

Mary Wilson Carpenter

Introduction

Where to start speaking of the end? But on the other hand, isn't it
always from the end that one starts?

Barbara Johnson

The quotation above is taken from “The Last Man,” an essay originally written in French for a 1980 colloquium held in Cerisy, France, and organized as a response to Jacques Derrida’s work, especially his essay “Les fins de l’homme.”¹ In 1980 Johnson was an Assistant Professor of French and the Literature Major (an undergraduate program taught by faculty from Comparative Literature and other departments) at Yale, and already internationally known for her work in deconstructionist theory. Her dissertation, *Défigurations du langage poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion), had been published in 1979, and her first English collection of essays, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Johns Hopkins University Press) was published in the same year as “Le dernier homme,” 1980. Her translation of Derrida’s 1972 work, *La dissémination*, would be published as *Dissemination* in 1981. But her essay on Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826), reprinted in this volume, was the beginning of her published writings on Mary Shelley. It marked her first publication in the field of “women’s studies,” one of whose areas was the rediscovery and critical analysis of works by women writers previously excluded from the academic canon. The last book manuscript she completed before her death in August 2009 was “Mary Shelley and Her Circle,” published here for the first time. Mary Shelley was thus the subject for Johnson’s beginning in feminist theory and criticism and also for her end.

In “The Last Man,” she questions, “Why couldn’t such a story be entitled *The Last Woman?* . . . Would the idea that humanity could not end with a woman have something to do with the ends of *man*?”² The idea

that a woman's story, unless it was written for the "ends" of man, was somehow monstrous, unthinkable, had already emerged in her teaching at Yale. There, in a 1978 course titled "Man and His Fictions: Narrative Forms," and team-taught with Peter Brooks, Barbara Guetti, and Joseph Halpern, Johnson had lectured in a course section titled "Life Stories" on Rousseau's *Confessions*. The course included no texts by women writers in this year or the next, in which Johnson did not teach. In the fall of 1980, the course had been retitled as the gender-neutral "Narrative Forms." Now team-taught by Johnson, David Marshall, and J. Hillis Miller, the section "Life Stories" included Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Johnson was the lecturer for this text. Seminar discussion compared *Frankenstein* and Rousseau's *Confessions* as "life stories." In her essay "The Last Man," Johnson begins with *Frankenstein*, proposing that "to speak of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is immediately to approach the question of *man* indirectly through what has always been at once excluded and comprehended by its definition, namely, the *woman* and the *monster*" (p. 259). Citing Rousseau's statement that "the most useful and least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man," Johnson suggests that Mary Shelley's novel demonstrates on the contrary that "if one translates in this way the command to know oneself as a command to know *man*, one risks losing contact monstrously with what one doesn't know" (p. 261). Johnson thus begins her first essay on Mary Shelley's work with a comparison between *Frankenstein* and Rousseau's writing as writing about "man and his fictions," a project that seems to both critique and anticipate the teaching of the Yale course.

She characterizes *The Last Man* as Mary Shelley's "story of the one who remains" (p. 262). The narrator—the last survivor of a universal plague—is witness, survivor, scribe, or the same role Mary Shelley plays at the moment she writes her novel. Commenting that Mary Shelley's life was also a series of survivals at the time of her writing of *The Last Man* (her mother had died in giving her birth, three of her own four children had died, Percy had drowned, and Byron had just died in Greece), Johnson suggests that "at the age of twenty-six, she considered herself the last relic of an extinct race" (p. 263). Mary Shelley paints her own mourning on "a universal scale" (p. 263). But since that universal scale was the one which characterized the writings of the Romantic poets, she "does more than give a universal vision of her mourning; she mourns for a certain type of universal vision" (p. 263). Beyond mourning, however, "the image of a

certain conception of *man* . . . will be progressively demystified throughout the novel that follows . . . The story of *The Last Man* is in the last analysis the story of modern Western man torn between mourning and deconstruction” (p. 265).

