In Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, the familiar Romantic category of the sublime—traditionally associated with transcendence, ambition, imaginative and physical force and striking natural landscapes—turns suddenly against itself in the grotesque figure of the monster. In Frankenstein’s creature, the shadowy underside of the sublime—vengeful, ugly, murderous—comes home to roost. Yet the creature is also a figure of the beautiful gone wrong: his aggression develops out of unmet social needs. Perhaps for this reason, the monster has frequently been considered a figure of the female grotesque, allied with women in his role as an outsider to society, as an ungainly combination of repulsive materiality and emotional vulnerability. In the next twenty minutes, however, I’d like to propose some alternate readings of the grotesque in Frankenstein—readings which emphasize the metamorphosis of the male sublime into the grotesque (and thus emphasize the relationship between these two apparently opposite terms).

I see Frankenstein as a response to Edmund Burke’s gendered categories of the sublime and the beautiful—a response perhaps motivated and certainly mediated by Shelley’s reading of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft’s work. Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Man is an immediate response to Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France; her Vindcation of the Rights of Woman addresses the gender issues first raised in the Rights of Man at greater length. Both Vindications are thus part of Wollstonecraft’s own response to Burke. It is well known that Shelley was reading Wollstonecraft’s Posthumous Works in 1815; A Vindication of the Rights of Woman
reappears on her reading list in 1816, when she was at work composing *Frankenstein*. Years later, Shelley would explicitly compare her life and work with that of her mother. She writes in her journal in 1838, “Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions. That my parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it.” And then, a few paragraphs later, in self-defense, “If I have never written to vindicate the rights of women, I have ever befriended women when oppressed. At every risk I have befriended and supported victims to the social system.” [October 21, 1838]. Shelley distinguishes her own individualized, unsystematic support of social victims from her mother’s more systematic attempts at reform. I want to suggest nonetheless that *Frankenstein* reads as an extended and fairly systematic indictment of the aesthetic (and implicitly social) structures outlined in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*—the political implications of those structures are further developed in Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Rather than a vindication of the rights of woman, Shelley offers a critique of the gender division between the sublime and the beautiful—but that critique is acutely conscious of Wollstonecraft’s earlier response to Burke. *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* attacks Burke’s politics through his aesthetics, the *Reflections* through the *Enquiry*. So too Shelley’s *Frankenstein* emphasizes the social consequences of such aesthetic categories as the sublime and beautiful, though Shelley sees those social consequences somewhat differently than her mother did.

Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry* begins ostensibly with the personal rather than the political. His explicit goal is to distinguish clearly between the sublime and the beautiful—his proposed methodology a three-part investigation of natural laws, aesthetic properties and human passions, “in our own breasts.” Burke presents both a static and a dynamic model of the beautiful and sublime—or, to put it another way, he focuses both on those objects of perception which might be called beautiful or sublime
and on the physiological effects created by those objects. Burke’s sublime produces
delight, a feeling he says arises from the cessation of pain; the sublime represents
danger at one remove, and is tied to the passions of self-preservation, the fear of death.
The beautiful by contrast produces pleasure; it is linked to the social passions, to
community and domesticity—but also, as we shall see, to weakness, imperfection,
deceit and illness. In Burke's static model, while men are frequently presented as
figures of the sublime, the beautiful is associated primarily with women. According to
Burke,

Beauty where it is highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it
an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this;
for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit
weakness, and even sickness. In all this, they are guided by nature. [110]

The sublime demands respect, the beautiful invites disdain: in Burke’s own words,
“pain [associated with the sublime] is always inflicted by a power in some way
superior, because we never submit to pain willingly”[65] while “love [linked to the
beautiful] approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined”[66]. The
(feminized) beautiful has little to recommend it in this system, as Burke’s younger
contemporaries recognized: Richard Payne-Knight’s 1805 attack on Burke implicitly
acknowledged the phallocentrism of Burke’s sublime even as it parodied his emphasis
on astonishment and terror. (Knight suggested that if Burke himself were to walk up St.
James Street without his breaches and holding a loaded blunderbuss, this might
occasion astonishment and terror, but not the sensation of the sublime.)

Burke insists on the incompatibility of the sublime and the beautiful: “the ideas
of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had
almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without
considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions” [114]. This
division between the sublime and the beautiful is underwritten by the differences between male and female in Burke’s system—male and female as objects of perception, for Burke assumes that his readership and the perceiving subject at large is necessarily male; women are present in his system strictly as aesthetic objects.

Given this asymmetry—men as subjects and objects, women as objects only—the philosopher’s dynamic model of the effects of beauty and sublimity complicates the gender division he would like to establish. The lines drawn between sublime and beautiful, male and female, begin to blur. Burke’s beautiful produces pleasure in the perceiving subject, but that pleasure leads physiologically to a state of relaxation which is (predictably) pernicious over time. According to Burke, relaxation “disables the members from performing their functions. […] Melancholy, dejection, despair and often self-murder, is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body.” The sublime offers an antidote to beauty’s pernicious effects: “the best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour; […] a surmounting of difficulties.” Just as muscles need exercise to stay in shape, so the imagination or the “finer parts” of the constitution “must be shaken and worked to a proper degree” if they are to remain healthy. Yet despite the apparent machismo, the process by which the sublime elicits this imaginative labour inscribes the male observer temporarily in a feminine position, vulnerable to a creature of greater strength. Burke tells us to

Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and [ask] what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction [65].

