

**“As I Was Perpetually Haunted by These Ideas”:
Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* and Its Influence on
Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda***

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Fig. 1. Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas, 101.7 cm x 127.1 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts. Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, 55.5.A.

One of the most unexplored regions of art are dreams, and what may be called the personification of sentiment.

—Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), *Aphorism 231*^{[1](#)}

Art, Science and Literature: The “Personification of Sentiment”

From its first viewing, Henry Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* (1781, Detroit Institute of Arts; Fig. 1) was recognized as a richly layered investigation of physiological and emotional ecstasy and torment.² We see a young woman whose white gown clings to her body as she lies across a bed which extends across the picture plane. Her body is so close to the spectator that her lax hand grazing the ground can almost be touched. Glowing light on her head, torso, and thigh is supported by rich gold fabric under her and a muted red drapery on the bed. Secondary attention is directed to a figure emerging from the background darkness: the head of a white horse. An incubus, crouched on her diaphragm and pelvic area, completes the composition. Even today this canonical art historical landmark has the power to entrance and to shock its audience.

In spite of its iconic status as an art historical milestone, it is worthwhile noting that the contexts in which this work was created and received include both scientific theory and fictional literature, and my essay will delve into these sources to shed light on Fuseli’s powerful work and its persisting impact. In the eighteenth century,

specialist and amateur readers and viewers of visual art were fascinated by a dream’s ability to represent not only experience but desire, including sexual desire. Fuseli’s friends Dr. John Armstrong and the botanical scientist Erasmus Darwin had already suggested an erotic context for nightmarish dreams. Fuseli’s frustrated love for Anna Landolt, which resulted in his own dream, inspired the female portrait appended to the back of the canvas of *The Nightmare* (which I will discuss as Fig. 4). Throughout his career, he created art works on themes relating to the fear of sexual attraction and domination. At times these works present attitudes which are misogynistic. Fuseli’s views and his art inspired personal and professional responses by his friend Mary Wollstonecraft and by Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. Both were women who advocated for the right of women to full autonomy and free expression, and a significant factor in their responses was their gendered physical experience of personified sentiment. For them, women’s love and sexuality could result in catastrophe. Mary Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever after giving birth to her daughter. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who became Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley, experienced the loss of

three young children. She grieved their deaths during the period in which she was writing two literary works which re-present Fuseli's art works with both profound insight and pointed critique: *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) and *Mathilda* (1819).

Fuseli's *The Nightmare*: Darwin and Armstrong

Fuseli's *The Nightmare* both reflected and inspired scientific commentary. During March–April 1781, when Fuseli was producing his initial sketch for *The Nightmare*,

Erasmus Darwin visited London and they became friends. Fuseli introduced Darwin to Joseph Johnson, his own friend and publisher, forming a relationship which continued to the end of Darwin's life. These friendships were manifested in a number of projects. Thomas Burke's authorized 1783 engraving after *The Nightmare* (Fig. 2) incorporated verses from Darwin's as-yet-unpublished poem *The Botanic Garden or, Loves of the Plants* (a book-length poetic work), that was completed in 1783, but not published until 1789



Fig. 2. Thomas Burke after Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, 1783, London: John Raphael Smith, 1783, stipple engraving, 22.7 x 25 cm, London: British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

(anonymously) and then in 1791 under his name with another poem as *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts; Part 1. Containing the Economy of Vegetation; Part 2. The Loves of the Plants*. Thomas Burke's etching and engraving (Fig. 3) after Fuseli's 1791 variant composition of *The Nightmare* (now in the Goethe Museum, Frankfurt am Main) appeared as an illustration in this edition.³ Darwin's text (an extended version of the lines already

printed in Burke's 1783 engraving) praised Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and explicated the subject matter which had inspired the artist: modern scientific theories about the relationship between physiology and emotion in the act of dreaming. Martin Priestman has argued that Fuseli's conversations with Darwin in 1781 influenced the initial development of the pictorial composition.⁴ Darwin's passage deserves to be quoted in full:

So on his Night-Mare, through the evening fog
Flits the squab fiend o'er fen, and lake, and bog
Seeks some love-wilder'd maid with sleep oppress'd
Alights, and, grinning, sits upon her breast.⁵
—Such as of late, amid the murky sky,
Was mark'd by FUSELI's poetic eye;
Whose daring tints, with SHAKESPEAR'S happiest grace,
Gave to the airy phantom form and place.—
Back o'er her pillow sinks her blushing head;
Her snow-white limbs hang helpless from the bed;
While with quick sighs, and suffocative breath,
Her interrupted heart-pulse swims in death.
—Then shrieks of captur'd towns, and widows' tears,
Pale lovers stretch'd upon their blood-stain'd biers,
The headlong precipice that thwarts her flight,
The trackless desert, the cold starless night.
And stern-eyed Murderer, with his knife behind,
In dread succession agonize her mind.
O'er her fair limbs convulsive tremors fleet,
Start in her hands, and struggle in her feet;
In vain to scream with quivering lips she tries,
And strains in palsy'd lids her tremulous eyes;
In vain she wills to run, fly, swim, walk, creep;
The WILL presides not in the bower of SLEEP.
—On her fair bosom sits the Demon-Ape
Erect, and balances his bloated shape;
Rolls in their marble orbs his Gorgon-eyes,
And drinks with leathern ears her tender cries."⁶



