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Victor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley and Prometheus in the Role of Creator.

*“The gifts I gave to mortals has yoked me in these sad necessities: I hunted down fire’s stolen spring and hid it in a fennel stalk, revealing it to mortals as teacher of all arts, a great resource. And that’s the crime I pay the cost pinned here in chains beneath the open sky.” - Aeschylus,*

*Prometheus Bound*

Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* tells the story of what happens when man tries to go against the will of God by taking it upon himself to create life, in this case through scientific means. The novel then shows the consequences that follow when said creator is not prepared to take responsibility for his creation. This tale is similar to the Greek myth of Prometheus, the Titan who created man from earth and water and went against the will of the Olympian pantheon, particularly Zeus. By tracing the promethean myth throughout history, it is no surprise that Shelley would have come upon one or more incarnations of it during her lifetime, considering that in one way or another it had been preserved and modified to fit the current time. Multiple writers have created their own versions of the myth, most famously the Greek writers Hesiod and Aeschylus. Naming her novel, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*, Shelley invites readers to contemplate connections between her characters and the myth; however, she, herself, fulfills this role more accurately. Most readers and critics ascribe the term “Modern Prometheus” to the character of Victor Frankenstein, yet the similarities between Victor and the Greek Titan are extremely limited; instead it is Shelley who better fulfills the Titan’s role of creator and protector.

The myth from which Shelly got the name of her novel is a tale dating back to at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The first written account of Prometheus is believed to have come from the works of the Greek poet Hesiod. His poems “Theogony” and “Works and Days,” depict a less popular version of the Greek Titan. His version of Prometheus is no more than a trickster who wants to annoy Zeus. Olga Raggio states in her essay “The Myth of Prometheus: Its Survival and Metamorphoses up to the Eighteenth Century,” that Hesiod believed Prometheus to be the “destroyer of a happy original state” (1). In his account of Prometheus, he depicts a story in which Prometheus tricks Zeus into eating a bull’s bone wrapped in fat during a meeting at Mekone. By doing this, Prometheus enables man to keep their meat and only have to burn animal bones as sacrifices towards the gods. By enraging Zeus, Prometheus sets into motion events most often associated with the Titan. Zeus, hides fire from man, and by doing so is essentially trying to bring on a genocide on Earth. “A great calamity both for yourself and for men to come,” (Hesiod 38) which is the threat spoken by Zeus to Prometheus after he stole back the fire and delivered it to man. Prometheus’s punishment is to be chained to a boulder and have an eagle eat his liver every day, while man’s punishment came in the form of Pandora, the first woman. Hesiod’s depiction of Prometheus is not a flattering one. In his poems, Zeus’s punishments for him are justifiable and Prometheus is in no way the image of a champion of mankind.

Two centuries later a version would emerge in which Prometheus would become the sympathetic and heroic Titan that modern society has come to know. Through the play, *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, Prometheus becomes the martyr for the development of mankind. He steals the fire from Zeus, not as a trick, but instead as a way for caring for his creation. By providing fire for man, he is also bestowing upon them the ability to technologically and artistically advance. “I hunted down fire’s stolen spring and hid it in a fennel stalk, revealing

it to mortals as teacher of all arts, a great resource” (Aeschylus 7). These are the words Prometheus speaks as he explains to Power that he understands the consequences for his actions and that his foresight has enabled him to face this punishment since it provides him with the information on when his punishment would come to an end. This interpretation is far from what Hesiod had portrayed. Aeschylus’s Prometheus is both creator and protector of mankind, not just a trickster.

Though the myth would be altered throughout time, the representation of the myth remains mostly intact. Raggio comes to the conclusion that the myth managed to survive due to “It’s absorption into the Christian iconography” and that the “other episodes of the legend disappear from art of the High Middle Ages” (6). Prometheus became an icon depicted in other biblical iconography and relics. Writers of the church would use Prometheus as an example, as the first sculptor of idols and as the first one responsible for the spread of idolatry, which is the worship of false idols. This is a far jump from the ancient idea of him being the creator of man, but considering that it was the church that absorbed the idea of the Titan, it comes as no surprise that they would eventually use this figure to advance their own agenda. What does come as a surprise is that it is the ancient myths of Prometheus that would be adapted from later writers and poets such as P.B.S. and Mary Shelley, who would go on to bring life to one of the more notable adaptations of the myth.

