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## Frankenstein's Exploitation of the Prometheus Myths

M.K. Joseph

The Greek myths of Prometheus, one of an early race of gods called Titans, fascinated Mary and Percy Shelley and their poet friend Lord Byron. One of these tales told of Prometheus *plasticator*, or molder, who fashioned humans from clay; the other of Prometheus *pyrphoros*, or fire-wielder, who gave knowledge of fire to humans. As M.K. Joseph, a former professor at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, explains here, Mary Shelley effectively wove both of these themes into the fabric of her novel *Frankenstein*. In a way, then, Victor Frankenstein is a "modern Prometheus" (the book's subtitle), infusing the spark of life into nonliving matter.

When Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin began to write *Frankenstein*, she was not quite nineteen; yet none of her later novels has achieved anything like the same universal hold on the imagination. Whatever she may have owed to other novelists, particularly to her father William Godwin and to the American Charles Brockden Brown, the novel remains completely original. In spite of her errors, which are those of a novice—particularly her tendency to invent fresh improbabilities rather than to think her way through difficult passages in the story—the central idea is carried through with considerable skill and force.

The unexpected and bizarre success of the novel was due to one of those lucky accidents which, in most writers' lives, happen only once. For two troubled and uncertain years, she had been living with [poet Percy Bysshe] Shelley. Now, in the summer of 1816, they had temporarily escaped from England and were settled in Geneva, among the splendours of lake

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and mountains, and in the stimulating company of [poet Lord] Byron. The germ of *Frankenstein* is to be found somewhere in their wide-ranging nightly conversations, which must have covered, not only gothic terrors and galvanism and current theories on the origin of life, but also the myth of Prometheus and its significance. For Mary subtitled her story 'the modern Prometheus', and this is an essential clue to its meaning.

### AN ANCIENT MYTH LINKED TO MODERN SCIENCE

The myth of Prometheus contained two main elements. The first, best known through the *Prometheus Bound* of [the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright] Aeschylus, was the story of Prometheus *pyrphoros*, who had brought down fire from the sun in order to succour mankind, and, whom [the chief god] Zeus had punished by chaining him to the Caucasus [a mountain chain] with an eagle feeding on his vitals. The second was the story of Prometheus *plasticator* who, in some versions, was said to have created or recreated mankind by animating a figure made of clay. This aspect of the myth, little used by the Greeks and unknown to Aeschylus or Hesiod, seems to have been more popular with the Romans.

By about the second or third century A.D. the two elements were fused together, so that the fire stolen by Prometheus was also the fire of life with which he animated his man of clay. This gave a radically new significance to the myth . . . with Prometheus as the demiurge or deputy creator, but which could also be readily allegorized by Christians and was frequently used in the Middle Ages as a representation of the creative power of God. By the Renaissance, the image was a familiar one, as in Othello's words over Desdemona [in Shakespeare's *Othello*]:

'. . . I know not where is that Promethean heat  
That can thy light relume.

Later still, Prometheus became an accepted image of the creative artist. . . .

Before 1816 [Percy] Shelley seems to have been unaware of the potent symbolic significance of the myth; it was Byron, to whom Prometheus had been a familiar figure ever since he translated a portion of Aeschylus while still a schoolboy . . . who opened his eyes to its potentialities during that summer at Geneva. That it was discussed at the time can be inferred

from the results: Byron's poem, 'Prometheus', written in July 1816; his *Manfred*, with its Promethean hero, begun in September; and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, in part a reply to *Manfred*, begun later in 1818. But Mary Shelley was first in the field with her 'modern Prometheus', and she alone seized



#### PROMETHEUS: FATHER OF THE HUMAN RACE

In this excerpt from his book *Myths and Their Meanings*, literary scholar Max J. Herzberg briefly summarizes the Prometheus myths.

For a time Prometheus was the chosen counselor of Jupiter, who relied upon him for help in all things. Yet between them in time a quarrel arose; and all because of mankind. For when Jupiter beheld how men fell away from their former glory in the Silver Age, he swept them off the face of the earth, and resolved to create a new race. He called upon Prometheus for assistance, and the Titan took clay from the banks of a river in Arcadia and molded it into the likeness of the gods and breathed the breath of life into the images that he made. So a new race was born.

