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# Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and *Frankenstein*

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What is being repressed here is . . . the possibility that for women as well as for men the home can be the very site of the *unheimlich*.

(Barbara Johnson, “My Monster/My Self”)<sup>1</sup>

Domesticity is not exactly what comes to mind when you read either *Frankenstein* or “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” These are not works about *Gemütlichkeit*, plenitude, the pleasures of the hearth. If we are to look for domesticity in them, we have to turn to the margins. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” literally marginalizes the home, embodied in the wedding that frames the poem and whose domesticized bowers and maidens are apparently antithetical to everything in the mariner’s tale. *Frankenstein* might be said to invert that structure since it opens and closes on an ocean voyage with a narrator who explicitly refers to Coleridge’s poem as a guiding influence; and all three of the novel’s most climactic moments occur when the monster enters a home and destroys it—one of them on Frankenstein’s wedding night. Thus the structural inversion is really a mirror image: in both works domesticity is marginal, threatened, seemingly inadequate to the powers informing the central acts and mysteries that are narrated.

Both of these works, however, have long been read as allegories of “the return of the repressed.” I put the phrase in quotation marks because it is such a creepy cliché, on a par with “The Night of the Living Dead”: *Your past will come back to haunt you*. The return of the repressed is cliché: represented, it becomes kitsch, perhaps nowhere more than in the infinitely repeated persona of Frankenstein as monster. These works repress domesticity, and the monstrous arises from that repression. Departing from Freud’s theory of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*, in which Freud shows that the uncanny embraces both meanings of *heimlich*—the secret and the familiar—I want to reconsider the secret affinity between the domestic and the monstrous.<sup>2</sup> In these works, feminine domesticity is closely aligned with kitsch, that uncanny monster that is both marginal to art and its mirror image.<sup>3</sup>

Kitsch eludes easy definition; it is a term that not only censures a would-be

art object, but also locates the work within a certain kind of relation to art. That relation has several dimensions in the evolution of kitsch as a critical category. First, the work of art is construed as authentic, in contrast to the inauthenticity of kitsch.<sup>4</sup> Second, the inauthenticity of kitsch derives directly from its place in a postindustrial economy; this economy represents art as commodity. Thus its development in history directly parallels that of middle-class consumerism—and, not coincidentally, of Romanticism as cultural phenomenon: kitsch and Romanticism emerged at the same historical moment.<sup>5</sup> Although kitsch has long been associated with what is now called commodity culture, it has traditionally been viewed in the context of social class (as, for example, an instrument of mystification). I am arguing here that kitsch is also related to gender differences, that certain kinds of kitsch are marginalized because of their links with feminine domesticity. To put it most bluntly, “high” art historically needs to leave home. As art’s uncanny double, kitsch must be repressed, silenced, kept out of sight in the work that aspires to seriousness. But the very process of repression can leave its uncanny traces in the text. *Frankenstein* and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” are works haunted by a repressed feminine domesticity whose identity is closely related to “inauthentic” art—to kitsch.

One of the examples that Freud quotes in his long definition of *heimlich*, meaning “familiar; ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home,’” links it, not surprisingly, to the feminine: he cites the case of “‘A careful housewife, who knows how to make a pleasing *Heimlichkeit* (*Häuslichkeit*) out of the smallest means” (“‘einer sorglichen Hausfrau, die mit dem Wenigsten eine vergnügliche *Heimlichkeit* [*Häuslichkeit*] zu schaffen versteht”)<sup>6</sup> *Heimlichkeit* is thus something created; its creator is female, who carries the burden of care and who at best knows how to please her audience, to bring him pleasure. Her stage, her genre, is the domicile. The house, in turn, not only protects, but conceals. Freud goes on to cite meanings of *heimlich* as *Geheimnis*, secret: “*heimlich* places (which good manners oblige us to conceal)” (p. 374). This last meaning merges with that of *unheimlich*, the word that ought to be its opposite; the *unheimlich* is uncanny precisely because (here Freud cites Schelling) it “is the name for everything that ought to have remained. . . hidden and secret and has become visible” (p. 375). The home, implicitly, that center of *Heimlichkeit*, is also the center of the *Unheimlich*, all that must be concealed or repressed.

