

“So Spake Our General Mother”:
A Portrait of Mary Shelley as a Young Novelist

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“I did not make myself the heroine of my tales” (xxii)—so claims Mary W. Shelley in the introduction she wrote for the 1831 republication of *Frankenstein*. Her “hideous progeny” had been noisily making its way in the world for more than a decade, and she had been writing creatively (novels, poems and short stories) throughout the period in spite of—or sometimes because of—a succession of family tragedies, domestic disputes, and legal and money troubles. In the quote above, the author is referring to the elaborate fantasies she concocted in her girlhood, but she just as easily could be discussing the works she produced as an adult—for the vast majority of them have male protagonists. This is certainly true of the three novels she is best known for today: *Frankenstein* (1818), *Valperga* (1823), and *The Last Man* (1826). Which has raised the question among scholars, why would such an intelligent and independent woman like Mary Shelley—the daughter of protofeminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whom young Mary knew exclusively through the writings that she absorbed to the point of memorization—consistently make men the central figures in her most important fiction? (I recognize that *import* has been ascribed by a male-dominated academy, but I will leave that discussion to another.)

Numerous essays and books have been written to respond to the scholarly question, or variations of it. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that the subordinate rank of female characters in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is due at least in part to the influence of the seventeenth-century poem that the novel references so frequently, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. That is to say, when Shelley was sketching her female characters—especially Elizabeth

Lavenza, the sisterly love interest and eventual wife of Victor Frankenstein—the budding teenage writer drew freely from Milton’s portrayal of Eve. Elizabeth, like Eve, is completely devoted to her man and readily assigns herself blame for the actions of others. Myriad scholars have worked to identify the Miltonic threads that weave their way throughout *Frankenstein*, so much so that the novel’s narrative is like the creature’s “yellow skin [that] scarcely covered the [Miltonic] work of muscles and arteries beneath” (42; ch. 5). Yet the Shelley/Milton scholarship tends to focus on complexly large-scale issues of psychology and cultural dynamics. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar sum up such scholarship when they plainly assert that “*Frankenstein* in particular is a fictionalized rendition of the meaning of *Paradise Lost* to women” (221).

I have no doubt that Mary Godwin, though young, had the intellect and literary sophistication to deconstruct Milton’s epic and reinvent its component parts for the themes of her novel. But I also believe that the untested and untrained (at least in a traditional and, yes, *male* sense) not-yet-author looked to *Paradise Lost* for much more utilitarian purposes. Mary Godwin had to feel her way through the story with little practical assistance from her lover and writing coach, Percy Shelley, who was more accomplished—and more interested—in poetry.

When Mary experienced her famous dream about “the pale student of unhallowed arts,” she initially thought she had the idea for a story—a reasonable goal for a young writer—but “Shelley urged [her] to develop the idea at greater length” (xxv). There is no question, based on journal entries and letters, that Percy Shelley provided his mistress then wife a vocal readership while she soldiered her way through her first novel-length manuscript, but given his condescending view of prose and his lack of experience with novel writing, one wonders how useful his advice was. Indeed, Johanna M. Smith suggests that in

addition to Mary's "domestic duties . . . as editor her husband may have been a further impediment" (273).

What, then, is a teenage novelist to do? It is one thing to be a voracious reader and quite another to write one's own narrative. And how does a poet like Percy Shelley, who is "more apt to embody ideas and sentiments," instruct his young protégé in nuts-and-bolts issues like developing characters, and interweaving symbolism with plot? As she had done her whole life, Mary looked to books. Not only was she culling philosophical notions from her reading, but now she was synthesizing narrative technique as well. Her reading ranged so widely, it would be naïve to suggest that Milton's work was her only model, but there is no question of its significance. Gilbert and Gubar write,

In these . . . years, Mary Shelley recorded innumerable readings of contemporary gothic novels, as well as a program of study in English, French, and German literature that would do credit to a modern graduate student. But especially, in 1815, 1816, and 1817, she read the works of Milton: *Paradise Lost* (twice), *Paradise Regained*, *Comus*, *Areopagetica*, *Lycidas*. (223-24)

Other pieces of evidence, within the text of *Frankenstein*, that suggest Mary Shelley's mindfulness of Milton are the epigraph from *Paradise Lost* and the creature's repeated allusions to the poem.

