

CHALLENGING THE BIOLOGICAL: THE FANTASY OF MALE BIRTH AS A NINETEENTH-CENTURY NARRATIVE OF ETHICAL FAILURE

GALIA BENZIMAN

Tel Aviv University

Feminist theorists have suggested that whereas Freud talks about the feminine sense of inferiority due to penis envy, there exists a corresponding uterus envy about which Freud remains silent—the envy that the male feels regarding the female capacity for motherhood. This privilege of the female body is a universal and timeless fact, and no less universal and timeless is the fantasy that a male may create new life without a woman: Zeus's delivery of Athena, Pygmalion's creation of a living woman by his art, or Geppetto's construction of the wooden Pinocchio, to cite only some examples. In this essay, I will discuss four nineteenth-century works that examine such possibilities, emerging in an era that offers a particularly rich treatment of the theme. With the rise of the belief in, and anxiety about, the supremacy of science, we witness in nineteenth-century fictional works a recurrent staging of the male subject's attempt to harness technology for the purpose of overcoming the biological limitation of his sex and procreating a new being. Science and technology function in these texts as a substitute for the female body; and the male scientist demonstrates, through the process, his defiance of nature as well as his rejection of the feminine. I will discuss this dynamic as it is represented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and examine its reappearance in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark," Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau*—three texts that rework the pattern of Shelley's novel. In each of the four works, despite the differences, the very success of the scientist's misogynist and

I wish to thank Elana Gomel for her important comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Address correspondence to Galia Benziman, 10/5 Keren Hayesod Street, Mevasseret-Tsion, 90805, Israel. E-mail: benziman@post.tau.ac.il

ambitious project paradoxically exposes his limitations and weakness in dealing with the consequences, and his desire to surpass nature is represented as an indication of moral irresponsibility and male aggression. As we will see, however, the destabilization of the self and the questioning of the progressive quality of the scientific project at large, which tend to be more latent in the earlier works, become more acute in the ones written toward the end of the century.

In order to understand this dynamic, the representation of the theme in the four works should be examined in reference to two dominant discourses which inform—in several ways—the narratives in question. One is the discourse concerning the female, and particularly maternal, body; and the other is the scientific discourse of progress, and particularly, the one relating to the potential for manipulating or imitating the biological processes of conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. My reading will show how the encounter of these two nineteenth-century discourses on the fictional level generates the recurrent motif of male birth as an act whose results are problematized on the ethical, interpersonal, and political levels.

First, let us turn to the discourse of the female, and especially maternal, body. In her comprehensive study of the representations of the female body in western culture, *Monuments and Maidens*, Marina Warner has emphasized the part played by the male sense of rivalry regarding the biological role of the maternal female. Following Catherine Gallagher, she asserts that the threatening side of female sexuality has to do with its maternal capacity.¹ Warner demonstrates how in world literature, the feminine is repeatedly shown to represent both the “biological necessity of the race to reproduce” and the “carnality and consequent inferiority of females” (202–3). Adrienne Rich, followed by Isaac Balbus, Camille Paglia, Natalie McKnight, and others, similarly talks about *matrophobia*: the rejection of the physical, earthly mother, perceived as a threatening, messy vitality.² Elaine Showalter exposes

¹Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens* (London: Pan Books, 1985), 124, 111. See also Catherine Gallagher, “More about Medusa’s Head,” *Representations* 4 (Fall 1983): 55–57. Further references will appear in the text.

²See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 198; Natalie McKnight, *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels* (Houndsmills, London: Macmillan, 1997), 29, 53; Isaac D. Balbus, “Disciplining Women.” In Jonathan Arac, ed., *After Foucault*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 142; Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 9.

some of the traditional cultural images that create an alliance between the female body and irrationality, disease, and madness.³ Davidoff and Hall show in their book on Victorian families how women, particularly when pregnant and thus incontrovertibly sexual beings, were associated with animalistic nature.⁴ In his study of Victorian masculinity, Herbert Sussman contends that Victorian male writers tended to construct fictional utopian sites of chaste male-bonding from which the feminine has been eliminated. He detects a masculine apprehension about bourgeois marriage sapping male energy, and domesticity vitiating male creative potency.⁵ Besides the masculine fantasy of psychically erasing women from society, Sussman also cites texts that manifest a displacement of men's inner chaos and sense of their own physical pollution onto the female or the racial Other (19, 24, 33).

And yet, at the same time, Victorian society idealized the maternal role. This duality led to the paradoxical double image of the bodiless, chaste, Madonna-like mother on the one hand, and the defiled female body of sex, pregnancy, and childbirth on the other. In order for them to be regarded as morally fit for their assigned roles as devoted daughters, wives, and mothers, women had to be imagined as spiritual, angelic, nonsexual, and bodiless. As a result, claims Carolyn Dever, a good mother in Victorian fiction is usually depicted as absent, or dead.⁶ In this respect, women, like children, represented the innocence of the natural world which active masculinity must support, protect, and oversee (Dever 28).

