The Motherless Child in Science Fiction: "Frankenstein" and "Moreau" (L'Orphelin de mère dans la science fiction: "Frankenstein" et "Moreau")

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The Motherless Child in Science Fiction: *Frankenstein* and *Moreau*

Mary Shelley muses in the Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* about how “I, then a young girl, came to think of, and dilate upon, so very hideous an idea” (21). Recent scholarship has come to see *Frankenstein* as a “birth myth” or “fantasmagoria of the nursery” (Moers 92, 99). Ellen Moers and Marc Rubenstein have focussed convincingly on the psychology of the author while she was writing this book. Rubenstein claims that “the horror and retribution attached to the procreative act in the novel make plain the conflicted dimensions of her identification with her mother and with being a mother” (189). Mary Wollstonecraft died shortly after bringing William Godwin’s daughter into the world, and Mary Godwin’s own daughter by Percy Shelley died in infancy shortly before she embarked on the writing of *Frankenstein*. Not only did this infant embody the monstrosity of an untimely death, but she also represented socially legislated “monstrosity” by not enjoying legitimate status. Is it any wonder that a young woman adrift in the world, twice the victim of reproductive tragedy, would be seeking a kind of “maternal heartland” (Rubenstein 174) or would be moved to contemplate the horrifying void of its absence?

*Frankenstein* addresses this most central issue in human experience, as does the H.G. Wells classic *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.

Mary Shelley’s grief over the death of her baby is refracted through the obsession of her “mad scientist” protagonist, Victor Frankenstein. That grief provides the sense of loss and lamentation underlying his megalomaniac hunger for power through procreative science. He says, for example: “I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time...renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (§4:39). Barbara Johnson accurately describes the victory of Victor Frankenstein as usurping the female role by “giving birth to a child.” She goes on to say that Mary Shelley “transposed her own frustrated female pen envy into a tale of catastrophic male womb envy” (8). But Mary Shelley was encouraged on all sides to use her pen, to write, and to participate in the literary world. She could not have been especially frustrated along those lines. On the other hand, she was extremely frustrated, if not tortured, in her basic procreative connection. The two tragic events in her life that point focussed her attention on the sources of human existence. They provided the anxiety and motivation which resulted in the literary accomplishment of
Frankenstein. In Victor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley created a male character who yearned for the existential security of elemental procreative power in the same way that she herself did.

The endurance of Frankenstein and its amplification to truly mythic status results from its articulating, “perhaps for the first time in Western literature, the most powerfully felt anxieties of pregnancy” (Mellor 41). The novel was inspired by Mary Shelley's anxieties over pregnancy: it addresses the narcissistic injury suffered by a young male regarding his incapacity for childbirth. Shelley experienced a tragic alienation from the essential sources of life which enabled her to identify, albeit for the most part unconsciously, with this basic male envy of the womb.1

This hypothesis provides another explanation for the profound ambivalence at the core of this novel, often explained in political terms (Suvin 115). The reader naturally has sympathy for the innocent victims of the monster’s aggression. That aggression is caused, however, by a society which tortures the innocent and thus transforms them into monsters. Sometimes seen as political vakcillation, this ambivalence is traceable to Mary’s sensitivity to fundamental psychological dynamics. She was forced by fate to identify with the basic procreative frustrations of men, but she also felt the instinctive drive to become a mother and confirm the natural monopoly of her gender.

The overtly patriarchal orientation of our culture tends to obscure the importance of womb envy. The mystique of male superiority does not admit any kind of inferiority of its own with respect to the “weaker” sex. Though the main thrust of psychoanalysis need not ultimately be supportive of patriarchy, it exemplified in its origins a typical blindness. The preoccupation of Freud with penis envy in the psychological development of children is probably accurate in most respects. However, his writing on the subject shows significant lapses. For example, he refers to little girls as being “castrated” without putting the word in quotation marks—i.e., as if it were a fact. He fails to differentiate between actual castration and the childish fantasy of “castration” which may play a part in psychological development (cf Freud 201). This archetypal Freudian slip might well be taken as indicating a repressed wish for what it literally asserts. With consistent bias Freud largely ignored the other side of the coin. He neglected to explore thoroughly the possibility that little boys might experience a complementary envy of female equipment and of the capacity to give birth.