Looked at through this lens, it would seem that the wedding at the margin of the ancient mariner’s story is in fact its center—its secret care, even its obsession. That suspicion is confirmed by the grotesque female form that appears at one of the poem’s turning points, the figure that approaches on the spectre ship and casts dice for the mariner’s soul:

Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,  
Her locks were yellow as gold:  
Her skin was as white as leprosy,  
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,  
Who thicks man's blood with cold.<sup>7</sup>

This is the harlot who inverts, and subverts, the wedding—who blights with plagues the marriage hearth. She has been read as the deformed mother, the object of desire distorted by the poet's guilt and rage.<sup>8</sup> Any biblical or apocalyptic reading of the poem must take her into account as the Whore of Babylon, seductive but fatal, the dark counterpart to a vision of the New Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Her complement is not only the bride, but the good mother, Mary, whose protective powers the mariner repeatedly invokes. Multiply demonic, LIFE-IN-DEATH has the bad taste to win the dice game against her presumably male opponent—and to cry out in triumph. There seems little question that hers is the triumph of the castrating female, that secret, fearful presence at the heart of the home.<sup>10</sup> The mariner must encounter that presence even in the exclusively, oppressively male domain of the ship at sea. Although critics have consistently located the poem's climax in Part VII, the moment when the mariner blesses the (phallic, possibly narcissistic) water snakes, surely the encounter with LIFE-IN-DEATH is at least as central. Her dice game marks a turning point in his existence from which there is clearly no return; and, as Edward Bostetter has pointed out, the fact that it is a game of *chance* she wins is crucial to any reading of the poem's larger meaning.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps because critical debate about the poem has been much exercised to define the nature and consequences of the mariner's blessing, it has paid relatively little attention to what we might call the poem's other center, its feminine one.

The description of LIFE-IN-DEATH is cryptic and dense. On one level, it simply lists a series of code words that add up to the conventional harlot figure: red lips, free looks, gold hair—and the deathly-white skin that makes the harlot an agent of disease and death. The redness of her lips has attracted some commentary because it joins a different series, the string of words evoking the redness of blood throughout the poem.<sup>12</sup> “Her looks were free” is one of those conventional phrases we understand without trying: he is talking about sexual freedom, but with a price tag. I do not mean to suggest that LIFE-IN-DEATH comes right off the streets of London; she has been turned into something more seemingly archetypal than that. But like Blake's harlot, she carries an apocalyptic burden that also possesses its share of contemporaneity. Here, however, the social commentary is more deeply buried.

We can continue to unearth that commentary in the subsequent line. "Her locks were yellow as gold" signals more than the color of her hair. Like many other words in the poem—the most salient being *rime* itself (rhyme, frost), as Arden Reed has shown—*locks* has at least a double meaning, referring both to her hair and to the metaphorical imprisonment she represents.<sup>13</sup> It is a meaning the poem reinforces when it asks about the spectre ship, "Are those *her* ribs through which the Sun / Did peer, as through a grate?" (p. 193). D'Avunzo quotes Revelation 18 on the Whore of Babylon: she is "the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird."<sup>14</sup> Like Belinda's locks in Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," LIFE-IN-DEATH's golden hair may be the agent of several different kinds of constraints, including psychological and sexual ones.

But Belinda is a woman in polite society. LIFE-IN-DEATH is pointedly a fallen woman, and one with considerable demonic power. Her locks are as yellow as the gold that buys her sexual favors: she represents the commodification of desire. The poet feels trapped by, and seeks to repress, the marketplace she insistently injects into his relation with the muse. Her destructive power usurps the celebratory garden of the wedding, the easy community with a friendly reader. It seems peculiarly appropriate that the woman whose "looks were free" should be the agent of chance: what the prostitute embodies is precisely the meaning of the marketplace, the arbitrary standard of monetary value. Her body is thus the empty vehicle of a set of relations within which the poet's voice is trapped. When she cries out in triumph, she represents an emblem not of feminine power but of masculine hostility.

LIFE-IN-DEATH is a prostitute, she is triumphant, and more: her companion is Death. In the original version (1798), Death is accorded two stanzas of description that Coleridge later excised. We see in the earlier version that what Coleridge had in mind was a good old-fashioned revenant, the dead risen from the grave:

His bones were black with many a crack,  
 All black and bare, I ween;  
 Jet-black and bare, save where with rust  
 Of mouldy damp and charnel crust  
 They're patch'd with purple and green.  
 . . . . .  
 A gust of wind sterte up behind  
 And whistled thro' his bones;  
 Thro' the holes of his eyes and the hole of his mouth  
 Half-whistles and half-groans.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars have generally applauded Coleridge's decision to eliminate this fellow and show more restraint: Death still appears in the later version but without unnecessary description. John Livingston Lowes identifies the earlier death figure with "the familiar charnel horrors" of the "mysteries of the Gothic cult."<sup>16</sup> His wryness is not lost on us: the gothic is *familiar* because it is clichéd, a popular genre whose (feminine, commercial) taint must be banished from the serious poem. I want to quote Lowes further because he becomes so wonderfully carried away with his point:

Nothing in the poem, indeed, is more remarkable than the sublimation, as if they had passed through some ethereal alembic, of the crudities which marred the formative elements of Coleridge's unique conception of the supernatural. And his momentary surrender to the unnatural, in the rejected "Gothic" stanza, throws into sharpest relief the psychological verisimilitude which we have seen and have yet to see displayed in his final delineation of his supernatural universe.<sup>17</sup>

No mention by Lowes that the stanza Coleridge leaves in, with its nightmare LIFE-IN-DEATH, might be equally clichéd and even more crude and unnatural, a flaw in the "psychological verisimilitude." No mention, either, that Coleridge was eager to incorporate elements of other popular genres—the folktale, the traditional ballad—as long as they were not kitsch, that is, as long as they belonged not to contemporary Britain but to pre-industrial culture. The Gothic was familiar, *heimlich*, and at the same time *unheimlich*, the site of the return of the repressed—the kitsch of the marketplace that haunts this poem—and was thus "unnatural." The supreme value implicit throughout Lowes's judgment here (and in his book more generally) is the "unique" and authentic quality of that "ethereal alembic," Coleridge's poetic imagination.

The poem itself has a more complex self-conception. Lowes tells us an amusing anecdote about the final stanza cited above: although Coleridge intended to have it cancelled, it slipped into *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817 because the printer ("The Devil daub him!" wrote Coleridge in Mr. Butler's copy")<sup>18</sup> kept it there. It was not to be suppressed so easily. Not only is that stanza the most gothic, it also represents most excessively the lack—or castration—embodied in the death figure. It is hard to resist reading the half-whistles and half-groans as analogies to the poetic voice, speaking from a position of near-incapacity. Though we may grant that death has a kind of impotence, it also has the ultimate authority, akin to that of the mariner, a knowledge beyond the bounds: uncanny. In a move, then, that we recognize as characteristic of modern poetry, Coleridge represents in one image both the powerlessness and the power of the poetic voice. We do not know what kinds of pressure,

internal and external, brought Coleridge to the point of cutting those two stanzas; nor would I defend their obviously limited esthetic value. What is of interest is that his revision has been applauded because it apparently removes from the poem the elements most closely aligned with a Gothic sensibility—and there is no question that the term carried negative connotations then even more than now.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary reviewers who read the first version of the poem were most likely to criticize this aspect, though they do not use the word “Gothic.” It is worth remembering that *Gothic* had at least two literary senses at the time. It referred to the kind of novel of which Ann Radcliffe’s *The Castle of Otranto* was perhaps the most salient example—the kind that Wordsworth called “frantic novels,” or that Percy Shelley, in his preface to *Frankenstein*, calls “enervating.”<sup>20</sup> *Gothic* also still carried its strong association with German culture and could be used interchangeably with *Teutonic*. For contemporary critics reviewing the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the German connection is the most striking: where one faults “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” for having “the extravagance of a mad german [sic] poet,” and another calls it “a Dutch attempt at German sublimity,” yet a third calls it “a right English attempt, and a successful one, to dethrone German sublimity.”<sup>21</sup> Reading the contemporary reviews, one senses a kind of nationalistic competition with the Germans for territory in the newer literary modes. And yet the critics display toward the Gothic all of the ambivalence that rulers back home typically feel toward a colonized country. The new sublime Gothic romance must be kept in bounds, lest it get ideas about its power. Perhaps there is an unstated reason for their anxiety, displaced into xenophobia: whereas the German Gothic sublime was initiated in poetry and practiced by the country’s most esteemed male writers, in England the novels of Ann Radcliffe and others had given the Gothic mode a taint of the feminine—the “frantic” and the “enervating.”<sup>22</sup>

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” LIFE-IN-DEATH, like Death, has Gothic qualities, most strikingly in her effect on the observer/reader: the sight of her “thicks man’s blood with cold.” Authors of the Gothic in the eighteenth century could measure success by two physiological responses in readers: hair standing on end and blood running cold. Thus LIFE-IN-DEATH has the same effect on the mariner that the poem should have on us. One of the most successful Gothic works of all in the eighteenth century was Bürger’s “Lenore,” and Coleridge is routinely thought to have tried to emulate Bürger’s popular success when he composed “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” It is no secret that Coleridge and Wordsworth wrote the *Lyrical Ballads* with the market in mind, hoping to make money off the volume. What is unusual is that Coleridge does not simply include the Gothic in the poem, but locates it in a figure that at once represents and

critiques the commodification of literature. The Gothic, Coleridge divines, is kitsch; it is commodity that poses as art, and its aura of horror is something like a negative version of the aura of authenticity whose loss in the nineteenth century Walter Benjamin lamented. It is surely significant that Coleridge prefers to locate the trap of the inauthentic in a female figure, a whore/hoar whose presence infuses the rhyme/rime with an uncanny chill.

