Killing Mother Natures: Maternity and Womanhood as a Death Sentence in *Frankenstein*

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, features only a few women throughout the text who are either removed from the direct action, positioned as observers, or are dead and therefore haunt the text at critical moments. Despite being mostly centered on male characters, Shelley's text manages to depict the fatality of womanhood under patriarchy. Through Elizabeth, she offers the 'domestic angel' trope as one of imprisonment and execution; through the female Creature, marriage as a death trap; through Mother Nature, an account of men's physical and ideological assaults on women's bodies; finally, through Mrs. Margaret Saville as the novel's recipient, a woman in a position of power. Through Victor, the image of maternity as punishment is developed, suggesting that the socialization of women as 'happy' mothers incinerates female agency and personhood. I argue that inclusion of female deaths in the contexts of marriage and reproduction capitulates patriarchy as a murderous regime whose demands of heteronormative conformity both create and destroy women. I add that Shelley locates the terrors of parturition on male bodies, including a fear of death-by-birth and disgust for one's child, making legible the reality of tormented, unwilling mothers that is otherwise repressed by patriarchal society. Thus, appropriating male privilege for her purpose, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a novel expressing discontent towards normative institutions, inundating readers who are societally attuned to men's concerns with feminist coded critiques of the family, marriage, and reproduction.

From the start of Victor's narrative, Elizabeth is characterized in angelic terms and is shaped into a divine ornament to the Frankenstein family, essentially imprisoning her in an unrealistic ideal. Elizabeth is to them "a child fairer than pictured cherub—a creature who seemed to shed radiance from her looks and whose form and motions were lighter than the chamois of the hills" (Shelley 27). She is granted a greater-than-heavenly status, outcompeting even the idea of a cherub; her beauty acts as her halo, throwing light from her face, and her movements are as delicate as a mountain goat. Despite this description affording Elizabeth angelic and graceful qualities, Shelley's final use of the chamois image connotes the precarity of idealizing female children. The attributes projected onto her body ascend her to an idealized peak, but one misstep from this angelic summit—like the chamois—would send her plummeting to her death. Elizabeth is thus confined to embodying only moral and physical purity, with the threat of becoming a 'fallen angel' at the base of this mountain keeping her teetering on the summit. Shelley furthers this theme, using descriptors like "The

apparition" (27), "a pretty present" (27), and "promised gift" (27) which thinly veil the flattening and possessing of women entangled in the family's language. The compliments crumble under the critical lens—they are embellished degradations. Elizabeth is made spectral—transparent—an unreal version of herself; her biological conception is written over and the Frankensteins re-conceive her as their son's partner. In essence, she is (re)born to be a bride. This possession is a life term for Elizabeth and Victor's masculinist desires sentence her: "[T]ill death she was to be mine only" (28). This not only makes her "the inmate of [his] parent's house" (27) but an inmate of patriarchal design. Shelley turns these veiled aspersions back on her own characters by deconstructing the barrier between romantic avowals and imprisonment. Her combination of Victor's initial claim and the use of carceral language critiques the socialization of women into angelic wives as an inflicted punishment. What is more is that Elizabeth's tragic arc and the destruction of the female Creature reiterates marriage as death row for women.

Both Elizabeth and the female Creature are discursively designed for marriage as they are subjected to, shaped by, and ultimately executed by their male counterpart's sexist possessiveness. The female Creature is the product of male Creature's internalized patriarchy: "*My* companion must be of the same species and have the same defects. [...] You [Victor] *must* create a female *for me* with whom *I* can live in those sympathies necessary *for my being*" (130-131). He even goes as far to "demand it [...] as a right which [Victor] must not refuse" (131). The female's existence is constructed as entirely centripetal to the male's life, as if her life purpose is to nourish and sustain him. She is possessed prior to her own creation; men monopolize the female body before it even exists. Applying rights-based language to the female body, Shelley underscores how patriarchal ideologies construct women as legal, constitutional property to men. The Creature echoes Victor's early possessive rhetoric that resurfaces after Elizabeth's death: "*my* love, *my* wife, so lately living, so dear, so worthy" (181). Shelley's syntax here ties the metrics of a woman's life to marriage status, revealing that what was "lately living, so dear, so worthy" and was Elizabeth's capacity to be a bride, much like the female Creature. Thus, these women act as Shelley's synecdoche for women at large, who originate and culminate as a man's object and are stripped of agency as patriarchal property. Even Elizabeth acknowledges that marriage to Victor "would render [her] eternally miserable unless it were the dictate of [Victor's] free choice" (173). Elizabeth's language demonstrates that she has been incorporated into the patriarchal regime, believing that marriage to Victor is her duty rather than choice because she does not apply the principle of free choice to herself.