Yet these men were feebler than the men of the two preceding ages, and they came into a world that demanded more of them than had ever before been demanded of men. They had to struggle against the changes of the weather. The earth would not bear food for them unless they first tilled the soil, and around them were dangerous wild beasts. It seemed as if this race would perish unless help came.

Prometheus, looking down upon them, saw what was happening.

"Come," he said to Jupiter, "let us give these poor creatures the blessed gift of fire. With fire they will not need to fear the cold. With fire they can make themselves tools and weapons."

But Jupiter feared that if he gave this great boon to men, they would think themselves the equals of the gods, and he refused to grant the request of Prometheus. The Titan was deeply grieved, and at length he resolved that he would no longer dwell with Jupiter but would make his abode with men. So he left Olympus, and carried with him, hidden in a reed, the gift of fire. Prometheus taught men how with fire they might make weapons to fight wild beasts and to contend with their enemies, how with fire they might contrive tools for all handicrafts and trades.

Max J. Herzberg, *Myths and Their Meanings*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, n.d., pp. 14-15.

on the vital significance of making Prometheus the creator rather than, as in Byron and Shelley, the suffering champion of mankind. In doing so, she linked the myth with certain current scientific theories which suggested that the 'divine spark' of life might be electrical or quasi-electrical in nature.

#### ELECTRICITY THE DIVINE FIRE

In the novel itself, Victor Frankenstein is understandably reluctant to reveal how he gave life to his creature; but there are clues to what Mary Shelley had in mind. In her Introduction she recalls the talk about [eighteenth-century biologist] Erasmus Darwin, who had 'preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion'; but this sounds like an ordinary case of alleged spontaneous generation. 'Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism [application of electricity to muscles and other tissues] had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.' She then goes on to describe the half-waking reverie which gave her the beginning of her story, in which 'I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.' Nor is the story itself without hints: in Chapter II a discourse on electricity and magnetism—the point is more explicit in 1818—turns Frankenstein's mind away from alchemy [an ancient art dealing with magic elixers]; and in Chapter V the 'instruments of life' which Frankenstein assembles before infusing the 'spark of life' also suggest an electrical rather than a biological process.

Frankenstein's change of interest from alchemy to chemistry and electricity is a circumstance obviously drawn from Shelley himself; and with the mention of electricity as vitalizing force we come . . . to a central idea of Shelley's which was to emerge, a little later, in the last act of *Prometheus Unbound*. In his eclectic synthesis of ideas drawn from [the well-known scientists] Newton, Volta, Galvani, Erasmus Darwin, and Humphry Davy (whom Mary was reading in October 1816), electricity became the divine fire, the life-principle, and the physical manifestation of spiritual love. . . . It seems likely that, during the conversations at Diodati [Byron's villa near Geneva], Mary absorbed from Shelley—and perhaps

from Polidori [Byron's doctor friend] as well—the idea of making electricity the animating force, the scientific equivalent of that divine spark which, in the myth, Prometheus had stolen from the sun. . . .

#### **IS SCIENCE CREATIVE?**

The implications of Mary Shelley's 'ghost-story' go much further than she or any of her circle seem to have understood. . . . With unassuming originality, her 'modern Prometheus' challenges the whole myth of . . . the artist as Promethean creator. One of its themes is solitude—the solitude of one who turns his back on his kind in his obsessive pursuit of the secrets of nature. Frankenstein sins against the . . . ideal of social benevolence. . . .

Prometheus was also an accepted metaphor of the artist, but when Mary Shelley transfers this to the scientist, the implications are radical. If Frankenstein, as scientist, is 'the modern Prometheus', then science too is creative; but whereas the world of art is ideal and speculative, that of science is real and inescapable. It must then take the consequences: the scientist, himself a creature, has taken on the role and burden of a creator. If Frankenstein corrupts the monster by his rejection . . . we are left asking a question which demands another kind of answer: what has rejected and corrupted Frankenstein? [God perhaps?] And if Prometheus, in the romantic tradition, is identified with human revolt, is the monster what that revolt looks like from the other side—a pitiful botched-up creature, a 'filthy mass that moved and talked', which brings nothing but grief and destruction upon the power that made him?

Mary Shelley wrote in the infancy of modern science, when its enormous possibilities were just beginning to be foreseen by imaginative writers like Byron and Shelley and by speculative scientists like Davy and Erasmus Darwin. At the age of nineteen, she achieved the quietly astonishing feat of looking beyond them and creating a lasting symbol of the perils of scientific Prometheanism.