With this insightful reading of Mary Shelley’s apocalyptic novel, Johnson leads the way in the then emerging field of Mary Shelley studies by proposing that her work mounts a deconstructive critique of Romanticism. Anne K. Mellor, in her introduction to the 1993 edition of *The Last Man*, which includes Johnson’s essay in its bibliography, comments that Mary Shelley articulates “a critique so total that the novel becomes the first literary example of what we now call deconstruction.”³ Esther Schor, in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley* (2003), describes *Frankenstein* as “the century’s most blistering critique of Romantic egotism.”⁴

At the time of Johnson’s essay on *The Last Man*, this and *Frankenstein* were the only two of Mary Shelley’s novels in print. *The Last Man* had been published by the University of Nebraska Press, edited by Hugh J. Luke, Jr., in 1965. In the same year the Signet Classic paperback edition of *Frankenstein*, an edition widely used for teaching purposes, was first published. This edition reprints the 1831 third edition of the novel, published some thirteen years after the first edition and nine years after Percy Bysshe Shelley’s death. It was for the 1831 edition that Shelley wrote her now famous “Author’s Introduction” characterizing the novel as “my hideous progeny.” The 1965 Signet Classic edition—the only edition ever cited by Johnson—also contains an “Afterword” by Harold Bloom. Bloom’s explanation of what makes *Frankenstein* an important book, “though it is only a strong, flawed novel with frequent clumsiness in its narrative and characterization” is that “it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self, one that resembles Blake’s *Book of Urizen*, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and Byron’s *Manfred*,” and that it was precisely because Mary Shelley’s novel “lacks the sophistication and imaginative complexity of such works, [that] *Frankenstein* affords a unique introduction to the archetypal world of the Romantics” (p. 215).

Bloom’s 1965 statement was only a pithy summary of the general view of most *Frankenstein* critics at the time. In her 1988 critical biography, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, Mellor notes that “before Ellen Moers’s ground-breaking discussion of *Frankenstein* in *The New York Review of Books* in 1973, literary scholars and critics had for the most part discussed

Mary Shelley's career merely as an appendage to her husband's, dismissing *Frankenstein* as a badly written children's book even though far more people were familiar with her novel than with Percy Shelley's poetry."⁵ By the time of Johnson's writing of "Le dernier homme," however, some revolutionary feminist readings of *Frankenstein* had appeared. In addition to Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), which included her reading of the novel as an instance of "Female Gothic," a "phantasmagoria of the nursery," Marc A. Rubenstein's "My Accursed Origin': The Search for the Mother in *Frankenstein*" had appeared in *Studies in Romanticism* (Spring 1976).⁶ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar had published *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), whose chapter "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve" identifies the monster, though created male, as "a female in disguise," a figure for the author's sense of namelessness and deformity.⁷ George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher's critical anthology *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (1979) included Knoepfelmacher's much-cited essay "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters," as well as other feminist critical essays on the novel.⁸ In 1980, the same year in which Johnson published "Le dernier homme," her colleague at Yale Mary Poovey published "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism" in *PMLA*.⁹

Johnson's position at Yale when she wrote "Le dernier homme" was probably central to her decision to both teach and write on Mary Shelley. As described in the Foreword to this volume, she and some of her Yale feminist colleagues tossed around the notion of writing a female counter-manifesto to the Yale School's entirely male-centered *Deconstruction and Criticism*, centered on *Frankenstein* rather than Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Triumph of Life." Though that idea never quite got off the ground, Johnson refers to it in "Le dernier homme," commenting that "perhaps it was not *Frankenstein* but rather *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley's grim depiction of the gradual extinction of humanity altogether, that would have made a fit counterpart to 'The Triumph of Life.' Percy Bysshe Shelley is entombed in both, along with a certain male fantasy of Romantic universality. The only universality that remains in Mary Shelley's last novel is the plague" (p. 33).¹⁰

