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Madison R. Rahner
Coastal Carolina University

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Frankenstein: A Feminist Birth Myth of Morbid Conception

Madison R. Rahner

In the context of Mary Shelley's biography and prose style, the theme and structure of *Frankenstein* indicate that, in addition to being an esteemed work of gothic horror, the novel is a feminist birth myth: a perverse story of maternity and a scathing critique of patriarchal dominance over the feminine. Frankenstein, as a maternal figure, repeatedly seeks to smother female sexuality and usurp heterosexual reproduction through grotesque and unnatural means. The ensuing death and violence are consequences of Frankenstein's inadequacy as a mother and the insufficiency of masculinity. The monster's morbid conception and subsequent murders intertwine birth and death in profound ways that mirror Shelley's own traumatic experiences with maternity. Her life and experiences manifest in Frankenstein's character to create a birth myth which despite its proto-feminist undertones, earned immediate success in literary climate of the 19th century which only tolerated women writing emotive works about domesticity.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, birth myth, gothic, feminism

Madison Rahner graduated Summa Cum Laude from Coastal Carolina in the May of 2018 after completing her degree in three years. She received her BA in English before moving on to pursue graduate studies with Coastal Carolina's MA in Writing. She won the Paul Rice Poetry Broadside competition in the spring of 2018 and served as the President of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honor Society for the 2017/2018 school year.

Biography of Mary Shelley

On August 30, 1797, Mary Shelley was born to William Godwin¹ and Mary Wollstonecraft². Wollstonecraft died while giving birth to Shelley (born Mary Godwin), thus marking the first intersection of birth and death in Shelley's life. American academic and literary scholar Ellen Moers remarks in her essay *Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother* that in studying the diary of Shelley, her biography includes several tragic collisions of birth and death, many of which overlap with the time she spent writing *Frankenstein*. At age 16, Shelley found herself pregnant for the first time with the illegitimate child of Percy Shelley³ (Moers, 1974, p. 8).

Her first child, Clara, was born in February of 1815. She was sickly and premature and died by March of that same year. Just three months earlier, Percy Shelley's wife, Harriett Shelley, gave birth to Shelley's son and heir. Shelley found herself pregnant again by April 1815 with a son who was born in January of 1816. In the months following William's birth, Shelley began writing *Frankenstein*. As she wrote during the months of new motherhood,, a series of tragic events rang through her life. In October 1816, her half-sister, Fanny Imlay, committed suicide after discovering she was not William Godwin's daughter, but that of Wollstonecraft's American lover. By the December of that year, not only was Shelley pregnant again, but Harriet Shelley drowned herself upon discovering she was pregnant with another man's child. With his wife dead, Percy Shelley was free to marry his longtime mistress, Mary Shelley, and did so before December ended. In May of 1817, Shelley birthed another daughter, Clara, and completed *Frankenstein*, which was published by 1818 (Moers, 1974, p. 8).

¹ William Godwin was an esteemed English journalist, political philosopher and novelist.

² Mary Wollstonecraft was an English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. Her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is considered to be one of the earliest works of feminist theory.

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley was a major English Romantic poet and is often regarded as one of the most influential lyric poets in the English language.

As she composed *Frankenstein*, life and death intermingled tragically in Mary Shelley's life. Under these circumstances, it is logical that she would create Frankenstein's monster, a grotesque and illegitimate newborn, to be like the babes in her own life: "at once [a] monstrous agent of destruction and piteous victim of parental abandonment" (Moers, 1974, p.10). Even after *Frankenstein's* completion, this vicious cycle of birth and death continued with Clara dying of dysentery in September 1818 and William dying of malaria by June 1819.

