

## Article

# Or, The Modern God: Biblical Allusions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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**Abstract:** Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is largely organized around its explicit reference to Milton's retelling of Genesis 2–3, *Paradise Lost*. Unfortunately, this reference to Milton has discouraged scholars from going back to the Old Testament itself. In fact, the novel contains three crucial biblical allusions. Most obvious, of course, are the allusions to creation (Genesis 1–3), which contain details not found in Milton's epic. The biblically literate reader will be able to discern two more crucial biblical allusions: one to Exodus 32–33 and the other to the Book of Job. In both of these texts, we find a man—Moses and Job, respectively—seeking an audience with his creator, such as that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden.

**Keywords:** Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; Old Testament; Hebrew Bible; biblical allusions

## 1. Introduction Section Title

The subtitle that Mary Shelley gave to *Frankenstein* is: *or, The Modern Prometheus*—apparently situating the novel in relation to certain Greek and Roman sources. Thus, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 2004), on the one hand, Prometheus (*Iapeto*) creates humans out of dirt mixed with water, in which case Victor Frankenstein is simply a type of modern demiurge. According to Hesiod, on the other hand, Prometheus is no creator, but rather a culture hero who, by stealing fire from heaven against the express wishes of Zeus, bequeathed culture and knowledge to mankind—fire being that divine force which enables humans to cook their food, offer up sacrifices to the gods in the form of smoke, work metals, and so forth. Zeus punishes men as the recipients of this illicit gift by creating “an affliction . . . to set against the fire [*anti puros*]” (Hesiod 1988, pp. 20, 38), namely, Pandora, from whom descends “the female sex [*genos gunaikōn*]” (Hesiod 1988, p. 20), a curse that will then counteract the benefits of fire.<sup>1</sup> In this case, Frankenstein's modern-Promethean endeavors must be seen as an encroachment upon certain divine prerogatives, albeit one that leads to the human acquisition of knowledge—more specifically, science, a recurring theme in the novel.<sup>2</sup>

In his highly suggestive and meticulously researched “Introduction” to the Hackett edition of the novel, David Wootton recently suggested a third reading of “modern Prometheus” (Wootton 2020).<sup>3</sup> In order to account for a Prometheus who, contrary to the Greek and Latin sources, “associated the theft of fire with the creation of human life”, he turns to the Neoplatonic “Christian accounts of the Promethean myth”, in which this association had become “a standard element” (ibid., p. xxii). This is the version of the myth, he argues, that Mary Shelley would have been familiar with thanks to her father, William Godwin, who wrote (under the pseudonym Edward Baldwin) an account of Greek and Roman mythology aimed at children.<sup>4</sup> However, it is far from clear that Neoplatonism is necessary to associate the theft of heavenly fire with the creation of humankind. Godwin (Baldwin) recounts, for example, how Prometheus “carr[ies] off at the tip of his wand a portion of celestial fire” in order to animate his “man of clay” (Wootton 2020, p. 201). One can easily imagine how post-classical readers spontaneously combined the Greek and Latin sources, insofar as Prometheus, according to Hesiod, stole fire from heaven by



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hiding it in a fennel stalk. What is truly remarkable in all of this, however, is how Wootton goes to the trouble of invoking an obscure Neoplatonic–Christian tradition while failing to note that already in Genesis “the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (2:7)<sup>5</sup>—a clay man animated by heavenly breath.

The specialists, it would seem, are reluctant to acknowledge that the novel’s central literary source, at least in regard to the themes of creation and knowledge, is the Old Testament, in particular, the two creation accounts found in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3.<sup>6</sup> Not only does Frankenstein’s ambition to bestow life upon a creature of his own making mimic the God of Genesis, this Creature will eventually read John Milton’s retelling of Genesis 1–3, *Paradise Lost*, thanks to which he will, in effect, come to see himself as a modern Adam. Furthermore, reminiscent of the ancient Adam—“And the LORD God said, *It is not good that the man [ha’adam] should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him*” (Gen 2:18)—the Creature reasonably concludes that the solution to his plight—his complete and utter rejection by human society—is to be found in the creation of a female companion, presumably based in part on his reading of Genesis, via Milton: “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse” (Shelley 2018, p. 136; 2.9).<sup>7</sup> (Eve is thus vaguely reminiscent of, if historically unrelated to, Pandora, that gift–curse bestowed by Zeus upon Greek men.) It is from precisely this desideratum that the rest of the novel’s plot fatally unfolds.

