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March, 2004

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Mary Shelley, Romantic-Era Women, and *Frankenstein's* Genesis

Jan Wellington

(Talk given as part of the Utah Valley University Lecture Series *Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature*, March 2004)

As we know from the story of Eve and the infamous apple, women have had a complex relationship with knowledge: they have desired it, sought it, and often been condemned for acquiring it. In early nineteenth-century Britain--the culture in which Mary Shelley grew up --women were second-class citizens. Considered to be men's property or appendages rather than autonomous beings, they enjoyed few legal rights and had limited opportunities for education. They were seen as (and expected to be) delicate, decorative, emotional, passive, their mental powers limited to keen observation of detail and fanciful flights. Some examples from Shelley's contemporaries will provide a fuller sense of her culture's notions about gender.

In her 1793 treatise, *Letters on the Female Mind*, Letitia Matilda Hawkins had this to say about the difference between female and male capacities and roles: "In general, and almost universally, the female intellect has less strength but more acuteness . . . less perseverance but more vivacity. We are not formed for those deep investigations that tend to the bringing into light reluctant truth," though when the truth is known, maintains Hawkins, women give it "spirit and decoration" (qtd. in Jones 118). Further, whereas "Male genius fetches its treasures from the depths of science, and the accumulated wisdom of the ages: the female finds her's [sic] in the lighter regions of fancy and the passing knowledge of the day" (118). But, Hawkins warns, if women insist on digging for wisdom's "diamonds . . . instead of weaving fragrant garlands, let them not be disappointed if they fail, or angry if the trespass is retorted more to their harm" (qtd. in Jones 119). As Hawkins makes clear, such mental trespasses could produce dire results.

One such result is apparent in Hawkins' description of the effect that mental exertion "produces on the [female] countenance and features. The contracted brow, the prolated visage, the motionless eye-ball, and the fixed attitude, though they may give force and dignity to the strong lines of the male countenance, can give nothing to soft features that is not unpleasant . . ." (qtd. in Jones 118). In short, concerted thought makes women *ugly*. What Hawkins leaves unsaid but makes all too clear is that the ugliness of a thinking woman will *not* attract a mate. Other writers of the time lend support to her conviction that a knowledgeable woman was repulsive to the generality of men.

In her celebrated 1839 conduct book, *The Women of England*, Sarah Stickney Ellis inquires, "what man is there in existence who would not rather his wife should be free of selfishness, than be able to read Virgil without the use of a dictionary . . ." (Damrosch Vol. 2B, 1523). Rather than mental development, Ellis advocates self-abnegation for women, whose place, she maintains, is at home, guarding the hearth, nursing the sick, and (if her husband happens to be a "book-worm") engaging in "that kind of conversation which is best adapted to his taste and habits" (1523). Laying the foundation for Ellis, Mary Shelley, and countless other women, Dr. Gregory, in his widely-read *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, gave this advice to his daughters in 1774: "if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts [i.e., ability] and a cultivated understanding" (31-32).

As these examples suggest, it has long been society's habit to reason backwards and delineate supposedly "innate" gendered attributes from the roles it assigns to the sexes. We can see this confusion at work in another of Shelley's contemporaries, the literary celebrity and moralist Hannah More: conflating culture and biology, she declares in her 1799 *Strictures on*

the Modern System of Female Education, "a woman sees the world, as it were, from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she makes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects which he who stands on a loftier eminence commands" (Damrosch Vol. 2A, 297).

Such notions about women's limited scope necessarily limited their education: for working-class women, education entailed minimal literacy and a grounding in religion; for the middle and upper classes, a hodgepodge of mental and social skills (politely termed "accomplishments") was prescribed. These accomplishments typically included romance languages, moral principles, a little history and math, and a smattering of science; equally important were drawing, dancing, music, fancy needlework, and elegant comportment--"skills" meant to help young women attract, adorn, and entertain husbands. To sum up, cultural ideology in Shelley's day dictated that women's knowledge should be carefully circumscribed and their "creation" limited to the domestic sphere.

Despite these restrictions, many women of the privileged classes did, through self-education and/or sympathetic family members, become learned; writing in particular was a way for them to develop and express their intellects and creative powers. In fact, at the turn of the nineteenth century in Britain, women writers were among the most prolific, influential, and applauded. At the same time, though, there remained much resistance to female achievement from men and women alike: those who would engage in intellectual pursuits had to walk a fine line, demonstrating scrupulous morality and domestic devotion in an effort to avoid being condemned as unnatural or "monstrous."