Johnson was also active at Yale in the Women's Studies Program. After the admission of women as undergraduates in 1969, momentum gathered to include women's studies in the curriculum. By 1976 the Women's Studies Task Force was formed, and in May 1979 the Yale faculty approved the institution of the Women's Studies Program. Johnson was included

as one of the “Core Faculty” along with Silvia Arrom, Nancy Cott (who became program chair in 1980), Faye Crosby, Margaret Homans, Lydia Kung, Catherine MacKinnon, Susan Olzak, and Mary Poovey.¹¹ Janet Todd was later to describe Yale as one of two institutions (the other was Princeton) that could boast more than one major feminist critic, naming Barbara Johnson, Shoshana Felman, and Margaret Homans, though Todd did not feel that either Yale or Princeton could be described as a “feminist establishment.”¹² Felman’s foundational feminist essay, “Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy,” was first published in 1975.¹³ Homans published her groundbreaking *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* in 1980.¹⁴

Johnson’s now classic essay on *Frankenstein*, “My Monster/My Self,” was published in a feminist issue of *diacritics*, “Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Critique/Feminine Text,” edited by Cynthia Chase, Nelly Furman, and Mary Jacobus, in 1982.¹⁵ But this was not the first time Johnson had appeared as a feminist critic in an American academic journal. *Critical Inquiry* had published a feminist issue the preceding year, Winter 1981, and the “Editor’s Introduction” begins with a quotation from Johnson’s *The Critical Difference*:

If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would probably be no need for literature. And if literature could truly say what the relations between the sexes are, we would doubtless not need much of it then, either . . . It is not the life of sexuality that literature cannot capture; it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality.¹⁶

For Elizabeth Abel, Johnson’s thesis here represents the turn in deconstructive criticism from “notions of textual difference” to “the complexities of sexual difference,” which, though “more pervasively engrained in our culture, have largely been confined to the edges of critical debate” (*Writing and Sexual Difference*, p. 1). Johnson herself, however, having dissected the Yale School’s gender politics in “Gender Theory and the Yale School,” gleefully applies her critical scalpel to her own work:

In order to end with a meditation on a possible female version of the Yale School, I would like now to turn to the work of a Yale daughter. For this purpose I have chosen to focus on *The Critical Difference* by Barbara Johnson. What happens when one raises Mary Jacobus’s question: ‘Is there a woman in

this text?' The answer is rather surprising. For no book produced by the Yale School seems to have excluded women as effectively as *The Critical Difference*. No women authors are studied. Almost no women critics are cited. And, what is even more surprising, there are almost no female characters in any of the stories analyzed. *Billy Budd*, however triangulated, is a tale of three *men* in a boat. . . . In a book that announces itself as a study of difference, the place of the woman is constantly being erased. (*World of Difference*, p. 39)

Nevertheless, she acknowledges that "this does not mean, however, that the question of sexual difference does not haunt the book from the beginning" (p. 39). Quoting the same passage quoted in Abel's introduction, Johnson sees *The Critical Difference* as able only to describe "the escape of the difference it attempts to analyze" (p. 40).

Johnson, according to Diane Long Hoeveler, was "one of the first American critics to link feminism and deconstruction." What Hoeveler finds most interesting in Johnson's reading of *Frankenstein* is "her recognition of the novel as dominated by its 'description of a primal scene of creation . . . where do babies come from? And where do stories come from? In both cases, the scene of creation is described, but the answer to these questions is still withheld.'"¹⁷ She quotes Johnson's generative perception that "*Frankenstein*, in other words, can be read as the story of the experience of writing *Frankenstein*" (*World of Difference*, p. 49).

Perhaps even more interesting, however, is the fact that Johnson both begins and ends her essay with the question of autobiography, specifically the monstrosity of female autobiography. She begins with the statement that "to judge from recent trends in scholarly as well as popular literature, three crucial questions can be seen to stand at the forefront of today's preoccupations: the question of mothering, the question of the woman writer, and the question of autobiography" (*World of Difference*, p. 144). Tellingly, her reflection begins with a comment on *popular* as well as scholarly literature: the essay—which is actually composed as a review essay of Nancy Friday's *My Mother/My Self* (1977) and Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976), against which Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is juxtaposed—demonstrates her grounding in the "real world," or that figurative term which, as she comments in her introduction to *A World of Difference*, denotes nothing other than "perceptions of the boundaries of institutions" (p. 3). Reading all three books together from her position in view of those boundaries, she works out her stunning analysis of *Frankenstein* as Mary Shelley's monstrous autobiography, the