Unfortunately, the novel’s explicit references to Milton seem to have discouraged readers from going back to Genesis.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ana M. Acosta recently went so far as to maintain: “The low esteem in which [Mary Shelley] held the Hebrew Bible may explain why she turned to the account of the Creation and the Fall in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* instead of Genesis when choosing the books that the monster in Frankenstein would read” (Acosta 2016, p. 366). I could not disagree more. In fact, various entries in Shelley’s journals, though they by and large postdate the writing of the novel, attest to the fact that both she and her husband were in the habit of reading the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while it is true that the Creature, as a character within the novel, presumably only had access to *Paradise Lost*, Shelley, as the novel’s author in the “real” world, nevertheless had access to Genesis. Thus, various details in the novel, as I will demonstrate, clearly allude to the Book of Genesis itself and not just to Milton’s epic. What is more, the reference to Eden is not the only biblical allusion in *Frankenstein*. The biblically literate reader will be able to discern two more crucial biblical allusions: one to Exodus 32–33 and the other to the Book of Job.<sup>10</sup> In both of these texts, we find a man—Moses<sup>11</sup> and Job,<sup>12</sup> respectively—seeking an audience with his God, such as that which Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden for a time.<sup>13</sup>

These allusions thus shed light on a major dimension of the novel’s plot, namely, Victor’s evolving relationship with his ultimately monstrous creature—from horrified retreat to reluctant confrontation, defiant betrayal, and diabolical pursuit. Frankenstein, in light of these allusions, comes to be seen as a monstrous inversion of the biblical God, who is said to care for his creatures, even if he is also capable of punishing them. The frequent and varied allusions to the Bible are thus, in my view, much more significant than the titular reference to Prometheus. I would even go so far as to maintain that the novel’s subtitle might more appropriately have been: *or, The Modern God*.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Rousseau

Before proceeding to my analysis and interpretation of these biblical allusions, I would first like to discuss another central, if non-biblical, literary inspiration, namely, the oeuvre of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Naturally, *Frankenstein*’s relationship to Rousseau is the subject of much scholarly debate.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, insofar as Rousseau merely constitutes a type of horizon for my interpretation here, I will offer a few minimal observations regarding the

connections joining Rousseau to the novel because understanding the novel's relationship to Rousseau will ultimately bring its allusions to the Bible into better focus.

I would go so far as to argue that Frankenstein's Creature is modeled in part on Rousseau himself and Shelley herself. First, there are the obvious biographical connections joining Shelley to Rousseau. Just as Rousseau's mother died a few days after giving birth to him, so too would Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, die shortly after her birth. Frankenstein, like Rousseau, hails from Geneva. Additionally, it was while Shelley summered in Geneva—during the “Year without a Summer”—with her future husband, Percy Shelley, as well as with Lord Byron and John Polidori, that she first conceived of her novel. Both Rousseau and Shelley were ostracized by “decent” society at various points in their lives due to their unconventional opinions and lifestyles. It is worth noting that the novel's Creature, too, is reviled by society due to his unconventional (monstrous) appearance. Finally, Rousseau, Shelley, and her Creature are all self-educated due to the circumstances surrounding their births. I maintain, in other words, that Shelley identified with Frankenstein's Creature as well as with Rousseau. The novel, then, is in large part an homage to Rousseau, despite the fact that Shelley's mother famously criticized the philosopher's sexist views on education in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Shelley, thanks no doubt in large part to her mother, apparently felt “vindicated” enough to oppose—at least in this limited way—the mother she never met.