Side-by-side with this discourse of the female body, there was another predominant discourse in Victorian cultural and intellectual life that implied, though more obliquely, a rejection of the feminine. The discourse of scientific progress promoted the belief that scientific discoveries and technological innovations could improve human society and living conditions for future

³Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830–1980* (New York, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 3–4.

⁴Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes* (London, Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1988), 27.

⁵Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5. Further references will appear in the text.

⁶Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19. Further references will appear in the text.

generations, and allow man to overcome nature. The gradual decline of religion contributed to the notion that processes that up until now had been considered divine and sacred were now open to manipulation by man. Scientific hubris of this kind—because contemporaries often did regard and represent such aspirations as hubris, appealing as they were—existed in many fields of research. One of them was the field of conception and childbirth, which preoccupied European and British science throughout the nineteenth century, and turned the female body and its reproductive capabilities into an object for masculine research and medical inspection. The invention of gynecology at the beginning of the century led to what historians of medicine sometimes refer to as the medicalization of the female body.

The professionalization of the treatment of pregnancy and childbirth made women helpless objects in the hands of male doctors, who now came to replace the traditional female midwives. In her history of gynecology in England, Ornella Moscucci states how male midwives—rapidly taking over the field of obstetrics as of the mid-eighteenth century—characterized themselves as the carriers of rational, scientific expertise to an area hitherto dominated by allegedly backward and dangerous practices. Moscucci claims that since the beginning of the nineteenth century and until our own day, the science of gynecology has legitimated the views according to which “[p]uberty, childbirth, the menopause, are deemed to affect woman’s mind and body in ways which have no counterpart in man.”⁷ According to her research, in the nineteenth century there was a resurgence of medical interest in the processes and mechanisms by which life was generated (12). The intimation was that science, as the undertaking of the reasoning male, “would penetrate the dark interiority where woman’s sexual organs were lodged and pry open their secrets” (33). Elaine Showalter similarly contends that in the imaginative as well as the medical literature of the period, the woman became “an object to be incisively opened, analyzed, and reassembled by the male writer.” Her claim is that the eagerness to open up the woman and see deeply into the secrets of her

⁷Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynecology and Gender in England, 1800–1929* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2. Further references will appear in the text.

body became central to the method of science itself.⁸ Evelyn Fox Keller, too, states that according to feminist critique, the method of modern science was a strategy for the “ferreting out of nature’s secrets, understood as the illumination of a female interior.”⁹ According to Fox Keller, Sandra Harding and others, modern science was traditionally gender-biased; its enlightened, rational methodologies were perceived as masculine, and its object of research—nature—as feminine. In quite a few texts from the days of early modern science, the scientific mission is represented as rape, and nature is conceived of as a passive female, indifferent to, or even welcoming, its own assault.¹⁰

Due to the increased scientific curiosity regarding reproduction and fertility, discoveries became rapid. In 1827, Karl Ernst von Baer demonstrated the existence of the mammalian egg. This in turn led to important revisions of prevailing theories of ovulation and conception, and a reassessment of female and male roles in procreation.¹¹ From the 1840s onwards, increasing attention was focused on the function of the ovaries. By the 1850s, the “ovular theory” of menstruation provided the chief scientific explanation of the biological basis of femininity (Moscucci 33–4).

In the second half of the nineteenth century a new scientific theory emerged, suggesting the possibility of manipulating the processes of conception and birth. Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911)—Erasmus Darwin’s grandson and Charles Darwin’s cousin—believed that procreation could and should be controlled technologically, in order to meet social and political needs. In his study entitled “Hereditary Talent and Character” (1865), Galton expressed the idea that manipulation of heredity

⁸Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York, London: Viking Penguin, 1990), 127–129. Further references will appear in the text.

⁹Evelyn Fox Keller, “From Secrets of Life to Secrets of Death,” in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, Jacobus, Fox Keller and Shuttleworth, eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 178–179.

¹⁰For more on the feminist claim that science embodies a strong androcentric bias, and on the role of gender symbolism in scientific representations, see Fox Keller and Longino, eds, *Feminism and Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7, 28; and Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 9, 113–133. Harding brings evidence from the writings of Sir Francis Bacon and Machiavelli in which rape and torture metaphors abound in descriptions of scientific inquiry (114–116).

¹¹See Carol A. Mossman, *Politics and Narratives of Birth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 13.

would provide the key to the reformation of human society. Offering a scheme to breed men for their intellectual ability and character traits, he asserts: "It would seem as though the physical structure of future generations was almost as plastic as clay, under the control of the breeder's will."¹² According to Ruth Schwartz Cowan, one of the chief innovations of Galton's theory of mental heredity was the denial of the existence of a God-given soul.¹³ She states that although many of his premises and so-called discoveries in the field of heredity had been naïve, and were subsequently proven false, many of Galton's contemporaries regarded him as a profound and influential thinker. In 1883 Galton coined the term *eugenics* (= good heredity), which he tried to establish as a viable social program for the noble purpose of saving the human race, and particularly British society, from deterioration (Schwartz Cowan ii, 42). The term *eugenics* was not yet charged with twentieth-century undertones and attracted wide support—as testifies the first International Congress of the Eugenics Society, held in London in 1912. It was sponsored by Winston Churchill and Alexander Graham Bell, and was attended, among others, by Arthur Balfour, George Bernard Shaw, John Maynard Keynes, and H. G. Wells.¹⁴

The two discourses that I have described here—one rejecting the maternal female body, and the other proposing medical and artificial manipulation of the processes of conception and birth—meet. Both of them imply an urge to displace the biological-natural, the physical-sexual, and the feminine, and substitute them by the masculine, the technological, and the artificial. As Regenia Gagnier states, eugenics is based on "the managerial urge to tidy up the accidents and messes that arise from sexual reproduction," and to bring reproduction under scientific control. This process, at the same

¹²Francis Galton, "Hereditary Talent and Character," *Macmillan Magazine* XII (1865), 157.