Biographical Influences in *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein's monster is itself a newborn, despite the horrors of its conception and the depravity of its creator. As such, *Frankenstein's* narrative explores the emotional trauma of such a birth. The death and destruction that follow mirror Shelley's own maternal experiences, which were sources of trauma for the young mother as she wrote the novel. Because of the biographical intersections between Mary Shelley's life and the Promethean tale of birth and destruction she composed, *Frankenstein* is a birth myth, a narrative that explores conception, birth, postpartum trauma, and subsequent death, situating Frankenstein as the novel's maternal figure and the monster as his "hideous progeny." Shelley created a horrific birth myth in the 19th century when there were very few relevant female authors, most of whom were spinsters and virgins, lacking the keen maternal insights that Shelley displays in *Frankenstein*. In the context of Mary Shelley's biography and prose style, the theme and structure of *Frankenstein* indicate that, in addition to being an esteemed work of gothic horror, the novel is a feminist birth myth: a perverse story of maternity and a scathing critique of patriarchal dominance over the feminine.

Summary of *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus, opens in epistolary form. Captain Robert Walton finds himself aboard a ship bound for the North Pole, which becomes lodged in impassible ice, miles from land. Walton composes many letters to his sister in London, Mrs. Saville, bemoaning his circumstances and loneliness. He wishes he had a “worthy” male companion with whom to pass the time. His wishes are fulfilled when Frankenstein cross their path on a dog sled. Walton and his crew take him aboard in his wretched condition. Walton tends to him and listens to his ward as he recounts the series of tragedies that led him to such a dismal and remote corner of the world. Walton records these stories in his letter to Mrs. Saville.

Frankenstein tells Walton about the rather mundane beginnings of his life and how once he was off to school, he grew interested in the topics of natural philosophy, chemistry, and alchemy and eventually managed to construct a whole human body from individual body parts robbed from the dead. He endues the grotesque body he has created with life and is horrified by it; he then flees, falling ill for several months. He is nursed back to health by his dearest friend, Henry Clerval.

Once well enough to return home, Frankenstein finds that his younger brother, William, has been slain. Though he intuits that it is the monster who did it, the family’s servant, Justine is convicted of the crime and condemned to death. Following this tragedy, the family vacations in the Swiss Alps where Frankenstein encounters his monster and listens to his tale, thus nesting a third narrative within the two existing stories.

The monster is furious with Frankenstein. He recounts that after his creator fled, he was shunned from all human society for his horrific physicality. He admits to killing William out of vengeance. In his loneliness and desperation, the monster demands that Frankenstein create a female monster so that he might have a monstrous counterpart for companionship. Frankenstein reluctantly agrees to do the monster’s bidding, but upon completing the female frame, he destroys it,

fearing that creating a male and female would result in a hideous race of monsters—or that the female would have free will and become violent. The monster swears vengeance against Frankenstein on his wedding night and murders Henry to Frankenstein’s great despair.

Frankenstein prepares to marry Elizabeth. On the night of their wedding, the monster kills Elizabeth, and Frankenstein’s father perishes in grief. Now Frankenstein swears his revenge and pursues the monster all the way to where Walton discovered him. Having completed his tale, Frankenstein perishes, and Walton is alarmed to find the monster weeping over his creator’s corpse before fleeing.

Patriarchy in the Nineteenth Century

In her article, “Gender Roles in the 19th Century,” Kathryn Hughes states that the early 1800s were a time of shifting gender roles which further delineated male and female spheres and allowed for the continuation and proliferation of patriarchal control over women (2014). Though previously it would not have been uncommon for men and women to work alongside each other, by the early 19th century men started to commute to work while women were left to tend to the domestic affairs of the family. This practice of maintaining “separate spheres” for men and women was justified by Victorian beliefs that men and women were inherently different. Men were considered to be both intellectually and physically superior, and thus better suited for labor, while women were perceived to be morally superior and entrusted with raising the children and staying off the moral taint of the external world (Hughes 2014).