Fig. 3. Thomas Burke after Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, illustration to Erasmus Darwin, *The Loves of the Plants* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), etching and engraving, 22.8 x 14.1 cm, London: British Museum.
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According to Darwin, a “love-wilder’d maid” experiences nightmares because of problems of blood circulation: her “blushing head” sinks back, her “interrupted heart-pulse swims in death.” Darwin was not the first author to connect these physical symptoms with nightmarish dreams. Fuseli’s friend, the medical doctor John Armstrong, published a poem entitled *The Art of Preserving Health* in 1744.⁷ Dr. Armstrong’s discussion of diet and blood circulation included a passage on nightmares, citing the research of Dr. John Bond (*Essay on the Incubus, or Night-mare*, published in 1753), which stated that those most likely to experience nightmares were “persons of gross full habits, the robust, the luxurious, the drunken and they who sup late.... Also Women who are obstructed; Girls of full, lax habits before the eruption of the Menses.”⁸ People lying on their left side, with their heads lower than their legs could experience blockages in the circulation of their blood which would cause them to experience difficulty breathing and make them unable to move voluntarily. Like Dr. Bond, Dr. Armstrong connected physiological and subjective experience. He warned that an unhappy love affair “unnerves the body and unmans the soul” and that excessive lascivious sexual congress could lead to impotence and disease.⁹ In addition to medical literature, libertine

fiction (most notably by the Marquis de Sade) and pornographic art (contemporary and antique, accessible in the Baron d’Harcarville’s modern, illustrated archaeological texts and produced by Fuseli himself) explored the possible control of sexual anxiety and fear of emasculation.¹⁰ The subject of an alluring woman’s nightmare was depicted by Fuseli five times; it had a strong personal relevance for him.¹¹

Fuseli’s Life and Art: Love and Sexuality

The Nightmare was inspired by Fuseli’s unrequited love for Anna Landolt, the niece of his friend Johann Caspar Lavater, the physiognomist. On the back of this canvas is Fuseli’s *Portrait of a Lady* (late eighteenth century, Detroit Institute of Arts, Fig. 4), perhaps Landolt herself. In 1779, after she had refused Fuseli’s proposal of marriage, Fuseli wrote Lavater about a dream which he had had about Anna in which his arousal had led to his staking his claim to her:

Last night I [dreamt I] had her in bed with me—tossed my bedclothes hugger-mugger—wound my hot and tight-clasped hands about her—fused her body and her soul together with my own—poured into her my spirit, breath and strength. Anyone who touches her now commits adultery and incest! She is *mine*, and I am *hers*. And have her I will.¹²



Fig. 4. Henry Fuseli, *Portrait of a Lady*, late 18th century, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase with funds from Mr. and Mrs. Bert L. Smokler and Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence A. Fleischman, 55.5.B.

In another letter Fuseli insisted, "Each earthly night since I left her, I have lain in her bed."¹³ Given Fuseli's description of repeated dreams of passionate sexual pleasure followed by his frustration when he awakened and recognized she was *not* "his"—he still did not "have her"—it is not surprising that Knowles, his friend, described Fuseli as "almost in a state of phrenzy" when he arrived in England in 1779.¹⁴

In that year he began work on a subject which portrayed his tormented emotions: a man brooding over the corpse of his unfaithful wife, whom he has murdered. Fuseli's initial pen and ink drawing (inscribed "Zurico febr. 79"), *Ezzelin Bracciaferro Musing over Meduna* (1779, London: British Museum, Fig. 5) differs from the final painting exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1780 (1779, Sir John Soane's Museum) in that it



Fig. 5. Henry Fuseli, *Ezzelin Bracciaferro Musing over Meduna*, 1779, pen and black ink and red chalk with brown wash, 34.5 x 40.5 cm, London: British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

shows the woman blindfolded and gagged.¹⁵

Fuseli's views on the problematic link between a woman's sexuality and her autonomy led to his creation of works throughout his career which represent alluring women's power to enslave, degrade, and emasculate men. In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon is responsible for the spell, but Fuseli reinterprets the literary text for his *Titania and Bottom with the Ass's Head* (1788–89, Tate Britain) for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery and presents Titania as a spell-binding Circe; one of her fairies leads a man on a leash.¹⁶ One of the most disturbing of these misogynistic works is *Brunhild Observing Gunther, Whom She Has Tied to the Ceiling* (1807, Nottingham City Museums and Galleries, Fig. 6), a subject from the *Nibelungenlied*.¹⁷ Gunther's love for "the adorable woman," his "caresses and endearments," elicit only rage. His attempt at physical domination fails; his strength vanishes, and his entreaties are ignored by a woman who, having "put a stop to his love-making" ignores him throughout the night, "lying very snug."¹⁸ Fuseli was the only artist to illustrate this subject until Alfred Hrdlicka in the twentieth century.¹⁹

In Fuseli's eyes, women's autonomy itself was a sexual threat.²⁰ His *Aphorism* 226 stated:

In an age of luxury women have taste, decide and dictate; for in an age of luxury woman aspires to the functions of man, and man slides into the offices of woman. The epoch of eunuchs was ever the epoch of viragos.²¹

Given these ideas, it is not surprising that his relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), whom he termed "the assertrix of female rights," proved combustible.²²

Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli

In 1788, Mary Wollstonecraft joined Joseph Johnson's circle (which at this time included Fuseli, William Blake, Thomas Paine and William Godwin) as a reader, translator, and author of articles for the *Analytic Review*. Her acclamation of the French Revolution, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), made her famous overnight. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), she called for women's right to autonomy, their intellectual development, and the inculcation of moral principles in them, instead of their being groomed to become "the toy of man."²³