Male supremacists and some radical feminists seem to agree in a curious way on this issue: the idea of men's envying the essential reproductive power of the female makes no sense from either extreme point of view (van Leeuwin 323). Joanna Russ’s denial of womb envy's having any significance in Frankenstein is a case in point. In her 1975 introduction to the Tales and Stories of Mary Shelley, Russ sets up a false dichotomy between Victor Frankenstein’s infringing on the territory of God and his trespassing on that of women. She then arbitrarily eliminates the latter as a factor in understanding the novel (14).
A number of other recent interpretations of *Frankenstein* seem influenced by the need to read a contemporary political agenda into a novel written almost 200 years ago. In 1979, Gilbert and Gubar, Knopflmacher, and Ellis published studies which all in their own ways see *Frankenstein* as an attack on the patriarchal family. Against this view, the entirely positive portrayal in the novel of Victor’s father, Alphonse, the patriarch of the *Frankenstein* clan, constitutes a formidable *prima facie* case.

Another serious problem with each of these treatments is the gender of the protagonists. How are we to understand a feminist attack on patriarchy without a major female character? Kate Ellis attempts to respond to this point in the following way: “If we can imagine a novel in which a woman scientist creates a monster who returns to destroy her family, the relevance to women of the problem that Mary Shelley has imagined becomes more immediately apparent” (140). Considering the gender of a character as a variable detail in the writing, or interpretation, of a piece of literature is questionable. The obvious stress in Mary Shelley’s childhood seems to have come from her stepmother in a fairly conventional way. It should not be ignored in this kind of discussion. Whatever critique of patriarchy does exist in *Frankenstein* is qualified by ambivalence. It is also a secondary thematic concern.

Hill and Vlasopolos take a psychoanalytic approach. They see incest as the mainspring of *Frankenstein*. This aspect of human relations is often found in the Gothic novel. However, Elizabeth can be seen as symbolizing Victor’s mother only in a very limited sense; and his rejection of Elizabeth can be explained quite adequately otherwise in terms of sibling rivalry, especially since Elizabeth is responsible for his mother’s death in a fairly direct way (Tropp 22). At the same time, there is the curious necessity of switching genders to extract the desired significance, to see the novel as primarily an expression of the author’s incestuous fascination with her father, William Godwin.

Instead of switching genders, another relevant interpretation requires their amalgamation. Peter D. Scott suggested in his contribution to *The Endurance of Frankenstein* that “the novel describes Victor’s fall as Androgyne Lost.” Scott sees Mary Shelley as attacking excessive masculinity and “the one-sidedness of male exploratory reason” (190). William Veeder develops this idea at greater length in his critical and biographical study, *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein*. Citing also the attitude of Walton’s sister towards Walton’s explorations, he argues that *Frankenstein* condemns Promethean pursuits in general. Veeder sees both men as bifurcated solipsists destructive of human sensitivity who should become more androgynous (84). True, the excessive ambition of men and their insensitivity to human values are evils thematically attacked in *Frankenstein*. However, androgyny is a symptom of these evils, not their cure.

In addition to serving as the frame narrator of the novel, Walton is a foil to Frankenstein. He is stealing knowledge of the Arctic map from the gods
in traditional Prometheus fashion for the benefit of humanity (Poovey 132). He has accepted his limitations as a man and his male role on the fringes of domestic warmth. He accepts the failure of his Prometheus quest, too, and shows sensitivity to his sister and crew by returning south. He has a crucial relationship with a significant female-other with whom he is sharing this experience. Her disquiet concerning his excursion (mentioned at the very beginning of the novel) seems hardly enough to discredit it. Without the affectionate sharing between Walton and Margaret, in fact, the story of Frankenstein would have been lost. It passes from Victor to Robert Walton to Margaret to the reader. Without Walton’s Prometheus pursuit into the far north, this chain of communication would not have existed. Hence, the legacy of the novel according to Veeder—that Prometheus pursuits are evil—would not have survived.

Victor Frankenstein, by contrast, flees the affection of his “more than sister” and attempts to usurp her biological female function. He refuses to accept the limitations of his male identity. He is the Modern Prometheus who not only trespasses divine territory, but challenges the divinely ordained, natural procreative role of the female (Kiely 64). In fact, what could be more androgynous that a man having, or making, a baby? Veeder attempts to deal with this point by making a systematic distinction, without a difference, between androgyny and hermaphroditism (99). The amalgamation of gender, however—or the interchangeability of gender—by whatever name is not the solution to Frankenstein’s problem. His problem—and it is the central thematic problem of the novel—is that modern science obviates the biological gender distinctions upon which our psychology and society have been built.

