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### Lightning, Knowledge, and the Myth of Prometheus in *Frankenstein*

Knowledge is a distinctively human virtue. After all, if not for the want of human beings to learn of and master our habitat, would we not still be counted among the beasts? For all of the good that knowledge brings to us, however, knowledge can just as easily bring pain. We discover new types of medicine to extend our lives, but that is balanced by our awareness of our mortality. We find new advances in technology with which to bring convenience into our lives, but those advances are countered by the resulting pollutions that are poisoning our world. These conflicting aspects of knowledge and its consequences were first discussed thousands of years ago by the ancient Greeks. The Titan Prometheus bestowed upon mankind the gift of knowledge, but that gift came with a price. In *Frankenstein: or, A Modern Prometheus*, Mary Shelley brings the ideas of Prometheus into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by co-opting three of the central themes of the Prometheus myth—the themes of knowledge with consequence, the underlying sexism within the story of Pandora, and the use of lightning as a means of representing knowledge.

A brief discussion of the myth of Prometheus is warranted. There are two major myths involving Prometheus—those of Prometheus *pyrophorus*, who brings fire from the lightning bolt of Zeus to benefit mankind, and that of Prometheus *plasticator*, who creates man out of clay. These two major themes involving Prometheus at first seem disparate but upon close examination fit together quite well. Prometheus is both the

creator and benefactor of man. Eventually, “[b]y about the second or third century A.D., the two elements were fused together, so that the fire stolen by Prometheus was also the fire of life with which he animated his man of clay” (Joseph 43). This image of lightning providing a “spark” to the fires of knowledge will come to figure prominently in Shelley’s work.

There are other views of Prometheus as well. Susan Tyler Hitchcock, in *Frankenstein: A Cultural History*, summarizes that Prometheus is “a savior who brought not just fire but language, tool making, ...medicine—all the arts and sciences—to humankind” (52). M.K. Joseph asserts that Prometheus becomes both “a representation of the creative power of God” as well as “an accepted image of the creative artist” (43). It is also worth noting that in the earlier versions of the Prometheus myth, after Prometheus’ transgression against the king of Gods, a vengeful Zeus sends Pandora into the world to bring to mankind “grief, cares, and all evil” (Shattuck 15). Roger Shattuck then notes that “[t]he most famous literary treatments of the Prometheus myth...leave out Pandora as an awkward appendage or complication” and in doing so the later authors of works about Prometheus “avoid dealing with the full consequences to humankind of the knowledge Prometheus brings as narrated in Hesiod’s earliest versions” of the myth (15). This aspect of the gift of knowledge, the unforeseen consequences, is something that Mary Shelley explores in *Frankenstein*. Also, as a sidebar, it would be interesting to know Mary Shelley’s opinion as a feminist regarding the concept of Pandora (read—women) being the cause of all of man’s woes.

There is a school of thought that suggests that this forgotten story of Pandora is perhaps what causes Shelley to mention Prometheus in the title of *Frankenstein*. As

noted by Johanna M. Smith "*Frankenstein* was published anonymously", and "its woman author kept her identity hidden" (313). It is also important to note that none of the female characters within the novel speak for themselves, and no female character is charged with any task outside of the home (Johanna Smith 313). In fact, the female characters within *Frankenstein* behave as if any independence whatsoever would be impossible. Shelley's primary female character, Elizabeth, desperately would like to travel to Ingolstadt to call upon her dear Victor Frankenstein, and yet writes in a letter to Victor of how she "regretted not being able to" visit Victor herself (Shelley 65; ch. 6). There are no actual restraints being imposed on Elizabeth, she simply does not consider traveling of her own accord to be a possibility. It is possible then that Shelley wrote her novel in this fashion as a form of protest towards the tale of Pandora. The thinking is that if a woman is nothing but trouble, who brings nothing but anguish to the hearts of men, then let's not give any woman within the novel the opportunity.

A stronger argument for the case that *Frankenstein* could be subtitled Pandora's revenge is made by Harriet Hustis in her essay "Responsible Creativity and the 'Modernity' of Mary Shelley's Prometheus". In that essay, Hustis successfully argues "that Shelley reconfigures the significance of the Prometheus myth in order to foreground the issue of responsible creativity" (846). Responsible creativity can be taken to mean that just as a mother is responsible for her child's well-being, Victor Frankenstein is responsible for the care of the monster. If this is true, that the idea of responsible creativity is an inherent structure within the act of creation, then it can be inferred that since Frankenstein fails his monster then all men would suffer guilt and pain even if Pandora had never existed. By invoking "the issue of paternal negligence

and the abuse of creative power”, Mary Shelley “effectively reconfigures the significance of an ancient myth in decidedly feminist terms” (Hustis 847).