Wollstonecraft and Fuseli became friends in 1790. William Godwin (in a biography published in January 1798, only a few months after her death) believed that Mary Wollstonecraft's admiration of



Fig. 6. Henry Fuseli, *Brunhild Observing Gunther, Whom She Has Tied to the Ceiling*, 1807, pencil, pen and ink, and wash, 48.3 x 31.7 cm, Nottingham City Museums and Galleries. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Fuseli's art, ideas, and person was due to her sensitivity to

the exquisite sensations of pleasure she felt from the associations of visible objects.... She saw Mr. Fuseli frequently; he amused, delighted and instructed her.... Mary was not of a temper to live upon terms of so much intimacy with a man of merit and genius, without loving him. The delight she enjoyed in his society, she transferred by association to his person.²⁴

Whether their friendship was platonic or sexual, in 1792 she proposed to Fuseli's wife that they live together in a *menage à trois*:

As I am above deceit, it is right to say that this proposal arises from the sincere affection that I have for your husband, for I feel that I cannot live without the satisfaction of seeing and conversing with him daily.²⁵

Mrs. Fuseli refused this offer. Mary Wollstonecraft was forbidden to return to the house.

Modern scholars have acknowledged that Fuseli's discussion of artworks with women included his erotic art. Whether his intention was aesthetic, lascivious, or a combination of the two, the result of Fuseli's relationship with Wollstonecraft was the opposite of his relationship with Anna Landolt:

rejection of a woman whose passionate emotions he had aroused.²⁶

Wollstonecraft went to France in 1792. There she fell in love with an American, Gilbert Imlay. Their child Frances (Fanny) was born in May 1794. Wollstonecraft returned to London in April 1795. After she discovered that Imlay loved another woman, Wollstonecraft twice attempted suicide.²⁷ In January 1796 she and William Godwin renewed their acquaintance and fell in love. They married in March 1797, shortly before the birth of their daughter, Mary, on August 30, 1797. On September 10, Mary Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever—a fact that would have a profound impact on the life and literary works of her daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Fuseli's *The Nightmare*

Like her mother, Mary Shelley (1797–1851) led a life in which passionate love and idealistic views resulted in domestic upheaval. She was educated in London by her father, and knew his friends (including Fuseli, who visited the Godwin house until 1813). In 1814, she eloped with Percy Bysshe Shelley, her father's disciple, who was already married to Harriet Westbrook.

For Mary Shelley, women's sexual expression was inseparable from catastrophe. She herself had inadvertently been the cause of her mother's death only days after her own birth. During the period 1815–19, three of her four children died soon after their births.²⁸ She and Percy Shelley were able to marry in December 1816 after they learned that Harriet, while pregnant, had committed suicide. This tragic link between love, birth, and death would be a significant feature of Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and her unpublished novella *Mathilda* (written 1819).

In the summer of 1816, Lord Byron (George Gordon Byron, sixth Baron) challenged his friends John Polidori and Percy and Mary Shelley to write ghost stories. After their discussion of Erasmus Darwin's experimental attempts to reanimate a worm, Mary dreamed of a scientist who succeeded in giving life to a creature formed of body parts taken from corpses. Horror-struck, the scientist fled to his bedroom, where the creature awakened him from sleep.²⁹ This dream was the inspiration for *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*, published anonymously in January 1818.

When Mary Shelley incorporated her dream into the novel, she added a crucial factor: the link between birth and death which

repulses the scientist, who has generated what he describes as "a catastrophe." Victor Frankenstein's guilt at transgressing nature's boundaries, his refusal to nurture the new life he has brought into the world ("the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life") will bring catastrophe to everyone he loves.³⁰

In chapter 5, Mary Shelley's nightmare is enacted when Victor first sees his unnamed creature:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open, it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe...? I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body ...; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room.

Immediately Mary Shelley links this repulsive creation to love and death: to Victor's fiancée Elizabeth and his mother's corpse. Once back in his bedroom, Victor dreams of

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.... I started from my sleep with horror.... [B]y the dim and yellow light of the moon..., I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created.... He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped.³¹

This scene of the first moment of confrontation is described in the frontispiece (Fig. 7) to the first illustrated edition of the novel (1831), designed by Theodor von Holst, Fuseli's pupil.³² When Victor learns that his younger brother William has been strangled by a thief who seized a locket bearing a picture of Victor's dead mother, he suspects that his repudiated creature—"my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave"—has been at work.³³ After Victor has broken his promise to create a mate for his creature, he is berated and warned by him:

"Shall each man," cried he, "find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn.... [B]eware!... [S]oon the bolt will fall which must ravish from you your happiness forever.... [R]emember I shall be with you on your wedding night."³⁴

In chapter 23, the dream which Victor had had at the moment of creation becomes reality on his wedding night. His bride, Elizabeth, is discovered in a scene which directly replicates Fuseli's *The Nightmare*:

[S]uddenly I heard a shrill and dreadful scream ... and I rushed into the room.... She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Every where I turn I see the same figure—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal biers.... I rushed towards her, and embraced her with ardour; but the deadly langour and coldness of the limbs told me, that what I now held in my arms had ceased to be the Elizabeth whom I had loved and cherished. The murderous mark of the fiend's grasp was on her neck, and the breath had ceased to issue from her lips. While I still hung over her in the agony of despair, I happened to look up. The windows of the room had before been darkened, and I felt a kind of panic on seeing the pale yellow light of the moon illuminate the chamber. The shutters had been thrown back, and with a sensation of horror not to be described, I saw at the open window a figure the most hideous and abhorred. A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife.³⁵