It is Prometheus the creator that Shelley depicts in her novel, not Prometheus the trickster, or Prometheus the idolater. Yet it is through the role of creator alone that Victor and Prometheus are alike. Their motives and levels of compassion separate them from being identical archetypes of each other. Prometheus suffered so that his creations could flourish, while Victor suffers due to his lack of compassion that he feels towards his creation, and it is through this lack

of feeling that the creature goes from child to monster. There are too many inconsistencies in, not only their personalities, but their roles as well to make them comparable to each other. The idea that Victor is anything like Prometheus is preposterous; the only commonality between the two is that they both create life outside of the typical way. Even if Victor is dubbed the modern version, there is not enough of a similarity to directly connect the two. Had Shelley not included it in the title, the themes would be lost on those who do not know the Promethean myth.

When Prometheus created man, he sculpted them from earth and water. When Victor created man, he composed his creation from dead flesh that he had stolen from graveyards and by desecrating holy ground. Prometheus created man after the Titanomachy, the war between the Titans and the Gods, as a task set upon him by the Olympian gods, with the help of his brother Epimetheus. Victor removed himself from the outside world so that he could focus all of his attention on the science of rejuvenating dead tissue. It is because of this separation that his mind begins to momentarily slip. "Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree; the fall of a leaf startled me, and I shunned my fellow-creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime" (Shelley 60). Unlike Prometheus, the work of creating life took a part of Victor's being, and the toll of it could have been why he shunned his creature instead of embracing it.

In the article "Responsible Creativity and the "Modernity" of Mary Shelley's Prometheus" by Harriet Hustis, she argues that Shelley titled her novel "Modern Prometheus," to "establish a point of departure" from the myth (845). Yet she does not back this statement up. Instead she moves on to discuss how Victor is a creator of man, therefore, Prometheus, and that Shelley is shying away from incorporating anything from the most notable Promethean myth by Aeschylus, which was popular with other Romantic writers and poets of her time. This is

inaccurate, but she does make the point that Victor is nothing remotely like the Prometheus who allowed himself to be tortured for the sake of his creation. Instead he is a creator whose first action upon seeing his newly animated creation is to lock himself in his bedroom and then abandon the house completely, leaving the new born creature to fend for itself.

It is not until chapter ten that Victor has any form of communication with the creature. Though the creature has no formal education, his speech upon seeing his master and creator seems to be that of a well-versed man who can logically think through situations. None of this allegiance came from his creator, instead the creature had to learn these gifts on its own. Prometheus on the other hand stole fire from Zeus so that he could bestow upon man the gifts of learning and the arts. Prometheus wanted his creation to thrive; it was Zeus who wanted to wipeout all of man's race, so that he could create another race, one that was better. This sentiment rings truer to Victor's motive towards his creature, than Prometheus's. Victor's anger is palatable though each word he uses to address his creation, "Wretched devil! You reproach me with your creation; come on, then, that I may extinguish the spark which I so neglectfully bestowed" (Shelley 95). Victor wishes to kill his creation, and by doing so would in a sense create a genocide, which is what Zeus intended to do in *Prometheus Bound*, before Prometheus stepped in to protect his creations. So, like Zeus, Victor has no sympathy for anyone, save but for himself.

Prometheus, by definition, means foresight or forethought, both of which Victor lacks up until it is too late to make a difference. The only time he shows the slightest hint of foresight is when he destroys the female creature's body. His action is out of fear that the creatures will repopulate the earth and wreak havoc on the human race. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, this fear might simply be because they are "other" and he fears what might happen if

they were to become “same.” This careful thinking did not occur to him when he originally decides to defy god and the natural order by taking it upon himself to dabble with balance of life and death. Hustis points out that Victor sacrifices the precision of his work in favor of speed. From the very beginning, this creature means nothing more to him than a science experiment, which would explain his less than paternal emotions that he feels towards it. Though he is responsible for the creation of this life, Victor refuses to take responsibility for it. He blames everything that goes wrong on his creature. This attitude is unlike Prometheus who suffered years of torture so that his creations could live happier and more successful lives.

When Hustis made the remark that Mary Shelley’s interpretation of Prometheus was not based off of the Aeschylus mythos, she apparently overlooked the small details from the Aeschylus myth that Shelley strategically placed within her novel. As previously noted, the Aeschylus tale focuses on the Titan stealing and returning fire to man. This is an action that Victor does not do for his creature. Instead, it is Shelley herself which provides the fire for the creature, and in turn takes on the role of Prometheus. “One Day, when I was oppressed by cold, I found fire which had been left by some wandering beggars” (Shelley 97). Shelley is the one to place the fire within the novel, when there was technically no other purpose for it to be there, other than to be discovered by the creature. This is not the only instance in which Shelley provides gifts for the abandoned creature. As with Prometheus providing man with gifts of knowledge, Shelley provides the creature with gifts of literacy.

