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“Sympathy and Compassion”: Sociability, Science, and the Double in Mary Shelley’s

Frankenstein

Mary Shelley’s enduring novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* conjures images of madness, hubris, and monstrosity, but one of its most identifying features lies with the doubling, or doppelgänger, relationship between creator and created. In this obsession with Victor Frankenstein and his creature, the doubling between Frankenstein and the novel’s first narrator, Robert Walton, often goes underappreciated. A polar explorer searching for “the region of beauty and delight” in a mythical arctic paradise, Walton represents “the scientific ambition” of contemporary northern adventurers (Shelley 15; Heringman 129). Similarly, Frankenstein exhibits many traits that establish his character as “a composite figure...in many ways typical of a whole generation of scientific men” (Holmes 185). As such scientific doubles, Walton and Frankenstein play off of each other and their shared quest for triumph, a driving pursuit that leads one into the desolate frozen wastes of the north, and the other to an isolated “workshop of filthy creation” (Shelley 55). In this doppelgänger kinship, however, lies a crucial variance that differentiates what prominent Mary Shelley scholar Anne K. Mellor calls “Victor Frankenstein’s bad science” and Walton’s redeemable aspirations (“A Feminist Critique” 300). This contrast emerges from Walton’s alignment with the novel’s persistent theme of empathy, friendship, family, and companionship, despite his exploration, and Frankenstein’s denial of domesticity for the sake of scientific greatness. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley uses the doubling between Frankenstein

and Walton in order to delineate “good” and “bad” science on the basis of sociability and sympathy. Moreover, Shelley’s judgment of scientific morality extends to the larger scholarly feminist critique of her work. Shelley’s ultimate view indicates the necessity of human connection to modulate the potential danger of scientific endeavors when placed in the wrong hands.

Though Frankenstein and Walton double in many ways throughout Shelley’s novel, their main connection originates in a mutual attraction toward science. As Janice Cavell notes, Walton is “an obvious mirror...for Victor” (295). Both characters work in tandem as illustrative young men of science who passionately seek to understand the natural world. Walton dreams of finding a fantastical “calm sea” and a land of “wonders” and “beauty” at the pole, where he may “discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle,” unravel the intricacies of “a thousand celestial observations,” and understand “the secret of the magnet” (Shelley 15-16). Frankenstein, too, shares Walton’s “ardent curiosity,” with his “fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature” and find the origin of the “spark of being” (Shelley 16, 41, 58). These are two men caught in the lure of grandiose intellectual ambition, treating science as a challenge of human will. Walton’s wish of finding a place not only intellectually but aesthetically stimulating, and Frankenstein’s aspiration of perceiving a world “of boundless grandeur,” both stem from the idea of the Romantic sublime, indicating a similar conception of science (Shelley 48). Both men even blame books and improper education for their parallel swings between science to the humanities, before finally landing on an ambitious iteration of their original intentions (Shelley 19-20, 40-41, 16-17). As well, Walton and Frankenstein carefully justify their fervor for discovery by noting “the inestimable benefit” and “glory” their revelations would “confer on all mankind” (Shelley 16, 42). Shelley paints a double image in these characters of two extraordinary men of science

who share a similar drive to make the unknown known through an alloy of brilliance, daring, grandiosity, and not a little egotism.

Shelley's conception of the scientist in *Frankenstein* comes from a highly intentional place, and she uses the doubled Walton and Frankenstein to critique the role of the discipline in society. Richard Holmes remarks that Shelley absorbed science into her psyche from a young age as a result of her father, William Godwin, and her husband Percy Shelley's influence (183). In particular, Holmes notes that Godwin took Shelley "to hear [contemporary chemist] Humphry Davy give his public lectures...at the Royal Institute" (183). Mellor argues that Shelley's "sound grasp of the concepts and implications of some of the most important scientific work of her day" can be traced to Davy, and that Frankenstein represents a critical opposite of the renowned experimenter, a "frightening image of the alienated scientist working in feverish isolation" ("A Feminist Critique" 288, 292). Frankenstein's descent into illness and madness, ending in a premature death, certainly brings forth Shelley's fear of science's potentialities as a reaction to the cultural bloom of science as distinct discipline. Shelley also, however, uses Walton to warn against the threat of "bad" science. In particular, Walton initially shares Frankenstein's willingness to cross into the realm of death for the sake of research, as he notes that "[o]ne man's life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race" (Shelley 29). In this doubling, Walton and Frankenstein merge as depictions of Shelley's moral fear that scientists might push their subject into the realm of the grotesque and horribly immoral. The fact that the novel ends with the Creature's death, Frankenstein's death, and the death of several of Walton's unfortunate crew, underscores this critique (Shelley 216, 220, 225). Even more, this doubling relationship provides Frankenstein the ability to himself moralize on the dangers of

