

Monstrous Femininity: The Female Abject in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract: This paper analyzes depictions of femininity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), arguing ultimately that Frankenstein's monster is representative of Milton's fallen Eve. I will analyze Victor as a type of Adam, discuss the similarities between Eve's and the monster's creation stories, and finally assess Eve's and the monster's eventual identification with Satan. This analysis presents *Frankenstein* as a reworking of Milton's myth, and in doing so sheds new light on the relationship between Adam and Eve as an archetype of the relationship between the patriarchal male and the resisting female.

In his comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), John Lamb suggests that "[Frankenstein's] monster's identity has been shaped by a cultural myth in which the fallen can be only Adam or Lucifer" (51). However, this essay will consider the implications of the monster as representative of a form of the female—specifically, the abjected female who materializes from the demonization of Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Marie Conn asserts that "no story has had a more profound negative impact on women throughout Western history than the biblical story of Eve," who, in both the biblical account and in Milton's work, becomes an archetype of the abject female who is both "seductive" and "evil" (Conn 3). This abjection of Eve connects Frankenstein's monster to the Edenic myth. In this paper, I will reveal how Frankenstein's monster can be read as representative of Milton's Eve, and thus the ab-

jected female, by analyzing Victor as a type of Adam, discussing the similarities between Eve's and the monster's creation stories, and assessing Eve's and the monster's eventual identification with Satan. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley reworks Milton's myth to display the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster as a reflection of the relationship between Adam and Eve, and ultimately the relationship of the patriarchal male with the unsubmitive female. Through this typological representation, Shelley highlights the inequality of Adam and Eve's relationship and presents the biblical Edenic myth as the root of the English literary tradition of "othering" the female sex.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor is presented as a type of Miltonic Adam who desires knowledge and companionship and, through these desires, exposes the world to monstrosity. Victor's solitude and desire for companionship link him to Milton's Adam, who recognizes his loneliness and desires a "fit help" (8.450). Like Adam in *Paradise Lost*, Victor links his desire for knowledge with his desire for companionship. In "solitude" (75) he embarks on his quest for knowledge, which ultimately leads to his creation of the monster. Similarly, Adam presents God with questions of the Earth and how he may "Adore [God], Author of the Universe" (8.359), before inquiring "but with me / I see not who partakes. In solitude / What happiness?" (8.364–66). Both Adam's and Victor's desire for knowledge lead them to acts of creation. Additionally, in the beginning of *Frankenstein*, Victor warns Robert Walton that the latter's search "for knowledge and wisdom" (62) appears similar to his own, as Robert also desires the "company of a man" (54). Victor relates that he "hope[s] that the gratification of [Robert's] wishes may not be a serpent to sting [him], as [his own] has been" (62). Here, Victor associates his quest for knowledge with the misfortune that came of his creative act. The monster is figured as the "serpent" that stung Victor, just as Eve is accused of being a serpent by Adam in Book X of *Paradise Lost*. Thus, Victor expresses his hope that Robert's desire for knowledge and companionship will not lead to the creation of an abject, as his and Adam's did. These similarities draw to-

gether the female abject of Eve from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the monster of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Moreover, Victor's relationships with Elizabeth and the monster possess similarities to Adam's relationships with prelapsarian and postlapsarian Eve. In this way, both *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* "split" their female characters into archetypes of the ideal and the abject. Splitting occurs as a result of an inability to bring together the dichotomy of both positive and negative qualities of the self or another. Splitting has occurred in literature for centuries in attempts to understand femininity, wherein the female is often split into archetypes of the virgin and the whore. In the Edenic myth, this splitting occurs in unfallen and fallen Eve, and in Shelley's *Frankenstein* it occurs in the characters of Elizabeth and the abjected monster. Victor views Elizabeth as "light and airy"; "she appeared the most fragile creature in the world," and he "never saw so much grace" in one being (66). Similarly, Adam is fixated on Eve's "beauty which whether waking or asleep / Shot forth peculiar graces" (5.14–15). Through the word "grace" and the attribution of an angelic quality, both unfallen Eve and Elizabeth are made to embody ideal femininity through the mediated gaze of a male character. Moreover, Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley's mother and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), regarded Milton's unfallen Eve as "'one of the masculine stereotypes of female nature' in which ... the female ... is grossly distorted [and] subjugated" (Wollstonecraft qtd. in Wittreich 502). Joseph Wittreich recounts that Wollstonecraft "discovers in Milton's Eve a 'commentary not on women but on men from whose imagination she sprang—from Milton's Adam, and before him, from Milton himself'" (Wollstonecraft qtd. in Wittreich 502). Therefore, from Wollstonecraft's perspective, Milton's prelapsarian Eve is the ideal female product of masculine imagination, as she is born through Adam's dream in Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*. She is imagined in Adam's dream as one who "infused / Sweetness into [his] heart, unfelt before" (8.473–75). Similarly, in *Frankenstein* Elizabeth is described by Victor as "good tempered, yet gay and playful as a summer insect"