In order to assure the novel's publication, Mary needed to give it a masculine tone. She allowed her husband free rein in editing her completed draft. Smith says that "[w]hile some of Percy Shelley's changes are clarifications and others are grammatical, even these minimal alterations show his desire to control the text and shape it in his own image" (273). Additionally, Percy "rewrote some sections extensively" (273). In particular, the young poet was giving the manuscript the appearance of being the product of "a public-school and

university education, available only to men” (273). Once *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* was completed, it was Percy who penned the original preface and pitched the anonymous manuscript to publishers. We know from Mary’s letters, Smith points out, that the young novelist equated masculine writing with “print-worthy dignity” while feminine writing “‘cut a very foolish figure’ in print” (272). Again, this typical nineteenth-century mindset—indeed, *stereotypical*—seems surprising from the product of such a radical union as Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, author of *Political Justice* (1793), among other forward-thinking treatises. But theoretical radicalism is often tempered by practicality.

Moreover, Mary Shelley biographer Noel B. Gerson asserts that Mary and Shelley were not nearly as wild as their reputations implied. In fact, Gerson writes that “Mary would have been shocked to learn that she was as much a prisoner of propriety as her own parents had been in time of crisis” (71). The composition of her first novel, as an unschooled teenager, when she and her husband and infant desperately needed money, could be viewed as a “time of crisis”; so it is not so shocking that “a prisoner of propriety” would set aside feminist ideology and look to John Milton for lessons in narrative craft, in spite of what Gilbert and Gubar term the poet’s carrying on of “a long misogynistic tradition” (188).

Perhaps the principal characteristic that Mary Shelley drew from Milton’s rendering of Eve is the mother of mankind’s subservience, which is quite clear in the first utterance we have from her in the poem. Speaking to Adam, she says, “O thou for whom, / And from whom, I was form’d; flesh of thy flesh; / And without whom am to no end; my guide / And head . . . / I chiefly, who enjoy / So far the happier lot, enjoying thee / Pre-eminent by so much odds . . .” (4.440-47). Following her longish speech in which she anticipates the joy of bearing great numbers of Adam’s children, Milton writes:

So spake our general mother; and with eyes

Of conjugal attraction unprov'd
 And meek surrender, half embracing lean'd
 On our first father: half her swelling breast
 Naked met his, under the flowing gold
 Of her loose tresses hid: he in delight
 Both of her beauty and submissive charms,
 Smil'd with superior love. . . . (4.492-98)

The poet's diction is baldly sexist, given Eve's "meek surrender" as she "lean'd" on Adam, who appreciates her "beauty and submissive charms" and is "superior" even in his love of her. Mary Shelley uses conspicuously similar wording when she introduces the reader to Elizabeth Lavenza, an orphan (like Eve) who is given to Victor Frankenstein as his "pretty present"; and Victor says that his "more than sister" was his "beautiful and adored companion" and from the beginning he "looked upon Elizabeth as [his]" (20; ch. 1). Furthermore, Victor and Elizabeth, growing up together in the innocence of childhood, never bicker: "Harmony was the soul of our companionship," says Victor (22; ch. 2). When Victor's mother dies from scarlet fever, he wants Elizabeth to be able to lean on him—" [A]bove all, I desired to see my sweet Elizabeth in some degree consoled"—but she "strove to act the comforter to us all" (29; ch. 3). That is, in spite of her youth and virginity, Elizabeth naturally assumes a maternal role with the Frankenstein family, or as Milton phrases it, "So spake our general mother." In Elizabeth's letter to Victor while he is away at college, she even refers to his younger brothers as "our dear children" (50; ch. 6). Elizabeth's admiration of and affection for Victor are clear throughout the letter, and she concludes with "Write, dearest Victor—one line—one word will be a blessing to us. . . . [T]ake care of yourself, and, I entreat you, write!" (52).

This Eve-like devotion is further reflected in other female characters in *Frankenstein*. Justine Moritz, who was abandoned by her mother after her father had died, came to live with the Frankenstein family as a servant and dependent; and Elizabeth, in the letter to Victor, describes Justine's utter devotion: "Justine was the most grateful little creature in the world" and "a great favourite of yours" (50; ch. 6). Even when Justine has been sentenced to hang for the murder of William Frankenstein, her advice for Elizabeth is that of submission, saying, ". . . I am resigned to the fate awaiting me. Learn from me, dear lady, to submit in patience to the will of heaven!" (72; ch. 7). This submission to divine decrees in particular is a part of *Paradise Lost* as well when, in Book X, God says to Eve, "[T]o thy husband's will / Thine shall submit; he over thee shall rule" (195-96). Moreover, Justine's advice to Elizabeth, woman to woman, is especially reminiscent of the advice given to Eve by the archangel Michael, God's messenger, when she finds that she is to be expelled from Paradise because of her actions: "Lament not, Eve, but patiently resign / What justly thou hast lost; nor set thy heart, / Thus over-fond, on that which is not thine" (11.287-89).

