Excerpted from

*Reading the symptoms: An exploration of repression and hysteria in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. By: Hobbs, Colleen, Studies in the Novel, 00393827, Summer93, Vol. 25, Issue 2

Shelley's fictional portrayal of grief in Frankenstein not only prefigures Godwin's response to an emotional crisis, but it replicates the sensibility of Reason and emotional restraint. Shelley creates the same terrible struggle for moderation between a learned father who shares Godwin's "philosophy" of logic and a passionate son struggling for self-control. In her representation, Alphonse lectures Victor on "the folly of giving way to immoderate grief" as the guilt-ridden protagonist mourns the deaths of William and Justine.[ [17](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=df29c7c3-5d0a-4d70-8fa2-aff2bc6a407e%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#bib17)] Shelley's character can avoid further censure only by adopting a strategy to avoid his father"until I had recovered myself so far as to be enabled to conceal those feelings that overpowered me" (pp. 91-92). She illustrates that the son has learned the father's lesson by having him uncritically repeat Alphonse's homily that "a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity" (p. 51).

Given the coincidence between the scathing condolence Shelley received from her father and her fictional representations of grief, it is understandable that Anne Melior would find Victor Frankenstein's statement of emotional control to be an "authorial credo and moral touchstone."[ [18](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=df29c7c3-5d0a-4d70-8fa2-aff2bc6a407e%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "bib18" \o "18)] However, critics who credit the thoroughness of the character's emotional repression overlook the problems raised by Shelley's model of artificial tranquility. Shelley's novel complicates the question of emotional control by revealing its problematic implication with gender. According to Godwin's model, as we have seen, expression of grief characterizes only the common "mob" of women; therefore, the Promethean protagonist of Frankenstein resists "unmanly" emotions. As Marlon Ross's study illustrates, this Godwinian repression of the feminine reflects a specifically masculine ideology within Romantic poetics. Ross finds that in separating itself from the feminine influence of shared community values, Victor's project "looses his own unrestrained desire upon the world, a desire that is relentlessly aggressive, anarchic, and destructive."[ [19](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=df29c7c3-5d0a-4d70-8fa2-aff2bc6a407e%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "bib19" \o "19)] While the monster illustrates the expression of Victor's unspeakable masculine desires, Shelley uses Victor's body to show the dangers of unspeakable feminine ones. She observes that because a social and psychological system categorizes strong emotion as feminine and common, the men who experience such emotion risk chaos: a redefinition of gender and class status. In examining Shelley's depiction of Victor's repression of the feminine, we must take into account the social and political consequences which occur when control gives way to an emotional transgression.

Shelley illustrates this redefinition most clearly in several episodes of hysteria that she associates with Victor--a character who may be less the phallic aggressor that some have described than a prototype for Freud's Dora. By attributing hysteria to a male character, Shelley invites us to look for problems in the cultural orthodoxy of masculinity, especially as represented in Victor's project. The representation of a male hysteric in Shelley's text illustrates her belief that, despite a culture's artificial division of emotions by gender, the male body can, if need be, speak in a "feminine" voice.

As we have seen, the purveyors of "rational" medicine allowed men to experience hysteria for "manly" reasons: duplicity, drunkenness, and pride. Yet Victor Frankenstein, who attempts to heed Alphonse's maxims for moderation, transgresses the conventions of gender representation by being the wrong kind of hysteric. Not until his manly deathbed speech does Victor become the prideful, masculine hysteric of Ferriar's model. Instead, his behavior more closely replicates talkative, emotional, feminine hysteria. In his failure to uphold his father's standards for male reason and control, Victor articulates the schism between "masculine" and "feminine" behavior. In Shelley's narrative, the bourgeois Frankenstein family unit has maintained Alphonse's standards by insulating itself from the disruptive outside world. As Kate Ellis has argued, the members "wall in" domestic affection as they "[adjure] one another to repress their anger and grief for the sake of maintaining tranquility."[ [20](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=df29c7c3-5d0a-4d70-8fa2-aff2bc6a407e%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d" \l "bib20" \o "20)] However, Ellis' model does not account for the manner in which the Frankenstein family has segregated masculine from feminine emotions, The iconic figure of Caroline Beaufort weeping on her father's coffin illustrates how gender intersects with demands for emotional control. Caroline is presented as a model of femininity, and her display is the only instance in the novel where grief is not only accepted, but valorized: the idealized image of Caroline "weeping bitterly" occurs early in Victor's autobiography and immediately defines the family pattern of female grief and its dependence upon male protection and control. Indeed, Alphonse finds a means of controlling even Caroline's moment of agony--the portrait he commissions captures her moment of despair in a manner that provides "an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity" (p. 73). Her pain is now domesticated in a fashion that enhances the charm of her grieving demeanor, and the squalor and poverty of the "historical" situation are omitted to emphasize the scene's calm "dignity."[ [21](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=df29c7c3-5d0a-4d70-8fa2-aff2bc6a407e%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4114&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#bib21)] Alphonse's aesthetic revision of Caroline's history implies a patriarchal code--the father's ability to control the emotions of his entire family, sanitizing an occasion of despair for display over the family mantelpiece.