ABSTRACT

BOLTE, CARALYN MARIE. “Her cradle, and his sepulchre”: The Shelleys’ Anxiety of Creation and Identity. (Under the direction of John D. Morillo).

Both Percy Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley asserted their belief in the nature of literature to transcend conscious thoughts and to operate as a dream state, manifesting unconscious fears and desires. By analyzing two primary works by the Shelleys as dreams, and applying Freud’s theories of dream interpretation and the unconscious, this thesis reveals how these works demonstrate a shared unconscious anxiety about the transformative nature of creation and its power to establish or destroy identity. In *Alastor*, Percy Shelley manifests his anxiety about his relationship with artistic creation through his treatment of gender, most especially in his description of and interaction with the veiled maid. *Alastor* demonstrates Shelley’s conflicting desire both to unite with the powerful creative force and to reject it in order to maintain his own socially constructed role as male Romantic Poet. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley both responds to and expands upon the thematic focus established by Percy Shelley in *Alastor*. Focusing on the power of physical creation to redefine a woman’s identity, Mary Shelley manifests her anxiety about the possibility of integrating the dueling aspects of her own identity, mother and author, into one cohesive identity. Percy examines how his desire for pure poetic expression affects his role within a masculine construct, while Mary interrogates her own beliefs about integrating the role of mother and author into one cohesive identity in a world that privileges and requires motherhood. Their creation of marginalized, exiled characters in the figures of the wandering poet, who chooses to shun society, and the monster, who is shunned by a society he deeply desires to be a part of, indicates their own fear of the consequences of societal rejection.
“Her cradle, and his sepulchre”:

THE SHELLEYS’ ANXIETY OF CREATION
AND IDENTITY

by

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DEDICATION

For my grandfather, who first introduced me to *Paradise Lost* and encouraged me never to look back.
BIOGRAPHY

Caralyn Bolte was born October 9, 1977 in Panorama City, California. After spending her formative years in California, and graduating from high school in 1995, Caralyn moved to North Carolina. She graduated magna cum laude from Peace College in December of 1999, receiving her Bachelors Degree in English. After spending two years as a middle school English and social studies teacher at Quest Academy Charter School in Raleigh, she was accepted into the Masters of Arts program at North Carolina State University, where she will graduate with an MA in English in August 2004. In the fall of 2004, Caralyn will enter the Ph.D. program at the University of Florida, where she hopes to concentrate in Victorian Studies.
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INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley, in May 1815, expressed privately what now seems an artistic and personally prophetic statement: “I begin a new journal with our regeneration” (Marshall 114). Such regeneration, and the luxury of introspection and peace that comes with it, was necessary following a year that must have eroded any sense of physical or emotional stability for the Shelleys, as Percy constantly dodged debt collectors and the couple’s first daughter was born prematurely and died shortly thereafter. The couple’s move to Bishopsgate in 1815, where they settled at the edge of Windsor Park, afforded them the first opportunity at a quiet life together. Separated often since their elopement, and most especially during the trials of 1814, Mary and Percy Shelley settled down in 1815 in what many biographers and critics see as the most idyllic and traditionally domestic time of their relationship, a year that created the environment within which two of their most famous works were composed.

The serenity of Bishopsgate resulted in long-lasting personal and professional growth. Percy found the environment conducive to work, as he concentrated on what he called that summer his “literary plans” (White 416). One of these “plans” resulted in Alastor, a poem which Shelley himself called his “first serious attempt to interest the best feelings of the human heart” (White 422). His ability to engage in such mature work is a testament to the peace that Bishopsgate afforded him, a peace that allowed him to delve into the poetic pursuits that frequent moves and financial stresses prevented. Mary, for her part, was also engaged in literary activities; her extensive reading list during this year included Chaucer, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, The New Testament, and Pope’s translation of The Iliad, to name
just a few. The year 1816, although less settled than 1815, also demonstrated the positive effects of the calm Bishopsgate era. The year was bookended by personal joys and artistic triumphs. Percy and Mary’s son, William, a “healthy, amiable infant with smooth rosy cheeks and auburn hair,” was born on January 24th and the Shelles were married in late December (White 426). During the couple’s stay in Geneva with Byron, Mary Shelley began what would become *Frankenstein* and Percy Shelley composed “Mont Blanc” and “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (Stahmer). This time of relative respite afforded both Shelles the opportunity to turn their attention inward and to reflect and examine, in their art, the intricacies of their internal experiences.

The Shelles believed that their internal experiences would manifest themselves in the art they produced. Percy Shelley, in his “A Defence of Poetry,” asserted that a poet’s concentration should always be focused on that rich internal experience and that a poet’s task is to translate this experience for readings by “indicat[ing] the shape it hides from the manner in which it is worn” (1171). This artistic theory privileges the power of the unconscious, embracing the idea that self-truths will emerge despite one’s best efforts to keep them concealed. Poetry, in Shelley’s mind, clearly demonstrates this concept: “it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness” and “is not subject to the control of the active power of the mind, and...its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will” (1170, 1177). Literary expression, therefore, operates as a kind of dream state, working without the poet’s conscious knowledge to create a series of symbolic episodes that represent the truth locked away in “accidental vesture” (1171). Mary Shelley’s statements about her own artistic process, which she describes as “the formation of castles in the air—the indulging
of *waking dreams*” (“Introduction” 222, italics mine), echo Percy Shelley’s artistic theory.

This Shelleyean concentration on the power of the unconscious to reveal truth in dream states parallels Freud’s landmark theory of dreams, including the concept of manifest and latent content and the twin ideas of condensation and displacement. Making use of these theories, and employing Freud’s tools of dream analysis, this thesis examines how both Percy and Mary Shelley manifest their repressed desires and anxieties in their work. Specifically, I concentrate on the parallel unconscious anxiety both authors exhibit about the overwhelming, transformative power of creation and how an individual’s relationship to this power defines identity. Percy Shelley’s self-reflexive narrative of the wandering poet in *Alastor* examines Shelley’s own fears about how to maintain his identity as a male Romantic poet when creation is considered an inaccessible, exclusively female enterprise. In *Frankenstein*, which works as a thematically parallel response to and expansion of *Alastor*, Mary Shelley grapples with how to create a unified identity out of two disparate, warring creative powers—that of mother and of author. The similarities of these two works, both a result of the peaceful time at Bishopsgate, indicate an introspective examination of artistic identity that transcends gender boundaries and generic distinctions.

I begin with Percy Shelley’s *Alastor*. The poem, published in a collection in early 1816, is overtly focused on the perils of poetic life as it chronicles the solitary life and death of a wandering, visionary poet. The poem itself has been the focus of a variety of psychoanalytic readings, most notably by Barbara Schapiro in her book-length examination of the figure of the mother in Romantic poetry. Schapiro asserts that *Alastor*
Bolte 4

is a poem about a “wandering Narcissus” whose interactions with Nature demonstrate his “pathological condition of a fragmented self,” a condition resulting from his “highly ambivalent relationship with the mother imago” (2, 18, 22). Schapiro’s reading of Alastor focuses, essentially, on how Shelley’s poem demonstrates, through his gendered descriptions of nature and his ideal but elusive constructions of women, a parallel, personal psychological fragmentation within the author himself. Although Ronald Tetreault similarly examines Shelley’s fractured psyche, he sees this fragmentation as a symptom of a crisis in Shelley’s authorial identity rather than as a fundamental psychological break. Within Alastor, Tetreault asserts, Shelley attempts to reconcile two poetic ideals: the Wordsworthian Narrator, who focuses on the power of nature, and the Visionary, who privileges the imaginative ideal above all. Tetreault sees Alastor as an opportunity for Shelley to create “for himself an imaginative space among his contemporaries in which he could develop his own poetic vision” (305).

My own reading of Percy Shelley’s Alastor begins with the hypothesis that both Tetreault and Schapiro seek to prove—that Shelley’s own psychological dynamics are reflected in this poem. I see the structure of Alastor, which Earl Wasserman has argued contains two distinct poetic voices, as a series of displaced, dream-like narratives which, while distinct, are all elements of Shelley himself. The clearest displacement of Shelley himself comes in the narrative of the wandering poet and, within that narrative, the wandering poet’s dream vision of the veiled maid; in this vision, and in the narrative of the wandering poet that surrounds it, we see the clearest indications of Shelley’s own anxiety about the nature of poetic creation. The veiled maid, who embodies the wandering poet’s creative side, becomes a fountain of organic poetic power, a power that
threatens the male poet. His attempts to assert his own power over the maid cause her destruction; as a result, the wandering poet is left haunted by the gendered female presence of organic creation, and is ultimately destroyed by his continuing, solitary quest to harness that power for his own purposes. The wandering poet’s interaction with the independent and powerful voice of the veiled maid demonstrates Shelley’s concern not only with gender roles, and the potential threat of the feminine, but also the nature of poetic identity. Drawing on Marlon Ross’s study of the construction of the masculine Romantic poet, I argue that the wandering poet’s reaction to the vision of the veiled maid is a direct result of his need to maintain a socially constructed, hyper-masculine poetic identity. This desire requires him to negotiate not just a set of patriarchal ideals, but also an allusive, primarily male canonical fabric, while simultaneously needing to embrace the creative, feminine side of himself which he sees as the source of all poetry. The poem, therefore, works as Shelley’s self-reflexive, displaced interrogation about the nature and potential of poetic identity.