Moving beyond biography, I would invoke Rousseau's famous declaration in the opening line of *The Social Contract*: “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau (2002, p. 156). Our original, natural state, then, is good, not unlike Adam's. As Jean Starobinski observes in his “Introduction” to *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*: “Rousseau rewrites a philosophical Genesis, which lacks neither the Garden of Eden, nor Sin, nor the confusion of languages”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, it is culture or society that enslaves us. Thus, “for Rousseau”, Erich Auerbach once remarked, “society takes over the role of original sin as conceived by Christians” (Auerbach (1961, p. 228), meaning that civilization, similar to the acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil—at least according to one extremely widespread and influential, if mistaken, reading of Genesis 2–3—constitutes a kind of “fall”.<sup>17</sup> Just so, Frankenstein, in a reverie during one of his solitary walks—reminiscent of Rousseau's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*—declares: “Alas! why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings. If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free; but now we are moved by every wind that blows, and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us” (Shelley 2018, p. 88; 2.2).

More directly relevant to my interpretation, the Creature himself is actually born good, capable of virtue. His first “savage” days are spent foraging for berries, food provided by nature (ibid., pp. 93–94; 2.3)—reminiscent of Adam and Eve in the garden, who eat only fruit gathered from God's orchard—and thus demonstrates what Rousseau would call the Creature's “self-love” (amour de soi), namely, the human instinct for self-preservation. He eventually finds a “low hovel” (ibid., p. 97; 2.3), where he observes and experiences for himself that Rousseauian drive known as “pity” (pitié), that is, the human instinct of compassion.

They often, I believe, suffered the pangs of hunger very poignantly, especially the two younger cottagers; for several times they placed food before the old man, when they reserved none for themselves.

This trait of kindness moved me sensibly. I had been accustomed, during the night, to steal a part of their store for my own consumption; but when I found that in doing this I inflicted pain on the cottagers, I abstained, and satisfied myself with berries, nuts, and roots, which I gathered from a neighboring wood. (ibid., p. 102; 2.4)

Yes, the Creature steals, but as soon as he understands that this act causes his unwitting hosts pain, he reverts to foraging for his sustenance.

Soon enough, the Creature learns of the evils of so-called civilization thanks to certain historical lessons he receives in what I would describe as the bildungsroman embedded within the novel,<sup>18</sup> clearly a nod to Rousseau's *Émile*:

For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing . . . . While I listened to the instructions which Felix bestowed upon the Arabian, the strange system of human society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood. The words induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave. (ibid., pp. 110–11; 2.5)

In effect, the Creature learns here about Rousseau's theory of the "origin" of inequality, arguably conceived of (as we have seen) in relation to the Christian notion of "original sin". Understandably, he comes to regret leaving his Edenic life in his "native wood" for the sake of knowledge: "I cannot describe to you the agony that these reflections [about being a monster] inflicted upon me; I tried to dispel them, but sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known or felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!" (ibid., p. 111; 2.5). Ultimately, then, in a telling departure from Rousseau, it is precisely by rejecting and persecuting the Creature, and thus excluding him from any possible social contract, that society turns him into the Monster. Thus, it is as an inversion of the free and good Creature who existed before his encounter with and rejection by society that the Monster will wreak havoc in the novel, chained as he now is to a hatred born of grievous inequality.

In a pointed reversal of the biblical representation of God, this rejection perversely begins with the modern God himself, namely, Victor Frankenstein, he who most owed his Creature some modicum of pity. More perversely still, the Creature discovers for himself the reasons for this heartless rejection through his reading of his creator's journal, an activity that thus allegorizes that devotional practice now known as "Bible study"—in this case, the study of a most horrific creation story:

I began to study . . . with diligence . . . your journal of the four months that preceded my creation. You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work . . . . Every thing is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine ineffaceable. I sickened as I read. "Hateful day when I received life!" I exclaimed in agony. "Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of your's, more horrid from its very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and detested. (ibid., pp. 121–22; 2.7)

Whereas the first humans, according to Genesis, were created in the "image of God" (Gen 1:27), here the Creature was made in his modern god's "filthy type", all the more "horrid" due to his "resemblance" to human beings. Whereas the Bible as a whole communicates God's loving care for his creation, Frankenstein's "Bible" reveals the sense of horror that this modern god feels toward his modern Adam. Not even Satan was so "solitary and detested". The communication between creator and creature that takes place within the world of her novel led Mary Shelley to fashion the three biblical allusions mentioned earlier.