leading science too far, as through his tale he warns Walton, a mirror of his earlier self, to not approach “my madness” and to not drink “also of the intoxicating draught” of blind hubris (Shelley 29). As such, Shelley uses doubling to “advocate[] certain boundaries to the application of scientific discoveries,” and avoid the terror of science gone wrong by portraying contemporary societal change in her characters and providing the mad scientist a voice, an intensifying parallel, and a moral outlet (Knellwolf 514).

Shelley’s doubling of Walton and Frankenstein, however, extends beyond the scientific, as she uses this relationship to highlight her characters’ contrasting sociability. The humanizing, calming effect of the social plays an important role in Shelley’s work as what Mary Poovey terms “the valorization of relationship” (339). Frankenstein shows a clear pattern throughout his story of family and friends tempering the madness of his scientific pursuits, as his natural inclinations turn him constantly away from domesticity (Shelley 56). He “shunned the face of all man,” and relies upon “deep, dark, deathlike solitude,” an alliteration that sheds light on his inner mental state (Shelley 93). Though Frankenstein upholds family as important to him, his actions reveal a withdrawn, antisocial man who locks himself in his own “cell” of deviant obsession (Shelley 55). Walton, on the other hand, temporarily removes himself from society through his arctic voyage, but his and Frankenstein’s isolation do not compare. As Poovey argues, “Walton provides an example of the domesticated man, whose altruism figures as an alternative to Frankenstein’s antisocial ambition” (339). Even in the frozen north and surrounded by a sea of ice, Walton remembers that his “first task is to assure my dear sister,” Margaret Saville, “of my welfare” (Shelley 15). Though on his research vessel Walton feels lonely, he still acknowledges his responsibility to “raise the spirit” of his crew of “men on whom I can depend” (Shelley 17, 19). And, even as Walton expresses a distaste of the “rugged bosoms” of his crew, he sees the

humanity in their “feelings” and “kindliness” (Shelley 20). Rather than completely shielding himself from the world to pursue science, as Frankenstein does, Walton understands his reliance on others to achieve his goals. Through their doubling, Shelley emphasizes this contrast, allying Walton with a different social temperament than Frankenstein.

As such, while Walton and Frankenstein share a desire for scientific glory that pulls each man away from his family, Walton retains a sociability foreign to Victor. Frankenstein’s journey from his family to the university at Ingolstadt symbolizes his descent into social isolation, as he goes from his “amiable companions” to his “solitary compartment” (Shelley 46-47). As touched upon earlier, Walton’s journey does not exhibit such an extreme degree of what Zoe Beenstock calls “Romantic withdrawal,” as he holds onto his sister, his crewmates, and, later, Frankenstein for social comfort (413). Conversely, Frankenstein’s “rejection of sympathy” takes him to “one of the remotest of the Orkneys” to undertake the gruesome task of creating a companion for his creature; he can’t bear the thought “of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted” and so dashes his new creation “to pieces,” justifying this violence on his (wrong) assumption of the Creature’s own violent antisociality (Daffron 417; Shelley 168, 170-171). What may be one of the clearest signs of division between Walton and Frankenstein, however, shows in their schismatic desires to bring another into their lives. Ostensibly a social urge, Frankenstein wishes to create “[a] new species [that] would bless me as its creator and source” (Shelley 55). In doing so, Frankenstein twists the egalitarian to the egotistic, the social to the master with his slaves. Conversely, Walton’s ultimate desire, reflecting his inner sociability, is to have a “friend” with “affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind” (Shelley 20). Unlike Frankenstein, Walton “longs for sympathy,” as he understands the need to balance scientific ambition with

human connection (Daffron 428). Shelley's doubling of these two scientists serves to create an intense contrast when the reality of their inner selves arises.

