

FRANKENSTEIN, GENDER, AND MOTHER NATURE

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On 16 June 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin gave birth to one of the enduring myths of modern civilization, the narrative of the scientist who single-handedly creates a new species, a humanoid form that need not die. In her novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Victor Frankenstein robs both cemeteries and slaughterhouses in order to suture together a creature composed of dead animal and human body parts, a creature he then animates with the “spark of being” (p. 41). In doing so, he claims he has renewed life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. Victor thus realizes the age-old wish of humankind to transcend mortality, to become a god. And like Prometheus, who in ancient myth both shapes the human species out of clay and then steals fire from the Olympian gods to give to man, Victor expects to be revered, even worshipped.

But in his hubristic quest to become God, to create an immortal species, Victor constructs a creature that eventually destroys his wife, his best friend, and his baby brother, so exhausting Victor that he dies at an early age. Mary Shelley’s novel has thus become the paradigm for every scientific effort to harness the uncontrollable powers of Nature and the unintended consequences that those efforts have produced, be they nuclear fission, genetic engineering, stem cell cloning, or bioterrorism. The popular conflation of the scientist *with* his creation—such that “Frankenstein” is as often the name of the creature as of his maker—only points to a profound understanding of Mary’s novel in which Victor finally becomes as filled with hatred, revenge, and the desire to destroy as the creature he hunts across the Arctic wastes. The novel implicitly suggests an alternative. Had Victor Frankenstein taken responsibility for his creation, had he loved, nurtured, and disciplined his creature, he might have created the superior species of which he dreamed.

How did the eighteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Shelley) come to write a tale so prescient of modern science? Two years earlier, on 28 July 1814, Mary had left her home in London to go to France with the married poet Percy Shelley. Seven months later she gave birth prematurely to a baby girl, called Clara, who lived only two weeks, after

which she had a recurrent dream that her little baby came to life again, that it had only been cold, and that she rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Immediately pregnant again, Mary gave birth to her son William on 24 January 1816. Four months later Mary, Percy, and her stepsister Claire left England to join Claire's new lover, Lord Byron, and his doctor, John William Polidori, in Geneva. Kept indoors by the coldest summer in a century following the eruption of the volcano Tambora in the Indonesian archipelago in April 1815 (which threw so much debris into the stratosphere that the sun was literally blocked out across India, Europe, and North America), reading ghost stories for their amusement, the four friends decided on 16 June 1816 to have a contest to see who could write the most frightening story.

That night Mary had the “waking dream” or reverie that provided the germ of *Frankenstein*. Born from Mary's own deepest pregnancy anxieties (What if I give birth to a monster? Could I ever wish to kill my own child?), her novel brilliantly explores what happens when a man attempts to have a baby without a woman (Victor Frankenstein immediately abandons his creature); why an abandoned and unloved creature becomes a monster; the predictable consequences of her day's cutting-edge research in chemistry, physics, and electricity (most notably the experiments conducted by Erasmus Darwin [1731–1802], Humphry Davy [1778–1829], and Luigi Galvani [1737–1798]); and the violent aftermath of the French Revolution. Mary drew psychologically on her own childhood experiences of isolation and abandonment after her mother's death in childbirth and her father's remarriage to a hostile stepmother to articulate the creature's overwhelming desire for a family, a mate of his own, and the consequences of his violent anger when he is rejected by all whom he approaches, even an innocent young boy, William Frankenstein (modeled on William Shelley), and then his maker. By including an image of the murder of her own son, William, in the novel, Mary articulated her deepest fear that an unloved (and psychologically abused) child, such as she herself had been, could become an unloving, abusive mother, even a murdering monster.

Given Mary's parentage, it is unsurprising that gendered constructions of the universe are everywhere apparent in *Frankenstein*: for example, Victor's identification of Nature as female—“I pursued nature to *her* hiding places” (p. 38, emphasis added). Victor's scientific and technological exploitation of female Nature is only one way in which the novel consistently represents the female as passive and able to be possessed, the willing receptacle of male desire. Victor's usurpation of the natural mode of human reproduction implies a kind of destruction of the female. We see this

destruction erupt symbolically in his nightmare following the animation of his creature: while in his embrace, Elizabeth, his bride-to-be, is transformed into the corpse of his dead mother—"a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" (p. 43). By stealing the female's control over natural reproduction, Victor has eliminated the female's primary biological function and source of cultural power. Indeed, as a male scientist who creates a male creature, Victor eliminates the biological necessity for females at all. One of the deepest horrors of this novel is his implicit goal of creating a society for men only: Victor's creature is male; he refuses to create a female; there is no reason why the race of immortal beings he hopes to propagate should not be exclusively male.

On the cultural and social level, Victor's scientific project—to become the sole creator of a superior human being—supports a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality. Victor's nineteenth-century Genevan society is founded on a rigid division of sex roles: men inhabit the public sphere, women are relegated to the private or domestic sphere. The men work outside the home, as public servants (Alphonse Frankenstein), as scientists (Victor), as merchants (Henry Clerval and his father), and as explorers (Walton). The women are confined to the home, kept either as a kind of pet (Victor "loved to tend on" Elizabeth "as ... on a favourite animal" [p. 18]) or as housewives, childcare providers, and nurses (Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth, Margaret Saville) or as servants (Justine Moritz).