My second chapter focuses on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a thematic, structural, and psychological response to *Alastor*. The novel’s legendary composition history demonstrates Mary Shelley’s great capacity for response; Shelley herself tells us in her introduction to the third edition of the novel that the story was a response to Lord Byron’s Geneva challenge for a ghost story, and that her persistence in writing was, in part, a result of Percy Shelley’s desire “that [she] should prove [herself] worthy of [her] parentage, and enroll [herself] on the page of fame” (223). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar see Shelley’s responsiveness extending much further, reading *Frankenstein* as an extended response to and a revision of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one that uniquely presents
Eve’s story, as well as a narrative chronicling Mary Shelley’s literary heritage and development as an author. This confluence of personal narrative and commentary on the literary canon is echoed in my own reading of the novel, which I see as Mary Shelley’s response not only to the thematic focus of *Alastor* but also to its anxious concentration on the nature of artistic identity.

Making use of the same structure of nested narratives, each voiced by a different displaced figure of the author herself, Mary Shelley responds to Percy Shelley’s *Alastor* by creating a story that focuses primarily on the same weighty issues of creation, identity, and gender roles in society. On the most basic level, *Frankenstein* works as a nightmarish example of the reality that *Alastor*’s wandering poet seeks—the male usurpation of the female domain of creation. In a way, the novel works as a cautionary tale for figures like Shelley’s wandering poet who, in an attempt to restore patriarchal power, attempt to wrest all power away from the woman. *Frankenstein*, like *Alastor*, manifests the many-faceted elements of Mary Shelley’s own psychological drama in the form of displaced figures who embody the fractured elements of her own identity. The two most prominent displaced figures of Mary Shelley in the novel, the never-created female monster and Victor Frankenstein, embody the two disparate elements of her own identity. In one key section of the novel, Shelley violently confronts the potentially destructive power of the maternal and the threat that power poses to her literary identity. The novel, therefore, works not only as a response to Percy Shelley’s concentration on the nature and the role of poet, but as an expansion of that idea, as she demonstrates the unique anxieties inherent in women who are charged with the task of reconciling the two powerful, disparate roles of mother and author into one cohesive identity.
Finally, I focus on the way in which a psychoanalytic reading of these works accounts for the clear literary craftsmanship and style of the Shelleys, as well as the way in which this idea of authorial response fits into a tradition of authorship that requires a willingness to be both increasingly allusive and inclusive. I also consider the canonical implications of this reading, which focuses on the parallel anxieties of identity in generically distinct works. Seeing the thematic and structural similarities in these two works, two works that have been seen as more distinct than alike, offers interesting possibilities for a different approach to reading both gender and genre within Romantic literature.
CHAPTER ONE

Veiled Maids and Silent Poets:
Dreams, Desire and Fear in Percy Shelley’s Alastor

All is wild and specious, intangible and incoherent as a dream.
We should be utterly at a loss to convey any distinct idea of the plan or purpose of the poem.—Eclectic Review on Alastor

Critical attention to Percy Shelley’s Alastor has long been centered on the complexity of the poem; as a result, many critics have focused on the confusing disjunctions within the poem itself, most especially on the controversy surrounding the relationship between the Narrator, the wandering poet, and the author himself.1 One resonating, oft-cited critical voice in this debate is Earl Wasserman, one of the first critics to attempt to clarify the complex poem’s purpose and meaning. Wasserman notes that the poem contains distinctly different figures with similarly distinct agendas. He laments what he sees as a consistently self-defeating mode of reading Shelley, fed by a “critical penchant for finding Shelley’s autobiography in everything he wrote and therefore for taking all passages in Alastor as meant to be of equal validity, despite the fact that the poem is an elegiac biography narrated by a dramatic speaker who has his own fictional identity” (11). Employing this method of reading, Wasserman argues, leads readers to find “the poem obscure and internally inconsistent” (11). This celebrated obscurity of Alastor is, I believe, a result of its dream-like nature, one that even its earliest readers, as cited in the epigraph, found “intangible and incoherent.”

1 For discussions of the disjunctions between Narrator and wandering poet, see Ronald Tetreault, Tilottama Rajan, and Christopher Heppner.
Analyzing the poem as a dream—and taking Shelley at his word when he stated that poetry itself is “beyond and above consciousness”—requires, then, that we clearly define the distinctions essential to dream analysis, the differences between the unconscious and preconscious elements of the mind. For Freud, the distinction between these two was so essential that they comprised “the fundamental premiss of psychoanalysis” (The Ego and the Id 3). The unconscious, in the “topographical” sense, is the area of the mind that contains the desires and anxieties that are being dynamically repressed; the “operation of repression” is therefore the means by which the contents of the unconscious have “been denied access to the preconscious-conscious system” (LaPlanche and Pontalis 474). The unconscious manifests itself, according to Freud, in “thing-presentations” (or in images rather than in words) and is governed by condensation and displacement, which are the “mechanisms specific to the primary process” (474). Dreams, for Freud, are the “royal road” to the unconscious, since dreams, the product of a time when the mind disengages from the conscious processes of everyday life, often generate images and vignettes that can lead to an understanding of unconscious fears and desires (475). The preconscious state, while occasionally mistaken for the unconscious, is distinctly different from the unconscious; it is the nebulous region that lies between unconscious and the conscious states of mind; not dynamically repressed, but also not overtly conscious, this “interval” between the two states is “latent, and by this we mean it [is] capable of becoming conscious at any time”

2 Freud makes a clear distinction between the “topographical” and the “adjectival” sense of the word unconscious; the topographical sense of the unconscious (indicated by Ucs. in his works) is a way to refer to the place or area where these repressed elements reside, while the adjectival unconscious (indicated by ucs.) refers instead to the elements within the unconscious, such as unconscious manifestations or unconscious anxieties. My use of the terms will parallel Freud’s. (See LaPlanche and Pontalis, The
The essential difference between these two states is twofold: the first, and most critical, difference is the absence of repression in the preconscious state. While the contents of the preconscious are not present in the conscious mind at the moment, they were at one time and can be again. The second difference focuses on manifestation. Rather than being presented through the primary process of condensation and displacement and making use of only “thing-presentations,” the preconscious manifests itself in “word-presentations.” In fact, these “preconscious ideas are bound to verbal language” (LaPlanche and Pontalis 326).

Freud’s theories of dream interpretation, which access the dreams that contain manifested, but unrecognized, unconscious anxieties and desires, are essential, then, to understanding Shelley’s dream-like Alastor. Dreams, as Freud explains, generate two distinct kinds of content: manifest and latent content. The manifest content is the obvious action of a dream, the “thing-presentation” that the dreamer experiences within the dream, and can be described as a “plastic, concrete portrayal” of the latent elements (Freud “Manifest and Latent” 121). The latent content, which exists below the surface of the manifest content and can only be accessed through dream-work, is essential to understanding one’s unconscious fears and desires. The dream-work, which focuses primarily on the twin ideas of condensation and displacement, is an essential tool in analyzing any dream’s latent content. Condensation is Freud’s term for his theory that “the manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent one, and is thus an abbreviated translation of it” (Freud “The Dream-work” 171). Condensation, then, may make its appearance as two people taking the form of one—a composite figure or perhaps a
composite structure that, in actuality, represents more than the manifest dream
demonstrates it to be. Displacement, an especially interesting and important element in
my reading of the Shelleys, can manifest itself in two ways: “in the first, a latent element
is replaced not by a component part of itself but by something more remote—that is, by
an allusion; and in the second, the psychical accent is shifted from an important element
on to another which is unimportant, so that the dream appears differently centered and
strange” (Freud “The Dream-work” 174).

