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Mary Shelley, Victor Frankenstein, and the Powers of Creation

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When Mary Shelley referred to her first novel, *Frankenstein*, as "my hideous progeny,"[1] she could not have comprehended the full significance of her words. For while her phrase eloquently compares her creation of the text with Victor Frankenstein's creation of the monster, we, reading the novel today, are witness to the "hideous progeny" to which her own text has given rise. Version after version has sprung forth, focusing on different aspects of her story, leading to such productions as the famous 1931 Boris Karloff film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1973) and the recent *Edward Scissorhands*. In the past fifteen or twenty years, however, *Frankenstein* has been reborn not simply in new versions but to a new life altogether, in the illumination of feminist criticism. While the Frankenstein story has yielded a rich tradition in the world of science-fiction and fantasies of horror, the text takes on a new dimension when we consider the significance of the fact that it was written by a woman. For, fundamentally, *Frankenstein* is the story of a man who creates a world in which women are unnecessary. The very function of the body that gives women a place in this world, in Mary Shelley's world, is appropriated by a man. Shelley emphasizes the significance of this project as a step towards rendering women unnecessary in two distinct ways. First and foremost is her characterization of Victor Frankenstein--his unhealthy attitudes toward women, his resistance to understanding women's biology, his refusal to create a female monster. Yet she also frames his story in that of Robert Walton, whose only tie with a woman is with his sister, and who, with a

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[1]Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein,* p. xii. All future references to this book will be included in the text.

group of men, strives to overpower nature and establish a new society at the North Pole. What Shelley creates, then, is a text that speaks to issues of men's control of women, the use of science to control nature, and the role of human biology in all of this.

Throughout history, the issue of reproduction has played an integral role in the ways in which men and women relate to one another. Procreation has always been the one absolutely essential function of our species; at the same time, it has brought with it varying degrees of enjoyment, and has become an issue of power balances. While reproduction depends upon the union of a man and a woman, it also accentuates the differences that separate male and female. The physical structure of our biology portrays different aspects of power; in the sexual act, man is the active penetrator of woman, the passive penetrated, yet it is the woman's body that builds, nurtures, and produces a human being. It is important to consider the constants of the process of reproduction--the sexual act itself, for example--in the context of our steadily changing knowledge and perception of the human body and how it works. I am examining here the idea of men's lack of understanding of the process of reproduction--both in a historical sense of a time when men simply did not understand the mechanics of conception, and in a social, more modern sense of refusing to understand it.

The idea behind this is not to belittle men's intelligence or capabilities of perception. The reason I start with this gap in men's consciousness is because of the link between issues of reproduction and the inclination in men to overpower nature. I will also consider how this conflict becomes an issue of control that oppresses and

victimizes women. These are the concepts which shape my reading of *Frankenstein*. These were issues that meant something to Mary Shelley. She and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, were both affected by double standards of sexuality in and out of marriage, both bore illegitimate children, both suffered complications in childbirth and unusual circumstances in raising children. I will treat the text by considering the historical/theoretical issues of reproduction and the relevant biographical aspects of Shelley's life.

I am using what Elaine Showalter has termed a 'gynocritical' approach.[2] This way of examining a text focuses on the woman as writer, and the significance of her gender in her work. Because of the traditional male domination of both literature and criticism, this approach is viable whether a woman writes an overtly political work, like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, or a superficially innocuous one, like Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." This is true because, as one so often discovers in examining the lives of women throughout history, the personal is political; for a woman simply to pick up a pen is a political act. Showalter emphasizes this in reference to a woman artist intimately involved with a male artist: "When we understand how susceptible women writers have always been to the aesthetic standards and values of the male tradition, and to male approval and validation, we can appreciate the complexity of a marriage between artists."[3] Often, gynocriticism incorporates a fair

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[2] Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," in Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism*, pp. 125-143.

[3] Showalter, p. 132.

amount of biographical material, for key to gynocriticism is understanding the writer as a woman and the woman as a writer.

In taking this approach to Mary Shelley's novel, I am bringing with it a good deal of non-literary feminist theory that speaks about the role biology and, specifically, reproduction plays in the way in which relationships between men and women are structured. I raise these issues in relation to the novel because I feel they are already there, and while I can't know what Shelley intended with every word, I find that the issues she raises in the text are issues that have also played an important role in relations between men and women. I will, therefore, examine the legacy of tension between men and women regarding procreation and creativity, and use this framework to attempt to illuminate, through a close reading of the text, the intentions and motivations of Victor Frankenstein and, when possible, those of Mary Shelley. I will explore theories of woman-centered societies turning into male-centered ones, in the works of Amaury de Riencourt and Marilyn French, as well as ways in which this shift related to an increase in men's understanding of their role in the reproductive process. I will also draw on theories focusing on the relationship between procreativity and creativity, in the work of Sherry Ortner and Mary O'Brien. The process of human reproduction carries with it issues of power and politics. The fact that when a man and a woman have sex the woman can get pregnant and the man cannot has always had an impact on the way in which sexual relations between men and women have been handled and perceived. Traditionally, women were supposed to be virgins when they married and then only have sex with their husbands; for men,

the rules are a great deal looser. The logic behind these codes of behavior works this way: if a woman does not follow these rules and becomes pregnant, how will anyone know who the father is? Maternity is never in question; paternity always can be. Men can parent children and never know it; women can't.