That grotesque LIFE-IN-DEATH is thus an eerie allegory of the poem's esthetic. At the center of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" lies an encounter with three allied kinds of marginality: death, femininity, and kitsch. Death and the female are two faces of the otherness that permits that which is not other to know itself; kitsch is the form they take here, the esthetic system that is alien to art. Everything about the mariner's story indicates that his is an experience of profound marginality. The poem presents itself as part of the Romantic project of redefining the marginal as central to our concerns. But in fact the poem, in this very process of redefinition, unself-consciously reifies a new marginality, a coalition of kitsch and domesticity. The poem represses that coalition, which reemerges as the monstrous, the uncanny, at its center.

*Frankenstein* is trapped in something of the same problem. Relatively scant attention has been paid to the novel's rich allusions to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," largely because they have been understood in the most accessible terms as part of Mary Shelley's indictment of the male Romantic poet. The seagoing Walton identifies with the mariner because he too is an overreacher whose ambitions threaten to consign him to solitary despair; and Victor Frankenstein is even more like the mariner in his self-destructive, compulsive behavior that endangers every refuge, even that of the wedding bower. Perhaps the figure who most resembles the mariner is the monster. Like the mariner, the monster is extremely isolated, to the point where his solitude and suffering themselves are monstrous. Like the mariner, the monster seizes his unwilling listener, the would-be bridegroom Frankenstein, fixes him with his eyes, and begs him to hear his story. As has often been noted, the monster's story forms the center of the novel, located as it is within concentric circles of narrative frames (Walton's letters home frame Victor's story, which itself frames the monster's account of his life). In this, *Frankenstein* is not unlike the structure of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," with the gloss that frames its tale, speaking in a voice that, though unnamed, is quite distinct from that of the narrator, whose voice in turn frames the mariner's story. But if we think of the mariner's tale as paralleling that of Victor Frankenstein, as each reports to the more "normal person"—Walton, the Wedding Guest—of horrors he has seen, then Coleridge's



parallel to the monster is LIFE-IN-DEATH, the fatal woman with the golden locks. Unlike Coleridge, Shelley gives voice to the monster, bringing it in from the margins, revealing its presence in the home. In doing so, she indicts the kind of vision embodied in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," while at the same time subscribing to Coleridge's perception of the author's dilemma: the monster represents not only a repressed femininity, but also the monstrousness of the marketplace. In sum, the monster embodies the threatening power of kitsch.

Despite one or two recent arguments to the contrary, the overriding impression remains that the women in the novel are hopeless as icons of femininity: nearly one-dimensional, angelic, they are far less real than the monster.<sup>23</sup> But that, of course, is the point, and everything that the novel represses as it represents the feminine—most notably all hostility—returns with a vengeance in the monster. Recent critics have noted repeatedly that the women in *Frankenstein* are almost exclusively domestic. Frankenstein's foster sister and fiancée Elizabeth writes to him, "Get well—and return to us. You will find a happy, cheerful home, and friends who love you dearly" (p. 64). But what he finds when he returns home is death, suffering, and guilt. Elizabeth not only has been powerless to protect their home from the destructive force of the monster, she has assumed guilt herself for the deaths he causes, as though he were the trace not only of Frankenstein's repressed violence but also of her own.

Violence is at the heart of every home in the novel.<sup>24</sup> Victor's own parents were married as a consequence of a death: his father's best friend died, leaving an only daughter, who met the senior Frankenstein as she was grieving at the deathbed of her father. The only furnishings we see in Victor's house are two paintings that hang on the mantel, in a symbolic location occupying and transforming the hearth. One is a miniature of William, the youngest brother who is also the monster's first victim. The other painting represents Frankenstein's mother:

It was an historical subject, painted at my father's desire, and represented Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity. (p. 78)

What strikes us today as a bizarre painting to hang over the mantel would have been less extraordinary to contemporaries. The historical subject, the portrait, and the sentimental narrative of a genre painting are here combined in one work that calls to mind a kitsch sensibility. Despite the narrator's claims about dignity and beauty, it is impossible not to feel an uncomfortable combination of clichéd art form with tasteless display. What

is displayed is Caroline's grieving, but what is displaced is the courtship that immediately followed, indeed was enabled by it. The painting celebrates both her martyred suffering and her husband's triumph, as though her pain were the continuing guarantee of his power. Her death merely gives that paradigm permanent inscription.<sup>25</sup> This representation of the mother is of supreme importance in the novel. Not only does it define the locus of the mother in the home, but it is also echoed by the miniature of Caroline that prompts the monster to murder little William. The miniature travels from pocket to pocket like a mobile signifier of desire, but we can arrest its meaning on one point: the representation of the mother as object of desire is integrally related to the mother as kitsch sign of domestic value. Kitsch produces covert violence. Or, more precisely, works that unwittingly represent covert violence in operation may strike us as kitsch: they alert us that something is wrong here.