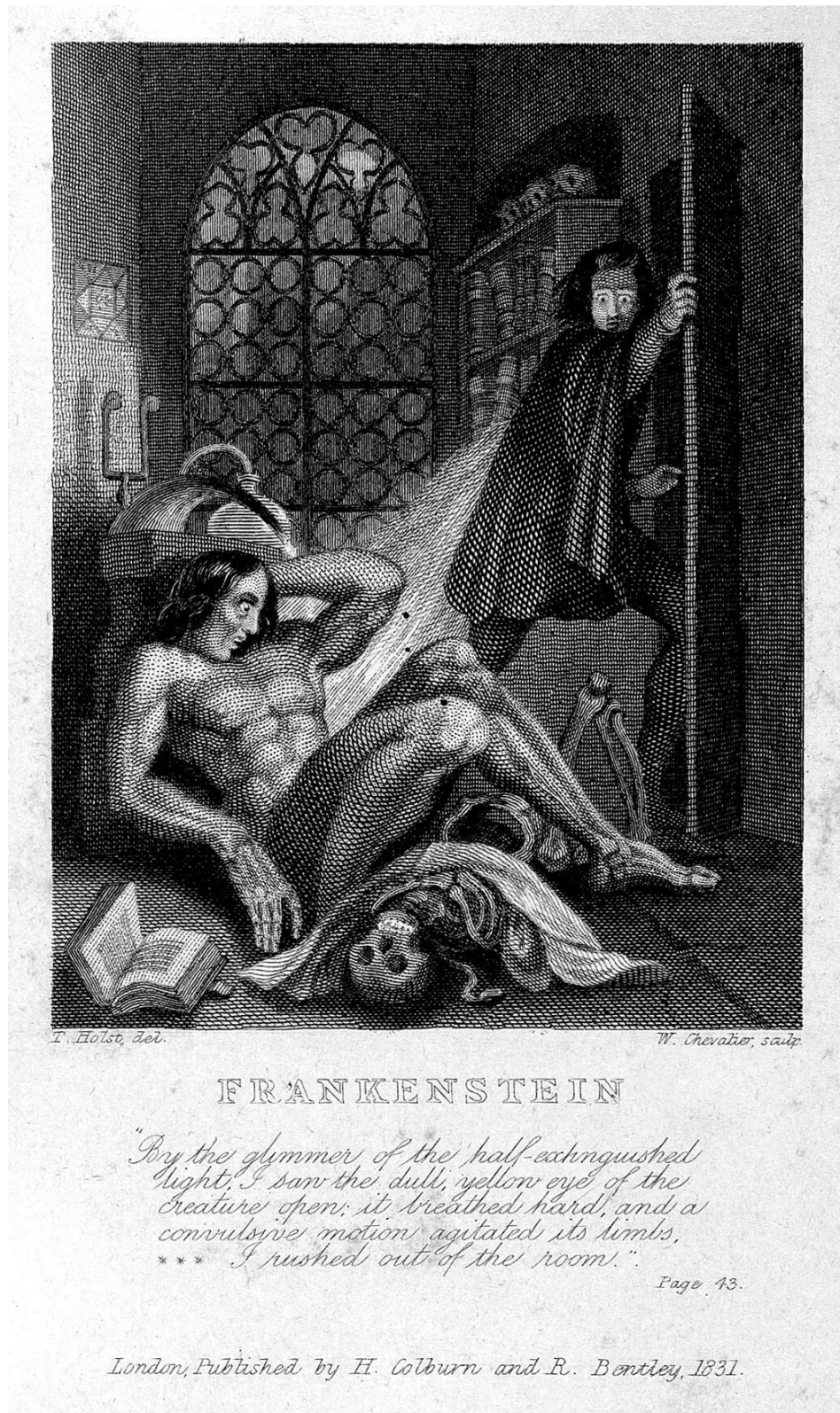


Fig. 7. "Victor Frankenstein Observing the First Stirrings of his Creature,"
W. Chevalier after Th. Von Holst, 1831, steel engraving, 9.3 x 7.1 cm.
Frontispiece to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831).
London: Wellcome Collection, public domain.

The persisting impact of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* in pictorial variants, graphic reproductions, and satires was amplified by *Frankenstein's* illustrated editions, dramatizations, and graphic works.³⁶ At least fifteen dramas based on the novel were produced between 1823 and 1826. Spectators in theaters would have had even more reason to be awed by the physical presence of the actors and their gestures than spectators of a static painting. It is not surprising that Fuseli's *The Nightmare* was featured in an exhibition at the Morgan Library celebrating the 200th anniversary of *Frankenstein's* publication.³⁷

Although Fuseli's painting and Mary Shelley's fiction present virtually identical scenes of sexual release as physical torment, their emotional resonance is very different. Fuseli shows the viewer a beautiful woman asleep, writhing under the pressure of the incubus, in simultaneous orgasmic arousal and suffocation. When Mary Shelley shows the reader/viewer a beautiful corpse, we are complicit in Elizabeth's veiled rape/murder because we take the protagonist's viewpoint. Victor Frankenstein is the initiator of destruction, not the creature outside the room. Victor engendered life but refused to nurture it. His creature ("my own spirit let loose from the grave") has

destroyed his brother William, his family's servant Justine, his friend Clerval, and now his "more than sister," his "pretty present" Elizabeth.³⁸ This same theme, the incestuous objectification of a young woman, is the focus of Mary Shelley's novella *Mathilda* (written in 1819).³⁹ Here we see enacted Mary Wollstonecraft's description of the destructive education of women to be the pretty toys of men instead of autonomous human beings.

