Frankenstein, Gender, and Mother Nature

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Taken from Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*: *Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds* (pp. 344-352). Kindle Edition.

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, 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….

…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….

… 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.