



## PROMETHEUS, "PARADISE LOST" AND SHELLEY'S "FRANKENSTEIN" : AN INEVITABLE CORRELATION

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### ABSTRACT

This research article aims to explore the inevitable correlation between the themes and concepts of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with that of the character of Prometheus and John Milton's grand epic *Paradise lost*. Mary Shelley's novel plays an enormous part in putting forward the deeper meanings embedded at its heart and is woven into its fabric in a multi layered manner.

**KEY WORDS:** Myth, Legend, Paradise Lost, Christianity

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*Frankenstein* is the story of an eccentric scientist Victor Frankenstein who through an unconventional experiment, attempts to create life and succeeds with horrendous results. Arguably, the first real science fiction novel, the classic story by Mary Shelley has achieved cult status and makes for a riveting, spine-chilling read even today. The central character Victor Frankenstein is born into an affluent Swiss family and has everything a young man would want in life. However, his undying curiosity and hunger for knowledge leads him to study at the prestigious Ingolstadt University. His experiments revolve around the creation of life and consequently, he creates a living being out of the limbs of dead people. Frankenstein is both awed and horrified at his creation and flees from college in an attempt to distance himself from his research and the grotesque creation of his labor. However, this is not easily done as Victor comes to know that the creature has escaped and has committed a murder. Even worse, the creature is aware of his creator and is now seeking him out demanding companionship.

The conflict between the creator and his creation and the horrible consequences of this conflict form the central theme of *Frankenstein*.

The original, full title for the Mary Shelley novel we have come to know, simply, as *Frankenstein was Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. The subtitle is a reference to ancient Greek mythology and is very interesting. It thematically links the novel to myths of mankind's creation and fall, both the Greek and Judeo-Christian. The latter is evident in the numerous allusions throughout the story to Milton's *Paradise Lost* - a poetic retelling of the myths of Satan's fall from grace (as recounted in the so-called *Apocrypha*) and Adam's and Eve's expulsion from Eden (as recounted in *Genesis*). The allusive complexity of the novel draws a parallel between Victor Frankenstein and the Titan, Prometheus; at the same time, Victor is likened to God and his Creature is variously equated with the fallen Adam and Satan.

It is first important to understand some of the particulars of the story of Prometheus. He is usually thought of as the figure who stole fire from the sun and brought it down to man, earning the wrath of Zeus, who punished Prometheus by binding him to a rock in the Caucasus and sending an eagle to eat his liver (which grew back every day so the punishment would be everlasting). The full story of Prometheus is more complicated and dovetails with the myth of Pandora and her infamous box. The clever Prometheus and his dimwitted brother, Epimetheus, were given the task of creating man. According to the most common version of the legend, Prometheus fashioned man out of clay and Athena breathed life into him. Prometheus had great affection for his creation and a great grudge against Zeus and the other Olympians (a recounting of the specific reasons would involve an unnecessary digression). Man was required by Zeus to make animal sacrifices and Prometheus helped man trick Zeus into accepting the bones and fat, rather than the choice meat, as a sacrifice. In retaliation, Zeus deprived man of fire. This is where the familiar part of the myth comes in. Zeus also ordered one of the gods to create a mortal woman of stunning beauty, but deceptive and lying. This was Pandora. Epimetheus fell in love with her, despite the warnings of his brother not to trust gifts from Zeus. Most readers know the story of Pandora's Box, and the resulting suffering and calamity for mankind. This is the ancient Greek version of man's creation and fall.

The subtitle of Shelley's novel clearly casts Victor Frankenstein in the role of Prometheus. Like the Titan, Frankenstein creates a man and gives him life, and, also like Prometheus, he ultimately endures great torment (as he watches friends and loved ones murdered by the Creature). Unlike Prometheus, however, Frankenstein has no affection for his creation, but reviles and abandons it. This dereliction of paternal/Godly duty results in a Pandora's box of evils being let loose with disastrous results for all within Frankenstein's world. In a sense, he is both Prometheus and Epimetheus. These are not the only correlations with the Greek myth. For example, there is a scene in Volume 2, Chapter 3 where the Creature laments the loss of his

fire, which he had accidentally found and did not know how to produce for himself. The main concern of the present treatise, however, is with Shelley's allusions to Milton, so Frankenstein's role as Prometheus will here be set aside.

At the same time, Victor is cast in the role of the Judeo-Christian God as Creator, which places the Creature in the role of Adam. Shelley signals this right from the very beginning with a quotation from *Paradise Lost* in the epigraph:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay  
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me? (10.743-45)

These lines are spoken by Adam, in his anguish, to God, but could just as easily be spoken by the Creature, who is also tormented, to Victor Frankenstein. The Creature, however, is not tormented because of any transgression of his own. He is a fallen, outcast Adam as a result of Victor's transgression and the callousness of humankind. Tragedy does not befall the main characters because Frankenstein tries to "play God" and, therefore, earns His wrath and punishment, as some simplistically think. The tragedy results from his failure to properly care for his creation by leaving it to the mercy of a human race that fears what it does not understand and judges people by superficial appearances. This leads to rejection and profound isolation for the Creature and turns his basically noble nature into something vengeful. In his dark and vengeful scenes, the Creature is re-cast in the role of Milton's Satan, who rails against the God who rejected him and plots to avenge himself upon that God. It will be helpful, here, to examine some specific examples of the numerous references to Milton's masterwork that can be found in Shelley's great gothic novel.