The literary world of the 19th century did not escape this increased delineation between what was deemed appropriate for men and women. In her article “Women Writers,” Kat Powell discusses that women of the Romantic era wrote more extensively than those before them; however,

they were expected to write about the domestic life with flowery, emotive prose that the literary establishment deemed to be appropriate for them (n.d). Writing authoritatively and directly was seen as masculine. To modern sensibilities, it may seem impossible to gender something as abstract as prose style, yet this was a very real concern of the early 19th century, as exemplified by Anglican clergyman, Richard Polwheles' 1798 poem, "The Unsexed Females: A Poem, addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature" which divided female writers into the proper and improper. "Proper" female writers wrote about emotions and the domestic sphere for a primarily female audience and were considered valid because they educated their readers on proper behavior. Examples of such adequately feminine writers include Anne Radcliffe and Hannah More. On the other side of the spectrum were women like Shelley's own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Mary Robinson. They were targets of criticism and condemnation as authors because they ventured into "masculine" topics including philosophy, science, history, and theology. Their works are delivered with authority and directness, with prose rooted in intellect and reason rather than emotion (Powell, n.d.).

As the author of *Frankenstein*, Shelley followed keenly in her mother's footsteps. Though there are suggestions of (what was at the time viewed as) feminine prose, with *Frankenstein's* frequent moments of hysteria and emotional displays of horror, sorrow, and remorse, the book is overwhelmingly written in a direct, authoritative prose style. In addition to the stylistic elements of Shelley's prose, the subject matter of *Frankenstein* would have been considered distinctly masculine. A gothic monster certainly veers as far as possible from the domestic sphere of childrearing and homemaking. In addition to that, through both *Frankenstein* and his monster, Shelley creates opportunities to write about chemistry, alchemy, and classic literature like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives of Illustrious Greeks and Romans*, and

Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter*. All of the above suggest an elite formal education and a body of knowledge typically reserved for men.

Despite—or perhaps because—Shelley breeched into the realm of masculine prose, *Frankenstein* was a huge success following its publication in 1818, as stated by Kristin Lepine in her article “Mary Shelley and her Inner Frankenstein” (2016). This immediate success could be attributed in part to the fact that Shelley published it anonymously. This was not an uncommon tactic for female writers at the time, as contemporary readers were more likely to accept a work published anonymously than by a woman. Because Percy Shelley penned the first edition's introduction, there was great speculation that he was the true author of *Frankenstein*. When the second edition was published in 1823, Mary Shelley was revealed as the true author. Upon this revelation, more speculation ensued and rumors spread widely that Percy Shelley was actually the author, a falsehood that persists to this day (Lepine, 2016).

Subversion of Institutionalized Literary Patriarchy

Shelley's writing not only crossed the boundary of what was considered to be an acceptable style of prose for a woman at the time, but she also wrote a proto-feminist birth myth exploring the traumas of her experiences of motherhood. By using the codes and language of the patriarchal literary sphere she sought to subvert, Shelley was able to maneuver an institution that could have easily snuffed out her birth myth. According to scholar Devon Hodges in “Frankenstein in the Feminine Subversion of the Novel,” in addition to subverting patriarchal literary institutions through her prose style, Shelley also used the form of her novel to “undermine the stability of the male voice” by nesting two narratives, both Frankenstein's and the monster's, within Walton's original epistolary narrative (1983). The use of three different male narrators, each with different

shortcomings as storytellers, critiques narratives of masculinity as inherently inadequate and incomplete.

Walton's narrative encompasses all the other narratives and is inadequate because his only means of communication is via letters, which he admits to be "a poor medium of communication" (Shelley, 1818, p. 54). Frankenstein is introduced as a narrator when Walton begins to record his story of the horrors that lead him to roam about the North Pole. His narration is too inadequate and unreliable because of his poor mental and physical state on board the ship. His recollection of events is broken up by spells of fevers, fits, dreams, fainting spells, and long silences, all of which fragment his tale. The final narrator is the monster, as Frankenstein retells the monster's tale to Walton. The monster is an unreliable narrator because he is only able to perform language without being able to fully inhabit it (Hodges, 1983, p. 6). Frankenstein states that "[the creature] is eloquent and persuasive, and once his words had even power over my heart; but trust him not. His soul is as hellish as his form" (Shelley, 1818, p. 209). This passage suggests that, while the monster comprehends and displays language as he narrates his life story, he uses that language as a vehicle for manipulation and deceit, making him an unreliable and thus inadequate narrator. The monster mirrors Shelley herself in this way. Like the monster, she appropriates the language of the dominant culture as a means of achieving validity and communication that she would not have managed otherwise. It is also worth noting that, despite the fact that the novel is narrated by three males, each narration is transcribed by Walton in letters that are to be sent to his sister, Mrs. Saville. Consequently, the entire book is written for a decidedly female audience (Hodges, 1983, p.8).