### 3. Genesis

Frankenstein's ambitions, as he stands at the precipice of bestowing life upon his Creature, are nothing short of biblical in their proportions. Just as in Eden, "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7), so too does Frankenstein "toil" in order to "animate the lifeless clay" (Shelley 2018, p. 42; 1.3). Not only does Frankenstein propose to introduce light into darkness, as did God in Genesis 1, he would ultimately attempt to overcome death itself—reminiscent of the tree of life planted in the midst of the garden (2:9)—but this time through science: "Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source . . . Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time . . . renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (Shelley 2018, p. 42; 1.3). He eventually refers to this principle of animation as a "spark of being" (ibid., p. 45; 1.4), a slight variant of the "breath of life" breathed by the LORD into Adam's nostrils (Gen 2:7). Indeed, according to Godwin (Baldwin), Prometheus "formed a man of clay of such exquisite workmanship, that he wanted nothing but a *living soul*" (emphasis added)—note the precise echo of Gen 2:7—a want filled by "celestial fire" (Wootton 2020, p. 201). In these ways, Victor Frankenstein aspires to be a modern god, rather than a modern Prometheus.

Shelley goes so far as to reimagine the first days of biblical humanity's earthly existence—Adam's, in particular—through the eyes of the Creature:

It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened as it were instinctively, finding myself so desolate . . . I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept. Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens, and gave me a sensation of pleasure . . . I again went out in search of berries. I was still cold, when under one of the trees I found a huge cloak, with which I covered myself, and sat down upon the ground . . . Several changes of day and night passed, and the orb of night had greatly lessened when I began to distinguish my sensations from each other". (ibid. Shelley 2018, pp. 93–94; 2.3)<sup>19</sup>

Note the passage of "several" days, reminiscent of the first seven days recounted in Genesis 1. Just as God "divided the light from the darkness" (Gen 1:4) and "divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament" (1:7), so too the Creature, who at first "could distinguish, nothing", must slowly learn to distinguish between various sensations and things.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, reminiscent of Adam's original diet ("Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat" (2:16)), the Creature sustains himself by eating berries gathered from the forest, that is, fruit that one merely gathers, as opposed to agricultural products that one must plant and cultivate, and eats them in the raw state. One crucial difference remains, however: the novel's Creature has been abandoned by his creator. In both Genesis 1 and 2,<sup>21</sup> in a revealing contrast, God immediately speaks to his creation: "Be fruitful, and multiply" (1:28); "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it" (2:16–17). Frankenstein's Creature, however, must fend for himself, without the guidance of a creator.

What is more, the Creature, upon reading Milton's epic, comes to realize that he is a modern Adam. As the Monster eventually declares, finally face to face with his creator, "I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (90, 2.2)—viz., he is an innocent Satan. Based upon his knowledge of Genesis, via Milton, the Creature concludes that he needs a female mate to make his life bearable: "What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they

will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! my creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!" (Shelley 2018, p. 137; 2.9). Frankenstein himself is moved by this plea: "but I felt that there was some justice in his argument . . . . And did I not, as his maker, owe him all the portion of happiness that it was in my power to bestow?" (ibid.). The Creature's demand, as well as Frankenstein's eventual agreement to meet it, follow from the LORD God's realization that "*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him*" (Gen 2:18). In modern terms, one might say that it is not good for any speaking being to exist alone, denied of any human contact and thus bereft of speech with an Other, that which makes humans human. To live in such isolation is to be excluded at the outset from any social contract, starting from language itself, that original social contract.

The novel's allusions to Genesis thus establish the basic literary relationship joining Frankenstein-as-creator to the Bible's creator-God. Point by point, the novel portrays Frankenstein as a monstrous inversion of the biblical God. Whereas the God of the Bible cares for his creation, Frankenstein heartlessly abandons his. It is precisely this abandonment—not only on the part of Frankenstein but of society as a whole—that turns Frankenstein's Creature into his Monster, and this Monster, alone in the world, thus comes to seek an audience with his creator.