There’s a homoerotic thrust to Burke’s illustration here, in which rapine, accompanied by submission and pain, stands in for a threat of rape. The question of eroticism is distanced by Burke’s refusal to accomodate desire within the category of either the
sublime or the beautiful. Nonetheless, the danger (and promised delight) of Burke’s sublime is the possibility that even a powerful man will find himself temporarily emasculated by a superior force. The sublime resides in the overcoming of this forced or threatened submission, but that overcoming is uncomfortably less than a foregone conclusion.

I want to suggest that Burke’s denial of desire and his insistence on the gender division between a masculine sublime and feminine beauty marks an uneasiness about that division—an uneasiness which erupts in his later Reflections on the Revolution in France. In the Reflections, beauty is represented by Marie Antoinette, whom Burke describes as “decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in—glittering like the morningstar, full of life, and splendor, and joy” [169]. The effect of the sublime, I would suggest, is inscribed in the chivalry whose absence Burke mourns (“I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult” [170]). But in France, the sublime has miscarried: chivalry is impotent, the swords remain sheathed, and the threat to queen and society comes not from a masculine sublime, but from women who have overstepped the bounds of the beautiful to become themselves an active force and threat. The women Burke describes as escorting the king and queen from Versailles to Paris are not sublime but grotesque: he emphasizes their “horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women” [165]. For Burke, the energies of the sublime become grotesque when set in female form. Women and the sublime remain incompatible; the opposite poles of grotesque (which is less human than the sublime)

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1Beauty is not to be desired: this is perhaps the primary lesson of the Enquiry. Burke is careful to distinguish beauty from the desirable: Burke informs us that “we shall feel desire for a woman of no particular beauty” (I particularly like the indicative tense here: this is not a vague possibility but a firm prediction).
and beautiful (which is far less powerful than the sublime) remain the only options open to women.

Mary Wollstonecraft, responding to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, picks up on the polarized imagery of queen and mob. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Man* attacks Burke’s category of the beautiful as it operates in both the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections*; her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* attempts to integrate the active force of the sublime into women’s lives and educations [Paulson]. Yet though Shelley seems to have read both *Vindications* before or during the period she composed *Frankenstein*, the novel does more to reproduce Burke’s categories and gender roles rather than it does to embody Wollstonecraft’s. In place of Marie Antoinette, we have figures like Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth and Safie; in place of the mob of women, we have the figure of the monster. But we lack any clear representative of the educated woman, of Wollstonecraft’s female sublime—the closest we come to this ideal is the education shared by Safie and the monster. Wollstonecraft’s educational program is hinted at by the novel, but not localized in any specific figure. The female sublime remains at best a potential within *Frankenstein*: the novel’s focus stays firmly on the polarities of beautiful and grotesque.

As numerous critics have shown, the monster begs to be read as a counterpart to the female: as Milton’s Eve revisited (Gilbert and Gubar), as a creature whose desire is not its own (Homans), whose powers of reproduction are controlled, and so on (Newman, Hedges, etc.). In this light, the monster appears as the female grotesque, a shadow cast by Burkean notions of femininity—and, one might argue, by his mingled horror of the working class and of women. I want to suggest another reading of the gendered grotesque in this novel, however—a reading best framed in relation to Wollstonecraft’s earlier responses to Burke. Both Wollstonecraft’s attack on the beautiful and her attempted appropriation of the sublime leave the categories of
sublime and beautiful more or less intact. In *Frankenstein*, by contrast, Mary Shelley focuses on the grotesque, the site of disputed boundaries, the point at which the female body and the force associated with the sublime have been thought together. (cf. Bakhtin’s discussion of the female grotesque in his book on Rabelais—the grotesque of beginnings, of reproduction, of the open and overlapping body.)

Yet the grotesque body of the monster is not female but male—all the cultural crossdressing, the similarities to women, notwithstanding. I have said that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* problematizes the gender division Burke tried to establish between sublime and beautiful; it does so in part by using the grotesque figure of the monster to revalorize the category of the beautiful. Shelley and Wollstonecraft both question Burke’s insistence on the incompatibility of sublime and beautiful, but while Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications* focus on the exclusion of women from the world of the sublime—the world of action, effort, exercise, public authority—Shelley’s novel turns the equation around to emphasize the way that men, considered as figures of the sublime, are excluded from the benefits of social sympathy and female companionship.

We have seen that Edmund Burke associated the sublime with men and with power, the beautiful with women and weakness. I would suggest that Victor Frankenstein’s first mistake as creator comes from expecting the monster to be beautiful. (Had he listened to Burke, he would have known better.) The monster is male, gigantic, rough-hewn and unfinished. Taken as a figure of the sublime, he might be bearable, even admirable; as a figure of failed or insufficient beauty, he can only be grotesque. The monster makes the same mistake as Frankenstein, though from a different perspective: he expects to be loved. But love, according to Burke, belongs in the realm of the beautiful, and it is the monster’s exclusion from this realm, from the world of social sympathies, that sets all the various tragedies of the novel into motion. As in Burke and Wollstonecraft, the grotesque appears as a displacement of the
beautiful, but in *Frankenstein*, that displacement is framed as a male lack of beauty rather than a female transgression of the codes of beauty.