Obviously Mary Shelley was well aware of the classical tales of Prometheus, and the image of Prometheus chained to the mountaintop was one that was clearly on the minds of Shelley and her peers. One of Shelley’s companions at the Villa Diodati during the summer of 1816, in which she began work on *Frankenstein*, was Lord Byron, who during the same period wrote a lyric dedicated to Prometheus (Hitchcock 53). Mary Shelley’s husband, Percy, was so enamored with the legend of Prometheus that Percy was spurred to write an epic poem entitled *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Percy Shelley writes of “a total renovation of nature and human experience, symbolized by the release of the Titan from the rock” (Hitchcock 52). The thought that the quest for knowledge is noble without exception exhibits a common sentiment amongst the intellectuals of the time, and factors into Percy Shelley’s exclusion of Pandora from *Prometheus Unbound*. Simply put, the prevailing thought of the time is that knowledge is power, and limitless knowledge is the path to Godliness. There is not much thought put into the ramifications of what limitless knowledge brings. Mary Shelley crafts Victor Frankenstein as a character who is well aware of the naivety of believing that knowledge has no consequence, as Frankenstein speaks to Rober Walton “[I]earn from me...how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge” (Shelley 57; ch. 4). The themes of power through the act of creation and the consequences thereof figure greatly into Mary Shelley’s crafting of *Frankenstein*.

According to Anthony F. Badalamenti, in his essay “Why did Mary Shelley Write *Frankenstein?*”, Mary Shelley’s intent was to “make a strong emotional appeal to deep

wishes for immortality in man and for an understanding of human origin” (419). These themes ribbon their way through both the myth of Prometheus and the novel *Frankenstein*. This quest for knowledge is what has driven mankind since our earliest days upon Earth, when our ancestors first began to venture out into the world and claim dominance over all of her creatures. It is during the time of Mary Shelley that mankind is beginning to feel as though it has reached a sort of intellectual zenith. Humphrey Davy, of whom Mary Shelley was quite familiar, notes that “a new science has gradually arisen...The dim and uncertain twilight of discovery...has been succeeded by the steady light of truth” (218). This academic narcissism is widespread during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the technological advances of the time lead to a sense of human scientific dominance.

Ironically, this distortion of the purpose of scientific advancement takes place during a time in which, when speaking of the human mind, “there is very little reason for believing that the period of its greatest strength is passed; or even that it has attained its adult state” (Davy 218). The ignorance of the results of unchecked knowledge is eloquently worded by Shattuck, who states, “Prometheus’ daring raid on Olympus produces a liberating fire for our ancestors, and the further consequences of that raid are forgotten” (15). This romantic and idealized view results in the idea that the “[h]umanists and intellectuals in Shelley’s time commonly sided with Prometheus, praising the impulse that had helped humans ascend above the poor circumstances that nature had bestowed upon them” (McCurdy 263).

Unlike most of her contemporaries (including her husband Percy), Mary Shelley recognizes that the goal of science is beginning to shift from unraveling the mysteries of

nature and turning into a means of control (McCurdy 263). Shelley seems to be somewhat skeptical in the opinion that scientific advancement, in general, serves to “improve the human condition” (McCurdy 258). Obviously, Victor Frankenstein fails in his attempt to better mankind, and Frankenstein’s attempt to break through the “fortifications and impediments that seem[ed] to keep human beings from entering the citadel of nature” had unforeseen and dire consequences (Shelley 47; ch. 2). Here we see a clear example of the effect of the Prometheus myth on Shelley’s novel, and the idea of science with consequence again rears up.

The use of lightning as a metaphoric image in the novel *Frankenstein* is both readily apparent and somewhat subtle. Although it can be argued that an examination of the role of lightning in *Frankenstein* is of a basic understanding of literary criticism, the parallels between Prometheus’ theft of Zeus’ lightning, the use of lightning within *Frankenstein*, and scientific understanding of electricity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be understated. Therefore, it is important to examine the role lightning plays in *Frankenstein* and the myth of Prometheus. In doing so, we become aware of the influence of Prometheus myth on Mary Shelley.

Lightning, or rather electricity, is an important image throughout *Frankenstein*. It is a bolt of lightning which gives young Victor Frankenstein reason to discuss the “new and astonishing” ideas of “the subject of electricity and galvanism” (Shelley 48; ch. 2). Just as Prometheus uses Zeus’ lightning to spark the fire of knowledge within man, Mary Shelley uses a lightning bolt to spark Victor Frankenstein’s quest towards creation. However, it must be noted that although Shelley may have been driven by her knowledge of the myth of Prometheus to endow lightning with such power, there are

several other scientific sources of the time which may have served to inspire Shelley to use electricity in such a manner.

In Mary Shelley's 1831 preface to *Frankenstein*, Shelley notes that of great influence to her crafting of her horror story is the notion that Dr. Erasmus Darwin in some way was able to preserve a piece of vermicelli in a glass case. This story apparently had a great affect on Mary Shelley, and in her 1831 preface Shelley "goes on to reveal as her raw materials the conversations at the Villa Diodati about galvanism and Erasmus Darwin's wriggling vermicelli" (Baldick 35). Several scholars have noted that Mary Shelley was greatly interested in chemistry, and seeing as how Mary Shelley could be considered part of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century counter-culture, Shelley certainly would have been familiar with the somewhat anti-establishment Dr. Darwin. On the rainy night in 1816 in which Shelley references in her 1831 preface, Shelley and her companions that night very likely were discussing the theories of Dr. Darwin. In fact, C.U.M. Smith notes that "Darwin's radical political stance, ...views on the future of science and engineering, and...speculations on spontaneous generation...must all have commended him to the small group of English free-thinking expatriates in the villa" (52).

