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The Rebellious Imagination of *Frankenstein's* Monster:

The Different Ways to Save Female Monsters
between Shelley and Wollstonecraft

Haruno NISHIGUCHI

Keywords: Mary Shelley / human justice / female servant / imagination / writing

Introduction

Mary Shelley wrote her horror fiction *Frankenstein* (1818), in which the protagonist, a Genevan science student, Victor Frankenstein, in his fervent attempt to build a new and improved form of mankind, created a hideous monster. Shelley's monster imagery has been interpreted in the context of the 1790s England's political debates regarding the French Revolution. One of the leading polemicists, Edmund Burke, expressed his anti-revolutionary view in his polemical writing *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and in his letters, describing France as a "monster of a State," "the mother of monsters," and "this monstrous compound" (263, 290, 321). By investigating other conservative writings of the revolutionary age in England, Lee Sterrenburg found that Burke's monstrous rhetoric is also applied by conservative writers to lampoon radical reformers, including William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, who were Shelley's parents. Conservative novelists have a standard plot in which "[u]topian reformers breed monsters who threaten to destroy them" (147). Sterrenburg and other critics agreed that *Frankenstein* has the typical conservative plot in order to caricature the utopian reformer Godwin, in that "Victor's attempts to regenerate human life echo both Godwin and the conservative critique of Godwin's ideas" (148). These conservative groups attributed the evilness of the Revolution to Godwinian radical philosophy. Shelley's monster is derived from the Burkean rhetorical tradition of monstrous radicalism.

On the other hand, Sterrenburg also suggested the Wollstonecraftian social

view of an evil rebel in *Frankenstein*; unlike the conservative tradition, the rebellious monster's evilness is attributed not to his innate character, such as radicalism, but to the result of a fallible social system. Shelley's monster protests a "strange system of human society," which has an unreasonable standard to separate people into masters and slaves. The monster tells his creator and a human representative, Victor Frankenstein, the following:

... The strange system of human society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood.

... I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few. (96)

Based on this quote, the monster reflects on his own situation and finds it miserable: "I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property" (96). By recognizing his deprived status, the monster comes to forcibly acknowledge his social isolation: "[w]hen I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?" (96). Experiencing social inequalities, the monster decides his horrible vengeance on the superior being, Victor.

The monster's observation above echoes that of Wollstonecraft in her polemical writing, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.¹⁾ She attributed the furious retaliation of the lower class insurrectionaries to the established social separation. She wrote:

The depravation of natural, equal, civil, and political rights reduced the most cunning of the lower orders to practice fraud, and the rest to habits of stealing, audacious robberies, and murders. And why? because the rich and poor were separated into bands of tyrants and slaves, and the retaliation of slaves is always terrible. (370)

As Wollstonecraft argued, the retaliation of the slave *Frankenstein's* monster is terrible.

By conflating the 1790s polemical writings of both Burke and Wollstonecraft above, Shelley made her monster story. Sterrenburg pointed out that Shelley's originality lay in the subjective description of the consequences of the 1790s political discussion regarding social oppression or higher-class misrule, through the eyes of the monster as the very "victim who is also a rebel" (166). However, this subjective narration of a socially oppressed and rebellious character already existed in Wollstonecraft's fiction, which Sterrenburg did not analyze. In her gothic novel *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft made a female servant, Jemima, tell her life story as a social victim, using the subjective "I." Anne K. Mellor suggested that a monster's situation as a social outcast echoes the deprived status of a female servant, in this case, Jemima. Her voice corresponds to the monster's in that Jemima is disowned and isolated by all men from birth, and social inequality prevented her from obtaining her position in society:

I was an egg dropped on the sand; a pauper by nature, hunted from family to family, who belonged to nobody, and nobody cared for me. I was despised from my birth, and denied the chance of obtaining a footing for myself in society. Yes; I had not even the chance of being considered as a fellow-creature... (95)

Mellor pointed out that Jemima called herself a monster, and the similarity is emphasized between the female servant, Jemima, and *Frankenstein's* monster. While Sterrenburg literally interpreted the monster as a male character, Mellor indicated that *Frankenstein's* monster becomes a universal being, as "[in] echoing Jemima, Shelley's male monster appropriates the female voice" (421).