The basic paradigm of Frankenstein as God and Creature as Adam is, perhaps, best exemplified in a scene from Volume 2, Chapter 7. The creature is musing on what a "wretched outcast" he has become. He seeks solace in thoughts of Eden, and pictures himself walking "in the fields of Paradise." He feels sorrow on coming back to reality and realizing that his plight is even worse than Adam's in that he has no Eve to "sooth [his] sorrows." At this point he recalls "Adam's supplication to his Creator."

The reference here is to Book 8 of *Paradise Lost* (lines 338-451), where Adam, pointing out that every other creature has its mate, asks God for a companion for himself because: "What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (8.366-67). The Creature comes to the realization that his Creator, Frankenstein, has abandoned him. Those who know the novel know that the Creature will eventually try to force his Creator to make a mate for him, in a beautiful parallel to this scene in Milton. The paradigm is also expressed a few paragraphs earlier, where the Creature actually talks about having read *Paradise Lost* and consciously compares himself to Adam. As he darkly muses, however: "Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition." As a created man, he is like Adam, but in the torment he suffers - as well as in the vengeance he ultimately seeks - he is more like Satan. There are many references based upon Milton's poem, to the Creature as Satan.

There is, for example, the scene in Volume 2, Chapter 3, where he comes across a hut, inadvertently frightening the poor occupant into fleeing. He is enchanted with the coziness of the dwelling and says that, to him, the cottage seems "as divine a retreat as Pandæmonium appeared to the dæmons of hell after their sufferings in the lake of fire." The reference here is to the city built in Hell, upon a hill above the lake of fire, by Satan and the other outcast angels in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*. Such is the relief the Creature feels upon entering a shelter from the elements after his wanderings. Later, in Volume 2, Chapter 8 of Shelley's book, the Creature is discovered by and driven from the cottagers he had come to love (unbeknownst to them). Feeling more wretched than ever, he realizes that loneliness and rejection by mankind will always plague him - his inner torment will always be with him and he curses his Creator and says: "I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me." The reference here is to Book 4, line 75 of Milton's epic where Satan says: "Which way I flie [*sic*] is Hell; myself am Hell." In other words, even if he physically leaves the confines of the underworld, he is still tormented. To complicate matters, the Creature (a few paragraphs later in the same chapter) returns to his fallen Adam

role when he asks: "And now, with the world before me, whither should I bend my steps?" This reference is to the final lines of *Paradise Lost*, where Adam and Eve are leaving Eden: "The World was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest" (12.646-47). In the last couple of pages of the novel, the Creature again equates himself with Satan. This occurs when he reflects on the death of Elizabeth (the Eve to his Adam), which leads him to feel despair, to which he sees no end. He has lost his hope of a mate. He decides: "I had cast off all feeling...Evil thenceforth became my good." This is a direct paraphrase of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, when he resolves: "All good to me is lost; / Evil, be thou my good" (4.109-10). Just two paragraphs later, there is a wonderful quote wherein he is thinking back over his creation, his early hope and his final downfall: "I cannot believe that I am he whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness...the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil." This is the novel's final nod to Milton. The Creature started out good (like the archangel Lucifer), but became evil (i.e. the fallen Lucifer, called Satan).

Victor Frankenstein also comes to view himself as a fallen one. In Volume 3, Chapter 5 of *Frankenstein*, Victor is reading a letter from Elizabeth, and he, too, dreams of paradise (the paradise to be found in her love). His happiness is short-lived, as he recalls the Creature's threat to bring him woe on his wedding day. Victor thinks to himself: "the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope." He is now comparing himself to the fallen Adam who, when he was cast out of Eden, was blocked from returning by an angel holding a fiery sword. This is also described in Book 12 of Milton's poem (12.636-44). Frankenstein as God has now fallen from grace to become Frankenstein the outcast Adam. Furthermore, the agent of Frankenstein's chastisement is his own Creature who, in this sense, is acting as the God figure!

Thus, the Creation-Fall trope is worked out through a complex series of variations and transformations, in which Victor moves through the roles of Prometheus, God and Adam, and his Creature shifts from Adam to Satan and, even God.

These shifts are signaled by shifting allusions to ancient Greek mythology, as well as to the various parts of *Paradise Lost*, the greatest poem in the English language about the myth of man's creation and fall. This allusive complexity makes the reading of *Frankenstein* a rich experience for the reader, and cements its reputation as one of the greatest novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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