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THE (NON) - REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

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Abstract

“Mary Shelley’s first novel both endorses and challenges the traditional gender roles of its late eighteenth-century time period” (Lucy Morrison in Fisher and Silber, 2003:112). There are different interpretations available for *Frankenstein* all over the world. Its ambivalent representation of gender is difficult to decipher, as with everything else in the novel. It's as if Mary Shelley accomplished disguising her own attitude towards the subject. The two notable male characters, Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein are demonstrated by their excessive ambition and egotism, preferring male friendship over a romantic relationship with a woman, resulting in inadequate relationships including that of irresponsible parenting. The female voicing is excluded by choosing three male narrators and furthermore presenting women as idealized objects confined to the private sphere and thus offering a stereotypical image of women in literature at that time. But when the novel extends the image of same men as 'monsters' that can be read as Mary Shelley’s challenge of those gender norms.

This paper examines how women are represented in *Frankenstein* and what role they play, scarcely or not. It also decodes Mary Shelley's intentions behind choosing male narratives over female.

KEYWORDS: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Representation, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Gender roles

INTRODUCTION

The late eighteenth century was marked by the concept of Enlightenment and a debate on the rights of men; however the woman’s lot was bounded by laws and religious doctrines from previous centuries, which imposed monogamy, procreation of children as the purpose of marriage and giving birth outside marriage, banned. The dominant ethos had hierarchical and patriarchal character and it was almost impossible to get divorced. The public institutions used science and laws to manipulate and oppress women. There are

public records of physicians in the eighteenth century arguing, for example, “that since women possess less physical strength than men, they must have a weaker will too” (Richards, 22). In addition to their rights being ignored, women had economic and educational restrictions too.

Mary Shelley growing up in these circumstances must've bore the burden of these societal norms and they played a huge role in shaping her identity. In Mary Shelley’s case, her literary parentage was also responsible for imbuing her with creative vitality and imaginative greatness.

Both her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, were political and social philosophers, writers and iconoclasts whose influence went far beyond the Romantic Movement. Mary Wollstonecraft's book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects' (1792) commenced the Feminist Movement in history and William Godwin's work 'An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness' (1793) is known as the first modern proponent of anarchism.

Mary was familiar with these doctrines and they undoubtedly had an indelible impression on her beliefs growing up. She's most famous for her first work *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) which she started writing at the age of 18 and published anonymously at 20, to be called a 'genius'. Readers may be of the general opinion that Mary Shelley had very little to say about the social position of women since the women in the novel have little to say themselves and hence, she did not care for the gender inequality as her parents did. But the researcher contends, that Mary on the contrary, points and holds a billboard to the condition of women in the nineteenth century by conspicuously demonstrating them as shunned from society, both: socially and sexually. "Frankenstein depicts women firmly entrenched in the domestic sphere, their focus conventionally invested in children and household, while men are more active, more powerful, and encouraged to study and explore the world" (Morrison in Fisher and Silber, 2003:112).

The women identified in the text are Margaret Saville, Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth Lavenza, Justine Moritz, Agatha De Lacey and Safie, The Arabian. Let's examine how Mary presented the female characters in the novel:

(1) Margaret Saville: Margaret Saville is Robert Walton's sister. We only hear of her through the voice of Walton as we do not get to read her letters and as such Mary Shelley follows the refrain that only 'the male sex is authorized to speak'. It is Walton's letters to Margaret that reveal her characterization and indirect voice. Walton addresses to her: "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an

enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings" and a bit further down: "[...] you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation" (Shelley, 1993:13). This is a very subtle and cunning way on Mary Shelley's part to criticize the over-reaching male ambition of glory and discovery, through Margaret's doubts and concerns. Mary allows Margaret a voice with the use of a silent protest in order not to provoke too much.