Mathilda and Fuseli's The Great Father and Ancient Night

Mathilda, a young woman in her twenties, narrates her tale on her deathbed. She has been molded into the reflection of her father's needs. Her yearning for his love leads to disaster for them both.

The earth was to me a magic lantern and I [a] gazer, and a listener but no actor; but then came the transporting and soul-reviving era of my existence; my father returned and I could pour my warm affections on a human heart ... joy! joy! but, alas! what grief!... [T]o my happiness followed madness and agony, closed by despair.⁴⁰

When Mathilda's mother dies days after her birth, her father (he is never given a name), unable to bear the sight of his daughter, places her in the care of his sister and leaves the country. After

sixteen years, he writes his sister that he is returning, describing his daughter as “the creature who will form the happiness of my future life.”⁴¹ Her unseen father had become “the idol of my imagination.”⁴² Their reunion is blissful. But his possessive affection cannot permit his daughter’s mature involvement with another. When a young man begins to woo her, Mathilda’s father becomes angry, melancholy, silent. She presses him to explain, eliciting his acknowledgement of his love in a scene which deserves quotation at length:

“Am I the cause of your grief?” ...

“Yes, you are the sole, the agonizing cause of all I suffer, of all I must suffer until I die.... One word I might speak and then you would be implicated in my destruction; yet that word is hovering on my lips. Oh! There is a fearful chasm; but I adjure you to beware!”

“Ah, dearest friend!” I cried, “do not fear! Speak that word....”

“Why do you ... torture me, and tempt me, and kill me[?]... I am on the very verge of insanity; why, cruel girl, do you drive me on[?]”

When I repeat his words I wonder at my pertinacious folly.... I was led by passion and drew him with frantic heedlessness

into the abyss that he so fearfully avoided....

“[Y]ou no longer love me.”...

He began to answer with violence: ‘Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, my disgust! Oh! No[!]’ And then his manner changed, and fixing his eye on me with an expression that convulsed every nerve and member of my frame— “[Y]ou are none of all these; you are my light, my only one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!” ... “Now I have dashed from the top of the rock to the bottom. Now I have precipitated myself down the fearful chasm!... Oh, Mathilda, lift up those dear eyes in the light of which I live.... Monster as I am, you are still, as you ever were, lovely, beautiful beyond expression.... [D]evil as I am become, yet that is my Mathilda before me whom I love as one was never before loved: and she knows it now.... We have leapt the chasm I told you of, and now, mark me, Mathilda, we are to find flowers, and verdure and delight, or is it hell, and fire, and tortures? Oh! Beloved One, I am borne away; I can no longer sustain myself; surely this is death that is coming. Let me lay my head near your heart; let me die in your arms!” ...

[A]t one moment in pity for his sufferings I would have clasped my father in my arms; and then starting back with horror I spurned him with my foot.⁴³

Her father has referred to a metaphorical precipice which will

destroy them. In her nightmare, she pursues him; he flees from her and leaps to his death from a precipice into the sea. This ominous dream is followed by his suicide in real life. In his suicide note, he accepts his responsibility for their catastrophe: jealousy of her suitor had caused “the fiend [to waken] within me.”⁴⁴

Since Mathilda has only existed as the reflection of her father’s desires, she is unable to behave as an autonomous being. She insists that “I alone was the cause of his defeat.”⁴⁵ Mathilda is “perpetually haunted by ideas” of guilt and shame: “polluted by the unnatural love I had inspired ... a creature cursed and set apart by nature ... a pariah, only fit for death.”⁴⁶ Death, which “will unite me to my father,” is all that she desires; to have her shroud serve as her wedding gown.⁴⁷ Her father had chosen to

kill himself. She awaits an “innocent death”: consumption and heart failure as a result of exposure overnight in the rain.⁴⁸

Sophia Andres has compared the scene in which Mathilda spurns her father with her foot to Fuseli’s pencil and wash drawing *The Great Father and Ancient Night* (1800–1810, Art Gallery Auckland, Fig. 8), in which an impassive maiden looks down upon a mature male who holds onto the edge of a precipice.⁴⁹ While Gert Schiff identified the drawing as an allegory of Justice, Peter Tomory pointed out the influence of contemporary scientific literature: Armstrong’s *The Art of Preserving Health* and Erasmus Darwin’s *The Temple of Nature*, published in 1803 with illustrations by Fuseli.⁵⁰

Armstrong described empires toppling over “the desolate abyss”:

Time shakes the stable tyranny of thrones,
And tottering empires rush by their own weight....
The sun himself, shall die; and ancient Night
Again involve the desolate abyss
Till the great FATHER thro’ the lifeless gloom
Extend his arm to light another world.⁵¹



Fig. 8. Henry Fuseli, *The Great Father and Ancient Night*, ca.1800-1810, pencil, grey wash and blue wash, 45 x 30 cm, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, purchased 1965.
Permission of the Auckland Art Gallery must be obtained before any reuse of this image.

Tomory identified the male figure as Oceanus from Hesiod's *Theogony*, who offers pearl-seeded oysters (symbolizing the fertilization of new life), a reference to Darwin's *The Temple of Nature*:

Organic life beneath the shoreless waves
Was born and nurs'd in Ocean's pearly
caves⁵²

Mary Shelley's Mathilda, like Fuseli's female figure of *Ancient Night*, is caught between compassion and rebuke, between love and horror. Filled with contradictory passions, she could well be contemplating a leap into the abyss herself.