The female Creature does not even live to speak, and that is entirely the point: women, from the time of birth to death within a patriarchal society, have their voices co-opted, destroyed. The female Creature's meticulously crafted body and Elizabeth's assimilated voice symbolize the monolithic construction of women as brides under patriarchy. They exist solely to take on the concerns of men—and it kills them.

Victor's fear of the female Creature's agency quickly leads to an abortion of her life: "[S]he, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation" (153) so he "t[ears] the thing to pieces" (154). The personal pronouns briefly afforded to her decay, Victor's verbal rejection of her humanity transforming her into a 'thing' as his suspicion quickly spirals into paranoia. Victor's concerns reflect patriarchal anxieties over the destruction of a long-standing power structure by young, rebellious women. Likewise, Elizabeth's fate mirrors the female Creature's on her wedding night. She is "lifeless and inanimate, [...] her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier" (181), reduced to another corpse in Victor's experiment. Importantly, Elizabeth's body lies on a 'bridal bier'—a movable device on which a coffin is placed to be carried to the grave. Shelley's alliteration ties the two words' contrasting connotations together, suggesting that for women, marriage is a social and even physical death. Shelley crafts an extended metaphor by having both characters die as 'custom-made' brides: the rigid expectation to marry under patriarchy murders women's personhood as the institution itself deems their lives and bodies 'claimed' property of husbands. Shelley thus paints marriage as a fatal facet of the patriarchal regime and warps the Frankensteins' angelic "apparition" (27) into the vision of terror that always haunted the term. She furthers the notion of feminine destruction by portraying nature as barren following men's conquest.

Shelley employs Mother Nature as a symbol of the feminine, specifically the patriarchal expectation of the feminine to bear fruit and reproduce masculine biological legacies. She highlights the terrorizing nature of this quest by portraying Robert Walton and Victor's initial goals as unflinching conquests of Mother Nature. For example, both men's ambitions are couched in language of desire, echoing the sexual objectification of women. Walton states that he will "satiate" his "ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot on man" (9). Nature is painted as virginal in Walton's description, a sacred territory to be claimed and stamped by one *man* as the first possessor. Victor echoes this sentiment in his quest to be the first to be able to animate lifeless matter. Even at signs of warning, the men persist in their intellectual arousal: "I [Walton] try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight" (9). The fact that Walton must be persuaded to believe a known or plausible truth suggests that he has fashioned an argument against it, disregarding Mother Nature as an authoritative force. He literally (re)envisions the barrenness of the Arctic—a sign that perhaps this is a natural body not *consenting* to be treaded and made fruitful—into a truth that fits his narrative and satisfies his lust. Victor too warps the "rain [...] pouring in torrents, and thick mists [that] hid the summits of the mountains [... obscuring] the faces of those mighty friends" (87) into a challenge: "Still I would penetrate their misty veil and seek them in their cloudy retreats" (87). Nature speaks a language of caution and privacy here. These men do not misunderstand