#### 4. Exodus

Anticipating the novel's Monster, Moses similarly seeks an audience with the deity in Exodus 32–33. The Israelites have just transgressed their newly established covenant with God, by creating and worshipping a "molten calf" of gold (Exod 32:4). Forlorn, a solitary Moses walks up to the heights of the holy mountain of God in search of the LORD. Alone on the mountaintop, Moses finally encounters his God:

And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy. And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. And the LORD said, Behold, *there is* a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a clift of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen. (Exod. 33:18–23)

Moses cannot bear to continue on with his burden without gazing upon the divine presence. Yet, the creature must not see his creator. For there shall no man see him, and live. Indeed, even Moses's buffered encounter with the divine affects his appearance, which, vaguely reminiscent of Frankenstein's Creature, has an unnerving effect upon those who see him: "And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him" (34:29–30).

Consider, now, Frankenstein's initial encounter with his Monster: "From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene . . . . I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed . . . . I was troubled: a mist came over my eyes, and I felt a faintness seize me" (Shelley 2018, p. 89; 2.2). Like Moses "in a clift of the rock", Frankenstein, a solitary walker on the heights of the Swiss Alps, is about to encounter an inhuman presence, one which he can barely countenance. Reminiscent of God, the Creature must therefore and ironically shield his creator: "'Thus I relieve thee, my creator,' he said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me

with violence; ‘thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion’” (ibid., p. 92; 2.2). Note, again, the deliberate reversal of the biblical precedent. Whereas Moses may not see his creator lest he die due to the latter’s transcendence (a biblical anticipation of the Romantic idea of the sublime, e.g., the “awful majesty” of Mont Blanc<sup>22</sup>), Frankenstein cannot bear to look upon his Monster due to its ugliness, which is Shelley’s realization of the Romantic idea of the grotesque, referred to in the novel as “disgusting” (ibid., p. 45; 1.4; p. 106; 2.4; p. 110; 2.5; p. 122; 2.7; p. 134; 2.8; p. 160; 3.3).<sup>23</sup> Note in particular how Shelley has superimposed the biblical mountain of God—Sinai or Horeb, depending on the verse—on the Swiss Alps. The sublimity of nature thus provides the backdrop to Frankenstein’s encounter with the grotesque. Indeed, insofar as Frankenstein, while a demiurge, is no god, nature itself substitutes for the divine in this scene.

## 5. Job

Let us finally consider Shelley’s allusions to the Book of Job, which in fact constitute the most pervasive and complex of her biblical allusions. One will recall how Satan—whose allusive presence in the novel is established independently thanks to Shelley’s references to Milton—convinces God, in effect, to test Job by subjecting him to horrible losses and excruciating bodily suffering (Job 1–2). In particular, Satan afflicts Job with a disfiguring physical ailment: “So went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. And he took him a potsherd to scrape himself withal; and he sat down among the ashes” (Job 2:7–8). While Job’s friends may next visit him with the intention of comforting him, his ghastly appearance—anticipating the Monster’s disgusting form—literally renders them speechless for seven days and seven nights: “And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven. So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that *his* grief was very great” (Job 2:12–13). Apparently, a sincere expression of sympathy. Nevertheless, they, anticipating society’s persecution of the Creature in the novel, end up blaming the victim by arguing that God must be punishing him for some wrongdoing:

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said,

*If we assay to commune with thee, wilt thou be grieved? but who can withhold himself from speaking?*

Behold, thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands.

Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees.

But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled.

*Is not this thy fear, thy confidence, thy hope, and the uprightness of thy ways?*

Remember, I pray thee, who *ever* perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off? (Job 4:1–7; this is the general tenor of Job 4–37)

Readers know this to be false, however, insofar as the biblical writer as well as God himself have declared him to be “a perfect and an upright man” (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3). In effect, “society”, in the form of Job’s so-called friends, rejects the biblical Job due to his abject state and grotesque appearance, just as it rejects the novel’s Creature—not to mention Rousseau and Shelley.