Mary Shelley knew all of this. Both she and her mother had had to confront the double standard surrounding pre-marital sexuality for women; both had borne children out of wedlock. While she never knew her mother, Shelley read all of her works. It would have been impossible for Shelley to read *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* or *Maria; or, the Wrongs of Woman* and not have some sense of the struggles facing both her and her mother as women in society. And, of course, her own experience of life as a woman would have been sufficient to make her aware of the struggles her gender had to endure. There are aspects of Shelley's personal life that appear significant to the text of *Frankenstein*. She was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, both well-known political radicals of their time. Her mother died following complications of Shelley's birth, leaving her infant daughter, Godwin, and Fanny Imlay, the illegitimate child of Wollstonecraft's relationship with Gilbert Imlay, an American soldier. Godwin later remarried, but he and his daughter remained extremely close until her elopement with Percy Shelley, when she was sixteen; at this point, Godwin broke off all contact with her. Before beginning *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley had already given birth to two illegitimate children by Percy, the first of whom had died only two weeks after her birth, without ever being named. These and other facts offer interesting possibilities for

biographical readings of the text as well as insights into what some of Shelley's intentions may have been. The issues *Frankenstein* raises for me have to do with the fact that it was written by a woman who was cognizant, as all women are forced to be on some level, of the situation of her gender. While at times in the text Shelley directly takes issue with ideas of her father and her husband, the underlying theme of *Frankenstein* concerns the relations between the sexes.

Victor Frankenstein's refusal to understand human reproduction and his determination to overpower and violate nature takes us to a conflict that has been at the core of relationships between men and women for centuries. The process of human reproduction has not always been clearly understood. The act of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman and the birth of a child nine months later was not an immediately recognized cause and effect relationship. In *The House of the Double Axe*, Agnes Carr Vaughan finds that this shift in consciousness as to the reproductive system to have occurred toward the end of the Minoan period.[4] Throughout history, this issue has played a significant role in the way men and women relate to one another, and in the development of power structures surrounding their interaction.

For some time, civilizations revolved around the idea of a Great Mother. Religion often grows from a desire to understand our origin, and the Great Mother was the source of all creation. In *Sex and Power in History*, Amaury de Riencourt explains the world of which primitive man was attempting to make sense: "[man] stood in

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[4] Agnes Carr Vaughan, *The House of the Double Axe*, p. 198.

awe of the mysteries of gestation and childbirth because they were *natural* manifestations of creative power."[5] Women's biological processes were not understood by men, and so they were attributed to some sort of magical power allotted to women by nature. Riencourt continues: "The weird menstrual cycle, the flow of blood, the magical birth of new life, made woman part of those forces of nature that [primitive man] did not understand and feared, and the necessary intermediary...between man and nature."[6] Women and nature were inextricably tied, colluders in a system men didn't understand; this system resulted in children, to whom men were unsure of their connection.

Riencourt notes the difference in biological processes between men and women that perpetuated this lack of understanding. Before this time, according to Riencourt, "Apparently, *men had no part in the creation of new life*. It was female magic and the reincarnation of ancestral spirit that thrust new life into the woman's womb, not man's semen."[7] The inability to understand reproduction left men completely alienated from the entire process. Of course, this had a great impact in terms of more than biology. Men's sense of parentage was significantly limited; "father" pertained mostly to legal and social situations. Kinship ties were matrilineal. M. Eliade incorporates cognizance of the psychological effects of the situation in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*: "We might say in a sense *that man*

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5 Amaury de Riencourt, *Sex and Power in History*, p. 17.
6 ibid.
7 Riencourt, p. 29.

was not yet born, that he did not yet realize that he belonged wholly to the biological species he represented."[8]

With these ideas behind her, Riencourt traces the evolution of the portrayal of the Great Mother in artwork in several examples of late-Bronze Age civilizations. She notes that in Minoan art, birth and growth are originally depicted as the Great Mother, able to give birth without aide, accompanied by her son, who demonstrated stages of growth. By late Minoan depictions, the child has been replaced by a male spouse. Construing this as significant in reference to male and female relations, Riencourt concludes: "There appears, therefore, to be a close connection between the disintegration of the female-oriented outlook and increasing knowledge of man's biological role in the procreating process."[9]

While Riencourt's analysis explains shifts in the thinking behind religion and art, Marilyn French takes this idea one step further. In *Beyond Power*, French depicts men's recognition of paternity as responsible for a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy. French contemplates the significance of men's biological role in reproduction to the men of a matricentric society. To French, it is logical that men's reaction would be one of increased demonstration of control, for "The male role can be interpreted as a controlling one: a 'shudder in the loins' was all that was required of him to procreate: the woman bore the entire burden after that."[10] Thus, the tables are turned; rather than women and nature acting together as co-

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[8] M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, quoted in Riencourt, p. 31.
[9] Riencourt, p. 31.
[10] Marilyn French, *Beyond Power*, p. 68.

conspirators in a plot to overpower men, men, in a moment of pleasure, can effect procreation of their genes while women, their incubators, must carry and nurture the unborn child.