Male imperialism into the female domain of procreating life is the central concern of a recent book by Gena Corea titled The Mother Machine. After the female sex-cell was discovered in 1861 and men grasped that they were not the sole genetic parents, they “began recreating the myth of single parenthood by the male, not, this time, through religious or scientific theory, but through technology.... Soon the new reproductive technologies will enable them to actually take over the life-giving powers of women” (310). This takeover was imagined well before 1861 by a young woman whose personal tragedies had enabled her to identify with the “unnatural” male desire to make babies.

Scholars should be instructed by the popular wisdom here. Numerous references can be found in the literature on Frankenstein to the “mistake” of calling the monster by the name of his creator. But folk wisdom understands very well that the monster is the technologically developed child of Victor Frankenstein, and should therefore take the name of his only parent.

In 1955 Bruno Bettelheim published a study of womb envy as a counterbalance to the orthodox Freudian approach. He became interested in the subject while treating four children who were patients in a group home as they encountered puberty. They are analogous to the four young people...
living in Switzerland, not in number, but in a similar isolation from their respective cultures. Bettelheim observed in his group something comparable to the game of ghost stories which called *Frankenstein* into existence. Independent of any adult model or authority, Bettelheim's kids invented their own game, or puberty rite, which suggested to him the theory of womb envy he explains in *Symbolic Wounds, Puberty Rites, and the Envious Male*.2

His study addresses traditional androcentric bias and shows how "women's strivings and influence have affected social institutions which we still explain on a purely masculine basis" (58). Bettelheim calls into question Freud's view that society was "founded on the association of homicidal brothers" in rebellion against the primal father (121). He explains how initiation rites, such as circumcision and baptism, are compensating parodies of female fertility. They are male attempts to "take over, symbolically and collectively, the functions that women perform individually and naturally." They express "men's desire to detract from the importance of childbearing or to cancel their own obligations to women as the source of life" (118). He speculates that men have created the larger forms of society, in fact, to compensate for their collective sense of procreative inferiority (120).

Bettelheim argues that each sex "feels envy in regard to the sexual organs and functions of the other" (19). Women are free to express this envy; but men, because of the "patriarchal dominance which puts them on top, must repress the extent of their longing for the simplicities and indisputable potentialities of being a woman" (11). Perhaps the central meaning of *Frankenstein* has remained obscure because of this mystique of male superiority. At the same time, the Frankenstein myth continues to obsess us because it articulates basic feelings which are at the core of all human experience.

The story of Frankenstein may serve in our culture as an initiation into awareness of sexual identity. It encourages young men to indulge their envy of female procreative predominance, understand the punishment which awaits trespassing against natural and/or divine limitations in this regard, and renounce their competitive envy in favor of more constructive outlets for their energy. These outlets consist ideally of physical and intellectual labor in the service of family and community. That is, instead of competing with women on a biological playing-field that is not level, they compete with each other in Promethean service to the female who is the source of life. Unfortunately, of course, this ideal has seldom been achieved in reality.3

The thematic content of *Frankenstein* is not limited to adolescent learning about sexual identity. David Ketterer is correct to emphasize that "it asks questions about the nature of knowledge, its extent, its value, and its reliability. Basically *Frankenstein* is about the problematical nature of knowledge" (92).

Early in the history of psychoanalysis, Mary Chadwick argued that infantile sexual curiosity motivates and structures all subsequent learning by the individual. She refers in this connection to alchemical attempts to create
the homunculus and notes that Paracelsus—a major inspiration for the young Victor Frankenstein—actually left behind a recipe for doing so when he died (65). Chadwick also cites examples of primitive art and myth which symbolize this genitaly rooted curiosity by putting eyes on the ends of penises (62). Percy Shelley’s famous hallucination provides a comparable image. The very night of the ghost-story challenge that was the inception of Frankenstein, he encountered the vision of a naked woman whose breasts featured eyes in place of nipples (Rossetti 128). Bettelheim seems to suggest that such a vision could be taken as a reversed gender version of the “seeing-penis.”4 Purely as agents of species preservation, perhaps, men see with their penises and women with their breasts. In any case, these stark images represent the non-cognitive ways of knowing that each sex envies in the other.