This study starts with Mellor's view that Jemima is a prototype of *Frankenstein's* monster. It tests the hypothesis that, when a female servant, Jemima, corresponds to the monster, the female servant Justine Moritz in *Frankenstein* should possibly be a character analogous to the monster. Although both previous above-mentioned studies focused on the social outcast monster, they never addressed the other social victim in *Frankenstein*, Justine. A female servant of Frankenstein's family, Justine is wrongly sentenced to death in a criminal

trial for the murder of little William, Frankenstein's youngest brother.

This attempt will show the difference in treatment of female servant characters between Shelley and Wollstonecraft. It extends the previous analysis to the hidden but cross-referenced relationship between the two socially oppressed characters in *Frankenstein*—the monster and Justine. The analysis points out that Shelley saves the female monster Justine from the social outcast status by making *Frankenstein's* monster succeed her role. Thereby, at the end of *Frankenstein*, Shelley presents a possible future in which a monster can escape from the middle-class ruling world.

***Frankenstein's* Monsters: The Monster and Justine Moritz as Non-human Rebels**

In *Frankenstein*, the monster and Justine Moritz are connected through their accusations of being ungrateful toward middle class people. The word "monster" has long been used with the meaning of ingratitude, namely turning against one's benefactors (Baldick 13).²⁾ During his creation of a new form of mankind, Victor Frankenstein believed that "no father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (36). Contrary to Victor's expectation, his child, whom Victor later calls monster, feels "no sentiment but that of hatred" towards Victor, and murders his brother and dearest friends (114). Through Victor's precursory discourse, Frankenstein's monster is presented as an icon of ingratitude. Identically, Frankenstein's female servant, Justine, is also labeled as ungrateful by her benefactor, Alphonse Frankenstein, Victor's father. Justine is allowed to live as Frankenstein's servant. However, she is wrongly accused of the murder of little William. At this event, Alphonse is deeply disappointed, saying, "I had rather have been for ever ignorant than have discovered so much depravity and ingratitude in one I valued so highly" (59). Both monster and Justine have the ingratitude toward their benefactors in common.

These two ungrateful characters are victimized by human justice and laws. *Frankenstein's* monster symbolizes the failure of human laws. In creating a monster, a human representative, Victor, applies "unnatural" laws, which reverse the natural process from life to death. The monster himself presents the devastating result of artificial human laws. In the case of Justine, it appears as the criminal

laws in the court scene of the accused Justine are applicable. Shelley might have borrowed her view that human laws in law courts are partial to the higher class people from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Wollstonecraft's *Maria*; however, unlike these two novels, Shelley elaborated on the public observers and exposed their class preference. As the court scene goes on through Victor's narration, *Frankenstein's* readers are already informed that the monster is the true murderer and Justine is wrongly accused. The public observers' beliefs in Justine's guilt are presented in the opening of the trial, and are not changed even by her mistress, Elizabeth, who testifies of Justine's benevolent character, although she is one of the bereaved family members. In contrast to her own intention, the public observers get all the more furious with Justine since Elizabeth seems to be a generous mistress forgiving her ungrateful servant. Along with Victor's perspective, sympathetic to Justine, *Frankenstein's* readers find it all the more unfair since they know who the true murderer is. Therefore, Shelley introduces her readers to a paradoxical situation: the public observers do not forgive the accused, even when one of the bereaved family members asks for her acquittal. If a fair-hearted audience had heard Elizabeth's testimony for Justine's benevolent character, the possibility of Justine's innocence would have been reconsidered. However, the court audience only strengthened their doubts. There must be an established class preference toward the middle class and prejudice against the lower class. In the murder trial of innocent Justine, human justice is depicted as partial to the middle class.