Violence has thus preceded the monster into Victor's home. The monster himself is characterized by his homelessness; it is the absence of a home for him that drives him to revenge. He acquires the idea of a home, and the longing for one, from peering voyeuristically into a cottage occupied by the motherless De Lacey family. What he sees when he first looks in is a fire, tended by the daughter, and he takes as his special task the provision of wood for the family, in an empathetic gesture to help ease their poverty. But the fire becomes itself the instrument of violence, when, after being repulsed and beaten by them, the monster destroys their house with a bonfire. The very symbol, source, and energy of domestic affections is their destruction.<sup>26</sup> We have been fully prepared, then, for the violence that invades the house in which Victor is to consummate his marriage with Elizabeth. His ambivalence toward her has been all too clear, and the pattern has been established: the monster gives expression to the repressed violence in the home. A number of recent studies of *Frankenstein* have refined our understanding of what that violence targets, though they have left us with the sense, finally, of its indeterminacy. Whether Shelley is attacking Godwin, Percy Shelley, or the sentimentalizing of motherhood, she is certainly revealing the home as the site of destruction.

Just as it is impossible to say what the original target of that destruction is meant to be, we cannot identify the monster as the double of any single individual in (or outside of) the narrative.<sup>27</sup> Freud makes it clear, in his discussion of the uncanny, that what he thinks is repressed has to do with the oedipal drama: he says of his male patients that most of them experience as uncanny the female genitals, the "entrance to the former *heim* of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning" (p. 399). What he casually elides is the female patient's experi-

ence of her own genitals; defining her body as *unheimlich*, he divides her from her own home, makes her perpetually into someone else's home.

Something like that twist occurs in the way *Frankenstein* mirrors in inverted form "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Mary Shelley, with overtly modest ambitions, wrote a Gothic fiction under pressure from Percy Shelley and Byron. Choosing a marginal genre, she promised not to unsettle them in their own generic domiciles; like Freud's housewife, she set about to make a pleasing home with only limited means. But her genre has been defined as *unheimlich*, so she is divided from it as though from her own body. Mary Shelley's novel, her progeny, is monstrous because it is her own body made familiar, her own home rendered *unheimlich* by the defamiliarizing gaze of the men who define it for her. The feminine Gothic is uncanny, moreover, not simply because it plays with ghosts, but because it is kitsch: it is the return of popular culture, that irrepressible esthetic force of the monstrous. Like death, its instrument of horror, it is a great leveler, undoing the distinctions not only within social hierarchies but also within the esthetic and semantic systems intricately related to those hierarchies.<sup>28</sup>

It is no great step now to interpret the monster as an allegory of kitsch. To read him in this way is to bring together two different kinds of interpretation: the monster as the uncanny, the psychologically repressed; and the monster as the force of the crowd, embodying the mass market, pieced together as it is from different configurations of desire. Although no one has seen the monster in quite this Benjaminian way, several readers have had a similar hunch, and two have contributed substantial background to such an interpretation. As Paul O'Flinn has shown, the monster may well be interpreted as an allegory of the working class.<sup>29</sup> O'Flinn argues that the novel must be read in terms of two issues that were prominent during the years of its composition: uneasiness about the new technology, and the possibility of working-class revolt (p. 196). These issues gave rise to the violence of the riots and machine-bashing during the Luddite disturbances of 1811–1817 and the Pentridge uprising of 1817, events that the Shelleys followed closely. O'Flinn documents this argument with evidence from Mary Shelley's letters and journal, and he notes that the issues emerge in *Frankenstein* in "oblique, imaginative terms" (p. 196). Their very obliqueness indexes, one suspects, the repression they occasion. O'Flinn detects a distinct political allegory at work: "the novel argues that, just as Frankenstein's creation drives him through exhausting and unstinting conflicts to his death, so too a class called into being by the bourgeoisie and yet rejected and frustrated by it will in the end turn on that class in fury and vengeance and destroy it" (p. 199). Shelley, then, represents both her anxiety and her sympathy in the monster.