The epistemological content of the Frankenstein myth is not only pre-figured in Prometheus, but can also be previewed as mirror images in the Christ and Faustus traditions. As a revolutionary healer, Christ represents the positive aspect of Prometheus. Probably the negative Prometheus, or Faust aspect, is what Veeder senses being thematically rejected by Mary Shelley. All three heroes, at any rate, were punished for their possession of some kind of knowledge.

The theme was reworked in one more very effective version before the end of the 19th century. H.G. Wells’s The Island of Doctor Moreau inspired the same outrage upon publication as had Frankenstein, and for very similar reasons. Both depict the takeover of natural female function by crazed male science.

The ship that rescues the narrator at the start of Moreau is called the Lady Vain. Female vanity might well be understood as rooted in women’s function as the source of human life. It is after escaping female reproductive predominance, then, that Edward Prendick is “restored to life by a kind of Frankensteinian miracle” through the fortuitous appearance and intercession of Moreau’s assistant.5

With difficulty Prendick is finally adopted into the bizarre domesticity which exists on Moreau’s island. There are no women, so Dr Moreau and Montgomery play the role of parents to numerous beastlike beings. Prendick discovers gradually that this odd couple is attempting to create human beings from animals. Moreau is employing the latest vivisectionist techniques he has developed in order to bring forth the human form and consciousness out of more primitive biological material. At first, Dr Moreau experimented wildly with whatever forms his imagination could invent, but after creating a monstrous serpent which terrified everyone, he subsequently “stuck to the ideal of humanity—except for little things” (§14:78). Moreau’s infringement on divine creative power, or nature in general, thus recedes in importance in favor of his focus on the fashioning of human beings without female participation. Pursuing this goal with increasingly relentless obsession and cruelty leads eventually to the destruction of his macabre home and family.
The thematic statement of Moreau clearly condemns the arrogant usurpation by men of the prerogatives of Mother Nature. Wells’s private speculations, outside the commercial requirements of popular literature, were different. In two separate essays published before the novel, he expresses the attitude of the demonic Dr Moreau in positive terms. “The Limits of Individual Plasticity” (1895) shows real enthusiasm for the prospect of using vivisection to mold living creatures “into the most amazing forms” (39). And in “The Province of Pain” (1894), Wells discounts pain as a consideration in such protoplasmic sculpture because of a conviction that lower animals do not feel it as keenly as higher. He also defends Cesare Lombroso’s suggestion “that women felt pain less acutely than men” (196).

Despite the genius of H.G. Wells and his humanitarian commitment, he may be a good example of the gap often found between the ideal and the actual (Christian and Faustian?) performance of Prometheus. His often questioned attitude towards women might best be expressed by the narrator of Tono-Bungay, who devotes himself, instead, to the mistress of scientific truth: “she hides in strange places, she is attained by tortuous and laborious roads, but she is always there! Win her and she will not fail you; she is yours and mankind’s forever. She is reality, the one reality I have found in this strange disorder of existence” (§3.3:346). Science, then, can provide a vessel for the germination of the future hopes of men without the emotional risks run in relationships with women. Unfortunately, scientific fact is hardly less mutable in the long run than feminine affection. Like love, the unpredictable tides of scientific innovation can be navigated only with humility.

Perhaps the ultimate disillusionment of Wells’s evangelical zeal for science is foreshadowed by this early sympathy for Moreau’s attitude. The difference between Victor Frankenstein and Dr Moreau is that the latter never doubts or expresses any regret for his actions. Although founded on doubt, one of the greatest threats to the future of modern science is the absolute hegemony of its rationalist agenda. The other main threat is the vilification of Promethean pursuits, the lack of courage to continually challenge our own ignorance. The Promethean audacity of exploratory logic—and action—is a valuable resource for humanity. However, its only measure of success is service. Moreau is a Faustian Prometheus of the Frankenstein type. He is not serving humanity by his solipsistic rebellion against the scientific status quo. The possibility of such service never occurs to him.

Modern reproductive technology has left both Frankenstein and Moreau far behind. The mapping of the human genome is proceeding at an accelerated pace made possible by the marriage of cytogenetics and cybernetics. Reproduction through direct intervention in the DNA blueprint has become conceivable. Science is making gender increasingly irrelevant, and the motherless child could well emerge soon from the disreputable speculations of SF into the reality of the future.
NOTES

1. Considering the intentional fallacy, even a direct statement from Mary Shelley herself might not constitute irrefutable proof of this hypothesis. Upon consideration, however, recognizing her feeling for male reproductive alienation does answer the question of how she came to write this horrific tale. It also points the way toward explaining the incredible endurance of *Frankenstein* in the western imagination (cf Levine & Knoepflmacher 13).