For middle class characters, human justice is favorably recognized. One of the middle class characters shows his trust in it; in the face of Justine's baleful trial, Alphonse tells the audience, including Victor, Elizabeth, and *Frankenstein's* readers to "[r]ely on the justice of our judges" and it enables them to "prevent the slightest shadow of partiality" (61). Alphonse completely trusts the righteousness of human justice and believes that Justine will be acquitted if she is truly innocent. This remark that the innocent is always acquitted is true to the case of Victor, who also gets wrongly imprisoned but escapes from death sentence due to the court judge showing a favorable understanding by finding his respectable class identification. In contrast to Victor's case and Alphonse's assumption on human justice of Justine's trial, "the justice of [their] judges" convicts Justine. These examples show that human justice in *Frankenstein's* world is applicable to the mid-

dle class, however, not to the lower class, such as a servant. The word “human” excludes the lower class, classifying those in it as non-human “monsters.”

Being excluded from human justice, two non-humans, Justine and monster doubt human justice, which the middle class characters rest on. After the human court, where Justine couldn’t be heard without prejudice, she calls human society as “the world of injustice” (67). After Justine is sentenced to death in the criminal trial, the same situation as Justine’s law court is succeeded by the monster. The monster presents a pseudo law court: he positions himself as the guilty, and seats Victor as the judge, persuading him to listen to his defense—his miserable life story. The monster makes the pseudo court situation overlap with Justine’s precedent trial. Victor is both the judge and the accuser of “monsters,” as a human representative. The monster points out the contradictory justice system of death sentences, with which one monster is deprived of life. He ironically speaks to Victor:

Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me. The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defense before they are condemned. Listen to me, Frankenstein. You accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! (78)

The monster powerfully questions the righteousness of human justice, criticizing Victor’s double-standard: Victor condemns the monster’s murder of William, but at the same time, tries to kill the monster. The monster’s accusation of human double-standard of killing echoes the contradictory death sentence of Justine on the law-court: the court judges, who condemn Justine’s killing of William as a crime, inconsistently think of executing her as their lawful measure. Therefore, these two monsters, Justine and *Frankenstein’s* monster, play a role in revealing the faulty nature of human justice.

The Monster’s Rebellion: Acquiring the Middle-class Capacity of Imagination and Writing

Partial human justice works with an accomplice—human imagination. It is

the power to one-sidedly define the imagined; the users can depict the imagined as they like it. The monster's shape and size are designed by Victor's imagination, and therefore, the monster is created by "human" one-sided imagination. Analogically, Justine is a one-sidedly imagined monster by the public observers, as the murderer of William, even before she opens her mouth for self-vindication. The public observers' imagination based Justine's guiltiness on a "circumstantial evidence" (65); Justine's position as a servant, and the jewel which is seen as the motivation for the murder are tightly connected in their imagination: "imagination of the enormity which she was supposed to have committed" (61). Her false confession suggests that Justine accepts the imagination of her "enemies," human beings who think she is guilty (66). Human imagination invades her. Justine then comes to think herself to be a "monster" (66). Human imagination, filled with preference and prejudice, transforms a human being into a monster. Human imagination transforms the human Justine into a rebellious monster.

In contrast to Justine, who is invaded by human imagination, a servant in *Maria*, Jemima, works as an antidote for Maria's imagination. In *Maria*, imagination is depicted as the force that confines the middle-class heroine Maria and other females from society by diverting their consciousness from the real world. A servant, Jemima, helps an imaginative romanticist, Maria, to escape from the mental hospital in which she is confined by her husband. By taking her out of the asylum, Jemima prevents Maria from lying in wait for her lover, Darnford, the image and character of whom Maria, with her romantic imagination, creates after "St. Preux or the demi-god of her fancy" (81). In fact, Darnford has a high possibility of betraying Maria at the end, driving her to commit suicide. There are several endings, however, an ending in which Maria survives is with Jemima. Therefore, Jemima is the deliverer of Maria's life, and plays an important role in preventing Maria from becoming the prey of her own imagination.

In *Maria* and *Frankenstein*, these imaginative powers are connected to the act of writing. As the case of Maria and Victor shows, imagination belongs to the upper or middle class human characters in both fictional works: Maria Venables, Henry Darnford; Victor Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Henry Clerval. The act of writing is their important characteristic. For Maria's confined life, it is important to exchange a written fragment as a communication with her lover, Darnford, and to tell her life lessons through writing memoirs to her child, who

is kidnapped and separated from her by her atrocious husband. Although her child is found dead at several ends, Maria surely expresses hope in her writing to her child during the days spent in the isolated asylum, in which she is confined. As for *Frankenstein*, middle class writing also plays an essential role. The whole story is told through the letters of a middle class north explorer, Robert Walton, who writes about what happened during his expedition to his elderly sister, Margaret Saville, in England. Walton's letters show that, from Victor's perspective, the middle class characters' act of writing: the letters of Elizabeth and Alphonse are presented, and the acts of Victor's and Henry's writing are observed. The acts of writing and the middle class are connected through both *Maria* and *Frankenstein*.