Similarly, Lee Sterrenberg relates the monster to imagery of the monstrous in contemporary criticism of the French Revolution, implying that

Shelley uses him to represent the Revolution, or the Jacobins, in critical terms.<sup>30</sup> Sterrenberg persuades us that the monster may well embody the force of revolution by documenting his argument with a number of uncanny parallels in British anti-Jacobin texts. For him, this reading evidences early signs of Shelley's later political conservatism; he argues that she "retains the monster metaphor, but purges it of virtually all reference to collective movements. Her monster metaphor explains the coming of a domestic tragedy. Political revolution has been replaced by a parricidal rebellion within the family."<sup>31</sup> Sterrenberg's seemingly inflexible division of public from private life obscures for him the depth and multiplicity of the monster's meanings. This is not a case of either/or. To represent the "Jacobin monster" in domestic and psychological terms is not to exclude the political, but to enlarge it.<sup>32</sup>

Sterrenberg's and O'Flinn's interpretations of the monster stress the political dimension of the crowd, the threat that it poses to social stability when it chooses violence to express its rebellion. But as Benjamin has taught us to see, the nineteenth-century crowd invokes increasingly not revolution but something else—the marketplace: "Die Menge is der Schleier, durch den hindurch dem Flaneur die gewohnte Stadt als Phantasmagorie winkt. . . . Im Flaneur begibt sich die Intelligenz auf den Markt. Wie sie meint, um ihn anzusehen, und in Wahrheit doch schon, um einen Käufer zu finden" ("The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the *flâneur* like a phantasmagoria. . . . In the *flâneur* the intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer").<sup>33</sup> Benjamin is writing of a different crowd, that of Paris at mid-century, but it is no less a crowd in which revolutionary threat accompanies commercial promise. What Shelley's *Frankenstein* recognizes is that this promise is itself threatening: at best unsettling, at worst lethal. In her sympathetic presentation of the monster, it is clear that she does not fool herself into thinking she is a *flâneur*, looking without participating. Just before writing *Frankenstein* she was catapulted into a new role as wife (in function, if not in name) and mother; her practical life during those months was an uneasy compromise between domesticity and improvised bohemianism. If she was looking at any group without participating, it was the group of male intellectuals to whom she was a willing listener.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, her position seems closest to that of her monster when he is peering longingly through the chink in the wall of the house occupied by the De Lacey family, where books are read and duties shared in a kind of utopian community atmosphere.<sup>35</sup> Mary Shelley writes from two positions at once: that of the extraordinary woman, Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, female intellectual, and that of the feminine crowd, consumers rather than revolutionaries, uncritical readers (and writers) of "enervating" novels, the marketplace for kitsch.

Benjamin, in the passage I quoted above, makes a firm distinction between the *flâneur* (*die Intelligenz*) and the crowd (*der Markt*). Something uncanny is happening when that clear distinction no longer holds; when the market has invaded and disoriented *die Intelligenz*, so that the two no longer are clearly divided; when a voice speaks from the crowd and is, unexpectedly, *die Intelligenz*. Both Coleridge and Shelley are writing in these works about something they do not clearly understand, which means that repression is an important component of their writing.<sup>36</sup> *Frankenstein*, I have been suggesting, may be read as a response to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” that takes up its terms and splits them: on the one hand the monster gives sympathetic voice to the monstrous woman who is in the displaced center of Coleridge’s poem; on the other hand both monsters represent the fearful power of an invading crowd.

To read those monsters as kitsch is to see them as effects not only of the psychic uncanny, but also, by extension, of what Lars Engle has called the political uncanny. Engle notes that “in the political uncanny . . . the edges of mental systems are felt as areas of threat.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, kitsch is at the edge of art, unsettling its categories of value and larger cultural meanings, challenging its relation to the marketplace and to its audiences. Engle later concludes that representations of the uncanny may be agents of political change.<sup>38</sup> Kitsch itself, however, remains in an uneasy place on the margin. A fuller understanding of it may require changes in our culture that we can now only hesitatingly apprehend.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 144–54. I would like to thank Lorrie Goldensohn for her astute response to an earlier version of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Although many readers will be familiar with Freud’s argument, I repeat it here for the sake of clarity. His essay on the uncanny has proven a nexus for a growing body of criticism. Lars Engle cites a number of key works in “The Political Uncanny: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer,” *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (Fall 1989), 101–27. See also Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1987); Helen McNeil, “Elizabeth Bishop,” in *Voices and Visions*, ed. Helen Vendler (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 395–425; and Elisabeth Bronfen, “Risky Resemblances: On Repetition, Mourning, and Representation,” forthcoming in *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen.