Fuseli's painting had a protean impact on his audience. He himself depicted the subject multiple times, and graphic reproductions helped to amplify its impact throughout the world in multiple media. Fuseli had declared that his passionate dream about "staking his claim" to Anna had determined her future for her: "Anyone who touches her now commits adultery and incest! She is *mine*, and I am *hers*."⁵³ Fuseli's art inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Mathilda*—literary works in which Fuseli's vivid representation of love's link to torment was transformed into insight and critique of the disasters which ensue when fathers fail to nurture those they

have generated, when they deny autonomy to those they profess to love: murder, incestuous objectification, suicide.

The first session of "Icons of the Midwest" was held at the Los Angeles 2012 CAA meeting. It focused on Henri Fuseli's The Nightmare in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

¹ Henry Fuseli, "Aphorisms on Art," in John Knowles, *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 3:145. Project Gutenberg e-book #38591, released 2012. Fuseli wrote his "Aphorisms on Art" between 1788 and 1818. They were first published by Knowles in 1831.

² Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli 1741–1825*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Berichthaus; Munich: Prestel, 1973), 1:496 (see cat. no. 757); Nicolas Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare*, Art in Context (New York: Viking, 1972).

³ Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (Goethe Museum, Frankfurt am Main); see Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, 1:525 (cat. no. 928); engraved by Thomas Burke; published as a separate print in 1791 (see David H. Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations by and after Henry Fuseli: A Catalogue Raisonné* [Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994], cat. no. 68). The illustration appeared in Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts; Part 1. Containing the Economy of Vegetation; Part 2. The Loves of the Plants*, 2 vols. (London: Johnson, 1791), vol. 2, facing p. 126 for *The Loves of the Plants*, canto 3, ll. 51–76. The British Museum example is the proof before letters and frame. The British Museum credits Thomas Burke with this engraving; Weinglass states that the engraver was Thomas Holloway (*Prints and Engraved Illustrations*, 60 [cat. No. 68]).

⁴ "So confident does this passage seem about Fuseli's intentions that it is conceivable that Darwin had discussed these theories with him before *The Nightmare* was painted, rather than

simply reading them into it afterwards" (Martin Priestman, "'Fuseli's Poetic Eye': Prints and Impressions in Fuseli and Erasmus Darwin," in *Romanticism and Illustration*, ed. Ian Haywood, Susan Matthews, and Mary L. Shannon [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 96–97).

⁵ These first four lines were those printed in Burke's 1783 engraving. See Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations*, 55 (cat. no. 67).

⁶ Darwin, *Botanic Garden*, 2:126–28, cited in Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Industrial Revolution 1750–1800*, vol. 1 of *A Social History of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 289–90. Darwin discussed the physiological derivation of dreams in his section on the cherry laurel, which he identified with the Pythia, the ancient priestess of Apollo, who experienced prophetic visions. See Asia Haut, "Reading Flora: Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*, Henry Fuseli's Illustrations, and Various Literary Responses," *Word & Image* 20, no. 4 (2004): 243–44.

⁷ John Armstrong, *The Art of Preserving Health: A Poem in Four Books* (London: Millar, 1744), republished numerous times separately and in Alexander Chalmers, ed., *Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper* (London: Johnson) in 1795, 1806, and 1810.

⁸ Doctor John Bond, *Essay on the Incubus, or Night-mare* (London: Wilson and Durham, 1753), 46–51, cited in Christopher Frayling, "Fuseli's *The Nightmare*: Somewhere between the Sublime and the Ridiculous," in the catalog of the exhibition *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake*

and the Romantic Imagination, ed. Martin Myrone, with essays by Christopher Frayling and Marina Warner and additional catalog contributions by Christopher Frayling and Mervyn Heard (London: Tate, 2006), 16, 20 n. 33.

⁹ Armstrong, *Art of Preserving Health*, 125–27 (book 4, “The Passions,” ll. 368, 390–97, 404–7; e-book 11214074 ([https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Preserving_Health - A Poem in Four Books](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Preserving_Health_-_A_Poem_in_Four_Books))).

¹⁰ For recent discussion of Fuseli’s pornographic drawings, see Camilla Smith, “Between Fantasy and Angst: Assessing the Subject and Meaning of Henry Fuseli’s Late Pornographic Drawings, 1800–25,” *Art History* 33, no. 3 (June 2010): 420–47; Andrei Pop, *Antiquity, Theatre, and the Painting of Henry Fuseli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Smith relates Fuseli’s drawings to the Marquis de Sade’s libertine sado-masochistic novels *Justine* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797), as well as Pietro Aretino’s “Sonnetti Lussuriosi” (1524) illustrated by Giulio Romano. Pop sets Fuseli’s engagement with Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideas into the context of “Neopaganism,” especially Pierre François (“Baron”) d’Hancarville’s *Recherches sur l’origine, l’esprit et les progrès des arts de la Grèce* (London: Appleyard, 1785).

¹¹ In 1827, Raddon and Colnaghi published an engraving in London after a painting at that time in the collection of the Countess of Guilford but since lost from view. This version was dated by Schiff to 1782–90 (*Johann Heinrich Füssli*, 1:496 [cat. no. 758]). Peter Tomory (*The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli* [New York: Praeger, 1972], 248)

suggested a later date (1792?). The engraving quoted the lines from Darwin which had appeared in the Burke authorized 1783 print. See Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations*, 57 (cat. no. 67D). The other two variant paintings are described in Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, 1:604 (cat. no. 1502, 1810–20, Zurich, collection of Martha Maag-Socin); and 1:637 (cat. no. 1789, 1800–1810, Vassar Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York).