Archangel Michael's advice to Eve of not setting her heart on that which is not hers is most poignantly displayed in Mary Shelley's novel when Elizabeth is trying to discern if Victor still wants to marry her after all of his years away at college, his illnesses, and all of the tragedies that have befallen the Frankenstein clan (at this point in the narrative, the deaths of Caroline, William, Justine, and Henry Clerval). She asks him, in the cause of their "mutual happiness," if he loves another woman. Elizabeth, of course, is completely enamored of Victor still: "I confess to you, my friend, that I love you and that in my airy dreams of futurity you have been my constant friend and companion" (171; ch. 22). But she wants to make certain that Victor's intention to marry her is "the dictate of [his] own free choice," for she would be "eternally miserable" if he marries her out of obligation. She would prefer that

he marry another if “that love and happiness . . . would alone restore [him]” (172). In short, all of Elizabeth’s hopes for the future are bound up in Victor. Likewise, in Milton, Eve’s expulsion from Paradise is made all the more bitter by her belief that she will be without Adam; however, Michael relieves some of her anxiety by assuring her, “Thy going is not lonely; with thee goes / Thy husband; him to follow thou art bound; / Where he abides, think there thy native soil” (11.290-92). Moreover, Elizabeth’s “airy dreams of futurity” regarding her union with Victor remind one of *Paradise Lost*’s final scene when Michael instructs Adam, “Go, waken Eve; / Her also I with gentle dreams have calm’d, / Portending good, and all her spirits compos’d / To meek submission” (594-97).

Another idea that Mary Shelley may have gotten from Milton is Elizabeth’s blaming herself for actions that are clearly not her fault. Repeatedly in *Paradise Lost* Eve accepts full responsibility for the fall when blame could be placed elsewhere. For example, in Book X, Eve says to Adam,

. . . On me exercise not
 Thy hatred for this misery befallen,
 On me already lost, me than myself
 More miserable; both have sinn’d, but thou,
 Against God only, I against God and thee. . . . (927-31)

Later, Eve says to Adam, “Ill worthy I such title [mother of all mankind] should belong / To me transgressor, who, for thee ordain’d / A help, became thy snare . . .” (11.163-65). But blame for Eve’s transgression could be assigned in many places. Satan, of course, is an obvious choice, as he spies the first couple in Eden and says, “Ah, gentle pair, ye little think how nigh / Your change approaches; when all these delights / Will vanish, and deliver ye to woe . . .” (4.366-68). Yet the blame game does not have to end there. After all, the fall was

foreseen and preordained by God, who planted the tree of knowledge in the garden as an instrument of temptation. Moreover, Gabriel catches Satan in Paradise, where the fallen one is plotting against Adam and Eve, and the archangel is prepared to lead his “angelic squadron” (4.977) against Satan, but God intervenes: “Th’Eternal . . . prevent[s] such horrid fray . . .” and Satan “[m]urm’ring . . . fled the shades of night” (996, 1015). Adam, also, had to eat of the fruit to make the fall complete. Milton writes, “[W]hile Adam took no thought, / Eating his fill . . .” (9.1004-05). Adam is called thoughtless because just before his first bite, the earth quaked and a violent thunderstorm erupted. In other words, Adam should have known better. Likewise, Elizabeth Lavenza blames herself for the tragedy that surrounds her. When, for example, William is killed, Alphonse Frankenstein writes to Victor, his eldest son, and reports that Elizabeth is devastated: “She weeps continually and accuses herself unjustly as the cause of his death” (57; ch. 7). In the same letter, Alphonse describes how William and Ernest, the middle brother, went off by themselves in the woods, and how Ernest lost track of William, who “had run away to hide himself” (56). Elizabeth’s only contribution to the tragedy was speculating that William may have wandered home on his own, thus delaying by a few minutes a search of the woods by torchlight. Clearly the murderer and Ernest are more at fault, and even Alphonse, as head of the house and William’s father, could have disregarded Elizabeth’s suggestion and initiated the search in the forest to begin with. Regardless, Elizabeth cannot be “console[d]” (57). Later, when Justine is sentenced to hang for William’s murder, Elizabeth is so distraught and frustrated by her inability to prove Justine’s innocence, she proclaims, “I wish . . . that I were to die with you; I cannot live in this world of misery” (73; ch. 8).