According to French, this recognition gradually effected a male-superior, and then male-supremist attitude in formerly matricentric societies; this eventually worked its way into full-fledged patriarchy. French notes the beginnings of men's new sense of control: "Because women had for millennia been associated with nature, had been seen as having a special relation with it to which men were marginal, the new value gave men a centrality and power they had lacked."[11] In this way religious power was shifted from a male to a female god, and this in turn enabled men to assert male supremist ideas in terms of the powers of their deity. Patriarchy did not merely shift matricentric ideas--it completely reversed them. "Women's generative processes, once seen as superior to men's, were degraded, diminished precisely because of their supposed closeness to nature."[12]

French's analysis offers insights into precisely the issues that plague Victor Frankenstein. Frustrated with the tendency to lump together under 'male-dominated society' distinctly structured cultures that either value men over women, or focus on male domination of women, or use a strictly patriarchal system, French proposes a new method of classification. "A more useful standard in describing varied societies might be an examination of the kinds and degree of controls exerted over nature. It is likely that the more

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11 French, p. 69.
12 ibid.

highly control is valued in a given society, the greater will be its regard for males and the more intense will be its diminishment of females."[13] Clearly, Victor's need to dominate nature is part of a long tradition of men before him.

It is easy to turn from French's analysis to the work of Eva Keuls. In *The Reign of the Phallus*, Keuls discusses the culture of ancient Athens, the civilization which many regard as the first full-fledged patriarchy of which we have record. Keuls points to the 'phallocracy' of that society, which serves as a basis for our own culture. It is interesting to examine the ideas circulated among ancient Greeks in the context of Riencourt and French's theses.

Much of Athenian culture derived from belief in the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. Many myths were created, in which these deities played significant roles, and by which all sorts of details of daily life were explained. The king of these gods was Zeus, well known for his lightning bolt and his insatiable lust. As a result of his relentless sexual pursuit of whomever struck his fancy, Zeus wound up fathering a great many children. Yet in the world of mythology, rules of parentage were not so strict in their application of gender-specific roles as dictated by biology. Zeus' daughter Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom, burst fully armed from Zeus' head one afternoon. Another feat of male pregnancy resulted in the birth of Dionysus, the god of wine. In this story, Zeus impregnated a mortal woman, Semele. Far along in her pregnancy, Zeus destroyed her with his thunderbolt, removed the fetus, and sewed it into his own thigh;

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[13] French, p. 71.

from there, Dionysus was born. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, a series of three plays that some critics say portrays the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, Apollo, god of the sun, refers directly to the issue of parentage. In the trial of Orestes, who has killed his mother out of revenge for her murder of his father, Apollo argues against Athena in Orestes' defense:

> The mother is no parent of that which is called
> her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed
> that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she
> preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere.[14]

He then uses Athena's birth as his evidence against her.

The issue of biology works its way into relations between the sexes from other angles as well. In "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" Sherry Ortner attempts to decipher why women are universally subordinated. Starting with what anthropologists classify as a "nature versus culture" tension in most societies, Ortner applies this classification to issues of gender. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, Ortner discusses physiological reasons why women have, throughout history, been considered closer to nature than men. These ideas stem mainly from women's biological processes of menstruation and childbirth; the word menstruation itself arose out of the connection between a woman's menstrual cycle and the phases of the moon. In this dichotomy, then, men are seen as more related to culture. Ortner cites as reasoning behind this the idea of different types of creation; while women create and are continued through the functions of their own bodies, men must create objects, systems--

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[14] Aeschylus, *Oresteia,* translated by Richmond Lattimore, p. 158.

culture--in order to be immortalized. Yet how does this in itself lead to the devaluation of women? To understand that we must understand the relationship between nature and culture. Nature is what we find around us, and culture is what we construct in order to control nature. Culture orders nature, fits it into systems so that nature can no longer threaten us. Fitting this idea together with French's definition of a woman-devaluing society as one which works to overpower nature, and the data supporting the idea that it is women's physiology that leads to their equation with nature, it is easy to understand how women's biology is linked to their oppression.

Whether one accepts the idea of massive power shifts from women to men relating directly to increased cognizance of parentage or not, there is no getting around the fact that human reproduction has been an issue with which men and women have had to deal for as long as they have been dealing with one another. Yet how does this issue play a part in structures within our society, or Mary Shelley's? Even in the early nineteenth century, men and women were aware of the biological processes affecting conception and child birth. Work by Riencourt, French and Ortner offers some explanation as to why this issue has created such tension and given way to such a struggle of power between men and women. And what we find in our and Shelley's society is that while circumstances have altered, while the facts of conception have become common knowledge, there persists what has changed on men's part from an inability to a refusal of understanding of the reproductive process, from the man who assumes his partner has taken care of birth control and so never

mentions it when they sleep together to the man who outwardly denies his paternity of a child. This is not to say that all men deny their role in procreation, but simply that all men have that option and all women do not. We can't pretend that the process of parentage is comparable in men and women; it isn't. And it is this difference in men and women's experience of parentage that has led to the complexity of the issue.

In *The Politics of Reproduction*, Mary O'Brien comments, "men's discovery of physiological paternity is the discovery *at the same time* of men's inclusion and exclusion from natural reproductive process."[15] While men are allowed freedom from the reproductive process, they are also forced from it. O'Brien delineates between what she terms the mother's reproductive consciousness, "a unity of consciousness and involuntary labor," and the father's paternity, "a unity of thought (specifically the knowledge of the relation between sexuality and childbirth) and action."[16] This action, which O'Brien sees as a way for men to "annul the alienation of their seed"[17] in the reproductive process, she terms "appropriation of the child."[18] The frustration to which O'Brien alludes for men forced to appropriate their own children in order to identify themselves as a parent fits neatly with Ortner's theory behind men's need to create outside of the family.