¹² Fuseli’s letter of June 16, 1779, to Lavater, in Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare*, 60, emphasis original. Powell cited Horst Janson, “Fuseli’s *Nightmare*,” *Arts and Sciences* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1963): 28, which includes a passage from another letter; unfortunately, Janson provides no citations.

¹³ Janson, “Fuseli’s *Nightmare*,” 28.

¹⁴ Knowles, *Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*, 1:56.

¹⁵ Lavater admired Fuseli’s characterization of Ezzelin: “Fettered by remorse of conscience ... he deplores his madness, but repents it not; he detests it, and yet still applauds himself for it” (Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Henry Hunter, 3 vols. in 4 [London: Murray, 1789–98], 2.2:294. A 1799 edition of Lavater’s *Essays in Physiognomy* contained an illustration of Thomas Holloway’s engraving after the painting *Count Ezzelin Bracciaferro Musing over Meduna Slain by Him for Infidelity While he was Away on a Crusade* (Weinglass, *Prints and Engraved Illustrations*, 103).

¹⁶ On the “emasculating imagination disguised as an erotic fantasy” of this work, see Nicola Bown, “The Enchantments of Tradition: Men, Women and Fairies in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 10, no. 3 (1999): 308–25 (here at 320).

¹⁷ Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, 1:587 (cat. no. 1381).

¹⁸ *The Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), trans. A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1965), cited in Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 67 (cat. no. 27). Fuseli’s teacher Johann Jakob Bodmer discovered, published, and translated manuscripts of this text. Fuseli owned the first full German edition of it (published in 1782 by Bodmer’s pupil Myller) and wrote poems based upon it. Christian Klemm has pointed out the importance of the poem’s portrayal of beautiful, powerful and vengeful women (“Friedel’s Love and Kriemhild’s Revenge: Fuseli’s Revels in the Kingdom of the Nibelungs,” in *Füssli: The Wild Swiss*, ed. Franziska Lentzsch with essays by Christoph Becker, Christian Klemm, and Bernhard von Waldkirch, catalog of an exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich [Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2005], 149–74). For example, Kriemhild betrays the secret of Siegfried’s invulnerability to the treacherous Hagen and cuts off the head of Hagen’s brother Gunther to force him to disclose where the treasure of the Nibelung is kept. Klemm describes Fuseli as “the first, most inspired and most significant illustrator of the epic” (150), and describes *Brunhild Observes Gunther Hanging in Chains from the Ceiling* (1807) as a work “in which Fuseli’s central obsession found perhaps its most astonishing expression” (161).

¹⁹ D. H. Weinglass, “‘The Elysium of Fancy’: Aspects of Henry Fuseli’s Erotic Art,” in *Erotica and the Enlightenment*, ed. Peter Wagner (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1991), 302–3. Hrdlicka’s work is entitled *Brunhild Chastises Fuseli*.

²⁰ Martin Myrone interpreted Fuseli’s misogynistic representations of women “as an imaginative working through of the fears about women’s authority experienced in Fuseli’s time: women’s real claims to power being translated into much simpler (and ultimately degrading) sexual hunger” (*Henry Fuseli* [London: Tate, 2001], 70–71).

²¹ Fuseli, “Aphorisms on Art,” 3:144 (Aphorism 226).

²² “You have not, perhaps, heard that the asserter of female rights has given her hand to the *balancier* of political justice” (“Fuseli to William Roscoe [25 May 1797],” in David H. Weinglass, *The Collected English Letters of Henry Fuseli* [Millwood, NY: Krauss, 1982]), 170.

²³ “Women are told from their infancy ... that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience ... will obtain from them the protection of man ... How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes! ... Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are ... consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; ... She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle” (“Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*,” in *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, ed. and with an introduction and commentaries by Miriam Schneir (New York: Vintage: 1972), 6, 12.

²⁴ William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Johnson, 1798), 86, 89, 90 (ch. 6: 1790–1792; Project Gutenberg e-book #16199, released 2005). Godwin included details of Mary Wollstonecraft's sexual liaison with Imlay, the birth of their illegitimate child, her suicide attempts, and his own premartial affair with her. Wollstonecraft had insisted her friendship with Fuseli was platonic. Fuseli continued to dine with William Godwin until at least 1813 but refused to give Godwin Wollstonecraft's love letters after her death. In 1826, Mary Shelley tried to help Godwin retrieve the letters to Fuseli from the deceased painter's executors (see Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley, Romance and Reality* [Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1989], 262). Her grandson purchased and then destroyed them (see Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* [New York: New American Library, 1974], 88).

²⁵ Blake wished Wollstonecraft to enter into a *menage à trois* with himself and his wife. See Tomory, *Life and Art of Henry Fuseli*, 40.

²⁶ According to Tomalin, Fuseli "enjoyed talking and writing about sex" and "certainly continued the process started by the Kingsboroughs, of arousing her [Wollstonecraft's] erotic imagination" (*Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 88, cited by Maryanne C. Ward, "A Painting of the Unspeakable: Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and the Creation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 33, no.1 (Winter 2000): 25.

²⁷ She attempted suicide with laudanum in May 1795 and threw herself into the Thames in October 1795; a passerby saved her from drowning. Her daughter Fanny Imlay would commit suicide with laudanum in October 1816.

