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This month I will focus on the alternative title to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "The Modern Prometheus" and examine how it connects with the novel's interest in purely paternal creation.

Prometheus is a figure from Greek mythology who creates mankind from clay, and his "modern" successor, Frankenstein, similarly works "to animate the lifeless clay" (78). According to myth, Prometheus later gives fire to mankind, leading to his daily, hepatic punishment by the Olympians. In some myths, however, Prometheus also animates his clay creations using fire. This is why, for instance, when Othello contemplates the irreversibility of murdering Desdemona, he says, "I know not where is that Promethean heat/That can thy light relume. When I have plucked thy rose/I cannot give it vital growth again" (5.2.12-14)[1].

Heat as an animating force is of particular relevance in early theories of the male's dominant role in conception. For example, Aristotle argues that the (male) human body makes semen using *vital heat*. In doing so, the body transfers some of that *vital heat* into the semen, which is then able to use its own *vital heat* to create life by imposing form on chaotic matter (the feminine menses). In order to produce semen (a vehicle of creation), the body itself must have sufficient creative power; it must be "hot" enough. As women do not produce semen, Aristotle concludes that women do not possess sufficient vital heat to create life. Thus, the actual creation of new life is the male's role. The female's role is only to supply the disorganized matter for his vital heat to act upon (See Eichman's essay for further details)[2]. This concept is roughly analogous to Shelley's discussion of creativity: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (440).

Under this ideology, the material substrate is provided by the mother while the organizing life force ("vital heat"/"vital warmth") is provided by the father. In the novel's 1831 introduction, Shelley reflects on the animation of the Creature, writing "perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (441). If the material substrate "might be manufactured"—a chillingly industrial term—then only the organizing life force would be required to produce life. In other words, only the father would be necessary.

Aristotle's theory of the male's creative heat remains the dominant explanation for conception, with some permutations, for centuries. For instance, William Harvey, a 17th century physician—and the first to accurately describe the heart and circulatory system that Aristotle had theorized

emerged from semen “concocting” menstrual blood (spoiler: it doesn’t)—retains Aristotle’s emphasis on vital heat in his writings. As Thomas Laqueur explains, “For Harvey, the heat of intercourse corresponds to no earthly blaze but to the stars, so that sperm bears, Prometheus-like, the celestial fire while fertilization itself is the male’s reenactment of what God wrought at the moment of creation. Impregnation for Harvey becomes metaphorically the igniting of women, setting them aflame as if struck by lightning” (146)[3].

Harvey is not merely an interesting historical aside. When listing the accomplishments of the “modern masters” of science, Frankenstein’s professor, Waldman, includes the “[discovery of] how blood circulates,” a recognizable nod to Harvey’s work (72).

But if semen transmits life force and imposes form on matter, how does it know what form to impose? The answer given by the preformationist theorists, appropriately called “spermists,” is that sperm contain homunculi, fully formed, albeit microscopic living men who, once exposed to the nourishment of the female womb, grow, and are then born. Significantly, the homunculus is first described by Paracelsus, the medieval alchemist who Frankenstein credits as one of the “lords of my imagination” (66).

In my previous two posts, I have made the following arguments: first, that the Creature is portrayed as a real human, who begins life as a neonate and ages over the course of the novel; second, that Frankenstein’s creative process is not scientific, but masturbatory, and this is seen in both his symptoms of chronic masturbation and the erotic undertones of his creative process. Now we can connect these arguments with the theories of vital heat and spermism: by masturbating, Frankenstein produces semen, containing sperm, that when allowed to gestate in the “frame” he has prepared (“manufactured”), eventually becomes a human child (77, 441).

This is remarkably similar to a passage in Paracelsus’s *De natura rerum*:

That the sperm of a man be putrefied by itself in a sealed cucurbit for forty days with the highest degree of putrefaction in a horse’s womb, or at least so long that it comes to life and moves itself, and stirs, which is easily observed. After this time, it will look somewhat like a man, but transparent, without a body. If, after this, it be fed wisely with the Arcanum of human blood, and be nourished for up to forty weeks, and be kept in the even heat of the horse’s womb, a living human child grows therefrom, with all its members like another child, which is born of a woman, but much smaller (328–329)[4]

But why does Shelley use these spermist theories in her novel? The anti-feminist nature of these beliefs is obvious; at their basis, they negate even the most rudimentary contributions of motherhood. In the novel’s 1831 introduction, Shelley writes at length about her parentage and describes herself as “the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity” (437). Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was indeed a distinguished literary celebrity, well-known for her feminist writings. And Wollstonecraft wrote extensively against both spermist theories of fetal

development and their accompanying diminution of women. In “Chubby Cheeks and the Bloated Monster: The Politics of Reproduction in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*,” Diana Edelman-Young writes that Wollstonecraft believes in the equality of the “woman’s role with man’s [in conception]. Both active and creative, [the woman] is no longer merely material, nor merely an incubator [...] conception is the business of both parties, not just one animating force” (693)[5]. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft contrasts the children raised by the ideal mother—“smiles on their chubby cheeks”—with the unhealthy, “bloated monsters” produced by “designing men” (684).

Frankenstein then makes for a compelling illustration of Wollstonecraft’s thesis: a fantastical exploration of the disastrous consequences of sole fatherhood—particularly sole fatherhood premised on the unimportance and the exclusion of women. The argument’s power is only enhanced by its connection to the very real minimization of maternal contribution taking place in scientific and philosophic discourses at the time of the novel’s conception. As Frankenstein himself states, these actions—as well as the theoretical and cultural frameworks that support them—lead only to “destruction and infallible misery” (76).

[1] Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017.

[2] Eichman, Peter. “Sex, Blood, and Soul: The Transmission of Form in Aristotle’s Biology.” May 2007, pp. 1–16., echodin.net/papers/phil515/aristotle.pdf.

[3] Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

[4] Grafton, Anthony, and Nancy G. Siraisi. *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*. MIT Press, 1999.

[5] Edelman-Young, Diana. “Chubby Cheeks and the Bloated Monster: The Politics of Reproduction in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*.” *European Romantic Review*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2014, pp. 683–704.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Original Frankenstein*. Ed. Charles E. Robinson. New York: Vintage, 2009. Print.