2. Upon commencing menstruation, the two girls of this group began trying to convince the boys to participate in their physical reality by cutting themselves in a "secret place." A compromise was finally reached whereby the boys would cut their fingers every month and then mix their blood with the menses (Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds* 55). Since the idea of this cutting originated with the girls, apart from any adult influence, Bettelheim suggests that Freud's primal father may not be the only, or primary, inspiration of circumcision and much else.

3. The Bettelheim hypothesis may be wrong, of course. Instead of being a normal phase of development, many or most males may never experience envy of the womb. In that case, womb envy would have to be seen as a strictly pathological phenomenon. Its prevalence in a particular culture, though, might still be a factor in promoting a widespread obsession with a novel like *Frankenstein*.

4. In discussing "Sleeping Beauty," Bettelheim writes that "complete selfhood comes only with having given life, and with nurturing the one whom one has brought into being: with the baby sucking from the mother's body" (*Uses* 235). The nurturing nipple is being proposed here as the ultimate means of self- and ultimately world-apprehension. *Frankenstein* addresses the difficulty which the childless person may experience, then, in perceiving the world to the fullest.

5. Robert M. Philmus points out that two explicit references to *Frankenstein* were deleted from this beginning passage of the original draft (9, note 3). Mary Shelley's masterpiece was apparently very much on Wells's mind as he embarked on his own project.

6. Wells contradicts Lombroso—and himself—in the final paragraphs of this essay (198). But his overall argument seems clearly in harmony with Lombroso and with the traditional view of woman as closer to nature, and the animal kingdom, than is the human male.

7. In fact, we have already progressed to this point in principle. The survival of the species has become more of a rational alternative than a natural instinct, whether we take a global view (nuclear and environmental doom) or restrict ourselves to the intensely personal. In the last scene of *Frankenstein*, the monster exclaims: "I, the miserable and abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on" ($24:204$). The power to give birth so envied by many, or all, men implies the power not to give birth. Male impotence in the face of the accessibility of modern abortion technology is possibly the source of an even deeper existential dread (Chadwick 67). If it does not find relief through love and in service to the community, this angst will attempt to fill the abyss of its own irrelevance with more of the futile compensations which have brought the world to its present state.

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RÉSUMÉ

Steven Lehman. L’Orphelin de mère dans la science fiction: Frankenstein et Moreau.—Cet essai explique la persistence du mythe qui issue du roman Frankenstein de Mary Shelley comme étant le résultat de sa focalisation thématique primaire sur l’envie d’utérus. Le roman a été largement inspiré par les frustrations procréatrices de l’auteur, et le mythe jouit d’une popularité continue depuis presque deux siècles parce qu’il s’adresse principalement aux frustrations subconscientes mâles du même genre. Frankenstein se lit ici dans le contexte de l’oeuvre de Bruno Bettelheim Symbolic Wounds qui, dans sa révision de la théorie psychanalytique traditionnelle, donne à l’envie d’utérus autant d’importance qu’au concept freudien de l’envie de pénis. The Island of Doctor Moreau de Wells est également interprété comme étant un exemple de la science “mâle” usurpatrice de la fonction féminine naturelle. L’épistémologie est aussi un thème étroitement apparenté: les deux romans suggèrent que
l'origine de toute connaissance provient de la curiosité génitale. Les effets d'épouvante créés dans ces romans trouvent leur origine dans la description de la menace que la science moderne présente aux rôles sexuels traditionnels. (SL/ABE)

Abstract.—This essay explains the persistence of the myth deriving from Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein as the result of its primary thematic focus on womb envy. The novel was largely inspired by the author's procreative frustrations, and the myth has enjoyed such persistent popularity for nearly two centuries because it addresses mainly unconscious male frustrations of the same kind. Frankenstein is read here in the light of Bruno Bettelheim’s Symbolic Wounds, which in its revision of psychoanalytic theory gives womb envy equal place with the orthodox Freudian concept of penis envy. Wells's The Island of Doctor Moreau is interpreted as another example of crazed male science usurping a natural female function. Epistemology is a closely related theme in these novels: both suggest that the origin of all learning is rooted in genital curiosity. The horrific effects of both derive from their depictions of the threat posed by modern science to traditional sex roles. (SL)