demonstrate a mode in which women subvert the patriarchal authority. According to Radcliffe (2008), acknowledging oppression or the assignment of traditional roles undermines the power from the oppressor. Therefore, in an oppressive society, Radcliffe, like Bloom’s (1997, 21) poet, “chooses the heroic, to know damnation and to explore the limits of the possible within it”. Radcliffe (2008) demonstrates this subversion of the social power structures in Julia’s exchange with the priest, in which

> [The Abate’s] false aspersions roused in Julia the spirit of indignant virtue; she arose from her knees with an air of dignity, that struck even the Abate.
'Holy father,' said she, 'my heart abhors the crime you mention, and disclaims all union with it. Whatever are my offenses, from the sin of hypocrisy I am at least free; and you will pardon me if I remind you, that my confidence has already been such, as fully justifies my claim to the protection I solicit.' (132)

In this scene, Julia rightfully defends herself against the priest's dramatic behavior. Thus, Radcliffe (2008) juxtaposes Julia's virtue with the Abate's irrational temper, which then justifies her boldness. Radcliffe's heroines demonstrate the need to express the female experience. Specifically, Hoeveler (1998, xvii) interprets Radcliffe's heroines as motivated by "a specifically female oedipal quest, a need to rewrite history from the vantage point of a beleaguered daughter intent on rescuing her mother – and by extension, her future self – from the nightmare of the alienating and newly codifying and commodifying patriarchal family". Even unknowingly, Radcliffe's (2008) heroines strive to save their mother from the oppression of their father. In doing so, they also save themselves by bringing forth what was once hidden. Thus, Radcliffe's (2008) gothic fiction and heroines reflect her own anxious relationship with the precursor and her unhappiness with the established literary tradition.

Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* also uses the supernatural to "create ... an anxiety-producing atmosphere where uncertainty and suspense rule" (Cameron 2003, 21). The narrative structure's absence of explanation and withholding of information creates what Radcliffe (2008) defined as "terror." As Ed Cameron (2003, 21) describes, it is the ability "to thematically and subliminally point to [the narrative's own] inability to 'say it all'” that causes an anxious mental environment. Thus, terror is created when the characters' experiences are left unexplained. For example, the characters investigate what they believe to be supernatural activity and "chilled into a silence, they listen and distinctly heard [a low hollow sound] repeated. Deadly ideas crowded upon their imaginations, and inspired a terror which scarcely allowed them to breathe" (Radcliffe 2008, 35). This anxiety can then only be fixed through comprehension that is given at the end of the novel in which the strange sightings and sounds of the southern towers are explained by the revelation that Julia and Emilia's mother, Louisa, had been imprisoned by the marquis. Cameron (2003, 20) argues that the mere presence of the supernatural "points to something unsatisfactory in the narrative, something the narrative is producing that is not perfectly adjusted to its story line". Hence, the supernatural in *A Sicilian Romance* indicates a disturbance in the narrative that is not distinctly conveyed. Given that Radcliffe (2008) has chosen to depict her heroine as a "victim," as Hoeveler (1998) suggests, it can be inferred that the supernatural is a manifestation of Julia's anxiety and "discontent with her future domestic role" (Cameron 2003, 24) as represented by her mother's imprisonment.

The castle, therefore, and its locked away sections and secret corridors can be seen as an extension of the repressed female desire and identity within language. Hoeveler
(1998, 2) observes that, “as her heroines flee from towers to labyrinthine catacombs to rooms with trick locks, they seem to be running in quick sand”. In other words, the pace of the narrative mimics the human psyche and reflects the anxiety of the real terrors that Radcliffe’s readers face – the hopeless fortune of a loveless marriage or being forced into a convent, both options which imprison women under a patriarchal authority. Interestingly, it is the marquis – the symbol of the patriarchal household and supreme authority – who closes off the section of the castle, thus “[suturing] his hold over the domestic scene” (Cameron 2003, 25).

Furthermore, embedded narratives that explore repressed female desire and identity accompany Radcliffe’s (2008) use of the supernatural in *A Sicilian Romance*. For example, the pursuit of Julia in the novel is temporarily interrupted when the duke realizes that the young lady he chases is not Julia but is instead the daughter of a Sicilian nobleman, who had confined her to a convent. Like Julia, this woman “fled with the lover to whom her affections had long been engaged, and whose only fault, even in the eye of her father, was inferiority of birth” in order to escape from her father’s rule (Radcliffe 2008, 94). This break from the main narrative and plot line, as Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 225) claim, indicates a “voyeuristic method of exploring origins, explaining identity, and understanding sexuality”. This narrative was another way in which Radcliffe (2008) explored female identity and relationships and depicted a heroine who rebelled against the established system. Hoeveler (1998, 5) argues that contrary to the primary understanding of the female gothic genre before 1970, the gothic tradition “became a coded system whereby women authors covertly communicated to other women – their largely female reading audience – their ambivalent rejection of and outward complicity with the dominant sexual ideologies of their culture”. According to Hoeveler’s (1998) observation, the gothic paradigm was a way in which women attempted to express the female experience. Thus, the covertly embedded narratives in *A Sicilian Romance* encouraged women’s coded passivity.