What we see in examining this heritage is the way in which the very process that men regarded in awe, that led men to elevate

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15 Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction*, p. 52.
16 ibid.
17 ibid.
18 ibid.

women to a position of power, eventually led to the diminishment of women. As men discovered their role in the reproductive process, they used that knowledge to change societal structures in order to wield power over women. Mary Shelley knew the significance of her role as childbearer, and this comes through in the actions of Victor Frankenstein.

The fact that Mary Shelley raises these issues in a novel--the fact that she writes a novel at all--adds another dimension to the issue of paternity and creativity. We will see that Shelley distances herself from her text and resists recognition for her work. These devices of Shelley's are common among women writers, especially those of Shelley's time, and emphasize the boldness involved in a woman calling herself a writer. One might think that Mary Shelley, "literary heiress," would be an exception; surely it would be all right, even expected, for the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft to claim the life of a writer. Apparently, thirteen years of having to answer for the creation of her first novel was enough for Mary Shelley to feel a need to apologize for it. In "The Madwoman in the Attic," Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the atmosphere surrounding nineteenth-century British women writers. Working neatly with Ortner's parallel between culture and men's need for creativity, the essay presents a world in which the male literary tradition stems specifically from a male desire for paternity. Gilbert and Gubar relate authorship to the uncertainty of biological paternity: "A man cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason, after all; that his child is his is in a sense a tale he tells himself to explain the

infant's existence."[19] Story telling, then, has become the vehicle for independent male procreation. Gerald Manley Hopkins, corresponding with a friend in 1866, wrote, "[the artist's] most essential quality is masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one's thoughts on paper".[20] In this context of male-dominated literature, one can imagine the difficulties involved in claiming an identity as a female author.

Let us now turn to the text itself. The 1818 edition of the novel is published anonymously. The 1831 edition begins with Mary Shelley's own introduction before reaching the "author's" preface, which she tells us was actually written by Percy. In her introduction, Mary Shelley explains how her novel came to be, as if defending the fact that she has written anything at all. She relates the now famous tale of the ghost story contest, providing a rationale behind her writing. She then further distances herself from her work by describing the scene that she dreamt of the hideous Monster hovering over his creator, and cites this dream as the basis for her tale. Mary Shelley herself refers, in her introduction, to Percy's encouragement of her writing. Yet both Mary and Percy repeatedly emphasize the baseness of prose as compared to poetry; one must wonder whether Percy would have encouraged Mary if she had wanted to write poetry. In letters surrounding the publication of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley fights for her recognition as the book's author but from a roundabout way that renders her only motive to

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19 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 5.
20 Hopkins quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, p. 3.

be freeing Percy from any embarrassment. In a letter to Sir Walter Scott of *Blackwood's* magazine, she refers to having seen mentioned in and edition of the journal that Percy was probably the work's author. She continues, "I am anxious to prevent your continuing in the mistake of supposing Mr. Shelley guilty of a juvenile attempt of mine."[21]

The short preface to the novel raises several issues, especially in light of the fact that it was written by Percy Shelley as if in the first person of Mary Shelley. This action of Percy's becomes quite intriguing in the context of O'Brien; Percy in effect appropriates Mary Shelley's creation, in which he had a limited involvement. He then proceeds to tell us, before we have a chance to decide for ourselves, what the novel is, and is not, about: "the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue...[no] inference [is] justly to be drawn...as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind." (xiv) He sprinkles among these claims of intention references to the superiority of poetry to prose and of the talents of Mary Shelley's companions (i.e., Percy and Byron) to her own. It is interesting to speculate as to why Percy Shelley felt the need to place these comments before the text of his young wife's first novel. It would seem likely that, given the radical reputation of Percy and both of Mary Shelley's parents, Percy would be concerned that his innocent, apolitical wife would have a chance for literary recognition separate from her controversial legacy. It would be interesting to know whether Percy Shelley actually found *Frankenstein* to be a

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[21] Betty T. Bennett, editor, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, p. 71.

political work or not. In many ways, his perception of the text as apolitical would make it more political in the context in which I am discussing it. Percy Shelley's failure to realize the political nature of a man seeking to appropriate the powers of human reproduction would neatly parallel Victor Frankenstein's blind spot to the reality of women's lives.

We then reach the text itself. We do not begin at the scene Mary Shelley dreamed of in Italy; in fact, that scene occurs some sixty pages later. We do not even begin by meeting Victor Frankenstein. The first person we encounter in the novel is Robert Walton, a frustrated explorer attempting to forge through previously unbroken waters to reach the north pole. Walton writes letters to his beloved sister, back in England with her family, and tells her of the trials of his expedition. He relates to her his desperate desire for a friend, a male companion with whom he can share his experience, his thoughts and fears. Walton then happens upon Victor Frankenstein, stranded upon an iceberg in pursuit of his monster. On a cursory level, Walton serves as a foreshadower of Victor. Walton ventures forth in a battle against nature. He and his crew are a colony of men, and Walton relates a need only for male companionship. His only connection with a female is with his sister. He believes himself to be intellectually superior to those around him. These are all details we soon learn to be integral to the tale of Victor Frankenstein's life, as he tells it to Walton. Yet their paralleled lives drastically diverge. As Victor tells his tale, Walton ceases his battle, concedes defeat, and turns back--the only character of the story to survive.