Reading Shelley’s *Alastor* psychoanalytically, as a dream manifestation of
unconscious fears and desires, and making use of Freud’s theory of dream interpretation
to do so, allows us to unify the seemingly disjunctive poem. Rather than seeing the
voices within the poem as distinct and, therefore, removed from the poet himself, I
believe this dream-like nature allows us to read these separate poetic voices as equal,
unconscious, displaced versions of Shelley himself. The structure of the poem itself
demonstrates this relationship, constructed as a series of displaced and nested narratives.
The Preface, featuring a didactic and temptingly simple explanation of the poem’s
message and meaning, features one displaced element of Shelley’s poetic voice, while the
Narrator’s chronicle of the wandering poet’s solitary life demonstrates yet another
displaced, but equally Shelleyean, voice. The Narrator’s unique contribution and poetic
style are seen most clearly at the beginning and the end of the poem proper. The
wandering poet’s story, although presented through the voice of the Narrator, is
simultaneously articulated to the reader through his actions. The nested structure of these
narratives displaces them further, making each removed narrative seem more like a
dream within a dream, and therefore as an even truer reflection of Shelley’s psyche.
The wandering poet’s dream of the veiled maid, which, because of its deepest nesting within this structure, would seem the best reflection of Shelley’s inner conflict, works equally as the centerpiece to understanding both the wandering Poet and Alastor’s meaning. Critics, regardless of their individual focus, seem to universally recognize and concentrate the vision’s importance within the poem. The veiled maid has been read as an epipsyche, a Muse, a sexual fantasy, an ideal reflection of the Poet himself, a mother figure, and a narcissistic sexual extension of the Poet. In most readings, she is seen as an inherently destructive influence and the reason for the Poet’s ultimate demise. Despite their concentration on this vision and the fact that it is the only extensive description of a woman in a poem otherwise completely focused on the male poet, few critics see the vision as a manifestation of Shelleyean gender ideology. Diane Hoeveler’s recognition that women throughout Romantic poetry “assum[e] archetypal and mythic qualities that resonate between poem and reader” (1) and Susan Fischman’s contention that the veiled maid is a revisionary poetic recasting of the mythological figure of Echo demonstrate that such an approach to this passage is an especially fruitful one in understanding Shelley’s meaning in this poem. Connecting the idea of the dreaming, unconscious manifestation of authorial conflict with how gender ideology is articulated throughout the poem, therefore, seems the most fruitful way of accessing the maddeningly difficult Alastor. Shelley’s narrative of the wandering poet in Alastor, with the dream vision of the veiled maid as its symbolic unconscious centerpiece, clearly demonstrates Shelley’s gender ideology and, most interestingly, the essential connection Shelley sees between gender

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3 See Rajan for a discussion of the maid as an epipsyche and Muse, Steinman for a reading of the maid as an ideal reflection, Wasserman for a focus on the maid as a sexual fantasy, Schapiro for an argument that the maid works in the poem as a mother figure, and Ross for a discussion of how the maid is a narcissistic sexual extension.
roles and his own intense desire for, and anxieties about, the potential for an individual and cohesive poetic identity.

Shelley establishes his clear focus on gender in *Alastor* from its first lines, as Nature is described as “our great Mother.” The clearest assertion of the unconscious relationship between gender and poetic creation, however, comes in the dream of the veiled maid. From the beginning of the dream, Shelley foregrounds the encounter between the Poet and this mysterious woman less in the terms of love and more in the terms of creativity by ascribing to her the equal role of poet. Our first introduction to her comes through her voice rather than her appearance, as she sits “talking in low solemn tones” (line 152); communication is more important for these poets than physicality. She is completely equalized with the wandering poet to whom she appears:

> Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
> Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,  
> Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held  
> His inmost sense suspended in its web  
> Of many-colored woof and shifting hues.  
> Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
> And lofty hopes of divine liberty,  
> Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,  
> Herself a poet. (Lines 154-161)

Her voice speaks the thoughts of his soul, a dialogue that establishes an egalitarian relationship not common between the sexes, especially in terms of artistic expression. Her “themes,” an especially loaded word in relation to any literary art, echo his own concerns, including topics not within the traditional domestic female sphere—

“Knowledge and truth and virtue, / And lofty hopes of divine liberty.” Rather than seeing her as subordinate, the wandering poet shares his patriarchally-sanctioned title of Poet

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4 Barbara Schapiro goes into great detail about the gendered portrayal of the landscape and Nature in *Alastor* in her chapter on Shelley in *The Romantic Mother*.
with her, thereby emphasizing their doublessness and perfect symmetry. In his dream state, this doubling asserts the veiled maid’s position as a displaced aspect of the poet himself.

As if to emphasize this essential connection, Shelley describes the veiled maid’s poetic power while simultaneously de-emphasizing the Poet’s. They are complementary equals, with all that relationship implies. As the Poet listens, the maid becomes the embodiment of all poetic power:

...Soon the solemn mood  
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame  
A permeating fire: wild numbers then  
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs  
Subdued by its own pathos…

Her poetry is organic in this passage, comprised of the elements of the earth and her own innate power. Her inspiration, as a “permeating fire,” connects her to an almost primal source of poetic inspiration and power. The description of her poetry as “wild numbers” emphasizes this primal nature, but the wild numbers never overwhelm the veiled maid. Instead, the language of the passage emphasizes the maid’s power, as she “raised” the poetry rather than being raised by it. She is able to mold its malleable nature to her purposes—while it fills her frame and has the ability to create “tremulous sobs” and to stifle her voice, this power does not silence her in awe. She sings, harnessing the power to create. As the veiled maid demonstrates her power over poetry and creative force, the Poet “listens with great care to the ‘thoughts most dear to him’ spoken in the female register” (Fischman 147). Because of their complementary relationship, the male Poet’s position as active listener works to evoke from her this demonstration of artistic power. She creates while he listens, with the implication that the roles could easily be reversed because of their equality. The necessity of both of these roles to artistic creation, and the
ease with which they both occupy these roles, further equalizes the two figures. This arrangement implies no competition between man and woman, male or female poet.

The balanced relationship between wandering poet and veiled maid begins to collapse, however, as the wandering poet, unable to access the female poet’s organic, primal power, is left unable to comprehend her. The female poet is described, at that point, in terms of the wandering poet’s confusion rather than in terms of complementary connection, demonstrating the wandering poet’s disconnection and “growing sense of alienation” (Fischman 158):

…her fair hands
Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.
The beating of her heart was heard to fill
The pauses of her music, and her breath
Tumultuously accorded with those fits
Of intermitted song. (165-172)

Her song, rather than reflecting the themes common to both souls, is now “strange” and “ineffable.” Yet, nothing but the poet’s perspective has changed—the veiled maid’s poetry is still described as organic as it echoes in blood, breath, and heartbeat, but the wandering poet now only hears “fits / Of intermitted song.” Because of the poet’s own anxieties about his failure to access this instinctive, organic, and primal creative power, and the competition that recognition establishes, this female poet is now “alone,” considered more alien than akin.

The wandering poet next destroys any lingering semblance of equality by sexualizing the veiled maid. The veiled maid is characterized now as Temptress rather than poet, a role that “traditionally represents woman as pure flesh, the embodiment of
female sexual power—dark, powerful, voracious” (Hoeveler 172). This dark sexual power is what many critics see as responsible for the destruction of the wandering poet, a reading that casts the veiled maid into the role of devourer and the wandering poet as the innocent prey. The poet, however, is the one whose vision has changed. He now sees only

…Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.
His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess
Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled
His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
Her panting bosom: (176-184)

The dream has become an erotically charged fantasy, a drastic change from the equalized poetic harmony we saw earlier. Her “outspread arms,” notably “bare,” and her beamy bending eyes” seem to invite the Poet’s voyeuristic gaze, while her “parted lips / Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly” seem to solicit a sexual union. This shift from poet to temptress parallels a shift in power, as the unusual equality previously demonstrated erodes in favor of a sexuality that privileges the male.

As his view of the veiled maid changes from equal to object, and as her position is systematically changed, she seems surprised. As he moves to consummate what, in his dreaming mind, has been a mutual sexual arousal, she hesitates and “[draws] back a while,” indicating her reluctance to embrace both him and this change in role. This hesitation demonstrates once again that, while the wandering Poet’s dreaming perspective of the maid has changed, hers has remained unaltered. The wild eyes and quivering limbs

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5 Susan Fischman, while concentrating on how the veiled maid resembles the mythological figure of Echo, discusses, in detail, this transition from harmonious song to ineffable tale.
that he sees as sexual invitations could as much be a result of an outpouring of poetic energy. Nevertheless, the maid has now been objectified; recognizing this newly powerless status, she

…yielding to the irresistible joy,
   With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
   Folded his frame in her dissolving arms. (185-187)

For a woman ostensibly embracing her lover, the one that she has apparently seduced and invited to this anxiously anticipated sexual union, the language used to describe her actions is particularly troublesome. She does not choose to embrace—she yields, implying that she recognizes that the force compelling her to do so would eventually overtake her anyway. Her movements as she does so are “frantic” and evoke a “cry” that, combined with the other language of powerlessness, seems more a cry of surrender than of ecstasy. She embraces the wandering poet, but hers is a submissive acceptance rather than a passionate choice. This submissive language most prominently demonstrates the change in power dynamic.