The fact that middle-class writings make an epistolary novel, *Frankenstein* analogically shows that the middle class characters rule *Frankenstein's* world. This suggestion is applicable to the symbolic relationship between Victor and his monster through writing. Victor, during his creation of a monster, keeps a journal on the process and his feelings toward it. His monster finds his journal; by reading it, the monster is forced to acknowledge that his origin is "accursed":

Soon after my arrival in the hovel, I discovered some papers in the pocket of the dress which I had taken from your laboratory. At first I had neglected them, but now that I was able to decipher the characters in which they were written, I began to study them with diligence. It was your journal of the four months that preceded my creation. You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work... You, doubtless, recollect these papers. Here they are. Every thing is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine ineffaceable. I sickened as I read. "Hateful day when I received life!" I exclaimed in agony. "Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid from its very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage

him; but I am solitary and detested..." (105)

Victor's journal informs the monster with "his odious and loathsome person," which even his own creator abhors. This Victor-monster relationship is an epitome of *Frankenstein's* world: the middle class characters define others. As mentioned earlier, Victor, with his imagination, designs the monster's form. Moreover, Victor's writing defines the monster's existence in the "human" world.

Justine, as another kind of monster, becomes the prey of the human world, where the middle class characters have the power of laws, imagination, and writing as their privilege. On the contrary, Shelley endues the real monster with the capacity to imagine and write on his own. This is Shelley's innovation. The former two monsters, Jemima and Justine, have the same features in common: they never use their own imagination. They are one-sidedly imagined in the human world through their lives. By contrast, *Frankenstein's* monster becomes a subjective user of imagination. The monster uses his imagination for his future happiness; he dreams of a social association with the De Lacy family, a higher class but exiled family, whose monster has long been observed from distance, since he is abandoned by Victor:

I formed in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to [De Lacy family], and their reception of me. I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love. (91)

His dream of the imagined future is not realized, however, this is his first step in entering the human world in double meaning: his first action for entering human society and the first use of his own imagination, a qualification of the middle class world. The monster tells this story to the middle class Victor, who has imagined him one-sidedly, at present, right before his eyes.

In the next step, the monster becomes an author. After his attempt above, the monster reads Victor's journal and decides to meet his creator, Victor. At their meeting, the monster claims that Victor should make a female companion for him and gains his agreement. At this time, the monster declares that if Victor breaks his promise, he will be "the author of your own speedy ruin" (79). The

promise is broken, and the monster kills Victor's dearest people, which results in Victor deciding to chase the monster for his destruction. The relationship between the chased and the chaser is converted. On Victor's journey to chase the monster, the latter's writings, including marks and messages, guide Victor to his direction, and renew his motivation to chase the monster. The monster's writing incites Victor's furious feeling towards him. Victor's monster-induced reaction is observed through his narration:

Sometimes, indeed, [the monster] left marks in writing on the barks of the trees, or cut in stone, that guided me, and instigated my fury. "My reign is not yet over," (these words were legible in one of these inscriptions); "you live, and my power is complete. Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive. You will find near this place, if you follow not too tardily, a dead hare; eat, and be refreshed. Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives; but many hard and miserable hours must you endure, until that period shall arrive."

Scoffing devil! Again do I vow vengeance; again do I devote thee, miserable fiend, to torture and death. Never will I omit my search, until he or I perish... (174)

Under the direction of the monster's handwritings, Victor continues his way. Shelley makes the monster the author of Victor's fate: Victor chases him to the north poles and passes away on Captain Walton's ship.