Another scientific breakthrough of the time which would not have escaped the attention of Mary Shelley is that of Luigi Galvani, who in 1780 was able to make an amputated frog's leg twitch by using electrical impulses (Kemp 529). This attempt to define life as a series of electrical impulses rocked the scientific world, for it now seemed that electricity was "the mysterious ingredient that infused dead things with vital powers" (Kemp 529). In the years that followed Galvani's experiment, many other would-be scientists began to experiment with lightning and electricity. As much as it

serves the purpose of this paper to connect the use of lightning in *Frankenstein* to Zeus' stolen bolt, these contemporary experiments with electricity must surely have effected and influenced Mary Shelley.

That said, there are several examples of lightning playing a significant role in *Frankenstein*, both thematically and metaphorically. Lightning within the context of the Prometheus myth was used both to animate man and to provide man with the means to escape his earthly destiny and become like the Gods. Lightning has also come to be associated with the gaining of knowledge and insight into previously unknown conditions. It is in these aspects of lightning do we see the strongest parallels between the myth of Prometheus and *Frankenstein*.

It is in a flash of lightning the Victor Frankenstein sees the monster for what it is—a murderer. After the death of Victor's brother, William, Victor returns to Geneva. Although the housemaid Justine is accused of the heinous crime, Victor cannot bring himself to accept this as fact. A distraught Victor wanders the countryside by night, cursing the fate of his innocent younger brother, when in the words of Frankenstein a "flash of lightning illuminated the object...its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect...the filthy daemon, to whom I had given life...He was the murderer!" (Shelley 75; ch. 7). Victor's anguish is increased dramatically, as he may now blame himself for the death of William. In this instant Victor realizes that he "is a man-maker who has difficulties...being responsible to the man he made" (Badalamenti 432). The flash of lightning, and the knowledge that it brings, serve as "a moment of internal revelation as much as a silhouette perceived in the landscape" (Hitchcock 54).



Lightning also serves as a substitute for specific knowledge when examining the actual creation of the monster. Through the course of the novel, “Victor Frankenstein constructs his monster with no technological ends even remotely in view”, and this stunning lack of detail is brushed aside as if it is of no importance whatsoever (Baldick 44). Within the novel, Shelley has Victor Frankenstein going from discussing his grisly means of gathering body parts for the monster at the end of chapter four directly into the moment of creation at the beginning of chapter five. The lack of “how” on the part of Mary Shelley begs the question, why would Shelley ignore such a seemingly vital piece of information. The answer is quite simple. Howard McCurdy states that “Shelley understood the symbolic importance of the story she was telling...Shelley did not need to know exactly how to raise the dead in order to comment on the cultural significance of such an accomplishment” (261). Here, lightning is provided to the reader by Shelley as a means of explaining the unexplainable, as though it is Shelley herself who is taking the role of Prometheus.

Perhaps the most obvious correlation between the myth of Prometheus and *Frankenstein* can be made by examining the ways in which Mary Shelley uses lightning as the tool by which Victor Frankenstein animates the monster. For all of Mary Shelley’s scientific knowledge, she “is careful not to describe Victor Frankenstein’s ‘instruments of life’, but” Shelley makes it abundantly clear that Frankenstein “used the unleashed powers of ‘electricity and galvanism’” to breathe life into the monster (Kemp 529). Again, an obvious comparison is made between Prometheus and Victor Frankenstein, with lightning being the natural device used to create a being which usurps the natural order. Shelley clearly reinforces this comparison in the words of

Victor Frankenstein, who admits his plan to “infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing which lay at my feet” (60; ch.5). In doing so, Victor Frankenstein is assuming the role of creator, and like Prometheus, knows not of the damage which his attempts to become like God will produce.

If we are to look at Victor Frankenstein as Prometheus, we see several similarities which cannot be denied. Clearly Frankenstein plays the role of Prometheus plasticator, in that Frankenstein creates life out of the lifeless by use of lightning. Also, according to Hustis, Victor assumes the role of Prometheus pyrhoros. Although Victor may not be immediately aware of the fact, the monster is Victor’s charge, and Victor is responsible for providing to his creation the means by which to live a decent, human life. Both Prometheus and Victor Frankenstein steal lightning from God in order to serve their own respective purposes. Finally, and most importantly, both Prometheus and Victor Frankenstein discover too late the potentially destructive consequences of their actions.

Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at a time in which modern science was in its infancy, and the possibilities of where science could take mankind were only beginning to be realized. Shelley was greatly interested in the science of her time, and was born into a household in which the ideals of intellect and radicalism were honored. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley was able to craft a transcendent work, which manages to glorify the wonders of the scientific frontier while at the same time warning of the dangers which remain unforeseen. *Frankenstein* stands as a modern testament to the powerful thirst of knowledge, a knowing tribute to the myths of Prometheus, and a reminder of what lies within Pandora’s Box.

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