However, as some critics have noted, Radcliffe’s (2008) optimistic view of the companionate marriage only offers a false sense of power. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo (1998, 3) argues, the images of the confined and imprisoned woman “offer the illusion of power, although she in fact provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness”. For even in a companionate marriage, women are still under the authority of their husbands, and in *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia moves from being under the authority of her father to being under the authority of Hippolitus (Radcliffe 2008). As Carol Margaret Davison (2009, 208) claims, “While companionate marriage, the new middle-class ideal, was based in theory on affection, mutual concerns, and sympathy, the wife remained subordinate to her husband under law. The romantic ideal treacherously disguised the existing reality where women remained powerless handmaidens to men”. Davison (2009) refers to the idea that a companionate marriage suggests the
privilege of choosing a husband, which then implies an attempt for selfhood. However, even though there is love in a companionate marriage, wives are still subject to the power and domination of their husbands. Therefore, male authority quickly suppresses any sense of individuality.

Contrarily, Mary Shelley (1992) uses the gothic paradigm and frame narratives to represent the inability to express identity. Shelley, the daughter of two very prominent literary figures, philosopher William Godwin and pioneering feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, anonymously published her novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818. Shelley’s parentage and her love affair and marriage to Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley had a large impact on her identity as a writer. Shelley, like many other Romantic authors, was familiar with the works of Ann Radcliffe, and many elements of *Frankenstein* stem from the tradition of the gothic novel. Like Radcliffe’s confrontation with a patriarchal society, Shelley faced the influences of a male-dominated literary tradition. Shelley (1992, 5) writes in the introduction of the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, “my dreams were at once more fantastic and agreeable than my writings. In the latter I was a close imitator – rather doing as others had done than putting down the suggestions of my own mind”. Tradition dictated Mary Shelley’s identity as a writer, and these influences led to tensions between herself as an author and her place in the long history of the novel. Shelley was immersed in the literary culture, and as Nora Cook (2000, 61) argues, her work “is not so much about a woman’s fear of breeding monsters as about masculine usurpation of the feminine”. What Cook (2000) suggests is that Shelley’s exposure and connection to literary figures calls for the need of a unique perspective when evaluating her work. Witnessing how literary figures attempted to establish their own identity by invalidating the precursor showed Shelley how identity “is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself” (Butler 2004, 128). Thus, Shelley understood that the expression of identity was not based on any psychic core but is idealized and transitory in nature. Not only does the male author fail to establish his identity and superiority in concrete terms, but the need for this repetition also indicates the absence of a “psychic reality” that precedes the expression of gender and identity. Shelley’s skepticism at the attempts to express female desire and identity in literature, including Radcliffe’s (2008) solution of a companionate marriage, drives her to write *Frankenstein*.