The test that Satan proposes is to see whether Job, when subjected to undeserved suffering, will “curse [God to his] face” (1:11; 2:5). Job, despite his wife’s advice—“curse God, and die” (2:9)—passes the test: “What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips” (2:10). Nevertheless, Job, out of the depths of his suffering, does finally pronounce a withering curse upon his own

life, if not upon God himself: “After this opened Job his mouth, and cursed his day . . . . Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night *in which* it was said, There is a man child conceived./Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it . . . . Why died I not from the womb? *why* did I *not* give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?” (3:1–11). In this respect, the Book of Job does not so much question and then defend God in relation to the existence of suffering and evil (theodicy) as it does question and then defend life itself (nihilism).<sup>24</sup>

All but quoting Job 3, Shelley takes up Job’s self-curse on a number of occasions within her novel. Thus, when Frankenstein first encounters the Monster, he declares: “Cursed be the day, abhorred devil, in which you first saw light! Cursed (although I curse myself) be the hands that formed you!” (Shelley 2018). In so doing, he follows the advice given Job by his wife, i.e., he curses the novel’s modern God, viz., himself. At the same time, Frankenstein, out of his self-pity—again, a monstrous inversion of the biblical God—curses rather than blesses his Creature. In stark contrast to Job, the novel’s Creature/Monster—justifiably, it seems to me—eventually comes to curse his creator. Thus, he recalls reading Frankenstein’s diary, a type of allegorical figure for the Bible: “‘Hateful day when I received life!’ I exclaimed in agony. ‘Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?’” (ibid., p. 122; 2.7). He soon repeats this curse: “I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator; but where was mine? he had abandoned me, and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him” (ibid., p. 123; 2.7). Furthermore, after being rejected by the family who had been unwittingly educating him, he declares: “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?” (ibid., p. 128; 2.8). The Monster even dares to threaten his creator face-to-face with a similar curse: “if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear . . . . Have a care: I will work at your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart, so that you curse the hour of your birth” (ibid., p. 137; 2.9)—thus turning Job’s self-curse of his very birth back upon his maker.<sup>25</sup> Even so, he can imagine a future in which, placated by a sympathetic mate, he will refrain from cursing: “My evil passions will have fled, for I shall meet with sympathy; my life will flow quietly away, and, in my dying moments, I shall not curse my maker” (ibid., p. 138; 2.9).

To return to the Book of Job, Job knows that he is innocent. He is guilty only of needless suffering. Once again, the plot of this biblical book does not so much turn on a vindication of God (theodicy) as it turns on the vindication of Job (trial).<sup>26</sup> Job understandably feels like he is being persecuted by heaven. Indeed, one should carefully consider here that, in Job, the word translated as “Satan”, *hassatan*, might be more literally and appropriately translated as “the accuser”, a common noun—as indicated by the definite article—something like heaven’s prosecuting attorney. What Job thus actually demands of God is his day in court (however futile his case might be), hence his repeated recourse to legal terminology: “How much less shall I answer him, *and* choose out my words to *reason* with him? Whom, though I were righteous, *yet* would I not answer, *but* I would make supplication to my judge” (9:14–15); “For *he* is not a man, as I *am*, *that* I should answer him, *and* we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman betwixt us, *that* might lay his hand upon us both” (9:32–33); “Behold now, I have ordered *my* cause; I know that I shall be justified” (13:18); “Also now, behold, my witness *is* in heaven, and my record *is* on high” (16:19); “Oh that I knew where I might find him! *that* I might come *even* to his seat! I would order *my* cause before him, and fill my mouth with arguments” (23:3–4); “Oh that one would hear me! behold, my desire *is*, *that* the Almighty would answer me, and *that* mine adversary had written a book” (31:35). Job’s demand is ultimately met by the LORD’s speeches “out of the whirlwind” (38:1; 40:6). Even if he does not exactly receive the cosmic vindication he had hoped for, insofar as the LORD merely places Job’s undeserved suffering within the larger context of a nature that is utterly unaware of and indifferent to the existence of humankind (Job 38–41) (biblical anticipation, again, of the Romantic idea of the sublime), God does, in the end, vindicate Job in relation to his friends (society): “And it was *so*, that after the LORD had spoken these words unto Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite,

My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me *the thing that is right*, as my servant Job *hath*" (42:7).