(66). Not only do both ideal women possess childlike purity, but they also show a willingness to submit to male authority. Elizabeth is described as willing to “submit with ... grace” (66), just as Eve is figured to “[yield] with coy submission, modest pride, and sweet reluctance” (4.310–11). Finally, Victor narrates that “the world was to [him] a secret, which [he] desired to discover; [but] to [Elizabeth] it was a vacancy which she sought to populate with imaginations of her own” (66). Here Victor suggests that Elizabeth is not endowed with his curiosity for knowledge, relating Elizabeth to Eve, who likewise does not participate intellectually in Adam’s conversation with the angel Raphael. Adam, like Victor, “thirsts” (8.8) for knowledge of the universe, while Eve, observing “by his continence [Adam] seemed / entering on studious thoughts abstruse,” contents herself in “retir[ing] in sight” (8.38–40). Thus both women are presented as the ideal female through their beauty, innocence, lack of intellectual curiosity, and willingness to submit to a male as their guide and “head” (1 Cor. 11:3).

In opposition to the ideal relationship of Victor and Elizabeth, which mirrors Adam’s relationship with prelapsarian Eve, Victor’s relationship with the monster presents similarities to Adam’s reaction to the postlapsarian Eve. Lamb suggests that like *Paradise Lost*, “*Frankenstein* is a ‘birth myth’” (52). As such, the creation of Frankenstein’s monster reimagines Milton’s birth of female monstrosity in the character of Eve. Both creatures are born out of the minds of men: the monster is born out of Victor’s creativity and intellect, just as Eve is created through Adam’s dream. Moreover, the monster is assembled from body parts, which Victor fashions into a man, while Eve is born out of Adam’s “rib,” which God then “formed and fashioned with His hands” (8.471). Thus, both the monster and Eve are created from pre-existing body parts in the myths of their birth. Additionally, both Eve and the monster are described as “creature[s]” at the time of their creation. Describing Eve’s creation, Milton writes that “under [God’s] forming hands a creature grew” (8.470), and in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* Victor recalls the “eye of the creature open” (83). The word “creature” refers to

“anything created” (“creature”), and can retain this originally neutral denotation; however, it can be argued that in these myths, given the outcome of both creations, the word “creature” is used to connote a “reprehensible or detestable other” (“creature”). This connotation of creature connects to Julia Kristeva’s definition of the abject as something that is “ejected beyond the scope of the ... tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close.... It beseeches, worries, and fascinates” (1). Both the fallen Eve and Frankenstein’s monster are “close” to Adam and Victor, having been made by them, and both have been “ejected” from the favour of their creators and hated as “detestable other[s]” (“creature”).

Frankenstein also represents the monster as a reimagining of the abjection of Eve through reference to Eve’s first memories. The monster recounts that he “gradually saw plainly the clear stream that supplied [him] with drink, and the trees that shaded [him] with their foliage” (122). This passage evokes Eve’s first memory in *Paradise Lost*, where she gazes into the “clear smooth lake” (4.459–60). Both the monster and Eve are startled by their reflections in the water. Eve indicates that she “started back” (Milton 4.462) just as the monster narrates that he “started back” (130). However, the monster is “terrified, when [he] viewed [himself] in the transparent pool” (130), while Eve is “pleased” (4.463) by the beauty of her reflection. At this moment in *Paradise Lost*, Eve is still the ideal female; however, Shelley’s monster reflects the abject figure that Eve becomes after her temptation by Satan.

In addition, there are similarities between the monster’s creation and Eve’s experience as she eats the forbidden fruit. Firstly, both narratives use a pathetic fallacy to describe the reaction of Nature to the event. In the monster’s birth, it is a “dreary night in November” (83), which reflects the sad results that the birth of the monster will effect. Similarly, Milton uses a pathetic fallacy to describe Nature’s reaction to the fall: “Earth felt the wound and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe” (9.784–85). In both works, Nature foreshadows the result of the creatures’ monstrous births. Furthermore, just as Eve’s

fall is depicted in terms of a sexual act, the monster's awakening is described in similarly eroticized terms. Eve's act of eating the fruit causes nature to "sigh" (9.785) as she is "engorged without restraint" (9.791). Wolfgang Iser suggests Eve's experience with the fruit is described in terms of a female orgasm (113). Correspondingly, Victor narrates that the monster "breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (83). This description of the monster breathing heavily, and the "convulsive" motion of his body corresponds to the interpretation of Eve's fall as a sexual experience mimicking a climactic moment. Consequently, both the fall in Milton's work and the "fall" in Shelley's *Frankenstein* are figured as moments of sexual knowledge, presenting the abjected female as a sexual being.