¹³Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *Sir Francis Galton and the Study of Heredity in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1985), 14. Further references will appear in the text.

¹⁴For more on that First Congress, see Oren Harman, "Afterword." In *The Fateful Eggs* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2003), 154. A strong link existed in nineteenth-century Britain, between ideas of genetic "improvement" and certain views regarding the class conflict. James Walvin, in *A Child's World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), states that the eugenics movement held that the poor had "less intelligent" offspring; there were calls for reducing the relative fertility of the lower classes for the purpose of the "purification of society." See pp. 171–173.

time, “attempts to erase the role of women.”¹⁵ Since nature—now challenged by man’s scientific progress—is conceived of as feminine and maternal, to surpass it is also to defeat the female body, especially when conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are at stake. This dynamic serves to create narratives of reproduction that are conspicuously motherless, and in which a male, who is also a scientist, overcomes his own biological deficiency—having no uterus—and, by usurping the maternal role, produces a new creature. The four fictional narratives discussed in this essay rework this pattern and question its ethical, and sometimes also political, implications.

The breaking of limits, or the idea that the laws of nature might be overcome, is one of the central markers of the Fantastic at large, as well as its affiliated genres, the Uncanny, the Marvelous, and the Gothic, which incorporate properties of the supernatural. The genre to which the four works discussed in this essay correspond—the Gothic Fantastic—has been associated by critics both with the anxiety about science and with the anxiety about the feminine. As Kelly Hurley has argued, the emergence of the Victorian Gothic was largely a symptom of “a general malaise occasioned by the sciences,” and provided a space wherein to explore phenomena at the borders of human identity. Emphasizing the disruptive forces of new concepts such as natural selection, she argues that the Gothic, “working in the negative register of horror,” managed the anxieties engendered of scientific innovations by reframing them within the nonrealistic, hence more easily distanced, mode of gothicity.¹⁶ In his study of the Fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov has drawn a link between this mode and perverse male sexuality, which is often deeply misogynous. According to Todorov, sexuality is a recurring theme in many works of the Fantastic and the Uncanny. It is perceived in such texts as uncontrollable, limitless, and excessive, hence threatening; therefore it must be either repressed or distorted. Sexuality thus often turns into misogynous male chastity as

¹⁵Regenia Gagnier, “Individualism from the New Woman to the Genome: Autonomy and Independence,” *Partial Answers* 1 (January 2003): 125, 103.

¹⁶Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5–6. Further references will appear in the text. Patrick Brantlinger and Richard Boyle similarly contend that the Victorian Gothic or Fantastic, serving as a contra to the generic dominance of realism at that period, reacted against the Victorian idea of progress. See their “The Education of Edward Hyde,” in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde after One Hundred Years*, William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch, eds. (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 270.

well as male violence, cruelty, sadism (whose sexual origin is not always apparent), and sexual perversity: incest, necrophilia, and so forth.¹⁷ These properties of the Fantastic and the Uncanny, although not obligatory, “do appear with sufficiently significant frequency” (157). And thus, because so threatening, the sexual desire of the male protagonist often finds its incarnation “in the form of the devil [W]e have . . . unambiguous example[s] of the identity of devil and woman or, more exactly, of the devil and sexual desire” (127). We can trace similar elements to the ones suggested by Hurley and Todorov in all four works that we now proceed to examine.

The earliest of these texts, whose influence upon the others was formative, is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818, revised in 1831), which has been regarded as the origin of modern science fiction.¹⁸ Victor Frankenstein, the ambitious and seemingly idealist Genevan student of natural philosophy, serves as a literary model for many other fictional scientists to follow. “The world was to me,” he says, “a secret which I desired to divine,”¹⁹ and, idealistically, he nurtures visions of extensive usefulness which his discoveries may bestow on mankind, mixed with a selfish desire to achieve personal glory. His is the discourse of the unbounded scientific aspiration to surpass all previous scientists, and even nature itself: he will produce a new living creature without a female body. “So much has been done,” says Victor—whose name testifies to his unrelenting spirit and sense of rivalry—“more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (48). After many efforts he finally discovers the secret of imparting life to inanimate matter. Megalomaniacally, he foresees his own descendants: “A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs” (54). Collecting

¹⁷See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 48, 126–127, 132, 138. Further references will appear in the text.

¹⁸See Donald Lawler, “Reframing *Jekyll and Hyde*,” in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde after One Hundred Years*, William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch, eds. (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 248. Further references will appear in the text.

