

GENDER IN THE MONSTER: DR. FRANKENSTEIN AS A MOTHER

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ABSTRACT

When Mary Shelley created her novel, *Frankenstein or Prometheus Unbound*, during a ghost story competition among Byron, Percy B. Shelley and herself, she could probably not foresee that she would create one of the most influential literary texts of English literature. Her tale became a Gothic classic which has inspired, for 200 years, not only writers, literary critics and theoreticians but also film directors who have adapted the story for cinema in various degrees of loyalty to the original plot. However, one of the latest adaptations, *Frankenstein* (2007), directed by Jed Mercurio, presents a new Dr. Frankenstein. Deconstructing the established male creator/male monster pattern, the doctor's name is not Victor, but Victoria. The film shows that it is not a mere alteration of two letters, but a completely new Dr. Frankenstein who, with a female identity in the 21st century, is furnished with gender roles. The female Frankenstein and her monster build a kind of relationship different from their previous counterparts. It is certain that, in this relationship, attributed gender roles are determiners not only in the type of the relationship, but also in the identity crisis of the monster. This study will, therefore, present how gender roles of Victoria deconstruct the established pattern of the tale and reconstruct it under new terms of gender, and how this influences the gender formation of the monster.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, gender, identity, adaptation, film

CANAVARDA TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET: BİR ANNE OLARAK DR. FRANKENSTEIN

ÖZET

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein Ya da Modern Prometheus* adlı romanını, Byron, Percy B. Shelley ve kendisinin de dâhil olduğu bir hayalet hikâyesi yarışması sırasında yazdığında İngiliz edebiyatının en etkileyici edebi metinlerinden birini üretmiş olduğunu muhtemelen öngörememişti. Bir gotik klasiğine dönüşen hikâyesi, 200 yıldır sadece yazarlara, edebiyat

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eleştirmenlerine ve kuramcılarına değil, asıl kurguya değişen derecelerde sadık kalarak öyküyü sinemaya uyarlayan film yönetmenlerine de ilham kaynağı olmuştur. Jed Mercurio tarafından yönetilen 2007 uyarlaması ise yeni bir Dr. Frankenstein takdim eder. Öyküdeki yerleşik erkek yaratıcı / erkek canavar kalıbını yapı sökülümüne uğratan uyarlamada doktorun ismi Victor değil Victoria'dır. Uyarlama bu değişimin sadece son iki harfte olmadığını ama 21. Yüzyılda toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine bürünmüş bir kadın kimliğiyle tamamıyla yeni bir Dr. Frankenstein olduğunu gösterir. Kadın Frankenstein ve canavarı daha önceki muadillerinden farklı bir ilişki kurarlar. Bu ilişkide atfedilmiş toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin sadece ilişkinin tipinde değil canavarın kimlik krizinde de belirleyici olduğu kesindir. Bu çalışma, Victoria'nın toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin öykünün yerleşik kalıbını nasıl yapı sökülümüne uğrattığını ve bunun canavarın toplumsal cinsiyet oluşumunu nasıl etkilediğini göstermeye çalışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, toplumsal cinsiyet, kimlik, uyarlama, film.*

Almost 200 years after its first publication, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or Prometheus Unbound* still functions as a precious source of inspiration for many diverse ideas. The fertility of the novel has rightly established itself as the one of the canonical novels written by a woman in the nineteenth century. While the fertility of the novel has welcomed various interpretations from various critical theories, it has proved itself to be a generous source to be imitated in different modes. Its influence has not only been felt in literary circles but also in film industry as well. There are countless direct/indirect, explicit/implicit allusions to the novel in the film history. While some directors prefer to exhibit a close fidelity to the novel, like Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) starring Robert De Niro, some opt for novelties like the iconic *The Bride of Frankenstein* shot in 1935 by James Whale. One of the recent adaptations of the story is Jed Mercurio's *Frankenstein* (2007) which stars Helen McCrory as the female creator of the monster. The adaptation offers new insights for an alternative reading of the text as Victor Frankenstein is transformed into Victoria Frankenstein. This is not a superficial change of name but a deconstructive enterprise which results in radical alterations in the traditionalized male creator / male monster pattern. Imbued with gender roles, Victoria Frankenstein creates not a monster but a child alternative to his deceased one. Together they develop a mother / son relationship unlike the previous interpretations in which the female creator fights not for the destruction of the created monster but for the survival of it, even at the expenses of death of the others. In an interview that Mercurio gave to *The Telegraph*, he clarifies his purpose in the film:

I wanted to explore the relationship between creator and the created. In the novel, that relationship is explored through a religious viewpoint. The novel is subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, so there's the thought that some things are the province of human beings, and some are the province of higher beings. I wanted to look for a different kind of energy between the scientist and the monster. That's why I settled on a more maternal relationship. A relationship about a parent and a child.²