During the time that Shelley was working on her novel, she decided early on to incorporate a connection to Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” as discussed in “Mary Shelley Romance and Reality” by Emily Sunstein. Sunstein describes Shelley’s choice in inspiration as “a Promethean ambition given her inexperience and reverence towards Milton” (124). It comes as

no surprise then that the creature finds a sack of books, one of which is "Paradise Lost." It is from this knowledge gifted from Shelley, that the creature learns to read and in some aspects, discovers its place in the world. For Victor was its God and creator, and from what it had learned from Milton's novel "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (Shelley 94). It is interesting that the creature makes the self-connection to Lucifer, considering Percy Shelley connects his interpretation of Prometheus to that of Milton's Lucifer. Percy Shelley went as far as to say that "The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan." "Unsayings His High Language": The Problem of Voice in "Prometheus Unbound" by Susan Hawk Brisman. This little detail found in both writers' works provides evidence that the couple influenced each other's works and that they possibly shared ideas between them. At the very least, there is an apparent common knowledge of both the *Prometheus Bound* and *Paradise Lost* shared between the two writers.

Two years after the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, her husband published a four-act lyrical drama entitled *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). This play is his attempt at creating a continuation for the play *Prometheus Bound*. His play provides even more concise proof that Shelley would have been influenced by the Aeschylus Promethean mythos. However, her incorporation of the myth into her original story is much more subtle than her husband's direct continuation of the play, as well as his attempt to provide an ending for a work that was not his own. In Act three scene three in his play *Prometheus Bound*, Percy fulfills Aeschylus's story by fulfilling Prometheus's foresight in *Prometheus Bound* by having Hercules free him from his chains. "Thy gentle words are sweeter even than freedom long desired and long delayed" (P.B.S. 73). Mary Shelley birthed a tale that was of her own creation, and though she did receive help from her husband, it was not nearly as much as early critics suspected.

There is no question that Percy had some input into the final edits of Shelley's novel, but if one was to examine the earlier drafts, those which were completely Shelley's words, one would discover that all of the original ideas in the novel, as well as the characters, were of her mind alone. In the bind up *The Original Frankenstein* provides two versions of the 1818 edition of the novel. The first version provides one of Percy's edits of the novel and includes the letters from Walton to his sister. The second version in the novel features the earliest known draft of the novel and has all aspects of Percy's editing removed. This version is a bit rough around the edges, but the story is still there; Percy only made it a bit prettier.

Her novel might have begun as a contest between friends, but it soon took on a much more important role to Shelley. While her companions dropped out of the contest, she persisted. Sunstein remarks that "her ambition and her value were at stake, however, and she focused that pressure on her failure, determined to break it"(122). While the others sailed off and continued their carefree attitudes, Shelley determinedly worked on her creation. As with Prometheus, Shelley did not let anything get in her way, not the mocking jokes from her housemates, or the fact her gender would put her novel at a disadvantage. She birthed this creature into existence through ink and paper, while Prometheus used earth and water. Both created something completely new, Prometheus man, and Shelley the first science fiction novel written in prose. Her novel would receive several edits between when she first sat down to conceive her frightening ghost tale, and the 1831<sup>1</sup> edition of her novel. Like Prometheus, she could not allow for herself to abandon her creature, instead she persistently went back to it in hopes of bettering

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<sup>1</sup> The novel was originally published in 1818, revised editions in 1823 and 1831



it. Shelley might not have stolen from any gods, but she did more than just create a thing. This makes her far more Promethean-like than the character of Victor Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley did more for her creation than that of her fictitious modern Prometheus. She faced criticism from all sides including her husband, whose edits attempted to drown out her on creative flame. While Victor abandoned his creature for being unattractive and monstrous, Shelley stood by her creation from its earliest and less than appealing drafts. She worked with it until it became the novel that it was intended to be, while Victor's creature never truly got to become the human it was meant to be due to its abandonment. It is clear that by trying to emulate the promethean myth in her novel, Shelley instead became a modern Prometheus herself. No critics, or Olympian gods, could hold back her determination to finish her novel. This take on her life and work sheds a light on her commitment to her work. It shows that her talent and passion were always there and that her novel was not just a fluke of luck or successful merely because of her husband. Mary Shelley provided the means to bring her creation to fruition on her own and never ran in fear from the creature that was birthed of her own imagination.

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