this language because they acknowledge the barriers Nature puts up. They instead intentionally reinvent her tongue into tones of seduction, invitation, to justify their penetrative assault. Like Mother Nature, women who express their lack of desire to bear the fruit of men's biological and intellectual legacies are considered lacking an 'essential' part of their feminine 'soul' that just needs to be discovered. Similarly, those who deny sexual advances, like Mother Nature's ice that attempted to "[close] in the ship on all sides" (18) to prevent its further penetration, have their refusals mutated into invitations. Finally, the women who are deemed infertile, like Mother Nature's ice, finally "split and cracked in every direction" (198) because they do not or cannot yield the idealized fruit of men's desires. This barrenness forces men to retreat, and once the "heavenly bodies" sought by Victor and Walton in these "undiscovered solitudes" (9) of arctic ice and lifeless matter cannot be found or claimed, Nature transforms into a "vision so horrible" (201) in their eyes. In this sense, the patriarchal optics projected onto Mother Nature, symbolizing women, both construct and destroy her; they intoxicate themselves on the illusions of beauty, willingness, and assumed fertility that create an ideal, an enforced reification, upon the feminine. Yet, confronted with her sobering reality (an authentic, unmoderated self), they blame the object of their desire and re-fashion it into a form of ugliness and failure. Mother Nature serves as a macrocosmic representation of this reality, yet Shelley hones it onto the human psyche and body through Victor.

Shelley locates the experience of parturition on the male body by deploying rhetoric and images of conception, labour, and postpartum depression onto Victor. As one of the novel's most visible characters, this gender-bent application suggests, among other things, that this typically feminine experience can only be made visible through the vehicle of a male character by virtue of his relative publicity. For example, Victor introduces himself as "by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic" (24), which immediately registers him in a sphere of public recognition and a genealogical account which puts weight on his future contribution to this noble lineage. In a sense, Victor is subjected to similar reproductive pressure that women are, and it is important to consider the ways in which Victor embodies the social realities of a woman in the text. He grasps his "capacity for bestowing animation" (44), he calls his experiment "the blooming cheek of life" (43), and he understands the body as "intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, [that] still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour" (44-45). These ideas center the grandeur and toil of life creation on a single human mind and body and are undeniably truths that women must wrap their heads around as the designated reproductive vessels of a patriarchal society. The word 'labour' appears here and continues to populate the entire text, planting Victor into a metaphorical realm of pregnancy and birth as he gives life a human matter. The experience of illness, limited mobility, and physical disability are part of maternity, but they do not 'fit' into the narrative of overjoyed motherhood. Shelley is sure to inscribe it onto Victor; for example, the months that Victor is engaged in creating the Creature

he becomes "pale" and "emaciated with confinement" (45). He too experiences disillusionment with his 'child' after it's awakening or birth. First, he views it as the ultimate "accomplishment of [his] toils" (48) as it experiences the first sensation of life on earth: "it breathed hard, and a half convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (48). Almost immediately, Victor tells readers that "the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart" (48) prior to his escape from the child, from the responsibility of motherhood. This abrupt change in mood and characterization of the newborn creature as disgusting, a "filthy daemon" (65), a "wretch" (48) persists throughout the text, evoking the feeling of a long-term plague ravishing Victor's mind. Shelley's motif is reminiscent of what is now known as postpartum depression, which makes it difficult for the new mother to take care of herself and her baby because of psychological challenges in adjusting to motherhood. Victor consequently details a narrative in which he is deeply psychologically disturbed, has trouble with his old familial relationships, and understands his Creature as the murderer of William, synecdoche for his family. Tying this to Victor's introductory line crafts a relationship in which the birth of the child begins to kill off Victor's sense of self, as it is foundationally defined by his family name. Shelley here illustrates the woman's experience of a lifelong gnawing at agency and self-perception that having a child can produce. This suggests that the notion of 'happy mothers' is an unrealistic patriarchal ideal forced onto female bodies that confines them to the singular label of 'mother,' much like Elizabeth was to 'angelic bride'. Not only does this further the theme of womanhood as a life sentence under the demands of patriarchal reproduction, but it also begins to locate the scene of spiritual barrenness on the body.