Margaret is still defined by stereotypical conventions by Walton's praise of her. He idealizes her to the extent that she becomes the 'angel in the house' which is exactly the place she seems to be confined to. While Walton is actively exploring the world she is situated in London, England, passively expecting to hear from her brother. The gender roles between Walton and Margaret are therefore very clear and typical.

(2) Caroline Beaufort: Caroline Beaufort is Victor Frankenstein's mother. She plays the submissive and domesticated roles of wife, mother and daughter in the novel, and does so with an angelic magnificence. Caroline is not significant to the developments of the story and does not appear in the novel for long, before she is killed off by Shelley. This killing of Caroline can be read as 'setting her free' from her stereotyped role. This way, Shelley insinuates that this 'woman-type' is not needed and cannot persist any longer. She holds a mirror of her contemporary society, to express her frustration and resentment of the bourgeois, patriarchal family model so prevalent in her own day.

Caroline is presented to the reader through Victor's narrative only and it is therefore his image of her that we get, not an objective one. He recounts her as a devoted daughter, and a 'proper lady' because she took care of her sick father, setting herself aside completely: "Her father grew worse; her time was more entirely occupied in attending him; her means of subsistence decreased" and when he dies she falls into deep grief, but luckily Alphonse Frankenstein (Victor's father) comes to her rescue: "He came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care" (Shelley, 1993:27). She is thus reduced to –the damsel in distress. Her role

as a 'caretaker' is further permitted by Shelley when she becomes a 'guardian angel' to Elizabeth who catches the scarlet fever. Elizabeth is saved, but Caroline dies in the process. Thus, Shelley indirectly remarks that Caroline is willing to be a martyr for those she loves. Meanwhile Victor is not even willing to risk his reputation to save Justine, who he claims to care deeply for.

(3) Elizabeth Lavenza: Elizabeth is 'found' by Caroline Beaufort on one of her walks amongst the poor in Italy. She is different from other girls: "She appeared of a different stock.[...] her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness, that none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features" (Shelley,1993:28). Elizabeth is 'given' to Victor as a 'present': "On the evening previous to her being brought to my home, my mother had said playfully-'I have a pretty present for my Victor-tomorrow he shall have it.' And when on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally, and looked upon Elizabeth as mine-mine to protect, love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her, I received as made to a possession of my own (Shelley, 1993:29).

Elizabeth is reduced to an object, a thing that can be traded with, and a tool to please and entertain Victor. Furthermore, his statement echoes those of a malignant narcissist. He seems to believe that he can take credit for any praise she might receive and that she reflects him in that way.

Much emphasis is also put on Elizabeth's angelic beauty and motion. Those traits can therefore be seen as the most important to girls and women to possess at this time. But Elizabeth's death may direct the interpretation in a different direction; what is the use of being a devoted and perfect wife if the husband prefers his ambitions and egotism over his loved ones. Shelley shows what happens to women who obey men blindly-they die. But she suggests so in a very subtle and ambiguous manner.

Finally, Elizabeth is the only woman who is actually given a voice in the story. In her letter to Victor she lives up to the expectations of a proper lady and devoted wife. She cares more about

Victor's desires and feelings than her own. After Caroline's death, Elizabeth is announced as the new 'mother' of the household but denied the opportunity to travel (like Victor), drawing a biting image of the idealized but passive 'angel in the house'-female stereotype. At the end she becomes victim of Victor's self-adoration and that can be interpreted as a punishment for her passiveness and obedience.

(4) Justine Moritz: Justine Moritz is the family servant who was taken in by the family because she was cruelly mistreated by her biological mother. We are introduced to her through the letter of Elizabeth. Justine is, like the other women, an idealized 'pretty creature', domesticated, virtuous, passive and devoted to others. When Caroline fell sick Justine attended her with 'anxious affection' and as a result she herself became sick of sorrow. She also cared for her own cruel mother on her sick bed. She is falsely accused of the murder of William Frankenstein. When Elizabeth speaks on her case at the trial, she describes Justine's attachment to William as that of a mother's. In that way she fulfills two female roles; the mother and daughter. Even though Victor claims great fondness towards Justine, it is apparently not enough to make him save her. She is thus sacrificed at the 'altar' of male pride and the executor is society and its laws.