The final description of the veiled maid indicates both the maid’s complete loss of power as a result of the wandering poet’s objectifying gaze and the clear movement the wandering poet makes toward solidifying his masculine identity. While many critics see “her dissolving arms” as a clear indication of the veiled maid’s destructive force, I see this dissolution, given the clear reversal of power, as the wandering poet’s destruction of the veiled maid. As she submits to the role of sexual object, a role that is imposed upon her by the male poet, her arms—previously described as the powerful instruments creating and conducting her “strange symphony”—disappear and, with it, so does her poetic identity. This strange image of dissolution has clear implications for the
wandering poet’s identity as well, since she is a displaced figure of his artistic side. The veiled maid, who has been seen as “the perfect and mirrored Other” of the wandering poet, actually works as “the imago of [the poet’s] own body…whether it concerns its individual features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections” and the figure “in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested” (Lacan 3). This confrontation with the image of himself—or, more precisely, the image of his lack—in the figure of the veiled maid forces the wandering poet into the “assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (Lacan 4-5). Alternately desiring and fearing the power of those dissolving arms, the wandering poet establishes this female creative force as the other against which he will measure and construct himself. In so doing, he adopts the ideology of socially constructed gender roles and his own patriarchally sanctioned poetic identity.

The movement within the vision of the veiled maid from equality to a system of female objectification demonstrates the deep-rooted desires and fears of the poet. Marlon Ross, in his examination of the nature of masculine desire, asserts that “the Romantic poet’s unconscious desire produces his conscious desire to write, and…the conscious desire to write produces poetry, a product containing the traces of both desires, conscious and unconscious” (9). Shelley’s conscious desire to write and the poet’s conscious desire to find an ideal woman to love are the result of one fundamental unconscious desire: to create. This overwhelming unconscious desire manifests itself in the displaced female image of the veiled maid; that this desire would manifest itself in female form is understandable on several levels. Shelley clearly associated Nature, and the rhythmic patterns of creation, with a woman when he referred to it as “Mother of this unfathomable
world” within the poem itself; the creation of life itself is often ascribed to the feminine sphere. The unconscious split of the wandering poet’s identity into male and female figures reflects a dominant idea circulating throughout the Romantic era, “that artistic power and creativity were possible for men only if they unified their masculine and feminine components” (Hoevenler 2). In order for any poet, whether it be the wandering poet or Shelley himself, to be successful in poetic creation, the two sides must coexist equally in perfect balance.

The failure of the wandering poet to maintain this symmetry between the male and the female sides of himself is a clear indication of his conflicted psyche. For a male Romantic poet, maintaining the separation between the male and the female in all aspects was essential to the construction of his personal and poetic identity. Romanticism, and the writings of the authors in that world, was a means to “reconfirm their capacity to influence the world in ways sociohistorically determined as masculine”—or, in other words, to reassert their masculine power (Ross 3). The idea of then equalizing the feminine, creative elements of themselves that they had been “casting out and smoothing over” in order to “assure their own sociopolitical strength” as men negates their conscious constructions of identity. This action leaves them weak and without voice in the Romantic tradition (Ross 10). The fear of this kind of voicelessness leads the poet to a desire to conquer and harness that creative element of himself, to exert enough power to force submission to his will. In his unconscious rendering of the world, the Poet translates that desire into a masculine-favored power structure that he knows well: sexuality. The anxiety at the heart of this desire puts the poet in an impossible position. In order to maintain his identity, both as a man and as a poet, he must exert control over
the “encroaching feminine, a usurping and castrating power” (Hoeveler 7); exerting this control, however, destroys the balance that successful artistic creation requires.

The imagery within the surrounding narrative of the wandering poet echoes both the poet’s desire to harness organic creative power and his gendered view of the world. The first of these dream echoes comes in his continuing allusion to the *Oresteia*.