²⁸ Their daughter Clara, born prematurely on February 22, 1815, died days later on March 6. Their daughter Clara Everina Shelley, born on January 12, 1817, died on September 24, 1818. Their son William Godwin Shelley, born on January 24, 1816, died on June 7, 1819. Mary Shelley herself almost died from hemorrhage after a miscarriage on June 16, 1822.

²⁹ See Mary Shelley, introduction to *Frankenstein* (New York: Dover, 1994), vii. This text is the revised 1831 edition.

³⁰ Shelley, introduction, ix.

³¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 34–35.

³² Theodore von Holst (1810–44) designed the frontispiece to the revised edition (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1831). See Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, 71 (cat. no. 30).

³³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 50–51.

³⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 122–23.

³⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 144–45.

³⁶ Published anonymously as *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, and Jones, 1818); the second English edition (London: Whittaker, 1823) credited Shelley as the author. The novel's first translation was into French by Jules Saladin (Paris: Corréard, 1821).

The first French dramatic adaptation, *Le Monstre et le magicien* by Jean Toussaint Merle and Antoine Nicolas Beraud, opened in Paris in June 1824 at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin and ran for 96 performances.

³⁷ *It's Alive! Frankenstein at 200*, Morgan Library & Museum, New York (October 12, 2018–January 27, 2019), co-curated by John Bidwell (Astor Curator and Department Head of the Morgan's Printed Books and Bindings Department) and Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger (Curator of the Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle at the New York Public Library), with a catalog by Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger (New York: The Morgan Library & Museum; London: Giles, 2018).

³⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 17–18.

³⁹ Mary Shelley gave a copy of the manuscript of *Mathilda* to Maria Gisborne (a friend of the family) in 1820, asking her to give it to Godwin so that he could assist in its publication. According to Maria Gisborne's journal, Godwin found the subject "disgusting and detestable" (*Maria Gisborne & Edward E. Williams, Shelley's Friends: Their Journals and Letters*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951], 44, cited in Terence Harpold, "'Did You Get Mathilda from Papa?': Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," *Studies in Romanticism* 28, no. 1 [Spring 1989]: 63). Godwin ignored repeated requests to return the manuscript. Mary Shelley herself worried that its publication could cause her to lose custody of her son Percy Florence Shelley (born November 12,

1819) to his grandfather Sir Timothy Shelley, particularly after Percy Bysshe Shelley drowned on July 8, 1822. The novella remained unpublished until 1959. See two essays published in Syndy M. Conger, Frederick S. Frank, and Gregory O'Dea, eds., *Iconoclastic Departures: Mary Shelley after "Frankenstein"; Essays in Honor of the Bicentenary of Mary Shelley's Birth* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1997): Judith Barbour, "'The Meaning of the Tree': The Tale of Mirra in Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*" (98–114), and Ranita Chatterjee, "*Mathilda*: Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Ideologies of Incest" (130–49). As Chatterjee points out, Percy Shelley's tragedy *The Cenci* (centering on incest, rape and murder in that Italian Renaissance family) was published in 1820 with Godwin's approval (130).

⁴⁰ Mary Shelley, "*Mathilda*," in *The Mary Shelley Reader: Containing Frankenstein, Mathilda, Tales and Stories, Essays and Reviews, and Letters*, ed. Betty T. Bennett & Charles E. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 173–246 (reprinted with corrections from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Mathilda*, ed. Elizabeth Nitchie [Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959]), here at 245.

⁴¹ Shelley, "*Mathilda*," 186.

⁴² Shelley, "*Mathilda*," 185.

⁴³ Shelley, "*Mathilda*," 200–203.

⁴⁴ Shelley, "*Mathilda*," 209.

⁴⁵ Shelley, "*Mathilda*," 197.

⁴⁶ Shelley, "Mathilda," 238–39, 240.

⁴⁷ Shelley, "Mathilda," 244.

⁴⁸ Shelley, "Mathilda," 243.

⁴⁹ Sophia Andres, "Narrative Challenges to Visual, Gendered Boundaries: Mary Shelley and Henry Fuseli," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 272–73.

⁵⁰ Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, 1:639–40 (cat. no. 1804), described as "Allegory of Justice" ca. 1800–1810, derived from Plato, *The Republic* (book 2, 359c–360b). Tomory (*Life and Art of Henry Fuseli*, 123) identified the subject as stemming from Armstrong's *The Art of Preserving Health* (1744). Tomory curated the exhibition *The Poetical Circle, Fuseli and the British: Henry Fuseli and James Barry, William Blake, John Brown, John Flaxman, James Jefferys, John Hamilton Mortimer, George Romney, Alexander Runciman; Australia, New Zealand, April – November 1979* (Florence: Centro Di; Australian Art Gallery; Auckland City Art Gallery, 1979), where the work appears as cat. no. 28. "In No. 28 Oceanus (the Great Father) raises pearls to Night who points to breaking Day, and Charon (Death) flees like the bat in Guercino's fresco of Night in the Villa Ludovisi, Rome" (55). This work appeared in Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares* as cat. no. 117.

⁵¹ Armstrong, *Art of Preserving Health*, book 2, ll. 551–58.

⁵² Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature; or The Origin of Society: A Poem with Philosophical Notes* (London: Johnson, 1803), canto 1, ll. 295–96.

⁵³ Fuseli's letter of June 16, 1779, to Lavater, in Powell, *Fuseli: The Nightmare*, 60, emphasis original.