¹⁹Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36. All following quotes are from this edition.

bones and other pieces of dead human bodies from vaults and charnel-houses, he constructs the semblance of a human being, and at last gives it life. Although few details are supplied, the reader is led to understand that the spark of life manipulated by Victor is achieved through a combination of chemical and electrical processes; that means that although he uses human organs, technology now replaces biology. And yet, the creation of new life in Victor's laboratory is represented as an imitation of the natural, biological process of pregnancy and childbearing. It has taken him three seasons, or about nine months, to reach his breakthrough: "Winter, spring, and summer passed away during my labours" (56). The moment of discovery is described in terms that may fit actual childbirth, with its mixture of pain, labor, astonishment, and joy: "The astonishment which I had at first experienced [...] soon gave place to delight and rapture. After so much time spent in painful labour, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils" (52). But then, when the creature opens its "dull yellow eye" and takes its first breath (57), Victor experiences postnatal anxiety and disgust, and flees the creature he has created. The scientific experiment was successful, but the moral trial that the new, masculine parent has to face turns out to be more demanding. We will return to this agonized creature-creator relationship later.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birth-Mark" (1837) shows how another exceptionally gifted scientist, Aylmer, manages to discover nature's secret of creation. Although ostensibly Aylmer does not create new beings, Hawthorne's narrative repeats the pattern presented in *Frankenstein*. Deciding to employ his discovery otherwise, Aylmer uses it for the purpose of making his wife perfect. The wife, Georgiana, is almost that: she is beautiful, loving, and extremely obedient. Her only defect, in her husband's eyes, is a tiny crimson birth-mark in the shape of a hand on one of her cheeks. For Aylmer, the mark not merely spoils Georgiana's good looks; it serves as a constant emblematic reminder of nature's unlimited powers, and of the imperfection inherent in mortal beings. To remove the birth-mark is what he sets out to do; and his wife must now undergo a process of near rebirth in order to make the mark disappear. Just like Frankenstein's, Aylmer's aspiration is to surpass nature. He foresees his recreation of his wife as an act of new creation and compares himself to the producer of a new living being: "Even Pygmalion, when his

sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be,”²⁰ he predicts before embarking on his experiment.

Images of birth or rebirth are also metaphorically invoked in Robert Louis Stevenson’s tale of another scientist who, like Frankenstein, creates a monster. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published in 1886, is the story of a physician, Dr. Jekyll, who discovers a deep and secret truth of nature: he realizes that every man is made of two separate essences, good and evil. “[T]he direction of my scientific studies [...] shed a strong light on this consciousness of the perennial war among my members. With every day [...] I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth [...]: that man is not truly one, but truly two.”²¹ Now he begins to strive for another discovery: a discovery of the means by which he can separate these elements. After a series of chemical experiments, he concocts a drug which has the power to “shake and pluck back [the] fleshly vestment” of the “seemingly so solid” human body (76), and substitute it by “a second form and countenance” (77). Now, Dr. Jekyll can create for himself a separate personality that will absorb all his evil instincts. This setting free of the evil element, whom he will call Mr. Hyde, is likened to childbearing: prior to their delivery, the good self and the evil self are initially, and unhappily, “bound together [...] in the agonized womb of consciousness” like “polar twins” who are “continuously struggling” (76). Jekyll renders the moment of the first releasing of the evil self—his transformation into Hyde—as a process that in many respects resembles a birth:

late one accursed night, I compounded the elements, watched them boil and smoke together in the glass, and when the ebullition had subsided, with a strong glow of courage, drank off the potion. The most racking pangs succeeded: a grinding in the bones, deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit that cannot be exceeded at the hour of birth or death. Then these agonies began swiftly to subside, and I came to myself as if out of a great sickness. There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new, and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body. [...] I stretched out my hands, exulting in the freshness of these sensations; and in the act, I was suddenly aware that I had lost in stature. (77–8)

²⁰Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Selected Tales and Sketches* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 264. All following quotes are from this edition.

²¹Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; Weir of Hermiston* (London, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1929), 75. All following quotes are from this edition.

Thus the newly born, smaller and younger body of Mr. Hyde is given life. The narrator's subjectivity is double here: it incorporates the sensations of both the larger, pregnant, birth-giving body, and the little body of the newborn issued out of the former, parental one. As Edwin M. Eigner suggests, Jekyll and Hyde's relationship can be seen as symbolically analogous to that of a father and son.²² This analogy—which can also be traced in the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his creature—introduces the issue of the male creator's function as a parent, to which we will return later.

The fourth text that I refer to is H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), an evolutionary fantasy about a scientist, Dr. Moreau, a naturalist who has devoted his life to the study of the plasticity of living forms. He deciphers the secret of creation and manufactures new human beings out of animals by vivisection, followed by brainwashing. Through an excruciating, bloody process (described in detail) of mutilation and torture, each agonized animal is given a rough human form, as well as brains; the creatures become verbal, capable of producing speech, of comprehending, reading, and thinking; and they are all brainwashed to idolize their creator as a deity. As I will show later, Dr. Moreau's motivation—besides his professed scientific curiosity—involves a degree of megalomania that exceeds that of his fictional predecessors and bears political implications.