A final characteristic that Mary Shelley may have borrowed from Milton’s Eve—and this is perhaps the most difficult to fathom for modern feminists—is the *Frankenstein*

women's complete ignorance (that is, their disinterest in knowledge for its own sake). This difference between the sexes is made clear from the novel's opening sentence when Robert Walton writes to his sister, the enigmatic Mrs. Saville, "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings." Captain Walton, the self-educated and self-financed Arctic explorer, hopes to claim a number of scientific discoveries as his own and "to tread a land never imprinted by the foot of *man*" (2; Letter 1; my emphasis). Meanwhile, Walton's sister remains safely—and ignorantly—back in England. This gender difference is amplified when Victor Frankenstein becomes the story's narrator, reporting, "Elizabeth was of a calmer and more concentrated disposition; but . . . I was capable of a more intense application and was more deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge" (22; ch. 2). The author's word choice is interesting: Victor is *capable* of thirsting for knowledge, implying that Elizabeth, being female, is *incapable* of such "intense application." Victor goes on, "While my companion contemplated with a serious and satisfied spirit the magnificent appearances of things, I delighted in investigating their causes" (22). So, Elizabeth, though "serious," must remain at a superficial level of knowledge, with the "appearances of things," while Victor can dig below their surfaces to "their causes." Kate Ellis, in her comparison of the 1818 and 1831 texts, remarks that Percy's editing of this section in particular made Elizabeth fairly creative, but with Mary's revisions 13 years later and nearly 10 years after Percy's death, "Elizabeth's literary studies . . . have been dropped rather than developed" (134). Mary made several significant alterations to the text, according to Smith, who characterizes the revisions as an attempt "to bring her younger, unorthodox self into line with the conventional image of a proper lady" (273).

This distinctly nineteenth-century view of women can certainly be seen in the seventeenth-century *Paradise Lost*, in which Eve blithely announces,

My author [Adam], and disposer, what thou bid'st

Unargued I obey; so God ordains:

God is thy law, thou mine; to know no more

Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise. (4.635-38)

That is, it is the natural order of things that man determines the correct path and woman merely follows his lead, happily and appreciatively. Of course, Eve's great sin is to seek knowledge, which, according to Satan, God has forbidden in order "to keep you low and ignorant" (704). This notion of the natural order is further seen in *Frankenstein* when Victor goes off to Ingolstadt, an all-male college of course, where he is told by his mentor: "If your wish is to become really a *man* of science . . . , I should advise you to apply to every branch of natural philosophy, including mathematics" (34; ch. 3; my emphasis).

A bizarre example of the male superior intellect is in the creature's section of the narrative, in which he reports that he "improved more rapidly than [Safie] the Arabian" (103; ch. 13). So even a reanimated corpse—abused and abandoned by his maker, and sneaking every scrap like a hungry hound—is more adept at acquiring knowledge than a female. Again, this seems an odd plot detail from a woman who could understand several languages by the age of 20. It may be evidence of what Gilbert and Gubar describe as Shelley's and other nineteenth-century authoresses's "painful absorption" of Milton's "misogynistic theology" (189). In any event, the men of *Frankenstein*—Walton, Victor, the creature—boldly go forth in search of knowledge, while the women—Margaret Saville, Elizabeth, Justine, Safie—remain safely (or not) and happily (or not) ignorant.

Finally, Eve's concluding utterances in *Paradise Lost* can be read as eerie foreshadowing to Mary Shelley's life, though the author could only understand this, if she did at all, from the retrospective of her 1831 introduction. Eve says, "[I]hough all by me is lost, / Such favour I unworthy am vouchsaf'd, / By me the promis'd Seed shall all restore" (12.621-23). The word "by" means "because of" here, but if one reads it more prepositionally—"all *near* me are lost"—it certainly pertains to the older Mary Shelley who, by the time of the novel's republication, had lost three children, Percy, her half-sister, even Byron and Polidori, the midwives, so to speak, at the birth of *Frankenstein*. But, like Eve, Mary's Seed did all restore in that Mary and much of her circle have lived on in history solely because of her "hideous progeny" and its countless kin (books, films, cartoons, breakfast cereal). Perhaps still mindful of Milton's Eve and the mother of mankind's promis'd Seed, Mary concludes her 1831 introduction with "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper" (xxvi). Recollecting the walks she took with her "companion," Mary also looks forward to the day she will be reunited with Percy in another world, where she imagines perhaps "[t]hey, hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow / Through Eden [will take] their solitary way" (648-49).

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