Allusion, as a poetic device for Romantics, operates as a preconscious state; we are meant to see a poet, in the act of allusion, as being “moved in mysterious ways by the poetry they have come to know best” (Chandler 476). Referring to other authors, therefore, is not necessarily a conscious choice, but an echo both on a literary and a psychological level. Since the preconscious is a state of memories from previously conscious acts, allusion not only invokes the memories of a literary tradition through the poet’s work, but also, in the process, invokes the memories associated with that work for the poet. Interestingly, this allusion to the *Oresteia* comes as the wandering poet is lost in his own memories about the veiled maid; as he flees to search for this ideal, he equates himself to Clytemnestra:

```plaintext
--As an eagle grasped
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast
Burn with the poison, and precipitates
Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight
O’er the wide aery wilderness: thus driven
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,
Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,
Startling with careless step the moon-light snake,
He fled. (226-237)
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Within this pseudo-dream state of both allusion and poetry, this description works as the second step of Freud’s criteria for any dream expressing wish-fulfillment. The first step,
clearly evident in the vision of the veiled maid, features the object of desire prominently but masks the act being desired. The veiled maid, with her arousing appearance, clearly becomes the desired object in that vision, but we need to delve much further than the manifest element of that dream in order to understand the veiled maid’s role. In the second stage of a wish-fulfillment dream, “[t]he action will be named without disguise, but the person will either be made unrecognizable or replaced by someone indifferent” (“Revision” 491). In this allusive reference to the *Oresteia*, the Poet is clearly echoing the previous night’s dream recognition of two distinctly gendered, separate elements of himself. The contradicting acts related to these two distinct elements of himself—to merge them in order to achieve balance and poetic creation, and to sublimate the female in order to privilege the male—are much more overtly evident here than in the vision of the veiled maid.

The fluidity of these symbolic, allusive figures indicates the clear condensation of the wandering poet’s fears and desires. The figure of Clytemnestra, one of the main characters in the mythological story to which Shelley refers in this description, occupies both the position of the serpent and the eagle at some point during her story. As the conspiring wife inciting her lover to kill her husband, she is described by Aeschylus as a serpent. The roles are literally reversed, however, when “she dream[s] that she gave birth to a serpent, which she wrapped in swaddling clothes and suckled”; in the dream, as her child suckles, the serpent “draw[s] blood from her breast, as well as milk” (Graves 420). The serpent, rather than symbolizing the treachery of Clytemnestra, now symbolizes the vengeance of Orestes, driven by furies Aeschylus calls alastor. Aeschylus’s trilogy reverses a tale of a threatening woman to a story of a mother being murdered by the son,
of the creator being destroyed by the created. Just as Clytemnestra eluded traditional
gender roles in the Oresteia by occupying the role of both snake and eagle, so does the
Poet in his personal association with the story. Rather than associating himself solely
with the snake, the phallic symbol of Orestes in the second part of Clytemnestra’s story,
he associates himself also with the eagle, the symbol in this incarnation of the maternal,
creative force. Instead of continuing to see the female aspect of himself as distinctly
Other, as he did in the vision of the veiled maid, the wandering Poet now sees himself as
embodiying the feminine element completely. The allusion, however, to Clytemnestra
and the wandering poet’s association with the eagle in this element of the story
necessarily implicates him in the menacing figure of the snake. By condensing these two
figures in the use of this allusion—the aggressive, threatening snake and the innocent,
victimized eagle—the wandering poet, and by extension Shelley, demonstrates the
inevitable conflation of his fears and desires. He desires to unite with the feminine, to
fully occupy that role and harness the power intrinsic to such a figure, but fears the
potential of that kind of unification.

The fluidity of gender roles demonstrated by the Oresteia allusion is the ultimate
threat to the male Romantic poet. The serpent/bird imagery recurs later in the poem in
the description of the landscape; specifically, the waves “writhed beneath the tempest’s
scourge / Like serpents struggling in a vulture’s grasp” (324-325). The repetition of this
imagery emphasizes the danger of the femininity. Both roles are negatively portrayed—
the bird, once the symbol of maternal force, is now a vulture, a bird of prey characterized
by its scavenging and encroaching consumption. The phallic serpent image is now being
consumed by that vulture (rather than the reverse, which occurred in the previous
incarnation of this image), undermining the power of that masculine image. The classical origination of this image demonstrates no negative consequences for the fluidity of the symbolically gendered roles. Clytemnestra is punished not for transgressing established gender boundaries but for her role in conspiracy and murder. The negative consequences of this kind of fluidity in *Alastor*, therefore, are strictly a result of the restrictions of Romantic gender ideology.

Shelley isn’t the only Romantic poet to demonstrate fear about the encroaching feminine and the need to strictly police the separation of roles. William Wordsworth, in his “Tintern Abbey,” recognizes a potential transgressor in his sister Dorothy. He says,

\[ \text{...in thy voice I catch} \\
\text{The language of my former heart, and read} \\
\text{My former pleasures in the shooting lights} \\
\text{of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while} \\
\text{May I behold in thee what I was once,} \\
\text{My dear, dear sister! (Lines 116-121)} \]

Both Dorothy’s “wild eyes” and her use of a parallel language to Wordsworth’s own poetic discourse are echoed in *Alastor’s* description of the veiled maid as poet. Seeing Dorothy as a burgeoning poet in her own right, and occupying a role that Wordsworth himself once did, threatens him. This weakening of gender barriers, and the ensuing potential for a woman to switch between female and male roles without consequence, imperils the identity of the male poet—if a woman can occupy the patriarchally sanctioned role of poet, the gatekeeper of culture, where does that leave men? *Alastor’s* multiple invocations of allusive fluidity are continuing manifestations of the deep male fear of the powerful feminine, which both Shelley and Wordsworth believe has the clear potential not only to usurp male roles but also to destroy their male identities in the process.
The landscape through which the wandering Poet travels in his fruitless, yet relentless, pursuit of the veiled maid similarly echoes his anxiety about the potentially destructive power of the woman to a masculine identity. In one episode,

A little shallop floating near the shore
Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.
It had long been abandoned, for its sides
Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints
Swayed with the undulations of the tide. (299-303)

The sea, a universally recognized female symbol, is in absolute control here. The sea’s undulations create all movement in this passage; the boat does not move without the sea’s force to propel it and is useless without that force. The continuity and rhythmic motion of the sea are sharply juxtaposed with the absolute disjunction of the boat—the sides are gaping open, its joints are weakened. No unity exists here. In the Poet’s mind, this disjunction and destruction demonstrate that the female force of organic creation, unyielding and everpresent, is continuously in control; all manmade constructs that attempt to harness that power for their own purposes, of which the shallop is just one example, are wrecked. The poet’s notice of this element of the landscape indicates his own belief that there is no way to maintain one’s masculinity, a social construct, while attempting to embrace and harness the great power of an organic natural force.

The relationship between the boat and the poet’s identity becomes even more clear as he enters the boat and their fates become united; one particular scene indicates his continuing division from the female force he feels that he so desperately needs. The boat that, in the earlier passage, had been described as nearly destroyed now holds the poet, and they approach the end of the stream:

…A cavern there
Yawned, and amid its slant and winding depths
Ingulphed the rushing sea. The boat fled on
With unrelaxing speed.—“Vision and Love!”
The Poet cried aloud, “I have beheld
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death
Shall not divide us long!”  (363-370)

Here we find, symbolized in the landscape itself, the essential confrontation that *Alastor* focuses on throughout. Nature, in its inaccessibility, is characterized as feminine; the cavernous depths into which the stream disappears, and the area which the Poet desires to access, resemble the womb, the gendered origin of all creation. The fact that this cavernous womb image is physically located on Mount Caucasus further proves its symbolic importance. Caucasus is considered to be the cradle of civilization, and the ancient Greeks even considered it to be a pillar of the world. The poet believes that, in order to access the mysteries of poetry and creativity (or, as he terms it, “Vision and Love!”), all he must do is unite with this female creative force. His desire, therefore, to follow the stream into the cavern, despite the great physical risk that act poses, indicates that his overwhelming desire is to remedy the separation that prevents him from creating. The wandering poet’s goal, here, seems to be to sacrifice himself to unite once more with what he sees as a crucial part of his identity.

Despite the Poet’s clear verbal indication of his nearly overwhelming desire to be united with the force of the feminine, the Narrator demonstrates how much such an action would imperil the poet. His voice interjects:

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--Shall it sink
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress
Of that resistless gulph embosom it?
Now shall it fall?--  (394-397)
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While overtly talking about the fate of the boat that carries the wandering poet, and its relation to the dangerous waterfalls at the base of Mount Caucasus, this interjection takes
on much more meaning in the context of the fears and anxieties about identity that the poet has demonstrated. The Narrator here, whose interjection is framed with the dashes in the midst of his chronological narrative, poses these rhetorical questions to the audience and, in the process, calls attention to the heretofore unrecognized danger that the poet faces. The wandering poet, because of his willingness to sacrifice himself for this unification, is now in peril. The terms “abyss” and “resistless gulph” indicate a shapeless, consuming entity, an infinite swallowing up of one thing in the all-consuming space of another. The abyss described here is clearly that female force to which the wandering poet is so attracted—an unstoppable, unconquerable, inaccessible power that, if allowed, will destroy rather than unite. The Narrator’s role in asking these questions is essential in understanding how this fear of the consumptive feminine relates to the socially constructed identity of the poet. The Narrator, who himself is another displaced voice of Shelley the poet, represents a tradition of male poets who, understanding the delicate balance the poet must engage in to maintain his identity, desire to save the wandering poet from making a fatal mistake. For the Narrator and for the wandering Poet, masculine poetic identity is of paramount concern—constructing, maintaining, and preserving it at all costs.

*Alastor*, while certainly demonstrating the connection between the anxiety of gender and the anxiety of creation, also interrogates Shelley’s desire to establish a unique poetic identity. We are introduced to desire initially through the subtitle of the poem, “The Spirit of Solitude.” The spirit to which it refers could very well be the wandering poet, whose actions are punitively characterized in the Preface as “self-centered seclusion.” Similarly, the Narrator describes Alastor’s protagonist as one who “spurned /