<sup>3</sup> As Pawel Beylin has put it, “Der Kitsch erfüllt der Kunst gegenüber die Rolle des platonischen Spiegelbildes des Spiegelbildes” (p. 398; “Kitsch plays the role for art of the platonic mirror image of the mirror image”). By invoking Plato’s mirror, Beylin locates authenticity solidly with “art.” See Pawel Beylin, “Der Kitsch als ästhe-

tische und ausserästhetische Erscheinung," in *Die nicht mehr schönen Künste: Grenzphänomene des Ästhetischen*, ed. H. R. Jauss (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1968), pp. 392–406. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

I have advanced my argument here about kitsch and domesticity in a different context in "Libraries, Kitch and Gender in *Madame Bovary*," *L'Esprit créateur*, 28 (Spring 1988), 55–66. My interest in kitsch was stimulated by a seminar, the proceedings of which have appeared in "On Kitch," *Salmagundi*, 85–86 (Winter–Spring 1990), 197–312.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3. In Adorno's formulation, "Eines der Momente von Kitsch, die als Definition sich anbieten, wäre die Vortäuschung nicht vorhandener Gefühle und damit deren Neutralisierung sowohl wie die des ästhetischen Phänomens. Kitch wäre die Kunst, die nicht ernst genommen werden kann oder will und die doch durch ihr Erscheinen ästhetischen Ernst postuliert" (p. 466; "One of kitsch's impulses that might be taken as a definition is the false display—and thereby also the neutralizing—of feelings that do not really exist, with the result that the esthetic phenomenon itself is neutralized as well. Kitch can be seen as art that cannot and would not be taken seriously, but that nevertheless appears to postulate esthetic seriousness"). Kitch is no more a permanent state, however, than art: "Was Kunst war, kann Kitch werden" (p. 467; "What was once art can become kitsch"). Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> This is an aspect of kitsch spelled out by Hermann Broch and alluded to by Adorno. See Hermann Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitch," *Kitch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1969), pp. 49–76.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 370, 372. Subsequent citations will refer to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 194. Coleridge's italics.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 116. McFarland cites other sources on this point.

<sup>9</sup> Mario D'Avunzo gives the most complete interpretation of her as the Whore of Babylon, but it is grounded in a limited reading of the poem as a story of Christian redemption. For D'Avunzo, in the poem as in the Bible, "faithlessness to God is . . . put in terms of sexual infidelity" (p. 185). Codified gender is not in question. See Mario D'Avunzo, "'Her looks were free': The Ancient Mariner and the Harlot," *English Language Notes*, 17, No. 3 (1980), 185–89. Compare Elinor Shaffer's treatment of the biblical resonances of the two women in "*Kubla Khan*" and *The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 103 and 325n.

<sup>10</sup> McFarland quotes several potent nightmares of Coleridge that corroborate a reading of LIFE-IN-DEATH as prostitute/mother.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 114–15.

<sup>12</sup> "Her lips are red with provocation and the blood of her victims. She is all health and all disease. She is a masque of the red death, a Medusa who turns men to

stone . . . Perhaps this is heaven's mother, who comes when called. She is the vampire who haunts men's dreams." Camille Paglia, "Sexual Personae," in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,"* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 104. See also James B. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981), pp. 155, 157.

<sup>13</sup> Arden Reed, *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983). For Reed, *rime* signifies not simply poetry, but language, or more precisely, writing. Thus in a work that ostensibly privileges speech and presence, the title announces a Derridean deferral of the transcendent meaning presence entails (p. 178). The double meaning of *locks* underscores Reed's argument, since the object of recurrent desire is then also a trap enforcing a pattern of repetition.

<sup>14</sup> D'Avunzo, p. 186.

<sup>15</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), p. 279.

<sup>17</sup> Lowes, pp. 279–80.

<sup>18</sup> Lowes, p. 561n.

<sup>19</sup> Twitchell makes a related argument about Coleridge's use of vampire elements: originally, "Coleridge was quite taken by the recent successes of German vampire poems intended to capitalize on what he thought was a growing vogue," but his interest in the "vampire *qua* vampire" waned (or was suppressed) in the course of revisions (p. 156).

<sup>20</sup> Paul Magnuson quotes this phrase from Wordsworth in the context of his criticism of the "gothic horror" stanzas from the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." See Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), pp. 51–52. Percy Shelley's preface appears in Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1831; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 13–14.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted, respectively, from: unsigned review, *Analytical Review*, December 1798; Robert Southey, *Critical Review*, October 1798; and private opinion, Francis Jeffrey, in a letter dated 17 March 1799. All are in J. R. de J. Jackson, ed., *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 53, 54, and 60.

<sup>22</sup> On the connection between the Gothic mode and feminine culture, see Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 77–78; Juliann E. Fleenor, Introduction, *The Female Gothic* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1983), pp. 3–30; Mary K. Patterson Thornburg, *The Monster in the Mirror: Gender and the Sentimental/Gothic Myth in Frankenstein* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987). Perhaps no more needs to be said beyond the lines quoted by Elizabeth Napier from a 1798 journal: "O quit this trade, exert your proper skill, / Resume the needle, and lay down the quill." Elizabeth Napier, *The Failure of Gothic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. vii.