The novel's Creature similarly recognizes that he was originally innocent, guilty only of being disgusting or grotesque. That is, he was initially capable of caring for others. It was society itself, beginning with Frankenstein himself, who turned him into the Monster by rejecting him. Realizing that the only pity he might find must come first from Frankenstein, he relentlessly seeks an audience with his creator: "But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form". (Shelley 2018, p. 131; 2.8). In their initial confrontation, the Monster accuses his maker of malfeasance: "Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind" (ibid., p. 90; 2.2). He, like Job, thus demands a fair trial before he would be judged: "Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me. The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defense before they are condemned" (ibid., p. 91; 2.2). Job, as we have seen, was ultimately vindicated, at least before his friends. This is not the case for Frankenstein's Creature/Monster, who is denied even the slightest bit of vindication—but not vengeance.

## 6. Conclusions

The cumulative effect of the novel's biblical allusions is to portray Victor Frankenstein, in no uncertain terms, as the villain of the novel—its monstrous modern god—and his Creature as its (originally) innocent victim. It is true that Frankenstein ought never to have dabbled in the creation of human(oid) life, and that creating a second creature entails the risk of creating a monster, just like creating the first creature did. Nevertheless, once having done so, Frankenstein owes his Creature the potential solace of a sympathetic mate. Just so, as I have already observed, the LORD God himself, in the garden of Eden, perceives the need of his creature: "And the LORD God said, *It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him*" (Gen 2:18). God thus fills this want, as Adam himself admits: "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23). As we know, Frankenstein similarly agrees to the Monster's request and begins creating an help meet for him. At the last minute, however, Frankenstein, in a fit of rage—ever the inversion of the biblical God—destroys the almost-completed female companion and thus breaks his promise to his Creature. In revenge, the Monster wreaks havoc upon Frankenstein's family. Finally, the Monster destroys the—his—modern god.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For relevant commentary, see, in particular, [Vernant \(1981\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> See, e.g., [Smith \(2016\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> I owe this reference to Stephen Lewis.
- <sup>4</sup> [Baldwin \(1806\)](#). The relevant pages are reprinted in [Wootton \(2020\)](#), pp. 201–3.
- <sup>5</sup> Throughout, I use the King James Version of the Bible (with updated orthography), the translation Shelley presumably would have read.
- <sup>6</sup> Thus, [Pollin \(1965\)](#) makes no mention of the Bible. I would add here that, while the biblical allusions are clear enough, the verbal correspondences are rather weak, which leads me to conclude that Shelley wrote the novel without having the Bible opened in front of her. The novel's biblical allusions depend rather upon her readerly memories of the Bible.
- <sup>7</sup> For ease of reference, all citations to the novel will be made parenthetically: first to the page number of the Penguin edition: [Shelley \(2018\)](#); second, for those reading a different print edition of the novel, to the volume and chapter numbers. Given the particular focus of my study, I will not consider Shelley's 1831 edition of the novel.
- <sup>8</sup> Not even as highly astute a reader as Joyce Carol Oates detected, or at least bothered to mention, the biblical allusions camouflaged by Shelley's reference to Milton: see [Oates \(1984\)](#).
- <sup>9</sup> [Shelley \(1987\)](#), index, see under "Bible, Holy"; again, I thank Stephen Lewis for this reference. Twice she reports that Percy read aloud both "the Bible" and "the Gospel of St. Mathew" or simply "the St. Mathew" (304, 305), arguably indicating that "the Bible" refers specifically to the Old Testament. This would comport with the fact that the novel, so far as I can tell, shows no interest in the New Testament. So much for her "low esteem" for the "Hebrew Bible".
- <sup>10</sup> Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kavey unconvincingly argue that the Creature's monstrous, more precisely gigantic, form alludes to the story of the Nephilim in Gen 6:1–4 ([Friedman and Kavey 2016](#), pp. 34–39). Apart from the fact that the Creature's height does not suffice to establish this allusion, they misidentify the Nephilim as angels rather than their giant offspring and they conflate the biblical tale with post-biblical texts that would not have been available to Shelley: viz., 1 Enoch and Jubilees.