The position of women in Shelley's novel and Mercurio's film adaptation differs. The novel is populated with passive and submissive women characters like Elizabeth and Justine who are unable to survive and defend themselves. In other words, they are absent from the text. This absence of women in the novel is psychoanalytically analysed by Mary Jacobus. She makes a connection between the absent women and the oedipal tension in the novel. According to her, 'monster's tragedy is his confinement to the destructive intensities of a one-to-one relationship with his maker, and his exclusion from other relations - whether familial or with a female counterpart.'³ Moreover, Jacobus continues that because Frankenstein denies a female companion to the monster, he also causes the death of his own bride. However, Jacobus's main concern is in the absent mothers. To prove her point, she cites Frankenstein's nightmare after the monster's creation which 'conflates the body of his long neglected fiancée and childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth, with that of his dead mother.'⁴

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch -- the miserable monster whom I had created.⁵

Jacobus also claims that 'a curious thread in the plot focuses not on the image of the hostile father (Frankenstein/God) but on that of the dead

² Serena Davies, "Mothering A Mutant", *the Telegraph*, 2007
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3668665/Mothering-a-mutant.html>, 10.04.2017

³ Mary Jacobus "Is There a Woman in This Text?", *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1986, p. 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or, the Modern Prometheus*, Penguin Books, London, 1994 p. 56.

mother who comes to symbolize to the monster his loveless state.⁶ This is most apparent at the moment of the monster's first murder:

As I fixed my eyes on the child, I saw something glittering on his breast: I took it; it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned: I remembered that I was for ever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright.⁷

While Jacobus highlights the oedipal tension of the motherless characters in the novel, Ellen Moers focuses on 'birth myth'. According to Moers, the novel is most feminine 'in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences.'⁸ Moers associates this feminine aspect of the novel with Mary Shelley's own life by providing certain biographical details:

She hurtled into teen-age motherhood without any of the financial or social or familial supports that made bearing and rearing children a relaxed experience for the normal middle-class woman of her day (as Jane Austen, for example, described her). She was an unwed mother, responsible for breaking up a marriage of a young woman just as much a mother as she. The father whom she adored broke furiously with her when she eloped; and Mary Wollstonecraft, the mother whose memory she revered, and whose books she was rereading throughout her teen-age years, had died in childbirth -- died giving birth to Mary herself.⁹

Moers sums the novel as 'the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care.'¹⁰ Similarly, Mary Poovey also underscores a connection between the novel and Shelley's own life. For Poovey, the narrative technique of the novel allows 'Shelley to express and efface herself at the same time and thus, at least partially, to satisfy her conflicting desires for self-assertion and social acceptance.'¹¹ While Shelley is securely distanced and effaced from the novel, Victor experiences anguish and tensions of child-birth. His attempts to create life unwittingly take him to the feminine sphere.

⁶ Jacobus, *ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ Shelley, *ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

⁸ Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic' in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoeflmacher Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1979, p. 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Chicago University Press, London, 1994, p. 131.

Likewise, Cynthia Pon describes Victor as ‘the father who dispenses with the role of the mother.’¹² She concludes that ‘masculine humanity that has usurped the role of the female, and that has ruled the female outside the scope of accomplishment, can only produce something monstrous.’¹³ The monstrous production of Victor’s feminine project abhors and eventually disgusts him. What if would a female creator be replaced with the male creator? Mercurio’s 2007 adaptation presents a new interpretation of the novel by introducing a female creator which, in turn, deconstructs the established relationship pattern between the creator and the monster.

In Mercurio’s adaptation, the creator assumes the role of a mother while the monster becomes her child. In the adaptation, to strengthen the bond between the creator and the monster, Victoria makes use of the DNA of her recently deceased son. As they share the same DNA a close connection – indeed a kinship – between them is easily established. Like the Jungian mother archetype, Victoria Frankenstein exhibits a dual nature; she is ‘sympathetic’ towards the creature and displays ‘magic authority of the female’ during the film; on the other hand she has her dark ‘secret’ which is well hidden.¹⁴ While the absent mother in the original text has led to intriguing psychoanalytical readings, the appearance of archetypal mother has the potential to yield to fresh possibilities that can be put to use for the sake of an analysis of the text in terms of gender studies. Victoria is not only an archetypal mother in Jungian terminology but also performs the roles of a stereotype mother if her attitudes towards her two sons, William as the one whom she gives birth to and the monster, as her pseudo-biological son, are taken into consideration. Unlike her male counterparts, whether in previous film adaptations or in the original text, she manages to get into genuine contact with the monster.