woman writer's story of giving birth to her "hideous progeny." The monstrosity of female autobiography, she concludes, is due to "the fact of self-contradiction that is so vigorously repressed in women" (p. 153). In all three of the books discussed, "the monstrosity of selfhood is intimately embedded within the question of female autobiography" (p. 154). And how could it be otherwise, she ponders, since the very shape of human life stories has always been modeled on the man? "Rousseau's—or any man's—autobiography consists in the story of the difficulty of conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be. The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine, imagination" (p. 154). It seems clear, in other words, that "My Monster/My Self" was gestated in the Yale course that was originally conceived as "Man and His Fictions: Narrative Forms."

In 1982–83, Johnson was a Fellow at the Mary I. Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College in Harvard University. Feminist theory was electrifying the academic world at this point, and the Cambridge-Boston area was particularly explosive. So many feminist talks, lectures, meetings, films, conferences, and other events were being held in the numerous academic institutions in the metro Boston area that Ruth Perry, founding director of the Women's Studies Program at MIT, began compiling and publishing a monthly newsletter titled "Women's Studies Around Boston" in 1984. The Boston Area Colloquium on Feminist Theory was first held at Northeastern University in the spring of 1982. By 1983–84, when Johnson began her career as a Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature at Harvard, the third colloquium series was being held, now cosponsored by Harvard and Wellesley.

The battle to establish women's studies programs and to include women writers in such already established departments as Afro-American studies, as well as English and other modern language departments, was being fought on multiple academic fronts, including that of Harvard. Dean Henry Rosovsky established the Committee on Women's Studies in 1978, initially chaired by Edward Keenan, Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. In late 1983, Dean Keenan appointed Professor Susan Suleiman of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures as Chair of the Committee, to take office in 1985. In September

1984, Johnson was Acting Chair of the Committee, and she and Suleiman worked together to plan a degree-granting program, coordinating courses throughout the Faculty of Arts and Sciences that included a “gender component,” and also finding funding for lectures and symposia.¹⁸ In 1985, the Committee on Women’s Studies at Harvard and the Women’s Studies Program at MIT jointly sponsored a conference on pornography that occasioned intense debate from feminists “of different viewpoints,” most notably Women Against Pornography and the Feminists Against Censorship Task Force.¹⁹ From 1991 to 1993, Johnson was Chair of the Committee on Women’s Studies at Harvard, in which she was succeeded by Suleiman in 1993 and in 1995 by Alice Jardine of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures.

This era also saw the beginning of Johnson’s work on African American women writers. In the fall of 1983 she taught her first course, “Black Women Writers.” There were no women faculty in the Afro-American Studies Department at that point, and Johnson’s course pioneered the teaching of black women writers at Harvard. She offered a course with this title again in 1985 and one titled “African American Women Writers” in 1990, as well as a course titled “The Slave Narrative” in 1995. From 1990 to 1991, she was Chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies, where she vigorously promoted the hiring of new faculty members. In 1984 she published “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and in 1985 a second essay on Hurston, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” was published in *Critical Inquiry* and reprinted in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, also edited by Gates.²⁰

In the fall of 1995, Johnson taught an undergraduate seminar at Harvard titled “Mary Shelley and Her Circle.” By this time, critical interest in Mary Shelley had mushroomed. More than half of all students of Romanticism now read *Frankenstein*; the novel was a staple in such courses as “The Gothic,” “Women’s Literature,” and “The Post-Human”; and it was included in both *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, the leading undergraduate anthologies.²¹ *MLA Approaches to Teaching Shelley’s “Frankenstein”* had been published in 1990.²² Both scholarly and paperback editions of Mary Shelley’s other novels and short fictions had become available (Schor, pp. 1–2). Complete editions of Mary Shelley’s letters and journals had also been

English 201j
Mary Shelley and Her Circle
Fall 1981
6, Johnson, 4th Floor, Emerson
Office Hours Tu 10-12, 2-4
call 495-4185 for appn.