[the] choicest gifts” of “The spirit of sweet human love” (203-205). Solitude, according to these descriptions, is outside the norm for a poet. Despite being described as a poet by the Narrator, the solitary Visionary as critics note is unable to tell his own story. His withdrawal from society results in the silencing of his promising voice. Contrasted with the Narrator, who is able not only to create in order to tell his own story but also to narrate someone else’s story, the wandering poet’s silence is tantamount to poetic failure. Because he is not firmly ensconced within a community, a chorus, of poetic predecessors, the wandering poet is doomed to be a literary mute. This chorality comes in allusion, in drawing upon and referring to a fabric of past literary works in order to construct something new—a successful poetic identity. The artist’s identity must be a composite construction of those that have come before. Consequently, the wandering poet’s desire for solitude, for a unique poetic voice, utterly fails.

As dual displaced figures of Shelley himself, the Narrator and the wandering poet do, as Wasserman argues, demonstrate an internal interrogation of the poetic process. The Narrator’s ability to create, and his constant use of allusion, demonstrate his own understanding of how a Romantic poetic identity is constructed. The Narrator’s elegy for the fallen Visionary, read in the context of their roles as symbols of differing poetic philosophies, can be read as Shelley mourning the loss of possibility, of the potential for a unique poetic voice within the Romantic tradition:

…Art and eloquence,
And all the shows o’ the world, are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
It is a woe "too deep for tears," when all
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
His unconscious realization that solitude and independence are impossible to maintain as a Romantic poet parallels Shelley’s examination of poetic identity that permeates *Alastor*. While Shelley certainly desires a continued place within this poetic tradition, and deeply fears how his desire to harness an organic creative force might compromise his role, he also fears how this submission to an established order might similarly compromise what he sees as a unique poetic vision. His own personal attitude toward poetry itself, therefore, is yet another element of his poetic identity that he both fears and desires—and he manifests these anxieties unconsciously through his juxtaposition between the silent wandering poet and the successfully creative Narrator.

*Alastor*’s examination of these unconscious anxieties, concentrated on the numerous aspects of artistic identity, is ultimately about the perils of unifying seemingly conflicting elements into one cohesive poetic identity. Shelley is certainly grappling with the self-consciously masculine behavior necessary to maintain his role as the “proper” Romantic poet or even as a man of the nineteenth century, a role that requires the strict separation of gender roles. For a poet so clearly in touch with the ways in which poetry stems from the unconscious, Shelley seems especially interested in his own relationship with his creative self; this interest manifests itself clearly in the many displaced, dream images of the disjunctions within his identity and was, perhaps, the impetus for writing *Alastor*. The poem, while ostensibly about the quest for love and poetry, is much more about the quest for self-awareness and understanding. Shelley therefore continues the
focus on communal unity that critics see pervading his other work—although, in this case, he is hoping to create a working, healthy community of his many-faceted psyche.
CHAPTER TWO

“Write my story”: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Perils of Being Woman

...I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. –*Alastor*

I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for
this one pursuit...I collected bones from charnel
houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the
tremendous secrets of the human frame. –*Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*, which she referred to in her journal as “my
story,” demonstrates the extent to which the literary connection between the Shelleys
mirrored their personal attachment. The composition of the novel began just months after
the early 1816 publication of Percy Shelley’s *Alastor* and demonstrates just one of the
ways in which their relationship affected their work. Percy Shelley would later compose
the Preface of the novel upon its publication and make numerous textual “corrections”
and changes within the novel itself.6 Mary Shelley, for her part, was equally involved in
Percy Shelley’s work, particularly after his death in 1822. In her editing of his
*Posthumous Poems*, Mary Shelley significantly shaped the way in which the public
viewed her husband and his work, and therefore intimately involved herself in her
husband’s literary legacy in the same way that he involved himself in hers during the
production of *Frankenstein*.

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6 See James Rieger’s edition of the 1818 text of *Frankenstein* for a further discussion of this involvement.
Strangely, despite these clear connections, few have closely examined how the works of Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley are clearly responsive to one another. The critical landscape of *Frankenstein* studies has been varied and rich; many critics have followed Mary Shelley’s lead, as she called the novel her “hideous progeny” and attributed the story to a horrifying nightmarish vision, and have analyzed the novel psychoanalytically. By 1981, when Paul Sherwin published his Freudian reading of the novel, so many critics had focused upon the doubling of the monster and his creator that they had begun to “assume it rather than argue it” (qtd. in Sherwin 889). Many of the most well-known psychoanalytic readings have focused on the role of motherhood and the figure of the mother in the novel. Ellen Moers reads the novel as a hideous birth myth, while Marc Rubenstein sees the novel as centered on Mary Shelley’s experience learning about and confronting her own history with (or lack thereof) her own dead mother. Gilbert and Gubar note that many critics, Moers included, categorize *Frankenstein* as “somehow a ‘woman’s book,’ if only because its author was caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time she wrote the novel” (Gilbert and Gubar 222).

This critical connection between personal emotion and literary pursuit is overtly made in most psychoanalytic readings; in them, an author’s personal tragedies become material for masterful fictional or poetic works. Gilbert and Gubar interestingly combine this notion of personal psychodrama with the concept of overt literary response and revision, paving the way for a reading like mine. Along with a primary focus on how *Frankenstein* rewrites Milton’s *Paradise Lost* from a distinctly female perspective, Gilbert and Gubar also assert that it is “a Romantic novel about—among other things—Romanticism, as well as a book about books and perhaps, too, about the writers of books”
This catalog of thematic concentrations is certainly apt—I believe that
*Frankenstein*, while certainly focused on these ideas, is simultaneously a much more personal and literary response to the person who, at the time, was both her staunchest supporter and her most intimate literary rival: her husband.

Edward Strickland’s seemingly off-hand, though incredibly astute, pairing of the Shelleyean works in his reading of *Alastor* previews the connections I see within the two works. He says, “The dark nymph of *Alastor*, the veiled maid, is both epipsyche and a kind of Frankenstein-monster” (159). Certainly his invocation of the Frankenstein monster here is not necessarily intended to allude to the novel itself, since the concept of the Frankenstein monster has become an independent cultural icon of creation gone awry, but the unintended pairing asserts the intimate connection between the two figures at the heart of these works. At the most basic levels of characterization, structure, and thematic focus, *Alastor* and *Frankenstein* work together in a dialogue about the nature of and anxiety connected to creation. Mary Shelley’s novel, which makes use of both the structure of nested narratives and also displaced characters present in Percy Shelley’s *Alastor*, demonstrates her own psychologically fractured identity. Shelley’s anxieties about her role as both mother and author, and Percy’s anxieties about his role within the Romantic tradition, led each to create a work that manifests these anxieties about identity. A female perspective, however, allows the novel to respond uniquely to and expand upon Percy Shelley’s examination of identity; the novel narrates the plight of the feared female Other, the figure reviled and desired in *Alastor*, who must reconcile the potentially destructive power of the maternal with the almost exclusively male role of artistic
expression, thereby interrogating the gender boundaries ultimately upheld by Percy Shelley’s *Alastor*.

These two works demonstrate a remarkably similar structure and thematic focus. *Frankenstein*, overtly concerned with the palpable fear its title character has about his literal creation, clearly parallels Percy Shelley’s examination of his paralyzing fears related to creation in *Alastor*. In fact, Mary Shelley’s novel can be read, as I noted earlier, as a hypothetical example of the tragic results of harnessing the gendered power of creation. The novel’s presentation of the encroaching male scientific creator inverts *Alastor*’s concentration on the encroaching feminine. These parallels continue in the duo’s shared interest in the role of art in the unconscious portrayals of fears and desires, demonstrated by their strikingly similar comments about artistic expression as a kind of dream state and by Mary Shelley’s own description of the origin of her story.

Examining their parallel choice of structures is essential for a clear understanding of the motivation for their works. Mary Shelley repeats and transcends *Alastor*’s displaced set of narratives in *Frankenstein* by creating a novelistic structure that has been described as “a box within a box or as a series of concentric circles” with the monster’s narrative serving as the “vortex for the conflicts and dilemmas the novel embodies” (Schug 608). This concentric structure emphasizes the displacement she utilizes throughout—and especially how these displaced characters display the fissures within her own identity.

Within the novel, the characters who contribute a piece of this nested narrative—Frankenstein, the monster, Walton, and, to a certain degree, Walton’s sister—can all be

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7 Mary Shelley describes this nightmarish vision in her Introduction to the Third Edition of the novel: “When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness
seen as displaced doubles of Mary Shelley since they, too, are constructing a narrative. The key figures within the novel to understand the disjunction within her own psyche are the figures of Victor Frankenstein and the nameless female monster; the characterization of and confrontation between these figures mostly clearly demonstrate Mary Shelley’s unconscious anxieties at work.

To be a mother in Mary Shelley’s world, a role that Percy Shelley ascribes solely to the feminine sphere, is to be dead, dying, or killing; this response to Alastor’s focus strips the maternal of its generative power and demonstrates Mary Shelley’s own anxiety about the role. The two primary mother figures in the novel, Caroline Frankenstein and Elizabeth Lavenza, are tainted with death by association. Caroline becomes the archetypal literary dead mother early in the novel, remembered in portraits that only emphasize this negative characterization. Her primary memorial is a portrait hung “over the mantelpiece. It was a historical subject, painted at [Victor’s] father’s desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father” (73). She is not remembered for her life in this memorial, or for her role as wife and mother. Instead, she is remembered only in the “agony of despair,” a scene that invokes the death that automatically surrounds her role. The power of this association manifests itself most interestingly in young William Frankenstein’s murder. The crime, initially believed to be motivated by robbery, is blamed on the glittery miniature portrait hanging around his neck—a portrait of his dead mother. Elizabeth, who has stepped into the role absented by Caroline, immediately takes responsibility for this murder by saying, “I have murdered my darling infant” (67). The excited utterance issues from an

far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw— with shut eyes, but acute mental vision, — I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together…” (227-228).
unconscious recognition of her taint now as mother figure, as if she realizes that the mere presence of the necklace would, if not literally, symbolically strangle the young boy. The presence of any traditional mother or mother figure brings with it the threat of corruption and death to the characters and clearly advocates fear and suspicion.