Maternity as punishment and the fear of death during labour is furthered by the demands of the Creature for Victor to create a female companion. Victor's second "scene of [his] labours" (150), a remote island where he must reproduce against his will at the demands of a male, quickly deteriorates into a "scene of [his] odious work" (157). The landscape reflects Victor's feelings of dejection and lack of reproductive energy: "It was a place fitted for such a work, being hardly more than a rock whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves. The soil was barren, scarcely affording pasture for a few miserable cows" (150). The hard rock that serves as Victor's site of labour and birth is unfriendly and uncomfortable, even the soil is described as 'barren,' suggesting that the process of his first 'birth' left him unwilling to repeat it. That the natural environment is barren loops back to the depiction of Mother Nature that I have detailed above and makes a significant link between maternal infertility and the diminished energy—emotional and physical—that a mother has available to nourish her own "miserable cows" (150). Shelley creates an atmosphere of imprisonment on this island through a feeling of watchfulness. Victor has no "doubt that the monster followed [him] and would discover himself to [him] when [he] should have finished" (150), "every moment […] fear[ing] to meet [his] persecutor" (151), even seeing "the daemon at the casement" (153) observing his labour. Visible or not, he is the ultimate guard keeping Victor in his makeshift laboratory, where he is essentially

punished for abandoning his creation by being forced to make another, more abhorred. Shelley here implies again the theme of birthing as an enforced punishment, the physical and mental realities of which cage women into a loop of reproduction. Furthermore, the very real fear of dying in childbirth that haunts women and pregnant mothers is present in Victor's paranoid belief that animating the female Creature might come "at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race" (153). The gravity and terrifying nature of this maternal fear is signified in this magnification of death; that one birth might not only kill the creator but humanity itself. And, in the end, Victor is driven to death in the wake of his creation. Much like men co-opt the voices and bodies of women, Shelley enacts a powerful reversal here: she co-opts Victor's narrative sway as one of the primary narrators in her novel, infusing into his plot the very repression, fears, and threat of social and physical death that women face regularly under the patriarchal demand for birthing machines glorified as happy mothers.

Lastly, I turn to Mrs. Saville, to whom the entire novel is addressed. Shelley's removes her from the direct plot, ultimately preserving her as the only living female character and positioning her as the judge presiding over the text. She is implored by each frame narrator to "listen to [their] history" (23), to "listen patiently" (44) to each man's case including bodily desecration, murder, and transgressions against the laws of Nature and God. And when she "has heard that, abandon or commiserate [them], as [she] shall judge that [they] deserve" (91). Although the men are not speaking directly to her, Walton's transcription of each case to be sent to her defers to her as the most authoritative moral presence entangled in the plot. Shelley's "judge" diction and the incorporation of Victor's "deposition" (184) in Volume III infuse a legalistic rhetoric into the text that radiates outward to Saville and the reader, imploring them to take a stance on the crimes populating the novel. This rhetoric as a textual undercurrent further solidifies the carceral forms of punishment and imprisonment that I have explored in relation to women as a theme that electrifies the text. While Saville's objective posture arguably places her as the novel's only woman in a position of power, it is fraught with precarity due to the open-ended nature of Shelley's text. In the end, Mrs. Saville's judgment is never passed down, and the text ends without a conclusive epistolary sign off from Walton. Shelley thus suggests a few possibilities: that Mrs. Saville is also discursively silenced, crowded out by male perspectives; or, more hopefully, that she is granted the freedom *to* judge without having it solidified in text, suggesting that her history is unwritten and in the making; or, that women's power being restricted to symbolic, 'unofficial' courts of opinion makes their authority illegitimate in the patriarchal conception of law.

Ultimately, Shelley's novel demonstrates that women are executed, in the dual sense of the word—administered and killed—by the patriarchal regime demanding an angelic, static bride, a happy mother, and reproductive female. Through the characterizations of each female character, she deconstructs the sanitized versions of these ideals and renders their terror in the fatality of marriage and birth. Though

Victor serves as a vehicle for the exploration of parturition horrors, including abhorring one's child and dying because of birth, it is also important to consider the privileges bound up in the lack of embodiment that comes along with projecting these things onto the male body. While Victor does die, his psyche is most affected. Perhaps this is Shelley's point about women going through this; but the physicality that birthing people experience cannot be fleshed out through Victor's masculinist ambition. This is an area of rich analysis for another essay. Overall, Shelley makes a compelling case against patriarchy's normative institutions by projecting women's social death onto their bodies and the natural world and offers a fruitful avenue to discuss the gender-bent characterization of Victor and its resounding similarities to modern parturition in trans people and IVF politics today.

WORKS CITED

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Arcturus Publishing Ltd., 2022.