This anxiety of influence is evident in both Shelley’s identity as an author and in *Frankenstein*’s multiple frame narratives. Robert Walton, the first narrator of the novel, is a failed poet who “imagined that [he] also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated” (Shelley 1992, 16). Like Shelley, Walton feels the influence and pressures of literary history and the desire to be considered a ‘precursor’ like Homer and Shakespeare. After he fails as a poet, Walton seeks that which has never been found, and strives to
“satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited” and “tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” (Shelley 1992, 16). Walton’s desire to carve his own place within history mirrors Shelley’s desires to take her place within literary tradition as demanded by her various points of influence. Shelley (1992, 5) writes about the frequently asked question “How [she], then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?” That Shelley would dream of the “hideous” creation to come from a man’s romantic aspirations for grandeur justifies the inquiries into the origins of the story. Shelley (1992) describes how the story that would become *Frankenstein* stemmed from a dream. Mary Shelley accompanied her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and other leading figures of the Romantic Movement, George Gordon Byron (commonly known as Lord Byron), and John Polidori during a stay at Geneva. During their stay, Lord Byron proposed that the four of them write ghost stories, and in the introduction of *Frankenstein*, Shelley (1992, 7) describes her anxiety of creating a story that would “rival those which had excited us to this task”. In order to do so, Shelley (1992, 6) admits to repressing the “suggestions of my own mind” in favor of the artistic norms and aesthetic standards of literary tradition. She also reveals her husband’s pressure to “prove [herself] worthy of my parentage and enroll myself on the page of fame” (7). Under the tyranny of tradition, Shelley’s (1992) dreams and imagination, which she described as “my refuge when annoyed – my dearest pleasure when free” (5) emerged that night in an anxious and frightful vision of “the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world” (9). Shelley’s dreams and imaginations can be considered a “troublesome identification” to the established patriarchal tradition and aesthetics (Butler 2004, 120). Thus, Shelley’s struggles with her own identity make it probable that she would understand how “the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies” and how “they imitate a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity” (128). That is to say that ideas about gender are constructed through repetitions enforced by relations of power. Therefore, Shelley experiences first-hand how women writers were regarded as “derivative” or “secondary,” a copy of an origin which is itself the ground of all copies, but which is itself a copy of nothing” (128). Butler (2004, 129) further argues, “that heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that is, that it ‘knows’ its own possibility of becoming undone: hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence”. Thus, Shelley (1992) illustrates the incongruity of a male-dominated literary tradition that is always at risk “of becoming undone” and excludes women writers and classifies them as “secondary.” *Frankenstein*’s embedded narrative serves as a cautionary tale for Walton and as a way for Shelley (1992, 128) to stop the “endless repetition” of gender and identity. When
Walton claims that “One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race”: Frankenstein responds, “Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me – let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!” (29). Similarly, Shelley’s (1992) work condemns the egotistical patriarchal society (precursor) and demonstrates the illusory nature of gender and identity.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor often refers to himself as a god-like figure for which “life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (Shelley 1992, 55). Frankenstein’s obsession with the creation of new life and the “deepest mysteries of creation” illustrates his egotistical attitude and his failure to consider the morality of his actions. His work requires the gruesome observation of “how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted” and “every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings” (53) which ultimately isolates him from society. That is to say that Frankenstein becomes surrounded by death in his attempt to create life in his image. Therefore, Frankenstein’s obsession with making the monster in his image illustrates “a compulsion to repeat,” or complete his own identity which in turn suggests the transitory nature of identity (Butler 2004, 131). Butler (2004) concludes that the “need for a repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming de-instituted at every interval” (131). Just as every author hopes to become a precursor and thus continue the repetition of identity, Frankenstein hopes that his “new species would bless [him] as its creator and source” (Shelley 1992, 55). However, when he finally succeeds in animating the dead, the monster represents the de-institution of identity because instead of revering his creator, the monster criticizes Frankenstein’s immorality. He exclaims, “Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image: but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance” (133). Thus, the monster condemns Frankenstein for his inflated self-worth and audacity, illustrating how Shelley, as Crook (2000, 61) claims, uses the monster as “a critique of male mastery”. Furthermore, Frankenstein refuses to name the monster, which symbolizes patriarchy’s inability to acknowledge identity and desire through language. However, the monster uses his lack of identity to further criticize Frankenstein. He says, “I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (Shelley 1992, 103). The monster is denied his identity as “Adam,” just as female authors are not identified as contributors to literary history; women writers are then the “fallen angels” that are driven from the joy of expression in a male-dominated literary tradition. Crook (2000) further argues how, “in this scenario, Mary Shelley as author is a contrast to Victor as creator. He rejects, she cherishes,
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the hideous progeny” (Crook 2000, 61) when she bids her novel “go forth and prosper” (Shelley 1992, 10).

Frankenstein’s treatment of women also demonstrates his sense of entitlement. While there are few female characters in Shelley’s work, all are portrayed similarly to Hoeveler’s (1998) model of “professional femininity,” or as the passive, docile, and victimized woman. Frankenstein describes Elizabeth, his adopted sister, as “a creature who seemed to shed radiance from her looks and whose form and motions were lighter than the chamois of the hills” (Shelley 1992, 37). Frankenstein perceives Elizabeth’s “perfection” because of his possessiveness of her. He says,

[e]veryone loved Elizabeth. The passionate and most reverential attachment with which all regarded her became, while I shared it, my pride and delight. On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully, ‘I have a pretty present for my Victor – tomorrow he shall have it.’ And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine – mine to protect, love, and cherish. ... No word, no expression could body forth the kind of relation in which she stood to me – my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only. (37)

Elizabeth sustains Frankenstein’s perception of her when she tells him, “I figure to myself that the task of attending on your sickbed has devolved on some mercenary old nurse, who could never guess your wishes, nor minister to them with the care and affection of your poor cousin” (65). Elizabeth maintains that only she would know how to fulfill Frankenstein’s needs, and she appeals to his ego and his perception of her as the perfect woman. However, while Elizabeth appears to be engaged and happy in a companionate relationship, like Julia with Hippolitus in A Sicilian Romance, Shelley (1992) emphasizes that Elizabeth is still being subverted – and denied expression of identity and desire – because of Frankenstein’s possessiveness and her incorporation of his identity.