The traits that Victor and Walton share, their desire to overpower nature, their refusal to grant women a place in society, are confronted and challenged by Shelley's narrative. Why does she allow Walton to live? Is his plan so much less harmful than Victor's? While both fight against nature, Walton's plan is more to understand it than to control it. And Walton understands his fate in the context of nature's power. Nature is clearly victorious over Walton; the boat must turn back because it is too dangerous to forge ahead. Yet Victor never concedes the power of nature. He goes against nature, and calls the monster an aberration of nature, and it is the monster who is powerful. In Victor's reasoning, nature loses. While Victor does go so far as to rue his creation of the monster, this is more a reference to his success than to his failure. He regrets what he has done because the monster is so powerful and, as Victor sees him, violent and savage. It does not occur to Victor that he had absolutely broken all bounds of appropriate mortal behavior in attempting to create life outside of the natural process. He does not consider the fact that the tragedy his life has become could be, as in Prometheus' case, his punishment by the powers above for overstepping his place. In fact, Victor refers on several occasions to the divine nature of his project; as he justifies to Walton his destruction of the very creature he had toiled to create, he tells him: "You may give up your purpose, but mine is assigned to me by heaven, and I dare not." (205) While Walton acknowledges that his quest to reach the North pole is limited by nature, Victor sees his use of manipulation of nature by technology as so powerful that it is dangerous.

In the context of French's classification of male-dominated society and Ortner's article, it hardly comes as a surprise that Victor demonstrates a rather unhealthy attitude toward women. He obviously cannot separate them from their reproductive function; taking that role upon himself, he renders them obsolete in his world. To Victor, nature is a part of the female world, and he devotes his life to violating and overpowering her.

Victor's thoughts and actions demonstrate two distinct problems in his conception of women. Throughout the novel, woman's role as caretaker is emphasized, as all the characterizations of women fit into a doting mother or sister role. Victor's father marries his best friend's daughter, who has been tending to her father, and transfers that behavior to her husband and children. The intensity of Caroline's role as caretaker is heightened by the fact that she tends to the feverish Elizabeth with the result of her own death. Victor and Walton both interact with only one woman--each's sister--and are closest to men; Victor clearly shares more of himself with Clerval than with Elizabeth. The monster, whose only option for female companionship lies in Victor's creation of a female, would also end up with a sister-wife, as he and his lover would be of the same parent. Victor himself shows the blending of all women into a combination of daughter-sister-wife when he dreams of kissing Elizabeth and having her turn into his dead mother. Elizabeth had become his mother as soon as Caroline had died.

Yet the other aspect of Victor's skewed perceptions of women are his tendencies toward violence. His very quest is one of an usurpation of the one role allotted to women of his time--

motherhood. He attempts to take away the one way women have of creating an identity for themselves; he essentially obliterates them. From there he effectively kills Justine, abandons Elizabeth at the hour of her death, and savagely destroys the female monster. His hostility toward and fear of women comes through clearly when he cannot complete the female monster. While he trusts the male monster, whose malignity he has already witnessed, to keep his word, he cannot do the same for the female he is creating. The monster has told him repeatedly that he started out good but was turned evil by neglect; one might see this new creation as a chance for Victor to make a decent being. Instead, he desperately fears this unknown female's capacity for evil: "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for it's own sake, in murder and wretchedness." 158

The monster is the only male in the novel who cries out for female companionship. Interestingly, Shelley has the monster focus sexual desire specifically on women whom Victor knows--his mother and Justine. By using these particular people, Shelley emphasizes that the feelings that come naturally to the monster would never occur to Victor. The monster speaks to Victor of the stirrings of desire incited in him by the portrait of Victor's mother: "it was a portrait of the most lovely woman...it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips," and by Justine: "I bent over her and whispered, 'Awake, fairest, thy lover is near--he who would give his life but to obtain one look of affection from thine eyes; my beloved, awake!'" (136-7) Yet this passion is as unhealthily skewed

as Victor's own lack of it; in fact, it is the monster's ardent desire for a woman's love and companionship that he claims leads him to violence. As he frames Justine for young William's murder, he cries: "not I, but she, shall suffer; the murder I have committed because I am forever robbed of all that she should give me, she shall atone. The crime had its source in her; be hers the punishment!" (137) The monster blames all womankind for his solitude. Yet the monster, we must remember, has had a vastly limited notion of human experience. Consider his interaction with people up to the point where he frames Justine for William's murder. He knows that Victor created him. He has been watching the De Lacey family. He has read *Paradise Lost*. Based on this experience, he knows only of situations like his own--that of a father without a mother. When Safie arrives, he begins his education of society, outside of his reading list and observation of the De Lacey's. He is enamored of Agatha and Safie. But never experiencing any woman as a caretaker, his perception remains as one-sided as Victor's--limited to his experience of women as sexually desirable. What is so intriguing about this paradox of Victor and the monster's perceptions of women is that it juxtaposes the two creatures as equally extreme and dangerous in their ideas. Yet the two's experiences cannot be compared as equally narrow in scope. The monster was created unnaturally and then abandoned, left to wander and construe the world around him in whatever a manner he could. Victor grew up in a loving family, attended school, went away to the big city for university--he had every opportunity to perceive different kinds of women in the world around him. Yet

what Shelley creates for us is a scenario in which Victor's aberration of nature is actually more natural than the creator himself.