Victoria Frankenstein is a scientist working on stem cell technology for the Universal Xenograft Project in Windmill Research Building (Windmill has become iconic for Frankenstein movies since the monster in James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) was burned by the peasants in one of them). She is thoroughly passionate for her work since her 8-year-old child, William Clerval suffers from a heart disease and the only possible cure for him is an organ transplant. Her success in building a working human heart triggers her to create another one suitable for her son and for this sake she introduces her son’s DNA by injecting his blood into the procedure. This results in rapid growth rate in the stem cells, but for the sake of scientific advancement the project is not cancelled as the dean Professor Jane Pretorius desires. At the

¹² Cynthia Pon, ‘Passages in Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”: Toward a Feminist Figure of Humanity’, *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Autumn, 2000, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, New York, 1990, p. 82.

same night when Victoria's son dies, a lightning strikes the tower of the building cutting the electricity off and liberating the monster. After killing several people, the monster is caught and taken to a lab where Victoria's husband, Henry is in charge. In this lab, Victoria tries to communicate with the monster and during one of the sessions she realizes the resemblance between the monster and her deceased son. Therefore, she tries to free it with the assistance of Henry. However, soon they are caught and Henry is killed by the armed men commanded by Professor Jane Pretorius. In the closing scene, Victoria and the monster is taken to another facility where Victoria seems to educate the monster under the surveillance of Professor Pretorius who aims to use the monster for future possibilities like cultivating strong soldiers.

Even though the monster is not destroyed at the end, the plot construction of the film presents many similarities with the main story of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The main theme is to stop death using scientific advancement and the outcome of the main theme is the disillusion in blindfolded faith in the power of science to cure everything. However, intrusion of female characters with full power and authority dramatically changes the interpretation and creates clear spaces for alternative readings. Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a novel has become a generous text as feminist critics have frequently visited and re-visited the text. The reasons of the frequency of the feminist interest in the novel are various. First of all, the author is a woman. However, Mary Shelley successfully distances herself from the text. The invisibility of the authorial female voice is secured by virtue of narrative layers embedded in the text. Walton narrates the introduction, Victor relates the creation of the monster, and the monster presents his excluded life and his taking refuge in DeLacey's house. The fact that all of the voices in the novel are male is not so surprising if the publication date of the novel is considered. Jacobus confirms that 'if we look in this text for a female author, we find only a dismembered corpse whose successful animation would threaten the entire structure of the myth' (99). Injecting a female creator into the structure of the myth turns upside down the whole scheme.

The focal point of the film is Victoria and everything revolves around her. Unlike Mary Shelley's Victor, she is portrayed not just as a passionate scientist but as a caring mother. While Victor is motivated to create the monster after the death of his mother, Victoria's scientific ambition is nurtured by her maternal role as she aims to save her child. As they have different motivations in their scientific endeavours, their methods are also different. Victor's monster is a collection of body parts of dead people. In a way, his monster is a collage composed of the parts of other people, a case which creates an additional difficulty for the monster in its identity crisis. In parallel with this Kenneth Branagh's film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, presents a monster which has an uneven posture with stitches covering the body.

However, Victoria's monster is quite different. Even though its proportions do not match with normal human beings, the body of the creature seems to be in union and in one piece.

Another important and interesting point is while Victor's monster is a collection of body parts of complete strangers, Victoria's monster has the same DNA with Victoria as she introduces her son's blood into the experiment. The blood relationship between the monster and the creator makes it available for them to develop a close relationship. In the novel, Mary Shelley leaves the monster nameless, causing a misunderstanding in popular culture that monster is often called Frankenstein. Victor does not name his monster but prefers to call him 'monster, demon, devil, or fiend'. This is one of the reasons of monster's identity crisis. Victoria's monster, however, is named as the UX; it takes its name after the initials of the Universal Xenograft Project. Consequently, Victoria's monster, or the UX has bare advantages compared to Victor's monster, and in virtue of these advantages it manages to develop better relationship with its creator and thus can survive, though as a captive.

Motherhood, then, becomes the paramount feature in Victoria's character and by virtue of this fact a different pattern is established in the relationship between the creator and the monster. In a way, Mercurio's adaptation presents a mother in very much accordance with the motherhood defined and designated by social codes. Even though she does not give birth to the UX, she accepts it as her child and replaces it with his deceased son. Like Victor, she also for a while orders termination of the monster but when she comes face to face with it, she sees William, her son, and from that moment on she risks her life for the well being of the UX. While both Victor and his monster perish at the end of the novel, Victoria and her monster survive. Victor never treats the monster as a child but as a matured being. Victoria, on the other hand, approaches her creature as a child and interacts with it as a mother. Therefore, gender change creates a clear space for fresh readings and interpretations. Introducing a female creator into story, then, results not in destruction but survival.

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