The monster now has become a being capable of imagination and writing. With such a qualification, he is equivalent to the middle class characters, such as Victor, Elizabeth, and Walton. Acquiring these abilities belonging to *Frankenstein's* middle class characters, the monster successfully blurs the boundary between human and non-human. The one-sided relationship is completely broken.

Although both Wollstonecraft and Shelley depict female servants as monsters, they treat the endings of these monsters in different ways. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft rescues a monster, Jemima, from social isolation by uniting her to the middle class Maria. On the other hand, Shelley seems to disbelieve in female

collaboration. Elizabeth attempts to save Justine in the trial, however, it only produces an opposite effect of adding fuel to the audience's indignation against Justine. The cooperation of these female companions is forced to break away. Instead, Shelley saves her in a different way: she makes another monster succeed Justine's position as the innocent defendant, and endues him with competence for imagination and writing to subvert the middle class world. Shelley extends the story of a monster to one emancipated from the binary conflicts between human and non-human, by freeing her monster from the pen point of the middle class writing.

Conclusion

From *Maria* to *Frankenstein*, there are three monsters: Jemima, Justine, and the Monster. They are social victims of a failed system of human society. Although the monster is male, his character positions are closer to the female servants Jemima and Justine than to Victor and other middle class male characters. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft saved Jemima from the unequal world by making a female cooperation with a middle class woman, Maria, whose imagination continued to confine her in an asylum. Unlike Wollstonecraft, Shelley did not form a female relationship for Justine or the monster; Shelley detached Justine from the middle class woman Elizabeth, and teared the monster from his female companion. Justine's life was not saved through the broken female relationship, however, Shelley gave hope for the poor Frankenstein's servant in a symbolic way; she made Frankenstein's monster succeed Justine's position and made the monster's ability steadily becoming closer to that of the middle class characters: the monster became capacitated to write and imagine on his own. Thus, monsters can be worth as much as middle class protagonists. With his authoritative power, the middle class-centered world of *Frankenstein* is subverted. While delineating the world of the dichotomous confrontation between human and monsters, in the end, Shelley let her monster escape from it.

[Notes]

- 1) According to Shelley's journals, Mary Shelley read Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of*

Woman and An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution in 1814. See Feldman, Paula R., and Diana Scott-Kilvert, editors. *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

- 2) Chris Baldick investigated the various connotations of the word “monster” at its earlier usages, one of which is the meaning “ingratitude.” Baldick demonstrated that in Shakespearian works *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, the word “monster” was already used as tokens of ingratitude: “to be a monster is to break the natural bonds of obligation towards friends and especially towards blood-relations” (13).

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(Graduate Student)

SUMMARY

The Rebellious Imagination of *Frankenstein's* Monster:
The Different Ways to Save Female Monsters
between Shelley and Wollstonecraft

Haruno NISHIGUCHI

Frankenstein's monster has been interpreted in the context of the 1790s polemical writings on the French Revolution. Mary Wollstonecraft's social views on the Revolution echoed the monster's critique of fallibility of the human social system. Lee Sterrenburg pointed out that Shelley's new perspective was the subjective storytelling by the monster, who is a victim and a rebel, about the consequences of the oppression and misrule of the social orders above him. However, this subjective narration of a victim who is also a rebel already existed in Wollstonecraft's gothic novel *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. A female servant, Jemima, who is a social victim from birth and a rebel, as seen by the higher-class, tells her life history using the subjective "I." Interestingly, Jemima calls herself a monster. Anne K. Mellor bridged the mother-daughter novels by indicating a similar complaint against society between Jemima and *Frankenstein's* monster. Based on Mellor's study, this paper extends the analysis to another social victim in *Frankenstein*, a female servant, Justine Moritz, who also identifies herself as a monster.

Frankenstein's human world is a middle class centered one. Justine Moritz and *Frankenstein's* monster are victims of "human" justice and laws, which favor the higher class characters to the lower class ones. The monster, presenting the pseudo-lawcourt, succeeds the position of a victimized Justine, and powerfully questions human justice. The monster, by acquiring the competence to imagine and write, which are the main characteristics of the middle class, subverts the human world. Shelley finally emancipated her monster from the binary world between human and non-human, by freeing him from the pen point of the most outer middle class writer of *Frankenstein*, Robert Walton.