(5) Agatha De Lacey: Agatha is one of the cottagers that the creature 'befriends' (he does not actually befriend them but he sees them as his friends, as he observes them day and night). That she is a devoted daughter is seen in her and Felix's (her brother) unselfishness when they divide the little food they have among them; they give their blind father more food than they allow themselves to have. The creature describes her: "The girl was young, and of gentle demeanor" (Shelley, 1993:84). The creature often observes her in the kitchen or engaging in other domestic affairs but at times she is also out in the field with Felix. She is seen as more active than the four other women in the novel and as a result, perhaps, she does not end up dead.

(6) Safie, the Arabian: It is obvious from the creature's description of her that she is different from the De Lacey's, in both language and looks: "Her

hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated" [Sic] (Shelley, 1993:90). Safie's exotic appearance thus makes her stand out just like the creature. The difference being that hers does not scare people and she can therefore breakdown whatever prejudice there might be, with her friendly and cheerful personality.

The creature also describes her as having a "countenance of angelic beauty and expression" (Shelley, 1993:90), which labels her as an angel but hearing her life story changes that image. Safie, like the creature, has a punishing and selfish father and she is therefore 'forced' to disobey and revolt against him. With Safie, Mary Shelley breaks free from the norms and presents an independent, strong, passionate, and courageous female character. Mary Shelley relays some feminist thought and critique through the character of Safie, who revolted against patriarchal society. Repulsed at the prospect of returning to her country and being immured within the walls of a harem, for the infantile amusement of men, she decides to remain in England where she is allowed to be a part of society.

Safie is thus Mary Shelley's feministic argument and critique of the patriarchal society and the roles ascribed to women. It proves that Mary Shelley is aware of the inequalities between the sexes.

Her representation of women as entrusted and content in stereotypical female roles as mothers, daughters and wives reflect aspects of society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century but is also an attempt to illustrate where the problem lies. Women not being rendered a voice in the novel is a direct parallel to the real world, where the male sex was authorized to speak and women were not, especially in the public sphere. Mary's feministic critique can therefore be seen as a non-verbal critique, since it is also the narrator, who experiences a 'lack of voice' in the nineteenth century.

By choosing male narratives over female Mary brings to light the vehicles of escaping female and the female sexuality. The attitude of shunning both is very clear in Victor's response to the

Creature's earnest demand for a female companion. Victor 'tears to pieces' the nearly completed female, in fear of : the female trying to dominate the male, the female asserting her own will, the female who might not be obedient and mostly her ability to produce an offspring. A. Mellor notes: "What Victor Frankenstein truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner, and to propagate at will, can only appear monstrously ugly to Victor, for she defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive and sexually pleasing" (Mellor, 120).

This is apparent from Mary's representation of women in the novel who are the personification of nineteenth century ideal of the 'Angel in the House', representing the rigid gender-divisions of her patriarchal society.

The male discourse in literature at that time, offered conventional and formulaic images of women and thus, placed limits on the female writers in their depiction of female experience. Mary Shelley's marginalization of female characters, and killing of the 'angelic' women, can be seen as a counter reaction and as a refusal to portray women in those limiting descriptions.

She sets up the pivotal male characters in the book as egotistical over-reachers who fit the Aristotelian archetype of the 'tragic hero', destined to be doomed from the beginning. Furthermore, Victor appears to be an embodiment of the attributes possessed by Mary Shelley's husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, which she did not approve of. She extends the image of Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton as monsters who themselves were 'science's hideous prodigy'; both over-ridden by unbridled ambition and ego, which ultimately destroys them and everyone around them.

Thus, Frankenstein can be read as a horror story by Mary Shelley formulated along gender lines.

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