Frankenstein: The Birth Myth

Shelley's subversion of culturally imposed, patriarchal, literary tenets allowed her to write *Frankenstein* as a proto-feminist birth myth. *Frankenstein* manifests as a birth myth in a variety of

ways as the novel explores the trauma of giving birth, the emotions of motherhood, and draws striking parallels between Shelley's own experiences as a mother and daughter. In literature at the time, it was common to see exclusively joyous maternal reactions to birth, ranging from "ecstasy, a sense of fulfillment, and the rush of nourishing love which sweeps over the new mother when she first holds her baby in her arms" (Moers, 1974, p. 5). By contrast, Frankenstein's physical and emotional revulsion to the new life he has created is representative of after-birth trauma (Moers, 1974, p. 5). Upon seeing his creation brought to life, Frankenstein is overwhelmed by emotions, ranging from guilt to dread to terror and ultimately abandons his progeny in "breathless horror and disgust" (Shelley, 1818, p. 84). The grotesque and unnatural nature of the monster's conception and form makes conventional happy maternal reactions impossible to display or justify in the text, allowing Shelley to portray a striking alternative, a series of more realistic emotions that testify to the depression and anxiety that can follow childbirth. In doing this, Shelley creates a birth myth that is more analogous to her own traumatic experiences with motherhood.

Whereas birth is usually associated with hope and new life, Frankenstein's monster is born in death: "the churchyard to [Frankenstein] was merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life... [he] beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life" (Shelley, 1818, p. 78). The monster is created from a morbid intermingling of life and death, literally composed of the stitched-together portions of cadavers. Following his birth and immediate rejection by his paternal figure, the monster turns into a murderous, vengeful agent of death. Death and birth intertwine in the monster's conception, corporeal form, and nascent life. Mirroring the original monster's experiences is that of the female monster, who is also composed of cadavers and is destroyed before she can be endowed with life. Throughout *Frankenstein*, life and death exist with the same macabre intimacy that Shelley knew in her own life. As a newborn, Shelley herself wrought death upon her mother and, while pregnant, she bore the grief and guilt of both Harriet Shelley's and Fanny Imlay's suicides as

well as the loss of her first daughter. These experiences seem to inspire the theme of the interconnectedness of birth and death that runs throughout the text.

Frankenstein as Mother and the Usurpation of Female Power

To fully understand the extent to which *Frankenstein* functions as a birth myth, it is necessary to analyze Frankenstein for what he is: a life-giver. The maternal role that Frankenstein assumes in creating the monster stems from his fear of the power of females as creators of life and as sexual beings. This fear is first evidenced by the sexless nature of the women Frankenstein recounts to Walton, most notably, Elizabeth. Henry Cervel is offered more physical and emotional affection than Frankenstein ever gives to Elizabeth. Throughout the novel, although she is his betrothed, Frankenstein continues to represent and perceive her as sister, cousin, and surrogate mother, rather than as a romantic partner. Professor Anne K. Mellor, specialist in romantic literature, feminist theory, and women's and gender studies, argues in her essay "Possessing Nature: The Female in Frankenstein," that even on their wedding night, when Frankenstein and Elizabeth have the opportunity to consummate their marriage, Frankenstein shuns her, not only for fear of the impending vengeance of his monster, but out of fear of Elizabeth's sexuality (1988). Frankenstein sends her to bed and, rather than joining her, spends his time attempting to confront the monster until he hears Elizabeth's distant scream as she meets her doom. As Frankenstein "embraced her with ardor" he displays the greatest degree of physical intimacy he offers to any woman in the novel (Shelley, 1988, p. 198). He does this only after she is dead and no longer capable of bearing life or enacting the sexuality he fears so deeply.