As a consequence of this division, public intellectual activity is segregated from private emotional activity: Victor cannot work and love at the same time. He cannot feel empathy for his creature and chooses to work with large body pieces because doing so is easier and faster, despite the fact that his creature will be a deformed giant. And he remains so self-absorbed that he cannot imagine his creature might threaten someone other than himself on his wedding night. The separation of the sphere of public (masculine) power from the sphere of private (feminine) affection also causes the destruction of most of the women in the novel. Caroline Beaufort dies from scarlet fever caught when she alone volunteers to nurse the contagious Elizabeth. Justine, unable to prove her innocence in the death of William, is condemned to death by Victor's refusal to take responsibility for his creature's actions. And Elizabeth is murdered on her wedding night. The novel offers an alternative to this gendered division of labor in the egalitarian relationships in the De Lacey family, where brother and sister together share the duties of supporting their father, and Safie (an independent woman based on Mary Shelley's feminist mother, Mary Wollstonecraft) is welcomed as Felix's partner. But this ideal family is ripped out of the novel

when the creature enters their household, suggesting that Mary herself did not think such an ideal family could prosper in her time.

Why does Victor finally refuse to create a mate for his creature, an Eve for his Adam, after having promised to do so? He rationalizes his decision to destroy the half-formed female creature:

I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the *dæmon* thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? (p. 139)

What does Victor truly fear that causes him to rip up his half-finished female creature? First, he is afraid that this female will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature. Like French Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) natural man, she might refuse to comply with a social contract made by another person before her birth—namely, between the creature and Victor himself; she might assert the revolutionary right to determine her own existence. A second fear is that her uninhibited female desires might be sadistic: Victor imagines a female creature “ten thousand times” more evil than her mate, who would “delight” in murder for its own sake. Third, he fears that his female creature will be uglier than his male creature, so much so that even the male will turn from her in disgust. Fourth, he fears that she will prefer to mate with ordinary human males; implicit here is Frankenstein's horror that, given this female creature's gigantic strength, she would have the ability to seize and even rape a man she might choose. And, finally, he is

afraid of her reproductive powers, her capacity to generate an entire race of similar creatures.

What Victor truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life and her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary), and able to propagate at will can only appear monstrously ugly, even evil, to him because she defies the sexist aesthetic that insists that women should be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing but available only to their lawful husbands. Horrified by this image of uninhibited female sexual desire and power, Victor violently reasserts a male control over the female body, penetrating and mutilating the female creature in an image that suggests a violent rape: “trembling with passion, [I] tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged” (p. 140). The next morning, when he returns to the scene, “the remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (p. 143).

However, in Mary’s feminist novel, Victor’s efforts to control and even to eliminate female sexuality altogether is portrayed not only as horrifying and finally unattainable but also as self-destructive. For Nature is not the passive, inert, or “dead” matter that he imagines. Victor assumes that he can violate Nature and pursue her to her hiding places with impunity. But Mother Nature both resists and revenges herself upon his attempts. During his research, Nature denies to Victor Frankenstein both mental and physical health: “Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree” (p. 41). When he decides to create a second creature and again defy natural reproduction, his mental illness returns: “[E]very word that I spoke in allusion to it caused my lips to quiver, and my heart to palpitate. ... [M]y spirits became unequal; I grew restless and nervous” (pp. 134, 138). Finally, Victor’s obsession with destroying his male creature exposes him to such mental and physical fatigue that he dies of natural causes at the age of twenty-five.

Appropriately, Nature prevents Victor from constructing a normal human being: his unnatural method of reproduction spawns an unnatural being, a freak of gigantic stature, watery eyes, shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. His creature’s physiognomy then causes Victor’s revulsion from his child-invention and sets in motion the series of events that finally produces the monster that destroys his family, friends, and self.

Moreover, Nature pursues Victor with the very electricity, the “spark of being,” that he has stolen: lightning, thunder, and rain rage around him as he works. Rain pours down on the “dreary night of November” on which he completes his experiment (p. 41). When he returns to Geneva,

he glimpses his creature on the Alps through a violent storm and flash of lightning. After destroying the female creature, he sets sail to dispose of the remains in the ocean and is caught up by a fierce wind and high waves that portend his own death—"I looked upon the sea, it was to be my grave" (p. 144). Victor ends his life in the arctic regions, surrounded by the ice, the aurora borealis, and the electromagnetic field of the North Pole. The novel's atmospheric effects, which most readers have dismissed as the traditional trappings of gothic fiction, in fact manifest the power of Nature to punish those who transgress her boundaries. The elemental forces that Victor has released pursue him to his hiding places, raging around him like the female spirits of vengeance, the Furies of Greek drama.

Mary's novel not only portrays the penalties of violating Nature but also celebrates an all-creating Nature that is loved and revered by human beings. Those characters capable of feeling the beauties of Nature are rewarded with physical and mental health. Henry Clerval's relationship to Nature, for example, represents one moral touchstone in the novel. Because he "loved with ardour" "the scenery of external nature" (p. 132), he is endowed with a generous sympathy, a vivid imagination, a sensitive intelligence, and an unbounded capacity for devoted friendship. And it is no accident that the only member of the Frankenstein family still alive at the end of the novel is Ernest, who rejects the career of lawyer to become instead a farmer, one who must live in harmony and cooperation with the forces of Nature, one who lives "a very healthy happy life; and ... the most beneficial profession of any" (p. 48).

As *Frankenstein* finally shows, an unmothered child, like a scientific experiment that is performed without consideration of its probable or even its unintended results and that radically changes the natural order, can become a monster, one capable of destroying its maker. The novel implicitly endorses instead a science that seeks to understand rather than to change the workings of Mother Nature. Mary's novel thus resonates powerfully with the ethical problems inherent in the most recent advances in genetics: the introduction of germ-line engineering through CRISPR-Cas9 techniques of DNA alteration and the current scientific possibility of producing what Victor Frankenstein dreamed of, a superhuman "designer baby." At the same time, the novel vividly illustrates the terrifying ramifications and unintended consequences of such attempts to "improve" the human species.

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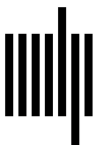
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