- <sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Rousseau—more on whom below—expressed a certain admiration for the Jews and for Moses in particular; see [Marks \(2010\)](#).
- <sup>12</sup> Acosta does detect "clear echoes of the Book of Job" in Shelley's life but not in Shelley's novel ([Acosta 2016](#), p. 368). Allusions to Job are noted, but of course without commentary, by Susan J. Wolfson and Ronald L. Levao ([Shelley 2012](#), pp. 211, 217, 228, 230).
- <sup>13</sup> Shelley's romanticism would also have helped motivate these biblical allusions due to the marked presence of nature in all of three of them: the panoply of nature in Genesis 1, the garden's nurture in Genesis 2, and the mountainous setting of Exodus 32–33; finally, when God at long last deigns to speak to Job, he does not address human suffering but rather describes the spectacular expanses of a nature that is utterly ignorant of the existence of humankind (Job 38–41).
- <sup>14</sup> Indeed, given how little Prometheus figures in the novel in comparison to the biblical references, I would even hypothesize that Shelley considered and ultimately rejected my proposed subtitle, which raises the question: Why? Of course, Prometheus was an important figure for Shelley's circle. At the time of the novel's publication (1818), Lord Byron had recently written "Prometheus" (1816), and Percy Shelley would soon enough write *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). One might then surmise that in her circle, a reference to Prometheus was more compelling than a reference to God, an allusion to Milton more interesting than an allusion to the Bible. I would also argue that the threat of persecution was at work. It was scandalous enough that a teenage girl wrote this rather unsettling novel; replacing the biblical God with a modern one, she might have feared, would only further alienate her readers. I have in mind [Strauss \(1988\)](#).
- <sup>15</sup> See, e.g., [O'Rourke \(1989\)](#), [Lipking \(2012\)](#), and [Beenstock \(2015\)](#).
- <sup>16</sup> [Starobinski \(2014\)](#), p. 19). This aspect of the Second Discourse may well have influenced Mary Shelley, who would have been unlikely to miss the biblical allusions.
- <sup>17</sup> In fact, being "as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5) does not constitute a fall; it means growing up into fully human beings, viz., adults (Deut 1:39). See [Kawashima \(2004\)](#).
- <sup>18</sup> On the Creature's education, see [Acosta \(2006\)](#).
- <sup>19</sup> See [Milton's \(2003\)](#) account of Adam's first waking moments after he comes to consciousness (*Paradise Lost*, book 8), according to which God appears to Adam in a dream and gives initial guidance. Note, however, that various details in the novel allude to Genesis, not *Paradise Lost*.
- <sup>20</sup> In the novel, the verb "distinguish" occurs four times early in 2.3; the related adjective "distinct", twice.
- <sup>21</sup> According to modern biblical criticism, Genesis 1–3 comprises not one but two creations stories: Gen 1:1–2:4a was composed by a priestly writer, commonly referred to as P; Gen 2:4b–3:24 was composed by the Yahwist or J. See [Friedman \(1997\)](#).
- <sup>22</sup> See, e.g., [Chen \(2018\)](#). Regarding the sublime as such, see Edmund Burke's classic definition in Section VII of his treatise, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling"

(Burke [1757] 2008, p. 39). In a happy coincidence, Caspar David Friedrich painted “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” in 1818, the very year that *Frankenstein* was originally published.

- 23 According to Jeanne M. Britton, the Monster’s “artificial body” (Britton 2009, p. 3)—which she will later describe as “grotesque”—excludes him from “sympathy” within the novel. While not a possible source for the novel, it is worth noting that Victor Hugo, in his preface to “Cromwell”, written not ten years after the novel’s publication, would champion the idea of a “modern muse” who would represent not only the “sublime” (pace Burke) but also the “grotesque”: “It will realize that everything in creation is not humanly *beautiful*, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque [*le grotesque*] on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light. It will ask itself if the narrow and relative sense of the artist should prevail over the infinite, absolute sense of the Creator; if it is for man to correct God; if a mutilated nature will be the more beautiful for the mutilation” (Hugo 1938, p. 345).
- 24 As Robert Alter argued decades ago, God’s answer “out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1; 40:6) systematically reverses Job’s self-curse (Alter 2011, pp. 105–38).
- 25 See also in the novel, 128, 2.8; 132, 2.8; 137, 2.9.
- 26 See Amos Funkenstein’s insightful remarks in Funkenstein (1993, pp. 58–64).

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