Shelley clearly intends for us to notice the consequences of Victor's appropriation of nature by emphasizing the fact that Victor never equates his role in creating the monster with his parents' role in creating him. If Victor had not circumvented the natural process of becoming a parent, he would have been able to connect the parallels of his responsibility with his parents'. As Victor begins to relate his story to Walton, he tells of the happy days of his childhood. Here Shelley clearly sets up a striking contradiction between Victor's perceptions of parentage in terms of his life as a child and his life as a parent. His actions and attitude toward the monster entirely contradict his own ideas about parenting. As he tells Walton, his parents doted lovingly on him:

> I was...their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by heaven, whom to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery , according as they fulfilled their duties to me. With this deep consciousness of what they owed towards the being to which they had given life...all seemed enjoyment to me. (33)

Throughout his life, Victor revelled in his parents' affection, which he felt deeply that they owed him.

His own role as a child is also clear to him. In his perception, his own responsibility to his parents is significantly less part of the natural order of things; regardless of the devotion of his parents, his affection is something to be earned:

> No human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself. My parents possessed the very spirit of

> kindness and indulgence....While I mingled with other families I distinctly discerned how peculiarly fortunate my lot was, and gratitude assisted the development of filial love. (37)

Obviously, this presents a considerable irony in light of Victor's parent-child attitude in relation to the monster. Yet Victor's comments in these passages are not made with rueful remorse, as if he were comparing his parents' style of child-rearing with his own failure. Victor simply reflects nostalgically on the pleasures of his childhood, and makes it clear that while his parents were exceptionally loving and nurturing, they offered Victor no more than they owed him; it was because they fulfilled their obligations to him that he was able to feel grateful and even loving. Clearly, Victor in no way relates his creation of the monster to his taking on the responsibility of parentage. Yet his responsibility is perhaps greater than his parents'. Victor's birth was probably not accidental; his parents desired children. But no birth in history was ever as intentional as Victor Frankenstein's birth of his creature.

Shelley puts forth intriguing ideas as to the sex of natural-born children. In relating to Walton the adoption of Elizabeth, when Victor was five years old, Victor says, "My mother had much desired to have a daughter, but I continued their single offspring." (33) This sentence is somewhat puzzling. If Victor's parents wanted a daughter, they would have been trying to have another child, although they would have no way of designating the sex of that child. Is Victor saying that his parents were having trouble conceiving? There is little evidence for that. But if they wanted a daughter, why weren't they trying to have another child? Within a year of adopting

Elizabeth, the Frankensteins conceive another child--a boy. Is this supposed to be symbolic of the intended fruitful union between Elizabeth and Victor? Some years later, William is born. The Frankensteins are clearly a fertile couple, yet Shelley seems to be implying that they cannot breed female children, and that they know that. This sets up an interesting parallel to Victor's conscious destruction of what would have been his female child. It also seems to remove females from the normalcy of everyday conception and birth to a kind of mystical generation.

Shelley also emphasizes how distinctly unnatural Victor's decision to independently procreate is by having him share with Walton, and with us, the reasoning behind his determination to create a human being. Children are theoretically born as a union of two people's love, or at least passion for one another. Yet Victor, simply by taking the process unto himself, denies the relationship between unity and procreation. His desire to create a human being separates him from, rather than unites him with, his loved ones. At first, he debates whether to start with such a complicated creature as a human, but finds no reason why he should be unable to succeed at this high goal. Nor can he deny himself the glory of creating a cognizant being that would recognize and appreciate his work:

> A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (52)

What matters to Victor is not that which he creates but recognition of his own role as the creator. He perceives that by

creating on his own he would achieve a higher ground than other fathers; what he fails to consider is the significance of the mother, and of combining the two roles into one. Clearly, this is not the soundest reasoning behind bringing a human being into the world. Yet to Victor, this logic is not only sensible but universal--as he builds a female companion for his monster, he is convinced that she will bear little monsters, because "one of the first results of those sympathies for which the demon thirsted would be children." (158) Ironically, this also contradicts Victor's own ideas of filial duty. Victor has made it clear that a child's love and gratitude is not automatic--his own was contingent upon years of devotion and affection from his parents. Yet he intends only to create. Nowhere does Victor speak of his plans for the life he will bring into the world; nowhere is there mention of where he will take the creature, what he shall teach him. There is no sign of what the creature's life would have been like if he were not hideous. If Victor had created a beautiful young man, what then? Would he have smothered him with attempts to mold and shape his intellect? Or would he have pushed him aside as he continued with his work?