Frankenstein’s monster, with its yellow eyes, imperfect skin and excessive size, is an uncanny fit with Burke’s description of the ugly—a category compatible with the sublime and opposed to the beautiful. The monster is repeatedly described as gigantic or larger than human, and according to Burke,

> The large and gigantic, though very compatible with the sublime, is contrary to the beautiful. It is impossible to suppose a giant the object of love. When we let our imaginations loose in romance, the ideas we naturally annex to that size are those of tyranny, cruelty, injustice, and every thing horrid and abominable. We paint the giant ravaging the country, plundering the innocent traveller, and afterwards gorged with his half-living flesh: such are Polyphemus, Cacus, and others, who make so great a figure in romances and heroic poems.

The Polyphemus Burke has in mind here is the Cyclops encountered by Odysseus on his travels; but there is another, less heroic side to this same Polyphemus. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (which Shelley was reading in Latin in 1815), Polyphemus appears as the rejected—and somewhat ridiculous—suitor of the nymph Galatea. Galatea tells her lover Acis, who is “sixteen, young and beautiful,”

> you should have seen him, suddenly taking pains
> With his appearance, trying to cultivate
> The art of pleasing, […]
> using a pool for a mirror
> To see his ugly features. [XIII, 763-8, Humphries translation]

Yet when Polyphemus sings to Galatea, even though she is lying in her young lover’s arms, she hears the words he sings, “and never could forget them.” Rhetoric, of course, is not enough, and Polyphemus never wins her love: the most he can do is throw the corner of a mountain at Acis, and ensure that Galatea share his own loneliness. Likewise, the monster in *Frankenstein*—a giant who cultivates the art of pleasing
through the science of letters, and who uses a pool for a mirror to see his ugly features—can only isolate Victor by killing Elizabeth: he cannot create a mate for himself.

“It is impossible to suppose a giant the object of love” says Burke, but the novel represents the denial of sympathy, of love, as a crime or a sin. “Am I to be thought the only criminal,” asks the monster, “when all humankind sinned against me?” [210] From the monster’s perspective, it is humanity’s own lack of sympathy which makes the creature appear and then become unacceptably grotesque rather than admirably sublime. Within the novel, the monster’s isolation at once defines and defiles him, yet the representation of that isolation wins for him the reader’s sympathies. Burke claimed that in relation to the giants, “the event we attend to with the greatest satisfaction is their defeat and death,” but Leigh Hunt in a letter to the Shelleys remarked in relation to a mutual friend, “Polyphemus […] always appears to me a pathetic rather than a monstrous person, though his disappointed sympathies at last made him cruel” and Mary Shelley replied, “I have written a book in defense of Polypheme, have I not?” [April 6, 1819]

Shelley’s defense of Polypheme attacks the gender divisions between the sublime and the beautiful on two different fronts: the novel represents quite powerfully the social injustice produced by considering the sublime of self-preservation incompatible with the beautiful world of social sympathies—and it represents this injustice by reframing the grotesque, beyond the pale of sublime or beautiful, as a masculine rather than a feminine category.

To read Frankenstein as a defense of Polypheme is to read the monster as more male than female, though surely much of the novel’s (grotesque) appeal lies in the indeterminacy and ambiguity of gender that plays about the figure of the monster. To
read for Shelley's defense of Polypheme is also to find the familiar landmarks of the novel even more unstable than they are usually considered. The text is, after all, haunted not by one Galatea but by two. I am thinking of the first Galatea to appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the statue created by Pygmalion and brought to life by Venus in answer to the sculptor's unspoken prayer. Frankenstein, the “modern Prometheus” is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a Pygmalion figure: his enthusiasm for creating a new race of beings is fundamentally selfish—they will "owe" their being to him, and he looks forward to being blessed as their creator and source. And if Frankenstein’s act of creation does not involve a generalized moral rejection of women (as did Pygmalion’s), it at least results in a practical rejection of both Justine and Elizabeth.

The scientist claims to have chosen his creature’s limbs with care—he expects his creation to be beautiful. Yet there is no one to play the role of Venus in this story, and in the end, Galatea too is missing. Rather than finding his beautiful ivory girl warm to his touch (and it’s worth noting that Pygmalion’s ‘girl’ is as nameless as Frankenstein’s monster in Ovid’s own text), Shelley’s Pygmalion finds himself confronted with Polyphemus, the failed and monstrous lover of Galatea, a figure which grotesquely duplicates his own failure and blocked desires. Pygmalion’s rejection of women and his artistic hubris, rewarded in Ovid, are severely punished in Shelley’s tale. From this perspective, the novel *Frankenstein* deals not with the female grotesque, but with the grotesque produced by the absence of the female—the grotesque implicit in male attempts to create and represent women.