At a time when men were eagerly seeking to "penetrate the secrets of nature," women had a conflicted relationship with the science. Like their male contemporaries, many women were

eager to pursue mathematics and the physical and natural sciences; botany (or botanizing) was an especially popular pursuit for middle and upper-class females. Yet many a father feared that knowledge of plant structure and reproduction would destroy his daughter's sexual innocence and set her on the path to lasciviousness. Women themselves expressed questions and doubts about science's double-edged potential to improve and harm, yet pursue science they did. One amusing example of women's participation in scientific discourse comes from Shelley's contemporary Charlotte Nooth in her 1815 poem "Love and Chemistry," a work that employs electrical terms to dramatize a love affair. The poem culminates with a character named "Phospher" exclaiming,

"Oh! mayest thou *insulated* be
 From every other one but me;
 To none beside *attraction* give,
 And I thy sole *conductor* live! (Lines 27-30)

Tellingly, as if to deny her own access to such specialized knowledge, the speaker in Nooth's poem is *male*.

Cultural reservations about accomplished women--especially those who excelled in traditionally male disciplines--were expressed even by Mary Shelley's male friends. One of them, the poet Lord Byron, though he admired Mary (no doubt because she wore her learning modestly), had grave reservations about learned ladies. In his epic poem, *Don Juan*, he creates a mother for his hero modeled on his own accomplished wife; Donna Inez, we learn, is "a learned lady, famed/ For every branch of every science known--" (1.10.73-74), a "walking calculation" (I.16.121). In an unforgettable couplet, Byron inquires of his fellow husbands similarly cursed with learned wives, "Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,/ Inform us truly, have they not hen-

peck'd you all?" (1.22.175-76). Seeking relief from his too-perfect wife, Donna Inez' own husband is compelled to stray, and, we hear, "like a lineal son of Eve./ Went plucking various fruits without her leave" (I.18.143-44).

This, then, is the equivocal cultural climate in which women's quest for the fruits of knowledge--and Mary Shelley's development--occurred. Fortunately, though, as the daughter of a radical, highly-independent feminist writer and an influential philosopher/novelist, Shelley was able, by way of her unconventional background, to transcend many of the obstacles attending a young woman's artistic and intellectual growth.

Although Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died a scant twelve days after her daughter Mary's birth, this daughter was weaned on the sentiments expressed in works like the groundbreaking *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*--works the young Mary read while sitting by her mother's grave. In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft had written of the need for women to be educated so as not to "stop the progress of knowledge and virtue" (Damrosch Vol. 2A, 230). Elsewhere in the book, she cast a critical eye on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*--a foundational text, by the way, for both Mary Shelley and her famous novel's creature. The following passage, in which Eve addresses Adam, raised Wollstonecraft's particular ire:

what thou bidst

Unargued I obey; So God ordains;

God is *thy law, thou mine*: to know no more

Is Woman's *happiest* knowledge and her *praise*. (qtd. in Damrosch 2A, 238)

On the contrary, Wollstonecraft maintained that all humans are blessed by their creator with equal capacities for judgement and reason--powers which they are equally duty-bound to develop

and exercise. Nowhere is this imperative more strikingly expressed than in the passage in which Wollstonecraft writes, "My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists--I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body . . ." (Damrosch 2A, 233). Dismantling the feminine ideal of her day, Wollstonecraft continues,

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being (233)

Such a laudable ambition, we should remember, belonged not just to Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary, but to that daughter's most memorable creation--Frankenstein's monster.

Equally important to Shelley's development was the man who married Wollstonecraft, admiring her in life and perpetuating her image and ideas after her death. William Godwin, regarded by many English in the 1790's as their most brilliant and original philosophic mind, would in treatises like *Political Justice* and novels such as *Caleb Williams*, weave the tenets he inherited from John Locke, David Hartley, Adam Smith, and the French *philosophes* into a moral and political philosophy that viewed humans as benevolent, rational, perfectible and just by nature, but corrupted and enslaved by society's institutions. Advocating the overthrow of restrictive social mores and tyrannical laws by educated, independent human beings, Godwin

likewise influenced his worshipful daughter's evolution into just such an educated, independent woman (Mellor Ch. 4).

Possessed of a keen mind, an unslakeable thirst for knowledge, and--in her father's words --an "almost invincible" perseverance (qtd. in Mellor 8), Mary, like most young women of her time, was not sent to school but taught to read at home and (unlike most of her female contemporaries) given a rich intellectual environment to feed on. Godwin, busy with a new wife and family and a struggling publishing business, lacked the time to systematically apply his dead wife's educational tenets to the upbringing of their daughter. Nevertheless--following a tenet shared with Wollstonecraft-- rather than pushing Mary to excel, he focused on cultivating her imagination. Thus she cut her mental teeth on Mother Goose, Beauty and the Beast, Robinson Crusoe, and the Arabian Nights, later feeding voraciously on her father's extensive library while hungrily absorbing the conversation of notable visitors, among them the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge and the scientist Humphrey Davy (Mellor 8-11; Seymour Ch. 4). Sent for her health to Scotland in her early teens, Shelley developed an intense love for nature and began to weave mental fictions that would soon find an outlet on paper.