In describing Victor's "conception and birth" of his monster, Shelley emphasizes how completely Victor's project becomes the antithesis of the natural process of childbirth. One often hears references to the "healthy glow" of a pregnant woman, yet Victor tells us "my cheek had grown pale with study"; a woman's body expands through to her lying-in, yet for Victor, "my person had become emaciated with confinement." (53) Throughout Victor's experience, "the moon gazed on my midnight labours, while, with

unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places." Yet in a natural pregnancy, activity is gradually diminished, eventually culminating in a concentration of labour. Victor is breathless, yet so much of the birthing process revolves around breathing; he speaks of nature hiding, yet a pregnant woman is the last person who can hide. Victor withdraws from nature and his interpersonal relationships, yet a pregnant woman often comments about feeling more in touch with nature, and the common experience of pregnancy frequently leads to spontaneous interaction with acquaintances, or even strangers. A friend you haven't spoken to for years might call to tell you of her pregnancy; two pregnant women passing on the street might strike up a conversation as to each's due date. Victor overtly fails to draw any connection between his project and nature's systems of continuing life--"I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves...so deeply was I engrossed in my occupation." (54) Looking ahead to the completion of his project, he comments, "My labours would soon end, and I believed that exercise and amusement would then drive away incipient disease; and I promised myself both of these when my creation should be complete." (55) This could easily refer to two issues. From a practical angle, the birth of a child is hardly an opportunity for a woman to begin a schedule of "exercise and amusement" but rather one of exhaustion from constant physical and emotional demand. Yet the phrase also reminds us of the dangers of childbirth; the culmination of Victor's labours would stave off his disease, while Mary Wollstonecraft's labour led to the disease that killed her. When the creature comes to life, Victor tells us, "Unable to endure the

aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room." (56) He eventually, of course, leaves the flat altogether, and then returns to find the creature gone. This course of events is unique to Victor's unnatural experience--few women would be able to get up and rush anywhere immediately after giving birth, and the monster is undoubtedly the first newborn to rise, throw on some clothing, and go for a walk. Intriguingly, however, there is one aspect in which Victor's birth experience distinctly parallels that of the natural procedure. In her article "Female Gothic," Ellen Moers begins her discussion of *Frankenstein* as a "birth narrative" with a quote from Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. In the passage cited, Spock describes the disappointing appearance of a newborn to inexperienced parents; much of the description of the misshapen forehead, yellowed skin and shock of black hair rings eerily of Shelley's description of Victor's monster.[22] Shelley underscores the fact that even inverting the natural process of pregnancy and childbirth still results in a comparable new creature which is emotionally, if not physically, fragile.

Shelley's emphasis of Victor's refusal to reconcile men's and women's roles in natural human reproduction illuminates his failure to take responsibility for his abandonment of the monster. Even when he takes enough responsibility for his actions to feel remorse, he still misses the point. Victor feels responsible for the monster's actions because he created him, when it is clear that it was not his creation, but his abandonment of the monster that led to the latter's

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[22] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 90.

violent actions. Victor is incapable of differentiating between the biological act of creation that makes one a parent, and the nurturing and fostering the job requires once a creature comes into the world. And it is easy to see how he could have made such a grave error. In his method of creation, one simply pieces and sews together, and life exists. Yet in natural reproduction, that is only the beginning. Once all the ingredients are there, nine months of feeding and nurturing must take place before a living being comes forth. Victor sees creation only as far as the male's integral but brief role in the reproductive process.

Shelley's depiction of Victor demonstrates with frightening realism the dangers of a man at once brilliant and tremendously capable yet blind to the realities of women's lives. Throughout the novel it becomes more and more apparent that Victor completely resists understanding the natural process of creation and procreation. Though he speaks of creating a new species, his entire project is a *re*animation of dead material. He tells Walton, "To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death...I must observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body." (50) Yet as a scientist, he should know something of conception and how life begins. Victor discusses his childhood, growing up with Elizabeth, and their different interests: "While my companion contemplated with a serious and satisfied spirit the magnificent appearances of things, I delighted in investigating their causes. The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine." (36) Yet Victor never once expresses any interest in that which intrigues all children from the moment they are able to inquire--where do we come from? How did

I get here? His mother gives birth when he is seven, yet he offers no reaction to this design of nature. Shelley underscores this gap in Victor's intellectual searching when the monster tells of his education. In describing his "schooling" with Safie, he says: "Other lessons were impressed upon me even more deeply. I heard of the difference of the sexes, and the birth and growth of children...." (115).

Most telling of Victor's misunderstanding of reproduction is the scene in which he destroys the female monster. While three years previously he had had all he needed to build a male monster, he must now travel to England to learn more in order to build a female. Nowhere in the text is any reason for this offered; Victor simply comments, "I found that I could not compose a female without again devoting several months to profound study and laborious disquisition." (143) When Victor decides to build a human being, he does not specifically mention that he is building a male; that is understood. Yet Shelley stresses for us the difference between Victor's initial project and the monster's demand. As mentioned above, he is convinced that the monster will seek to procreate for the same selfish reasons that he did. He has already envisioned a female creature significantly crueller than her mate. Faced with the possibility of their procreation, he imagines that "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." (158) Yet if Victor truly knows anything at all about female anatomy, he must know that he could construct her in such a way that she would be unable to reproduce. This option is closed to him,

however. Why? It is not a fear of the monster; the monster never refers to a desire to procreate--that is Victor's own projection. And even if the monster did want children, it would be years before he and his wife, off in the jungles of South America, discovered that there was a biological problem preventing their procreation. Victor cannot conceive of a woman who would be a companion, a soul mate, a sexual partner, not a procreative machine. He looks up, sees the monster's "countenance...of malice and treachery" (159), and shudders at the thought of creating a partner for him; fearing the female creature's reproductive abilities, he violently destroys her.