All the texts that I have cited portray male figures who usurp the role of God, nature, and the maternal body when they create a new creature in their laboratories. All male scientists are exposed, in the act, as morally irresponsible and aggressive, both towards the female sex and towards their own newly born creatures, the product of their science. Masculine childbirth, though unattainable in real life, is represented as feasible in these works of fiction; it is rather masculine parenting that is rendered by the authors as an impossibility. We should first look closely at the four protagonists' fundamental misog-

²²Edwin M. Eigner, in *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), refers mainly to the intriguing facts that Jekyll is twice Hyde's age; that Hyde is of a much smaller stature than his creator; that like an indulging father, the doctor writes cheques in order to keep Hyde out of trouble; and that he makes him the sole beneficiary of his will. There are also explicit statements made in Stevenson's text that draw analogies to the father-son model, such as: "Jekyll had more than a father's interest; Hyde had more than a son's indifference" (Stevenson, 86). See Eigner 156.

ny, and then examine their ensuing renunciation of their own creatures. The same fear of the other underlies the two responses.

The ethical flaws in the conduct of the four male scientists are first indicated by their attitude towards women. Besides the aspiration to displace the maternal female by science, male antagonism to the feminine is exposed in these narratives by the way in which women's characters are treated: they are either excluded from the all-male world of scientific aspiration and achievement, or—when present—they are mentally oppressed and physically attacked. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, we are shown an all-male society of old boys, a bunch of lifelong bachelors, from which women are excluded. One of the single, yet typical references to the female sex in Stevenson's novel, for instance, is when two respectable gentlemen are busy "keeping the women off" (7) when an angry crowd gathers around Mr. Hyde. Women have no business there, or anywhere else, it seems. Elaine Showalter offers a persuasive reading of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as a "fable of *fin-de-siècle* homosexual panic, the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self" (*Sexual Anarchy* 107). Even if we do not accept this reading, there is no denying that this novel, even if not homosexual, is at least conspicuously homosocial.

On Dr. Moreau's island, too, there are no women, except for the female manufactured creatures; but they are not referred to as "real" human beings. The female sex exists in this work only in the form of an animalistic, subhuman set of creatures. The only "real" human beings on the island are, once again, male. As Ornella Moscucci points out in her study of the history of gynecology, medical research that was based on animal torture became associated, in the nineteenth century, with the new medical science of gynecology. Feminist activists saw women as the actual or potential victims of sadistic monsters—their doctors—and compared them to helpless animals tortured by male scientists in vivisectionist experiments. Late-Victorian, anti-vivisectionist literature often claimed that women and animals shared the same fate as the victims of materialist medical men (124). The all-male community of Dr. Moreau, where the only females are "medically" victimized, fits well into these discursive associations.

The case is seemingly different in *Frankenstein* and "The Birth-Mark," which do present female characters as central to their action. And yet, these women are again excluded from the male

domain of science; they, too, are reduced to the position of mere objects, and, above all, repeatedly fall victim to male aggression. Two women in Victor Frankenstein's family suffer violent deaths, for which he is indirectly responsible. As part of his misogyny, in his imagination and dreams Victor associates Elizabeth, his fiancée, with death rather than life; and his aggression can be explained by the fact that the sexual consummation of their relationship is a constant source of anxiety for him. Barbara Johnson, William Veeder, Ellen Moers, and others have shown how Victor and Elizabeth's wedding night, marking the brutal murder of the bride rather than a consummation of the marriage, signifies Victor's anxiety regarding female sexuality.²³ U. C. Knoepfmacher goes on to claim that Elizabeth and the monster are symbolically one—both signifying Victor's anxiety about the feminine. The "beautiful and passive Elizabeth and the repulsive, aggressive Monster who will be her murderer are [...] doubles—doubles who are in conflict only because of Victor's rejection of the femininity that was so essential to the happiness of his 'domestic circle' and to the balance of his own psyche."²⁴ Another female figure—the she-monster that Victor decides to create as a mate for his first creature—is violently and vehemently destroyed at the creator's own hand. As Johanna Smith states, Victor fears the "sick destructiveness" of his monsterette even more than that of his male monster.²⁵

In Hawthorne's story, the only case in which the scientist is married (a contradiction in terms, as Hawthorne's narrator does not fail to observe), the narrative underlines Aylmer's inability to love his wife, his efforts to keep her out of his laboratory and away

²³Barbara Johnson, in "My Monster/My Self," *Diacritics* 12 (1982): 8–9, William R. Veeder, in *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 157–158, and others connect this masculine anxiety to the repeated elimination of the mother from *Frankenstein*. As a bride, Elizabeth's maternal potential approaches its fulfillment, and therefore she has to die. Veeder associates this motif with Mary Shelley's biography, especially with the fact that her own birth brought about her mother's death, hence might be seen as matricide. Ellen Moers, in "Female Gothic" (*The Endurance of Frankenstein*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), 79, defines *Frankenstein* as a "birth myth" and also connects this theme to the author's own life, especially to the death of her first daughter, born prematurely.