Shelley also utilizes this Walton-Frankenstein double relationship to further compare them from the same frame, and with it develop a moral critique of science. The similarities between her two characters as glory-seeking investigators of nature cause the differences in their social approach to science to stand out. Specifically, Walton treats science as a social enterprise, while Frankenstein does not. As Allison B. Kavey points out, Frankenstein "conducted his research entirely alone and without oversight," shunning the moderating force of "the University of Ingolstadt and its faculty" (498). Frankenstein begins with such support from his professors and peers, but obsession turns him inward. This obsession may be traced to his childhood misinterpretation of the scientist as a solitary diviner of nature, born from the "exploded systems" of discredited old alchemists (Shelley 42). Frankenstein's first impression haunts him, and he takes science too far, beyond the checks-and-balances of academia and into an unmonitored, reclusive mania that leads to monstrosity. Walton sees science in the same grand way as Frankenstein, but he conducts it with others, needing his crew and the promise of seeing his sister again to sustain his venture. Kavey remarks that this comparison of social versus antisocial science represents Shelley's "critique of scientific investigation and ambition, especially when the work is done alone," a criticism deriving from the ancient belief in "humoralism, that work must be balanced with entertainment, and time alone with time devoted to relationships, or it will destroy the health of the individual" (505). Frankenstein's descent into illness certainly shows what profound isolation wrought by an unhealthy pursuit of science may do.

In this doubling, Shelley also calls attention to Frankenstein's science of death, versus Walton's choice of life. Frankenstein undoubtedly practices a grotesque form of experimentation as he exchanges the living people of his academic world, a place he claims is "no longer conducive to my improvements," for the death and "decay" of "vaults and charnel-houses" as he assembles his creature (Shelley 52-53). As discussed earlier, this unequal and unnatural substitution plunges Frankenstein into a cycle of disease, making him sick, "pale," and "emaciated," ultimately leading to his own death (Shelley 55). Frankenstein's scientific proclivities are so antisocial that, as Noah Heringman states, he creates a new species only to destroy it, defining the Creature "solely by the prospect of extinction" (142). Walton, though he continues into the tomb-like world of the north as danger closes in, catches himself before his desires mimic Frankenstein's fatal flaw, a flaw that Shelley uses "to analyze and to critique the more dangerous implications of both the scientific method and its practical results" ("A Feminist Critique" 287). Walton's conscience stays him, as he admits that "it is terrible to reflect that the lives of all these men are endangered through me. If we are lost, my mad schemes are the cause" (Shelley 215). Here, Walton shows the presence of mind to choose life over death, a character trait that Frankenstein severely lacks.

By far the most important distinction between Walton and Frankenstein, however, emerges from their final behaviors that seal their fates. Expressly, Walton demonstrates what Frankenstein might be with proper sociability, offering an alternative of redemption. At the very height of danger, when "mountains of ice" surround the ship with Walton, his crew, and Frankenstein, Walton makes a crucial moral judgment, asking himself of his crew's request to leave the north if the ice clears: "could I, in justice, or even in possibility, refuse this demand?" (Shelley 216-217). Ever devoted to his twisted science, Frankenstein tries to convince Walton

and his crew to stay and “be brave men...steady to your purposes, firm as a rock...Return as heroes who have fought and conquered and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe” (Shelley 217-218). But Frankenstein’s rhetoric, while convincing, cannot overcome Walton’s natural inclination towards sympathy, even when at the edge of the highest glory. Two days after Frankenstein’s speech, Walton determines that he must “consent[] to return, if we are not destroyed,” as “I cannot withstand [the crew’s] demands. I cannot lead them unwillingly to danger, and I must return” (Shelley 218-219). Walton’s “superior heart” leads him to understand a morality that his counterpart Frankenstein could never grasp: the science of “danger and death” cannot be anything but destructive (Thompson 301; Shelley 217). Following Frankenstein’s advice would surely have killed them all.

Walton also cannot fulfill Frankenstein’s final request to “undertake my unfinished work” and destroy his creation, instead listening to the Creature’s eloquent speech and letting him have the final word (Shelley 220, 222-225). As Terry W. Thompson observes, Walton “does not turn away from [the Creature’s] ugliness, does not reject a fellow being on the basis of deformity or disfigurement” (301). In this, Shelley not only illustrates Walton’s capacity for compassion, but also shows that even Frankenstein’s “monster” may not be inherently bad, if accompanied by a maker of the appropriate sociability and sympathy. Walton displays what Frankenstein could be if he had the capability to align proper social moral judgment with his scientific fervor. Walton’s diversion from his and Frankenstein’s similar paths at this point subverts the notion of science as intrinsically “bad” or, as Mellor argues, an absolute “critique of objective, rationalistic thought” (“Possessing Nature” 306). Instead, Shelley offers hope of a “good” science that couples rationality with “sympathy and compassion” (Shelley 28). As Christa Knellwolf states, *Frankenstein* provides a “warning about the dangerous consequences of

scientific curiosity, however, [it] does not instruct us to desist from the desire to know,” instead encouraging us to “build the context” for a science aware of “the qualities and needs of human life” (517). Shelley parallels her two double men of science, but their final fates, death for Frankenstein and life for Walton, suggest that science may not be withdrawn, unsocial, and blinded by a drive to success, but a realm of community, life, and empathy. Walton reclaims Shelley’s novel from a blanket criticism of science to a criticism of Frankenstein’s lone, aberrant interpretation. In this, Shelley prefigures the collaborative nature of today’s research by recommending a proper social environment of science.