<sup>23</sup> William Veeder has made the most detailed and energetic case for the female

characters' complexity; he succeeds in demonstrating the text's intricacy, if not that of the characters. See William Veeder, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Veeder repeatedly discusses violence and the family in *Frankenstein*. See, for example, pp. 109–11. Kate Ellis makes the original, coherent case that the novel is an indictment of the bourgeois family, in "Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family," in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, pp. 123–42. This is an argument that Anne Mellor takes up and develops forcefully in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), especially pp. 44, 86, 125–26, and 213–18. Mellor's central point is that Mary Shelley fantasized a family on the working-class, egalitarian model.

<sup>25</sup> See Margaret Homans's astute reading of *Frankenstein*: "the predicament of Frankenstein . . . is that of the son in Lacan's revision of the Freudian oedipal crisis. In flight from the body of the mother forbidden by the father, a maternal body that he sees as dead in his urgency to escape it and to enter a paternal order constituted of its distance from the mother, the son seeks figurations that will at once make restitution for the mother and confirm her death and absence by substituting for her figures that are under his control," in *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 107.

<sup>26</sup> See Andrew Griffin, "Fire and Ice in *Frankenstein*," in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, pp. 49–78. Griffin calls the bonfire "one last grand offering in his year-long series of love-gifts of fuel" (pp. 68–69).

<sup>27</sup> But see on this subject the illuminating discussion by Paul Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), especially pp. 128–32. The issues of ethical responsibility addressed by Cantor go beyond the scope of this essay, but are nonetheless closely related to the problems of esthetic hierarchy discussed here. Clearly the issues of guilt and responsibility are another major point of relation between *Frankenstein* and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

<sup>28</sup> For more discussion of the relations between kitsch and death, see my *Kitsch and Culture: The Dance of Death in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Graphic Arts* (New York: Garland Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> Paul O'Flinn, "Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*," *Literature and History*, 9, No. 2 (1983), 199–213. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically in the text. See also Ronald Paulson, "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution," *ELH*, 48, No. 3 (1981), 532–54. Paulson also sees the monster as a representation of revolution, but he locates it in a Gothic tradition that tended to express the "negative, dark side" of the political context. Chris Baldick has mediated deftly among different readings of the monster, including the "monstrosity" of the Gothic novel and of the French Revolution as class uprising. He argues that the "Frankenstein myth" was born out of an "overlapping of literary and political discourses" (p. 17). See Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). See also Martin Tropp, *Mary Shelley's Monster* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), for a treatment of the monster as a symbol of modern technology.



<sup>30</sup> Lee Sterrenberg, "Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*," in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, pp. 143–71.

<sup>31</sup> Sterrenberg, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup> Sterrenberg himself admits Shelley's unusual achievement: "The Monster . . . is the victim of Burkean circumstances: he is resurrected from the grave. He is also the victim of circumstances a republican might single out: he is oppressed and misused by the social orders above him. Mary Shelley is able to represent the consequences of these influences subjectively, through the eyes of a victim who is also a rebel. This is a new perspective" (pp. 165–66).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX Jahrhunderts," *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 179; "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 156. *Intelligenz* is broader and richer in meaning than *intelligentsia*.

<sup>34</sup> In the famous sentence from her Introduction, "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener" (p. 8). Compare this with "Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a keyhole—what to see I forget—something very shocking and wrong of course" (Introduction, p. 7).

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Goodman first pointed out this poignant comparison to me. Anne Mellor has argued that the De Lacey's provide a contrast to the Frankenstein's failed family structure; they are "an archetype of the egalitarian, benevolent, and mutually loving nuclear family" (pp. 229–30). See Anne K. Mellor, "The Female in *Frankenstein*," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 220–32. Others have been more exacting, noting that the De Lacey family has no mother and that there is unsettling matter in the colonialist relation to the Turkish Safie. Nevertheless, the convergence of mutual affection, work, singing, and reading makes the De Lacey's hearth resonate with meaning.

<sup>36</sup> See Lars Engle: "The *Unheimlich* lives at the juncture of the will to interpret and the fear of what will be revealed" (p. 113).

<sup>37</sup> Engle, p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> Engle suggests that "fictive moments of *Unheimlichkeit* may serve as possible indices of a future in which the familiar will be transformed into the strange and threatening; but also . . . such moments may yield a future in which the new and uncanny may become at last the familiar, the accepted, the *heimlich*, may generate the as-yet-ungrasped way of living that will make all both utterly different and acceptable" (p. 123).