²⁴U. C. Knoepfmacher, "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), 109. Further references will appear in the text.

²⁵See Johanna M. Smith, "Introduction," *Mary Shelley: Frankenstein* (Boston: Bedford Books, 2000), 15.

from any intellectual knowledge, and his merciless treatment of her as an object for research. As Judith Fetterley has shown, however, “The Birth-Mark” has too often been read as a story of man’s worthy passion for perfecting and transcending nature; this is the reading usually given it.²⁶ The defects of Aylmer’s idealism, as well as the profound misogyny and selfishness that underlie his experiment, are too often ignored. Aylmer’s obsession regarding Georgiana’s birth-mark has to do with the fact that he sees it “as the symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death” (261–2)—in other words, as an indication of her physicality. He dreams at night that he carves her through with a knife, trying to extract the birth-mark out of her body; and, eventually, and this is no longer a dream, he succeeds in erasing the fatal tiny hand from her cheek, but this achievement is somewhat tainted by the woman’s consequent death.²⁷ If we accept Knoepflmacher’s reading of *Frankenstein*, which sees the central female character and the created being as doubles (108–11), another parallel may be drawn between Shelley’s and Hawthorne’s texts: the male protagonist’s misogyny and his scientific overreaching combine into an aggressive and hostile treatment of Creature and Wife, or Creature-as-Wife, the two beings merged into one detestable Other.

The fear of the female other, which—as we have seen—was so central to the scientific and medical discourses we have examined, is linked in the four narratives to another fear of the other: the fear of the creature manufactured by the male scientist. The scientists’ reaction to the progeny of their experiments exposes once again their self-centered inability to relate to others, which underlies their attitude to the feminine. Anne Mellor has argued that from a

²⁶Judith Fetterley, in *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 22, 191–192 (n. 6), cites classical evaluations of Hawthorne’s story by Brooks and Warren, Richard Harter Fogle, Robert Heilman, F. O. Matthiessen, Arlin Turner, and others, all claiming or implying that Aylmer is a tragic hero rather than a villain, and that his idealistic scientific ambition—which they see as disinterested—receives Hawthorne’s admiration. There are, however, other readings. Randall A. Clack, for instance, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 88, 97, does emphasize the idea that “The Birth-mark” demonstrates the “consequences of rejecting the transmutative qualities of love.” Had Aylmer been capable of loving his wife, claims Clack, he would have deemed her perfect already.

²⁷According to Fetterley’s radical reading, “The Birth-Mark” is the story of a successful murder rather than of a failed scientific experiment. Fetterley does not seem to succeed, however, in substantiating her claim that Georgiana’s death is consciously intended by her husband.

feminist perspective, *Frankenstein* is “a book about what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman,” with the result of the man’s ensuing failure to show love, compassion, or responsibility for his own creature.²⁸ This failure, which reappears in all the narratives that rework the model of Shelley’s novel, makes the technologically achieved male birth disastrous, despite the scientific triumph involved. The progenitors’ narcissism renders them unable to face the otherness of the new creatures, and all four manifest an utter lack of moral responsibility—a psychological feature that has been required, perhaps, in order for them to go through with their audacious experimentations, but which makes them incapable of coping with the consequences.

Victor Frankenstein escapes his creature due to its hideous form, and rejects the latter’s attempts to befriend him. “[B]y the dim and yellow light of the moon [...] I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. [...] [H]is eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed downstairs” (58). The newborn speaks—his creator does not hear. He smiles, but his creator watches him in abhorrence. He stretches out his hand, but his creator shuns him and disappears. Victor’s escape is depicted in the novel as some kind of parental abandonment, and is given to us as the reason why the neglected creature eventually became vindictive, fierce, and murderous. Victor fails to realize that he has certain obligations towards this hateful being of his own making. In fact, he seems incapable of seeing his own creature as an other—a separate subject who deserves to be related to according to some moral parameters. George Levine, following Martin Tropp, states that *Frankenstein* presents the technological as threatening, and that the mechanical creation of life in this novel shows us that “technology can never be more than a magnified image of the self.”²⁹ This observation should be somewhat modified: it is indeed Victor’s fantasy

²⁸Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988), 40.

²⁹See Martin Tropp, *Mary Shelley’s Monster* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 52, and George Levine, “The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*,” in *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979), 16.

to create a being that would function as a magnifying image of its creator's self; but the repulsion that he feels as soon as his creature comes to life and opens its eyes originates in the shocking discovery that the "thing" is now a distinct and independent being. Victor's abhorrence at the creature's ugliness is oddly belated, as much as it is strangely sudden: why has he failed to notice the creature's hideousness before giving it life? Until that moment, says Victor, I had thought him beautiful; "but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (57). Only when the creature is perceived as an other, does its presence become intolerable, both visually and emotionally.