Shelley’s use of doubling to articulate and advocate a social version of science also applies to the substantial feminist critique of *Frankenstein*. Scholars such as Poovey and Mellor identify Shelley’s work as a sharp criticism of “much of the scientific research of her day [that] incorporated an attempt to dominate the female” (“Possessing Nature” 305). Mellor particularly condemns Frankenstein’s science as a “rape of nature, a violent penetration and usurpation of the female’s ‘hiding places’ of the womb” (“Possessing Nature” 363). Such misogynistic “domestic destruction” aligns with Frankenstein’s turn from relationships, first to construct the Creature, and then to abandon and deny it any hope of its own social bonds through a female companion (Poovey 340). This moment of abandonment limns Frankenstein’s decline, as after it he dreams of his beloved Elizabeth transforming into his “dead mother” with “grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel” (Shelley 59). Frankenstein’s startling vision symbolizes the consequences of his science “elminati[ing] the female’s primary biological function” and “creating a society for men only” as the women in his life dissolve from his grasp (“Possessing Nature” 355). From this perspective, Frankenstein’s science is not just misanthropic, but misogynist. Without the

mentorship of his peers, Frankenstein attempts to sequester natural sexual reproduction for an asexual, antisocial imitation, playing god without providing his Adam an Eve.

Walton provides a salve to this destruction as Shelley creates an epistolary frame that makes the very outer shell of the novel female, with Walton's sister Margaret. Interestingly, in his paper "Male Bonding: Sympathy and Shelley's *Frankenstein*," Eric Daffron argues that Shelley's doubling of Walton and Frankenstein admits the latter's "feared desire for men" (425). According to Daffron, Walton and Frankenstein together form a sympathetic substitute for the domestic sphere that degrades "once no women remain" into "a claustrophobic, homophobic space of only men" (426). Daffron forgets, however, that Walton's sister remains a silent phantom throughout the novel, providing Walton an "anchor" (Poovey 335). Thus, one woman *does* remain in the background—Margaret Saville—and Walton even expresses of his sister that while "I have lost my friend...[as] I am wafted towards England, and towards you, I will not despond" (Shelley 218). Shelley allies the novel's glimpse of final optimism directly with a woman and the implication of a triumphal return to female domesticity. Not only does Walton provide Frankenstein a contrasting double to suggest an improved version of science, in him Shelley offers a man of science who bears intellectual disappointment with the understanding of greater humanity, and the importance of the feminine, in a reinterpretation of true, scientific success.

Always a warning against "bad" science, *Frankenstein* provides not only a direct negative example its dangers, but also an indirect optimism personified by Walton. In her novel, Shelley draws this moral line based upon the social, underscored by doubling. Within a larger context, science and literature, as "modes of discourse" that shape and are "mutually shaped by their participation in the culture at large," inform each other and should be utilized as

counterweights (Levine 3, 5-6). Shelley's argument extends into the realm of scientific ethics and implores us to not forget the importance of our humanity, as mirrored in others, in the search for ever more knowledge. Frankenstein's final words imply such an application: "Yet another may succeed" (Shelley 220). Shelley does not denigrate science as whole, but proposes that this "other" should be a double in the image of an explorer like Walton, imbued with compassion and a natural tendency towards the social. Walton and Frankenstein's resemblance only makes the differences in their sympathies, and the effects of their incongruities on their work and fates, even more lucid. Further scholarship may uncover how Shelley's moral stance evolved from the 1818 version of *Frankenstein* to the 1831 revision, as Shelley reacted to "science...[as] an increasingly social affair," providing a broader historical background (Kavey 506). In both versions, however, the novel resolves in the same way. Walton may not have found a friend to ameliorate his "most severe evil" of loneliness, and "to sustain me in dejection," but he finds something even more valuable: a warning shadow of himself that lifts his science out of the dangerous "darkness and distance" of icy arctic solitude and back into the clear light of human society (Shelley 19, 225).

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