Frankenstein's fear of female sexuality is best exemplified, however, by his fear of the potential of the monstrous female form he creates. He destroys the body before he can bring it to life out of fear that the female creature will breed with his original monster and birth "children and a

race of devils would be propagated upon the earth” or worse yet, be taken by the “superior beauty of man” and rape human men with her considerable strength and stature (Shelley, 1818, p. 174). Despite the pact he arranges with his original monster, Frankenstein acknowledges that the female monster, “in all probability, was to become a thinking and reasoning animal [and] might refuse to comply with the compact made before her creation” and he fears he will not be able to control her because of her free will (Shelley, 1818, p.174). Frankenstein destroys the female monster as a result of his fear of the “uninhibited female sexual experience” a female of such strength could enact, which would “threaten the very foundation of patriarchal power” by granting women agency over what he believes to be their greatest power, heterosexual reproduction (Mellor, 1988, p. 7). Because of his desire to cling to patriarchal control, Frankenstein seeks to usurp the female power of giving birth by bypassing heterosexual reproduction in creating his monster. In doing so, he eliminates the primary biological function of the female body, thereby invalidating the value of women as individual and sexual beings (Mellor, 1988, p. 1).

By removing the female body from the process of reproduction, Frankenstein becomes the maternal figure of the novel—in fact, he is the *only* maternal figure in the novel, excepting a brief mention of his mother’s death when he was seventeen. The monster’s misery, rage, and consequent vengeance are all evidence that Frankenstein fails as the maternal figure within the *Frankenstein* birth myth. This failure stems from his deliberate removal of the female from the reproduction process and is indicative of the various shortcomings of masculinity, especially masculinity that is unchecked by a feminine counterbalance. This is especially significant in the context of the 19th century, since women were considered to be morally superior to men and were responsible for the moral education of children. Without the influencing force of a female mother, the cruelty, vindictiveness, and violence the monster displays seem inevitable.

Characteristics that are seen as traditionally feminine, including empathy, compassion, and nurturance, are characteristics that Frankenstein severely lacks with respect to his creation, even in conception. Frankenstein builds the monster to be some staggering eight feet tall with hideous features, which shows an inability to empathize with the creature. Instead, he subjects him to a frightening and grotesque body, which results in the creature being rebuked and shunned from human society. Frankenstein subjects his monster to further cruelty by abandoning him at birth, neglecting his fundamental parental responsibilities as creator (Mellor, 1988, p. 3). The monster laments that Frankenstein left him “miserable and abandoned... an abortion, to be spurned at, kick, and trampled on” (Shelley, 1818, p. 220). The creature then cites Frankenstein’s wrongdoings as justifications for his murders. Though the monster was not born evil, the lack of maternal moral guidance and the stifling of feminine energy in his parent makes him into a creature of wrath and vengeance.

Conclusion

Victor Frankenstein’s fear of female sexuality and empowerment lead him to hijack the maternal role of heterosexual reproduction through macabre and unnatural means. He suffers significantly following the birth of his monster, facing the anxiety, grief, and fear that Shelley herself must have experienced through the various sources of trauma she endured both during her pregnancies and following them. The creature is born of death and is ultimately an agent of death.

Throughout *Frankenstein*, death and birth are inextricably tied in a way that only someone with Shelley’s unique and tragic experiences could have conceived them to be. Shelley’s maternal experiences and her subversion of the patriarchal literary institution of the 19th century allowed her to create a birth myth which is unlike any other, exploring the horrors and risks of maternity that she was all too well acquainted with. Maternity is a distinctly feminine subject matter, which

under other authorship, was often relegated to the literary periphery of the 19th century. Through Shelley's skillful subversion of form and an appropriation of the masculine literary voice, she created a successful novel that gripped audiences with its elements of gothic horror, allowing her to share a feminine birth myth and critique of the patriarchal society in which she lived.

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