Dr. Jekyll is described as much more sympathetic towards his monster than Victor Frankenstein is, perhaps because Jekyll and Hyde form one subjectivity. That makes Mr. Hyde not really an other toward whom there should exist any moral obligations. Yet Jekyll—although at first his attitude to Hyde is protective and paternal—begins to repress Hyde as soon as the latter's horrible deeds threaten the reputation and peace of mind of the respectable doctor. His eventual prolonged repression of Hyde, his panicky denial of this creature's existence, is rendered in the narrative as a deceptive and guilty act, which leads to an even more powerful and violent outburst of the vicious being and to his triumph over the creator, Jekyll.

Doctor Moreau, in H. G. Wells's story, is not only the cruelest but also the most dangerous of the four scientists. The three others are unfeeling, egocentric, and irresponsible in their dealings with their created beings, but Moreau is an outright sadist, rejoicing in his constant and wide-scale torturing of helpless, bleeding, howling living things. His island/laboratory becomes one huge factory of pain, and his experimentations in creating new lives extend beyond personal megalomania and acquire a political dimension. Victor Frankenstein's initial vision of the new species that he will father—a vision left unfulfilled because of his disgust with the first creature that he makes—is materialized in Wells's description of Moreau's new genus of natives, who deify him as their God and sovereign. Following Frank McConnell's view of Moreau's island as a precursor of the Nazi concentration camp, Elana Gomel goes on to claim that "Dr. Moreau is one of the first portrayals of the New Man of eugenics who later evolves into the

New Man of fascism.”³⁰ Thus, although Moreau’s violence first strikes Prendick (the shipwrecked narrator of Wells’s tale) as senseless, it is nevertheless grounded on a well-thought-out ideology. Moreau wants to imitate what he sees as nature’s ways; his work of creation is manifestly as remorseless and cruel as that of Darwinian natural processes. Like Hawthorne’s Aylmer, who desires to make his wife perfect and transcend the limits of mortal physicality, Moreau wishes to rise above the imperfection of the physical, represented here by animals. However, as Gomel argues, in Moreau’s case the sublime body that the scientist aims to produce is his own, rather than that of his object of experimentations. Torturing the other serves Moreau not just as a means for creating new beings, but also—perhaps mainly—for creating the illusion that his own body is superior and transcendent, and that it is immune from change, injury, and pain (Gomel 412–413). However, the results of Moreau’s experimentations reveal the reverse: the creator-scientist is devoured by the puma-woman he has created, and the entire enterprise, rather than underlining the superiority of the human over the animal world, subverts the distinction between man and beast. This destabilizing effect makes Wells’s story typical of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, which, according to Kelly Hurley, “accomplishes the utter ruin of the human subject, without apology, without nostalgia, without remorse” (113).

The ambiguous relationship between creator and creature depicted in the four works evokes, in other words, a series of ethical and psychological dilemmas and deficiencies. These failings expose the threatening side of scientific progress. Side by side, they also reveal the destructive nature of misogynistic masculinity, depicted as an unfeeling, cold, and inhuman form of parenting. All four narratives, although yielding their protagonists scientific success at first, end up catastrophically, in an inversion that renders this initial success a failure. Aylmer’s wife does not survive the experiment; Moreau is brutally murdered by the woman-puma he has created and tortured; Hyde vanquishes Jekyll and both commit suicide; and Victor’s monster slays his creator’s

³⁰Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 92, and Elana Gomel, “From Dr. Moreau to Dr. Mengele: The Biological Sublime,” *Poetics Today* 21 (Summer 2000): 412. Further references will appear in the text.

beloved relatives and friends, and destroys his life. All these texts repeat the pattern, initially presented in *Frankenstein*, in which the ethical and emotional rejection of the creature, as well as the denial of the body of maternity and sexuality, combine to thwart scientific achievement.

This denial of the body involves some ironic gaps in the four narratives. An examination of the progenitors' attitude to the body on the one hand, and of the function of the body within the narratives on the other, suggests that the scientists' outlook is limited. The protagonists, who begin by denying the need for a maternal body, do recognize, indeed, that the formation of a new creature—even if not biologically managed—necessitates a body for the created being to exist in. But despite this recognition, the creators still regard the creature's new body as secondary, incidental, and merely instrumental for the new life that vibrates in it. After Victor has already found out how to create the spark of life, it still takes him a long time to learn how to construct a body that may accommodate this spark. In other words, he perceives life as an essence that is separate from the body. Similarly, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Moreau, and Aylmer depend, for each of their inventions, on the separateness of the physical from the being that they create: Georgiana's birth-mark is removed in an attempt on her husband's part to deny her physical existence; as his laboratory records indicate he is an anti-materialist who wishes to transcend the physicality of natural objects. Hyde emerges in a new body, and when he goes back to hide in his creator's psyche, his new body is relinquished—as though the psyche conjures up or dispenses with the physical at its own will. And Moreau's animals change their form and are sculptured and molded into a human physique, quite different from their former, natural shape.