Victor, as the character most overtly connected to the issue of creation in the novel, demonstrates his own unconscious anxiety toward mother figures in the strange “wild” dream that he has early in the novel, a dream that echoes the vision of the veiled maid in its displacement and foregrounding of issues of gender and creation. As a dream within Mary Shelley’s own “waking dream” of a novel, Victor’s anxieties become displaced versions of Shelley’s own. Victor describes the dream in vivid, horrible detail:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (53)

The dream begins, much as the wandering poet’s dream begins in Alastor, with a comfortable scene for the dreamer. Here, Victor embraces and kisses Elizabeth, exerting his socially ascribed sexual predominance and she, as submissive female, passively accepts it. The horror comes as the object of Victor’s sexual desire turns, quite suddenly, from the socially acceptable Elizabeth to the wholly unacceptable taboo figure of Caroline, who now exhibits the dangerous power to inhabit and consume any identity she desires. Clearly, this dream could be read as a demonstration of Victor’s Oedipal desires, and the lateral substitution of Elizabeth, who now occupies the role of mother within the
Frankenstein family, as Other for his true desire for his mother. Julia Kristeva would argue, instead, that this conflation of corpse and lover, of life and death, is a more fundamental manifestation of the psychic power the maternal relationship wields over the formation of an independent identity. Her power to transcend borders of life and identity threatens Victor’s autonomy and, by extension, the autonomy of the patriarchy that he represents at the outset of the dream. This dream image demonstrates the patriarchal fear of female generative power to turn quickly from a positive into a negative force. The perception of this liminal boundary, symbolized in his dream by the condensation of Elizabeth and Caroline into one horribly corrupted and corrupting figure, threatens a patriarchy that requires boundaries between private and public spheres to be strictly maintained and fears this corruption’s effect on the construction of male identity.

Victor’s role as both a displaced mother figure and a displaced element of Shelley herself also manifests itself clearly in this dream. The dream occurs on the night of Frankenstein’s successful “birth” of his creature, the night that he succeeds in usurping traditionally female creative power and thereby transgressing gender boundaries. His narrative of the work preceding this “birth”day traces an inverted conception and gestation. Victor’s word choice alone indicates this intent—(“[w]ho shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil”)—and motivation—(“resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward; I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit”). His choice of the verb “conceive” and the language of overwhelming physicality that permeates his description mirrors linguistically the single-minded surrender to physical,

8 Mary Shelley is certainly not the only Gothic author to concentrate overtly on the connection between the grave, death worms, and the mother. For a fascinating tableau of mothers and graves, see Matthew Lewis’s narration of Agnes’s birth scene in The Monk.
primal impulses that occur in the procreative sexual act. By extension, Victor’s
description of his laboratory, in which he incubates his “great object” (50), mimics the
separation and enclosure of the female womb: “In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the
top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and a staircase,
I kept my work-shop of filthy creation” (50). Frankenstein describes the separation
between the outside world and the safety of this “womb” clearly, using the narrow
passages and staircases that mimic the female anatomy. This creation activity—the
piecing together of parts from tombs, the nightly, secret toil—also works as a self-
reflexive portrayal of the author’s creation of the novel. Mary Shelley’s reanimation of
dead stories, which occurs as she both alludes to and rewrites the stories of Prometheus
and the narrative of the Fall, emphasizes her own creation of a “hideous progeny” that
parallels Victor Frankenstein’s creation of his composite figure. The parallels between
Shelley’s artistic efforts and Frankenstein’s physical ones establish him as a clearly
displaced double for Mary Shelley, the hidden and self-conscious artist.

Victor’s actions in the dream, and the consequences of those actions, firmly
establish his position as a maternal figure; as a representative of the patriarchy, he
therefore demonstrates the realization of the fears that Percy Shelley examines in Alastor.
Already self-endowed with a kind of generative power in his animation of his monster, he
is welcomed into the company of ghastly mothers as he turns life into death within the
dream. Caroline is responsible for consuming Elizabeth, but Victor sets the process in
motion. His kiss precipitates Elizabeth’s physical decomposition; with his touch, he

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9 See Kristeva’s Powers of Horror for a more thorough discussion of the abject and its relationship to the
maternal.
literally invites death. He becomes, in the process, an agent of destruction just like his mother. This dream, much like the vision of the veiled maid, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Victor, dreaming a dream that manifests his own fear of the power of maternal identity, becomes the embodiment of the results of that fear. Just as Alastor’s wandering poet destroys the veiled maid because he both fears and desires her, Victor alternately is consumed by and consumes the maternal. This strange duality frames the young Mary Shelley’s own deep concerns about the potential for the maternal to consume both body and soul.

In a key section in the novel, Frankenstein’s creation and destruction of a composite mother creature both illuminates and complicates the displacement Shelley establishes throughout the novel. Frankenstein’s motivation for work on this mother figure is a desperate one, born of the threat his male creature poses that he would “work at [Frankenstein’s] destruction” if Victor did not create a “companion…of the same species” (140-141). Victor’s description of the work on this composite woman, which he says is a “horrible and irksome” task and one that results in his feeling “often sickened at the work” (162), makes it clear that Frankenstein sees this creature as the embodiment of the dangerous maternal force that threatens throughout. She becomes the physical symbol of the abstract qualities and characteristics associated with the mother especially when we are told that, as he is working, “the moon was just rising from the sea” (162). Both moon and water are classically female, even maternal, images; the moon is linked to Diana, the goddess of chastity and the hunt, while water is intimately connected to pregnancy. Frankenstein firmly believes that the primary concern of this new creature

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10 Marc Rubenstein discusses this parallel between female anatomy and Frankenstein’s description of his laboratory in his argument about how the novel centers around Mary Shelley’s discovery of her own
will be that of procreation, making her more mother than wife or companion: “the first 
results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race 
of devils would be propagated upon the earth” (163). Frightened by this potential more 
than the threats of death posed by the male creature, Victor chooses to destroy the half-
created monster mother rather than risk her future actions. Though she is, at this point, 
only pieces stitched together and not yet animated, Frankenstein still sees the creature as 
fundamentally maternal and, therefore, a continuing threat. He returns the body to the 
depths of the sea, the symbolic maternal depths that mimic the pre-birth state, under a sky 
with a moon “suddenly overspread by a thick cloud” (168). In Victor’s dual 
concentration on the composite and on the maternal in these scenes, Mary Shelley has the 
opportunity to comment on the nature of the maternal—its artificiality and conscious 
societal construction—and, in so doing, exorcise her own anxiety about the power of the 
role she is expected to play.

The complexity of displaced figure meeting the monstrous embodiment of a 
feared maternal force makes this scene of destruction the most interesting element of 
Shelley’s dream displacement. Victor’s construction of a mother figure at all, with a 
piece from here and a piece from there, indicates not only the absolute departure from the 
concept of native mothering instinct but also the pressure to create the “proper” mother 
from a hodge-podge of instructions and accepted social practices. The mother figure, like 
the male monster before her, is pieced together from the “intricacies of fibres, muscles, 
and veins” collected from the “unhallowed damps of the grave” and “vaults and charnel 
houses” (47-49). The mother monster, then, is not an organic whole—she must be 
constructed from the most suitable pieces, just as a woman’s role as a proper mother in 
mother.
society must be consciously crafted as well. Frankenstein, as a displaced figure of the artist Shelley, constructs in this scene the separate, alien image of Mary Shelley’s maternal side. The educated, well-read literary princess Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is constructing the monstrous mother Mary, a literal and psychological fragmentation that demonstrates Shelley’s inability to unite these two parts of herself and her anxiety about her failure to do so. This “lifetime of self-division” may be, as Mary Poovey asserts, “the result of one woman’s attempt to conform simultaneously to two conflicting prescriptive models of behavior” (352), the same kind of self-division manifested by the wandering poet in his conflicting desire to be both Romantic poet and unified example of gender balance. Fundamentally, Shelley’s demonstration of double displacement and psychic fragmentation within the novel demonstrates her own great fear of the role of mother; this fear prevents her from merging her own new role as mother with her already established identity. Such deeply ingrained fears seem natural, given her tragic history with motherhood.11 Her entire life is one testament after another to the consumptive and deadly power of maternity—her mother died giving birth, leaving her with only the “mythic vision of Mary Wollstonecraft as perfect mother, faultless author, and creature of destiny” to emulate (Rubenstein 188), and her own daughter died after only two weeks of life. Mary’s construction of a novel that features hideous portraits of creation’s inexorable link with death, therefore, is as much a psychological projection of her own fears as it is a solely fictional construct.

Shelley’s fears and reflections on her own role as mother are imbedded within Victor Frankenstein’s fears of and reflections on the maternal creature he constructs.

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11 See both Ellen Moers and Marc Rubenstein for a more thorough discussion of the connection between life experience with the maternal and their manifestations within the novel itself.
Victor’s memories of his first creation, which he recalls as he puts together this new female, echo Shelley’s stunted and tragic development as a mother. His assertion that he “was engaged in the same manner, and had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it forever with the bitterest remorse” could be as much the memory of a woman who had experienced the tragic early death of a child as it could be the memory of a man who had created a murderous being (163). Desolation of heart and bitterest remorse, for Mary Shelley, are emotions associated with all failed creators, regardless of gender or situation. Therefore, Frankenstein’s fearful imaginings of the potential of this new creature could also be the secret fears and concerns of a mother’s doubtful heart:

I was not about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; ….she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation….Had I right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?….now, for the first time, the wickedness of my promise burst upon me; I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest… (163)

Frankenstein’s musings here focus primarily on the effect of this creation on the future. For Mary Shelley, this future figure takes on a most familiar form—the “thinking and reasoning” woman that she has now become. In pondering the effects of her choices on the life of this hypothetical woman, Mary Shelley simultaneously considers the implications of her own mother’s choice and how that choice places her firmly within the situation Frankenstein describes. As the rational, educated woman, who sees the role of artist, student, and intellectual as distinct and distant from the role of mother, Shelley must decide whether she will “refuse to comply with a compact” that she believes that her mother entered into, an agreement to adopt the socially constructed role of mother
that all women are expected to embody. The potential horror of the creation that
Frankenstein ponders is the horror that the rational, artistic side of Shelley has at the