Returning from Scotland, Mary would encounter and fall in love with another key figure in her life: the brilliant, iconoclastic poet Percy Shelley, who had taken to visiting Godwin in the role of disciple and patron. Captivated by Mary's ethereal beauty, her intellect, and her status as the daughter of two cultural icons, Percy returned her ardor and, despite being already married and a father, persuaded the sixteen-year-old to elope with him to Europe.

It was on the second of their trips to Europe--down the Rhine, past Castle Frankenstein, to Switzerland in the summer of 1816, that Mary's first novel was conceived. On the shores of Lake Geneva in the Villa Diodati, the now-legendary ghost-story-writing competition among

Percy, Mary, her half-sister Claire, Claire's lover Byron, and his doctor Polidori transpired, inspiring Mary's horrific dream of the "pale student of unhallowed arts" (Shelley 191) first beholding "the wretch--the miserable monster" (41) his passion for knowledge had birthed.

Although it was published anonymously and in a limited edition early in 1818, *Frankenstein's*--and its creator's--fame would be cemented by the many dramatic adaptations that soon followed: melodramatic productions which would likewise cement the Frankenstein "myth." One element of that myth is the now-common identification of the name "Frankenstein" with the creature rather than with Victor, his creator; another is the persistent image of the creature as an icon of pure evil. (It's important to recall that it is Victor Frankenstein and the other horrified humans Shelley's creature encounters who call him "monster" even before he engages in monstrous acts.) Nevertheless, countless playwrights and screenwriters in Shelley's wake have persisted in recasting her creation as inherently monstrous rather than *made* so by the humans who rejected him, in the process denying him his warm heart, active imagination, and articulate voice-- a voice of righteous protest which critics deem one of the novel's most innovative features. That Shelley, on the contrary, intended us to sympathetically link her creature with other oppressed and denied outsiders--particularly women--is a point which recent commentators have provocatively made.

One of the most telling pieces of evidence of the creature's "feminization" (and, by extension, of women's "creaturization" at society's hands)--occurs when the creature, abandoned by his creator and wandering alone in the forest, peers into a pool at his reflection in a scene which reflects a famous moment in *Paradise Lost*. In that scene, Eve becomes enamored of her own beautiful aspect--the very aspect of woman that men will continue to fall in love with and worship, at the expense of her mind. In Shelley's rewriting of Milton's scene, the creature sees a

seemingly opposite reflection in the pool: the hideous countenance that will sever him forever from the human intercourse he craves. Yet these scenes are not so opposed after all: for in both, appearances ensure that each longing gazer--beauty and monster--will be denied the opportunity to develop their human potential.

Even today, two centuries later, there are those who perpetuate the myth of woman as lesser, as "creature" rather than creator. Phyllis Zimmerman, for instance, in her recent book, *Shelley's Fiction*, ignores the abundant external evidence from letters and journals of the Shelleys and their friends and argues, from "rather slender" internal evidence ("Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1999") that Percy, not Mary, Shelley was *Frankenstein's* creator. No less than a Harvard professor, John Lauritsen, concurs with Zimmerman, declaring that "Mary lacked the erudition, the imagination, and the command of English to contribute anything more than . . . her clerical services" to the making of the novel. In short, he contends that Mary Shelley, being innately incapable, was incapable of creating *Frankenstein*. While most reputable scholars disagree, the continued existence of this particular Frankenstein myth points to the disturbing persistence of the notion that female genius is preposterous--is monstrous.

The truth, of course, is perplexingly complex. In Shelley's lifetime, readers found other reasons to find her writing monstrous. When it was published, for example, *Frankenstein* (thought by some to be the work of Percy) was both celebrated and condemned for its bold imaginativeness. Eight years later, a critic reviewing Mary's novel *The Last Man* saw fit to applaud her genius, innovativeness, and imagination. Yet this same reviewer, true to his era's increasing demand for verisimilitude in fiction, on the one hand condemned the novel for its lack of realism, while on the other deploring Shelley's "minute[ly]" realistic description of the effects of an epidemic, disgustedly calling it "a lecture in anatomy, in which every part of the human

frame is laid bare to the eye, in its most putrid state of corruption." In the face of such contradictions, it is tempting to declare that a woman just can't win.

Happily, the fact that we are here tonight, embarking on what promises to be a fascinatingly fruitful celebration of Shelley and her creation, proves otherwise. With the help of Mary Shelley and her "hideous progeny" (Shelley 192), women's hard-won struggle to enjoy the fruits of knowledge has borne the sort of fruit that all of us can now enjoy.

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