Throughout the novel, Shelley demonstrates repeatedly that Victor visualizes the world in parts, rather than wholes. He does things without considering their effect on other people. He throws himself into his work at Ingolstadt without every really thinking about the fact that he does not visit his family for six years and eventually stops communicating with them altogether. He considers things in a linear rather than relational manner. The most tangible evidence of this is that which has the greatest impact on the novel and Victor's short life. As he begins work on the monster, he adjusts his plans to suit his impatience: "As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature...about eight feet in height, and proportionately large." (52) Somehow, he does not manage to associate this decision with the effect it will have on the creature's existence. Similarly, he pays attention to other physical aspects of his creation, but cannot picture the end result:

> I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (56)

Again, Victor can conceive of separate parts, but he cannot piece these segments into a whole, until it is too late. The monster berates him for this very fact, forcing Victor to confront the truth, that he is simply a mortal casting himself above all others: "Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even *you* turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance." (125) Victor has not achieved his goal. He set out to create a new and glorious species, and he completely botched it. And not because he had to, or he did it wrong, or he couldn't get the materials he needed. He took it upon himself to redo nature, and due to his own impatience, he created a hideously ugly human being, so ugly that it could not have a friend in all the world.

Yet Shelley offers another, equally vital instance in which Victor and others suffer due to his inability to conceive of a grand scale in which more than the immediate moment is affected. This is the course of events that leads to Elizabeth's death. As Victor destroys the female monster, the creature appears, enraged. "'Shall each man' cried he, 'find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone?'" (160) The monster is clearly incensed at

Victor's destruction of his one hope for companionship, and he leaves Victor with those fateful words, "I shall be with you on your wedding-night." (161) Of course, nearly every reader of *Frankenstein* has sat up with Victor on that night, enraged by his obliviousness to the fact that the monster is coming after Elizabeth, not him. But is it really just his ego that keeps him from realizing the truth? It is interesting to look at this scene in reference to work Carol Gilligan has done in attempting to assess levels of and approaches to morality. She has found a breakdown among gender lines of a male tendency to view ethics in a linear, straightforward perception of justice, while females tend to examine individual situations in terms of relationships. Here Victor parades downstairs, waving his pistol instead of consummating his marriage, and his thinking does indeed make sense--he has made the monster's life miserable; therefore, the monster would want to kill him. Yet the monster, in his limited experience of human interaction, has picked up on the significance of the relationships humans form with one another. He knows that, if vengeance is his goal, it is much more effective to ruin Victor's life by destroying everyone he loves than simply to end it. No wonder Victor tells Walton that "as if possessed of magic powers, the monster had blinded me to his real intentions" in the murder of Elizabeth; the monster is working from a completely different set of motives, neither distinctly male nor female. And to add to Victor's blindness, he can never understand the core of the monster's rage--the creature's desire for personal contact.

What does Mary Shelley want us to think of *Frankenstein*? What is the moral of the story? One moral is surely that you should

never abandon your children. But Victor never understands that. Another guide may be that one should not attempt to overpower nature. But is that what Shelley is saying? Victor tells his tale, and Walton turns back. But Walton wants to continue--he is forced by his crew to return to England. And Victor in no way advises him to relinquish his quest against nature; he berates the sailors who solicit Walton, nearly convincing them with his eloquence that theirs is a sacred, sworn journey, and to turn back would be to fall victim to cowardice. It is intriguing that Shelley offers *The Modern Prometheus* as an alternate title to her work, yet never judges Victor. All the references to Prometheus and *Paradise Lost* come from the monster; Victor never once entertains the thought that he has gone against a divine force, dictating the limits of man. Is the essence of the project Victor undertakes so awful? In the context of men creating culture to control nature, no. Victor's endeavor is simply one in a long line of projects geared toward ordering nature; unfortunately, this particular project walked and talked and thought and killed, so it was, overall, not a success. Yet from the point of view of a woman living in a world with Victor Frankensteins afoot, this violation of nature is life-threatening. In a world in which men designate appropriate roles for women, in which men set limits for women, the ability of men to then appropriate these roles for themselves endangers everyone. Victor's appropriation of the process of reproduction destroyed himself, the creature, and everyone around him. He simply concocts a human being, ignoring the union that usually precedes this result. It never occurs to him that there might be a reason why the process of procreation involves

two people. Victor does not understand the significance of having a child. We can't ignore the fact that Mary Shelley was an unwed mother who would have no legal recourse should Percy have deserted her with their children; that her mother had borne the child of a married man; that Percy had deserted his own pregnant wife and their children. This is not to say that these women regretted having their children; these births were the result of unions of, at one time, love and passion. But one must wonder what Shelley meant by having a man embark on single parenthood that was in no way connected to a loving union. And, of course, we must remember that Victor Frankenstein didn't make it through the first ten minutes. While the process of intercourse, conception, gestation, and birth has not necessarily worked to the advantage of women, Shelley reminds us that to tamper with that process is to fail. One cannot separate sex from pregnancy, women from birth, and as painful as the consequences of this might be for women, the solution is not to alter the process but to alter the people involved. What Shelley leaves for us, then, is neither a bemoaning nor a celebration of the natural process of pregnancy and childbirth, but a recognition of the fragility of the relationship between women and men and between women and our bodies, and the potential for the balance to be lost, and for us all to be endangered.

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