Syllabus

- Sept 10 Introduction
- Sept 25 Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary
- Oct 2 Mary Wol. stonecraft, A Vindication of The Rights of Women
- Oct 9 [holiday--no class start reading Goethe]
- Oct 18 William Godwin, Political Justice
- Oct 23 Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria
- Oct 24 Percy Bysshe Shelley, letter to Godwin, "Queen Mab,"
"Mont Blanc"
- Nov 1 Mary Shelley, Frankenstein
Lord Byron, "Prometheus"

SHORT PAPER DUE
- Nov 13 John Polidori, The Vampyre
- Nov 23 Lord Byron, "Marfrod"
Mary Shelley, Malinda
Percy Shelley, "The Genci"
- Nov 27 Percy Shelley, Introduction to Rosalind of Islay,
"Prometheus Unbound"
- Jan 4 Percy Shelley, "Ode to Liberty," "Hellas," "The Triumph
of Life"
letter by Mary Shelley on death of Shelley
material on death of Shelley and Byron in Byron's Poetry
- Dec 11-12 Mary Shelley, The Last Man
- Jan 9 FINAL PAPER DUE

published. Johnson's essay "Le dernier homme," now published in English translation as "The Last Man" in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* (1993), had begun to surface in the fertile field of Mary Shelley studies. Johnson's second essay on Mary Shelley, "My Monster/My Self," had been reprinted in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1987), edited by Harold Bloom, and was widely quoted.²³ It was to be reprinted the following year in the Norton Critical Edition of *Frankenstein*.²⁴ The syllabus for Johnson's course (reproduced below) included readings in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and William Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, and "poor Polidori," Byron's physician who later committed suicide.

The course was designed to present Mary Shelley not as an appendage to the "great Romantics," but as a major writer whose work deserved to be studied in itself, as well as in its intersections with that of her illustrious parents, husband, and other members of the famous literary "circle" among whom she lived and wrote—and all of whom she long survived.

In 2009, Johnson, now disabled by a progressive neurological condition which had forced her retirement from teaching, worked on "Mary Shelley and Her Circle" (she had already completed several other books post-retirement, including a translation of Mallarmé's *Divagations* (2007), *Persons and Things* (2008), and *Moses and Multiculturalism* (published posthumously in 2010). *Mary Shelley and Her Circle* is in essence a long reflective essay on this other "last woman," this other woman surviving beyond or outside her literary circle. Johnson explores Mary Shelley's relations to the mother who died giving her birth and to her radical feminist works, to her philosopher-novelist father and his ambivalent treatment of his feminist wife's daughter, and most especially to Mary Shelley's complex and difficult relation to her narcissistic husband, who continually sought and received all kinds of adoration and celebration that inevitably relegated Mary to the margins. Byron and his short-lived physician Polidori also figure in this strange circle that surrounded Mary Shelley at the point at which she produced her "hideous progeny." The book, like so much of Johnson's work, seems to emerge directly from her teaching. At times it displays an almost conspiratorial tone, as if initiating students into the hitherto unknown realm of the haunted woman writer and her haunting productions. At other moments, Johnson presents with deadpan humor the unvarnished truths of both sexual and textual intersections in Mary Shelley's circle. Ultimately, Johnson proposes, Mary Shelley desired to become what Percy Bysshe Shelley had been, a god-like

sole creator, “someone capable of having progeny alone” (Epilogue, p. 8). Although Johnson did not intend this book to be her last work, the book ties together a continuing thread in her work that began in 1980, while she was still an assistant professor at Yale, and that continued to engage her thought throughout her life. It is a fitting subject for the final work of Barbara Johnson, famed scholar and beloved teacher who eagerly joined in the crucial work of lifting other women writers out of obscurity and into those literary circles where still other students of women’s lives and literature could learn to know them.