threat of integrating this primal maternal power into one cohesive identity and, in the
process, potentially sacrificing the literary nature she has cultivated. In the process,
Shelley clearly provides a parallel, but expanded, view of the anxieties related to creation
that first appear in Percy Shelley’s *Alastor*.

Frankenstein’s decision to destroy his female creation, in order to prevent the
threat she poses, works also as Shelley’s confrontation of the elements of her dueling
identity; unlike *Alastor*’s poet, who continuously attempts to unify the warring elements
of his identity, Mary Shelley ultimately decides between the distinctive elements of her
own. Because Victor Frankenstein and the monstrous mother are displaced figures
representing her fractured identity, Frankenstein’s act of destruction is psychologically
both a murder and a suicide. Her artistic self, in the form of Frankenstein the creator,
refuses to unite with the maternal, represented by the female monster, and, therefore,
destroys that maternal side. Frankenstein explains his decision to destroy the female
creature thus: “I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another
like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged”
(164). His decision is not a rational one; Frankenstein certainly does not decide that it
would be more pragmatic to destroy this female creature and instead reason with the male
creature he created. Instead, he reacts to a paralyzing fear of the future, a future that
includes a race of new demons, a potentially catastrophic effect the monster might have
on future generation, and a deep underlying fear of his own inability to control what he
has created. He recognizes his previous failures as creator and his inability to create
human life successfully. His choice, then, to destroy the female monster is a refusal to continue the same pattern. Mary Shelley, in constructing this confrontation, makes the same decision. Her own experiences as a mother, especially in losing a child to early death and nearly losing her life following a miscarriage, demonstrate her own perception about her own inabilities as a mother to successfully create and sustain life as she believes (and society mandates) that she should. Her fears about a future of continuing maternal failure and, on an even more basic psychological level, her fear of death as a result of motherhood cause her to reject the maternal aspect of her identity. To reject the maternal preemptively allows her control over her destiny, rather than allowing that all-powerful maternal force to overcome and consume her as it did her mother. In so doing, Shelley simultaneously rejects the rigidity of socially constructed gender boundaries, boundaries that mandate that all women be excellent mothers and that all artistic expression is confined to the male sphere. Shelley kills herself, then, to save herself.

In responding to and expanding on the thematic focus established by Percy Shelley’s *Alastor*, Mary Shelley enters a discourse about poetic identity that would not normally be open to her and, in so doing, writes herself into a tradition of Romantic thematic concerns about artistry, adding a unique female voice in the process. The effect of this female response and extension to male concerns about identity is an investigation of the grave consequences of rigid gender ideologies. In examining the strictly separate but equally restrictive worlds of artistic and physical creation, Mary Shelley analyzes the cultural fears about boundaries established for women, providing a more complete picture of the issue introduced in *Alastor* by complementing Percy’s fear of the encroaching feminine with a parallel fear of the corruptive maternal. Mary Shelley’s demonstration in
Frankenstein that women, who are expected to be endowed with natural maternal instincts, fear the role as much as the men emphasizes that successful motherhood is not determined by biology but is a socially constructed role and, therefore, can be rejected by those who do not have the skills to be successful at it. In destroying the composite mother figure, Mary Shelley investigates a reality in which she rejects these socially ascribed roles in favor of her own desire to be defined as a unique, successful artist rather than as a gendered figure of a patriarchal society, just as her husband desires in Alastor.
CONCLUSION

In the clearly connected thematic focus and structural similarities of their works *Frankenstein* and *Alastor*, Mary and Percy Shelley demonstrate a unique artistic interconnection that parallels their intimate personal relationship. While seeing the Shelleys as artistically connected is certainly not a new perspective to adopt, seeing their works as psychologically and culturally connected offers, perhaps, a new way of understanding the complexities of their works. Both *Alastor* and *Frankenstein* manifest, in their shared use of nested narratives and displaced figures, the Shelleys’ similar anxieties about the nature of creation, both artistic and physical, and the power of that creative force to both establish and destroy identity. Concentrating on the unconscious as a means of understanding these works, while certainly an instructive and illuminating approach, raises complex questions about how to reconcile the clearly self-conscious construction of literature with the theory of art as “beyond and above consciousness.”

The elaborate, and nearly flawless, structure of the nested narratives within *Frankenstein*, along with the clear allusive response Mary Shelley makes to both Percy Shelley and

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12 Percy Shelley is widely acknowledged to be both author of the Preface and heavy contributor to the editing of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Mary Shelley contributed much editorial comment and prefatory material to the posthumous publication of Percy Shelley’s poetic works.
other well-known authors of the time, demonstrates a kind of conscious craftsmanship that cannot merely be attributed to the unconscious.

Marlon Ross’s theory about the relationship between these unconscious anxieties and the conscious act of writing, along with our Freudian understanding of dreams and the mechanism of the unconscious, offers an instructive place to begin. Ross asserts that, while informed by the unconscious desires and anxieties at the root of artistic expression, this act of writing is another unconscious result of these desires:

I produce a book to halt my desire, but the book instead reproduces my desire—not only in that it incorporates my desire but also in that once the book is finished, I must replace it with another object in the hope of stilling desire; not only in that the book is merely a temporary object of desire, but also in that it reproduces desire in others, who must read, or criticize, or rewrite my book. (8)

If we see this kind of action as an instinctive response to an unconscious desire or anxiety, then we can also see how, though certainly crafted carefully, the work still preserves its manifestation of the unconscious. As Freud cautions, though the dreamer may recognize and be able to describe unemotionally the manifest content of the dream, the latent meaning—and, therefore, the true expression of the contents of the unconscious—will remain veiled. The unconscious does not, by its nature, reveal itself easily. The careful crafting of Alastor and Frankenstein, then, may not necessarily expose to these authors their conflicted desires.

Active repression, the primary means by which the psyche maintains the sharp distinction between conscious and unconscious states of mind, is an essential component of analyzing dreams. Dreams contain “thing-presentations,” or signs and images, to lead to the idea being repressed; while certainly interesting to analyze, these images are important only in the sense that they lead us to a greater understanding about what still
remains veiled within the unconscious. In these Shelleyean works, the common construction of their literary dream images indicates a shared larger fear or desire being repressed. While certainly speculative and preliminary, I believe that the Shelleys’ mutual concentration on identity, and their fears about how creation both destroys and creates that identity, indicates a greater fear of rejection. Both Percy and Mary Shelley, in their respective works, demonstrate a deep concern with how their individual identities fit within a prescribed cultural norm—Percy examines how his desire for pure poetic expression affects his role within a masculine construct, while Mary interrogates her own beliefs about integrating the role of mother and author into one cohesive identity in a world that privileges and requires motherhood. Their creation of marginalized, exiled characters in the figures of the wandering poet, who chooses to shun society, and the monster, who is shunned by a society he deeply desires to be a part of, indicates their own fear of the consequences of societal rejection. In focusing so clearly within their works on the conscious construction of identity, both Percy and Mary Shelley seem to be simultaneously examining which identity will allow them the most inclusion within society and, in the end, wrestling with an answer that neither likes. Mary Shelley struggles with the idea that, in order to be warmly welcomed into society, she must adopt the traditional female role of wife and mother. For Percy Shelley, this societal construction of identity not only requires a masculine posture that he struggles with, but also an engagement with an allusive tradition of a chorus of strong poetic voices that will ultimately determine his success as a poet. Percy and Mary Shelley reflect, in these works born of the peace and introspection afforded them at Bishopsgate, both an unconscious
fear of societal rejection and a conflicting desire to reject the identity that such social inclusion requires.

Recognizing the complex questions that psychoanalytic readings elicit is, I think, essential to understanding that such a theoretical approach is only one way of looking at these works. The results of this reading, though, demonstrate a new, and potentially quite instructive, way of approaching male and female authors as participants in a continuing textual conversation about questions of cultural and social identity, one that implies equality and mutual respect. This call-and-response dialogue occurs, in this case, across genre and gender boundaries and is, I think, the most exciting element of this project. Anne Mellor, in her book *Romanticism and Gender*, sees a distinct difference between the approaches of male and female Romantic writers while also acknowledging what I see as an essential point:

…the relationship between “masculine” and “feminine” Romanticism is finally not one of structural opposition but rather of intersection along a fluid continuum. Any writer, male or female, could occupy the “masculine” or the “feminine” ideological or subject position, even within the same work. (4)

Mellor’s concept of a fluid continuum is an exciting way to see not only how gender differences are manifested structurally, but also how a focus on how gender differences are actually elided by a stronger sense of cultural and thematic connection. The questions that this concept elicits should generate, I think, an interesting body of work that further examines the interconnected relationship between male and female authors. How do men and women, so sharply split by cultural constructs of proper gendered behavior and spheres of influence, converse about the world in similar ways? How can recognizing the presence of a continuing textual conversation between male and female authors, which
includes complex and educated allusions, strong and technically brilliant structures, and a shared thematic focus, help us transcend the sometimes too-restrictive notion of gender and focus, instead, on the similarities between authors rather than their differences?

My reading of Percy and Mary Shelley’s thematic interconnection opens the door, I believe, to further work in this area. Perhaps this reading is an anomaly—perhaps the conversation between authors in the Romantic era is governed primarily by a strong sense of gender difference. Perhaps, as Anne Mellor suggests, sharply different modes of writing characterize this era and the close personal relationship between the Shelleys accounts for their remarkable similarities. Nevertheless, I believe that, for a genre hoping to reconcile its bastion of six well-known Poets with a large and varied secondary canon of women and lesser-known male authors, it is incumbent upon us as scholars to really examine the intricate responsive and allusive relationship, both overt and covert, that these authors had with each other. Perhaps, in doing so, we will recognize that a canon can be comprised not just of literary figures but also of cultural conversations, of ideas and questions that transcend personality, fame, and literary worth, and might, therefore, incorporate a better and more inclusive picture of what it meant to be a Romantic.
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