But then the masculine, or scientific, repression of the body is ironically inverted, in what seems to be the return of the repressed. The body—whose existence and function are systematically denied by the four scientists—reemerges, and in a most uncontained, hideous and threatening form. It overwhelms the scientists with its mass of deformity, defect, and monstrosity. The invented creatures are all distorted, ugly, revolting: Victor's monster is horrid to look at, with his huge limbs, his muscles and arteries half showing through his yellow skin, and his "shrivelled complexion" and black lips (57). The monster is an emblem of

the gross physicality of decaying flesh; he is a “filthy mass that move[s] and talk[s]” (147). Mr. Hyde, too, is unnaturally deformed and revolting: “There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarcely know why. He must be deformed somewhere” (10). His look is “so ugly that it [brings] out the sweat on [you]” (6). Similarly, Moreau’s creatures are misshapen, clumsy, crooked, short, and hairy; their faces are “singularly deformed,” with bloodshot eyes and a “huge half-open mouth” (13). Eventually, they also become murderous and revert to their animal form.

Physical deformity renders the scientists’ procreation a failure not just because their creatures are ugly, but because it seems to show that the natural body—although imperfect and decaying—cannot be rivaled. Each of the four works stages an imaginary realization of some of the collective needs and aspirations of its period. The texts are structured upon the same set of ideas that underlies the discourses of the feminine psyche and body, of maternity, and of scientific progress, as presented in the first part of this essay. The literary testing of these ideas offered by the four fictional works reveals, however, that these influential concepts have quite a few ethical and psychological flaws, despite their unmistakable appeal. The unintentional triumph of the uncontained body of the created being in each of the works suggests that because of these flaws, it is questionable whether science and technology—even when most successful—can ever outdo physical nature. Whereas in the earlier works, by Shelley and Hawthorne, the monstrosity is rejected as belonging to an Other; in Stevenson and Wells’s narratives it appears as internal, undermining the stability and familiarity of the self. As Donald Lawler claims, in Shelley’s narrative (and we should also add Hawthorne’s), the universe remains morally sane; aberrations are possible, but they are the results of Promethean overreaching, and in the end balance is restorable (255). On the other hand, Stevenson’s split protagonist, as well as Wells’s ambiguated boundary between the humanity and animalism of his characters, suggest in a more explicit manner than the earlier works have done, that the distinction between the scientific, rational, civilized self and its monstrous and bestial offspring has been irredeemably blurred.

Works Cited

- Balbus, Isaac D. "Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse." In Jonathan Arac, ed., *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Brantlinger, Patrick, and Richard Boyle. "The Education of Edward Hyde: Stevenson's 'Gothic Gnome' and the Mass Readership of Late-Victorian England." In William Veeder and Gordon Hirsch, eds., *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde After One Hundred Years*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Clack, Randall A. *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth: Alchemical Regeneration in the Works of Taylor, Poe, Hawthorne, and Fuller*. Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*. London, Melbourne: Hutchinson, 1988.
- Dever, Carolyn. *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Eigner, Edwin M. *Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Fox Keller, Evelyn, and Helen E. Longino, eds., *Feminism and Science*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Fox Keller, Evelyn. "From Secrets of Life to Secrets of Death." In Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. New York, London: Routledge, 1990.
- Gagnier, Regenia. "Individualism from the New Woman to the Genome: Autonomy and Independence." *Partial Answers* 1 (January 2003): 103–128.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "More about Medusa's Head." *Representations* 4 (Fall 1983): 55–72.
- Galton, Francis. "Hereditary Talent and Character." *Macmillan Magazine* XII (1865): 157–166, 318–327.
- Gomel, Elana. "From Dr. Moreau to Dr. Mengele: The Biological Sublime." *Poetics Today* 21 (Summer 2000): 393–421.
- Harding, Sandra. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Harman, Oren. "Afterword." In *The Fateful Eggs*, by Mikhail Afanasevich Bulgakov. Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2003.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Selected Tales and Sketches*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin de siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Johnson, Barbara. "My Monster/My Self." *Diacritics* 12 (1982): 2–10.
- Knoepfelmacher, U. C. "Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters." In George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979.
- Lawler, Donald. "Reframing *Jekyll and Hyde*: Robert Louis Stevenson and the Strange Case of Gothic Science Fiction." In William Veeder and Gordon

- Hirsch, eds., *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde After One Hundred Years*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Levine, George. "The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*." In George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979.
- McConnell, Frank. *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- McKnight, Natalie J. *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels*. Houndsmills and London: Macmillan Press, 1997.
- Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. New York, London: Routledge, 1988.
- Moers, Ellen. "Female Gothic." In George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979.
- Moscucci, Ornella. *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800–1929*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Mossman, Carol A. *Politics and Narratives of Birth: Gynocolonization from Rousseau to Zola*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.
- Schwartz Cowan, Ruth. *Sir Francis Galton and the Study of Heredity in the Nineteenth Century*. New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1985.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830–1980*. New York, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985.
- . *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. New York, London: Viking Penguin, 1990.
- Smith, Johanna M. "Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts." In Johanna M. Smith, ed., *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. Boston: Bedford Books, 2000.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; Weir of Hermiston*. London, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1929.
- Sussman, Herbert. *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to A Literary Genre*. Translated by Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Tropp, Martin. *Mary Shelley's Monster*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Veeder, William R. *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Walvin, James. *A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood 1800–1914*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Warner, Marina. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. London: Pan Books, 1985.
- Wells, H. G. *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. London: Ernest Benn, 1927.

Copyright of *Women's Studies* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.