Like Elizabeth, the unnamed monster’s narrative illustrates the inability to express gender and identity within language. Through his narrative, the reader learns that after his “birth,” the monster comes across a family living in a cottage (Shelly 1992). The monster’s knowledge of society is acquired by listening to the stories the family tells. Therefore, it is through his observation of this family that the monster “obtained a cursory knowledge of history and a view of the several empires at present existing in the world” which “gave [him] an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth” (Shelley 1992, 122). At first, the monster expresses wonder at the stories, but then he describes how
These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived as noble and godlike. ... For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing. (122)

It is only after the monster has spent time watching the family that he becomes disgusted by the horrible things that humans do to one another (Shelly 1992). Essentially, the knowledge of “vice and bloodshed” corrupts the monster and motivates him to reflect upon himself and his exclusion from society. He laments,

[o]f what a strange nature is knowledge! ... 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, except through means which I obtained by stealth, when I was unseen and unknown, and which rather increased than satisfied the desire I had of becoming one among my fellows. (123)

In realizing his rejection from civilization, the monster embraces his desire for revenge and murders Frankenstein’s younger brother, William, and then blames it upon Justine Moritz, a young girl who was adopted by Frankenstein’s family. The monster says, “The thought was madness; it stirred the fiend within me – not I, but she, shall suffer; the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me, she shall atone” (145). The monster blames Justine, the “professional feminine,” because he was “robbed of all that she could give me” and “the crime had its source in her” (145). Thus, Shelley (1992) represents women’s hostility (represented by the monster) toward their passive and virtuous image (Justine Moritz) incurred by a patriarchal society.

As this study has shown, while Radcliffe presented the companionate marriage as a mode through which female characters usurped the established structures of power, Shelley masculinized the female experience and demonstrated its inexpressibility and to parody the male “claim to originality” (Butler 2004, 130). Shelley’s (1992) use of the monster to masculinize the female experience demonstrates Butler’s (2004) argument that

[i]f gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth [emphasis added]. (134)

According to the patriarchal claim to originality, Frankenstein’s identity as a male should not rely on the approximation of male identity but on a psychic reality. However, the monster’s refusal (and physical inability) to resemble, and thus
imitate, his maker signifies that Frankenstein’s sense of identity “is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core” (Butler 2004, 134). Thus, the monster subverts Frankenstein’s claim to originality and power by disrupting the validity of his identity. Likewise, women can subvert the patriarchal structure, not through the expression of gender and identity but by disrupting the patriarchal claim to originality and power.

While Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue for the emergence of a female literary subculture as a response to the patriarchal structure, Shelley demonstrates how “the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either” male or female identity (Butler 2004, 128). Shelley does so by not simply inverting the male and female priority, as Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 220) argue in their reading of *Frankenstein* as a rewrite of *Paradise Lost* so as to make it a more accurate mirror of female experience. Instead, Shelley (1992) breaks down the structure of gender as psychic reality by exposing the repetitive nature of identity. Therefore, there can be no “female” literary subculture because “the psyche is the permanent failure of expression, a failure that has its values, for it impels repetition and so reinstates the possibility of disruption” (Butler 2004, 134). Shelley takes advantage of this “possibility of disruption” by masculinizing the female experience and illustrating how women writers could not reach literary autonomy in a patriarchal structure but would only gain this “illusion of inner depth” (134). The feminine rage, which suggests female dissatisfaction with literary tradition, does not allow women writers to achieve autonomy, as Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue because there is no autonomy to achieve. Instead, it abandons the woman writer in the void between her anger at patriarchal structures and her hatred at the “imagination” that haunts her but never achieves a substantial identity. Therefore, the female experience can never be expressed in a male-dominated language, nor will women writers gain anything but an illusory sense of identity. Consequently, with *Frankenstein*, Shelley (1992) undermines the structure that patriarchal authority relies upon for its power and the optimistic method of usurpation that Radcliffe (2008) offers and thus presents alternative means for women to be free from a patriarchal society.
References


