“Airy Flights of My Imagination: Mary Shelley’s Critique of Cultural Hegemony in *Frankenstein*”

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“Airy Flights of My Imagination: Mary Shelley’s Critique of Cultural Hegemony in
Frankenstein
In the 1831 introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel, Frankenstein, she writes about her
time in Scotland and the feeling of freedom she felt while writing “beneath the trees of the grounds
belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true
compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered” (Shelley 2). Shelley
exposes the power of words, whether spoken and written, and their destructive consequences in
order to critique and challenge this hegemony. Unlike Anne Mellor and Ellan Moers who focus on
biographical readings, and others, like John Lamb and T. J. Lears, who focus on the ethical codes
within the novel, I claim that Shelley uses an attractive white, Christian male of the upper class in
order to challenge the hegemonic structure, a system of values and codes represented by the upper
class of 19th century England. I examine the roles of Safie and the Creature, particularly their
relationship to Victor, to argue that Shelley uses Frankenstein to critique language just as much as she
uses it to support language, indicating that Shelley’s novel betrays an ambivalence towards language,
particularly when it excludes people, like the Creature, who do not fit in.