Frankenstein's monster is further analogous with Eve and thus the abjected female through his eventual association with Satan. In Wollstonecraft's criticism of *Paradise Lost*, she suggests that "women who saw themselves victimized by a male-dominated society and [found] their own situation mirrored in Satan's ... fastened their attention on his soliloquy in book IV" (Wollstonecraft qtd. in Wittreich 503). Through Wollstonecraft's suggestion, Eve is associated with Satan as one who resists tyrannical rule. In his soliloquy, Satan asks, "is there no place / Left for repentance, none for pardon left?" (4.79–80). Viewed through a Wollstonecraftian lens, this speech is a plea from Eve for forgiveness and grace from God, and ultimately a rejection of patriarchal submission and a call for female freedom. Victor's monster is also aligned with Satan as he is presented as carrying "a hell within [him]" (149), evoking Satan's suggestion in *Paradise Lost* that "Which way [he flies] is hell, [he himself is] Hell" (4.75). The monster laments that he "ought to be [Victor's] Adam; but [he is] rather the fallen angel, whom [Victor] drivest from joy for no misdeed" (119). The monster's identification with Satan mimics the feminist claim that under patriarchal oppression "women seemed all too like Satan, who 'bore about within him a hell in his own bosom'" (Wollstonecraft qtd. in Wittreich 503). In both the monster's and Eve's reality of abjection it is Satan who best

represents their desire for liberty.

Furthermore, Adam's hatred and rejection of the post-lapsarian Eve corresponds to Victor's hatred of the monster. After the fall, Adam looks on Eve with "shame, perturbation and despair / Anger ... hate and guile" (10.113–14). Similarly, Victor recalls that "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart" at the sight of his creation (84). This passage illustrates the similarities between both Adam's and Victor's dreams of the ideal, and the hatred they harbour toward their creations. Moreover, Adam associates Eve with the serpent, and expresses his desire for her to be physically grotesque in the following lines:

Out of my sight, thou serpent! That name best
Befits thee with him leagued, thyself as false
And hateful! Nothing wants but that thy shape
Like his and color serpentine may show
Thy inward fraud to warn all creatures from thee
(10.867–71)

This passage is analogous to Victor's expression of disgust at his creation, for which he "had selected his features as beautiful" (83). Victor is unable to imagine what he saw as beautiful about the creature whom he now finds so abhorrent. Driven by the same disgust as Victor, Adam desires Eve to be physically transformed into the serpent so that her outward appearance matches the hatred he feels for her. Finally, Victor laments that his "dreams that had been [his] food and pleasant rest for so long a space, were now become a hell to [him]; and the change was so rapid, the overthrow complete!" (84). In this passage, Victor expresses that his dreams have been drawn out of him to become manifest as a collective grotesque "other" to himself—an "other" fulfilled in the monster. In a similar way, Adam presents Eve as his abjected self by lamenting that she was made by "all but a rib / Crooked by nature, bent, as now appears / More to the part sinister from me drawn / Well if thrown out" (10.884–87). Adam regards Eve as the "sinister" part of himself, which he has "thrown out" (10.887) in the same way that the monster is the dream that Victor heaves from himself.

Ultimately, if this reading is to be accepted, the unde-

niable masculinity of the monster has to be addressed. One might wonder if it is possible for Shelley to have presented a concept of the abjected female through the portrayal of a masculine being. However, this masculinization appears to be the only fitting way to portray such a concept, as the abjected female is one who, in effect, acts as a man. Through tasting the fruit and claiming agency over herself, Eve takes on the characteristics of a man. Thus, Shelley's monster is at once the abjected female and the masculinized female, who dares to take the masculine role of being her own guiding "head" (1 Cor. 11:3). Therefore, it is significant that the monster, as a corresponding figure to the postlapsarian Eve and the abjected female, finally meets Elizabeth, the ideal female, and strangles her to death. Elizabeth, as one archetypal side of the split female, is eliminated by the abjected side. In this way, ungratified in its desire for "communion with an equal" (158), the monster becomes aligned with Satan, as Eve is "leagued" (10.872) with the serpent in *Paradise Lost*. Victor refuses to create "another like" (176) his creation and in this act refuses a relationship of equality, similar to the Edenic hierarchy that raises Adam above Eve. Eve's act of eating the apple can thus be read as a fulfillment of her desire to be "rendered more equal" (9.823) to Adam, though she and the monster both ultimately fail in that project. Therefore, both figures of the abjected female are created by man's unwillingness to allow for equality. Through a reimagining of Milton's "monstrous myth" (Lamb 51), Shelley presents a critique of the great patriarchal text and asserts her own monster as a redemption of Eve who will "ascend [his] funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames" (221). Aligned with the classic images of resistance to tyranny in Eve and Satan, the monster becomes a symbol of female agency that revolts against the forces of patriarchal oppression.

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