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Frankenstein, Family Politics and Population Politics

Saba Bahar

Having listened to the monster's story, Frankenstein agrees to make a mate for the monster on condition of their subsequent and immediate exile from Europe and all places in the neighbourhood of man. However, Frankenstein breaks this pact and the female monster is never created because the doctor, after a nightmarish vision of its consequences, interrupts and postpones the primal scene. Critics have commented on the extent to which this vision echoes and parodies Eve's narrative of origins in *Paradise Lost*.¹ In the Miltonic epic, Eve turns away from Adam "less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild" (IV: 478-9) and back towards her own reflection in the water. What the arrogant Frankenstein fears, however, is that his Eve will reject her reflection in the male monster in favour of "the superior beauty of man."²

The doctor's concerns are also motivated by the nature of the contract between himself and the monster, whereby the female is only an object for barter. In the absence of a binding promise, Frankenstein recognises that there is no contractual restraint preventing her from acting on her own desires and returning to Europe to threaten mankind. Because the original promise neither contains nor controls the female monster, it engenders her as more "malignant" than the male: she will necessarily delight in murder and destruction. More importantly, Frankenstein fears that together the monster and his mate will desire children who "might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror." It is because neither her desires nor her body are subject to the conditions of the original contract

¹ See, for example, Peter Brooks, "What is a Monster? (According to *Frankenstein*)," *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* [1831]. The World's Classics. Ed. M.K. Joseph (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 165. All further references are to this edition.

that her presence is perceived as a “curse upon everlasting generations” (165).

Frankenstein’s nightmarish reverie highlights the limits of a social contract which is contingent on an implicit, original and primary sexual contract. In contrast to the narrator of *Paradise Lost* who sees the contractual relation between Adam and Eve in terms of “He for God only, she for God in him” (IV: 631), Frankenstein’s nightmare raises the question of what happens if the female creature does not see God in the male. As if anticipating a response to Lévi-Strauss, he seems to suggest that the ties that bind society are not only those between father-in-law and son. He also fears that reducing woman to an object of circulation and exchange is not a sufficient condition to guarantee social ties and harmony. Implicit in the negotiations between Frankenstein and his monster is a discourse on reproduction, the family and population politics. In short, Frankenstein is afraid that his contract will not allow for a satisfactory regulation of reproduction and the family because it excludes one of the central parties.

In foregrounding questions of the social contract and reproduction, Mary Shelley’s family politics as figured in *Frankenstein* reflect and refer to her family’s politics. It is often forgotten that her father, William Godwin, to whom *Frankenstein* is dedicated, wrote on marriage, property and population increase, resulting in his being attacked and parodied in Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population*.³ Moreover, critics have often ignored the direct lineage between Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminist politics of motherhood and the absent or potentially monstrous mothers of her daughter’s *Frankenstein*. This politics addresses the question of the necessity of woman’s active participation in the social contract as a mother.⁴ In what follows, I would like to trace the family politics of *Frankenstein* to the family ties in Godwin-Shelley-Wollstonecraft politics. What remains common to all three is an insistence on “rational” families. They differ, however, in the way they define this rationality and in the persons to whom they wish to apply it.

At the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* Godwin, arguing for a social system based on a more equitable division of resources, responds to a possible objection that such a system would not have a positive impact

³ The relationship between *Frankenstein* and Godwin’s writings has been discussed by a number of critics, e.g. Baldick, Botting, Brooks, Knoepfelmacher, Marshall, and Sterrenburg. None of them, however, addresses the relationship between Malthus and Godwin.

⁴ In discussing some aspects of this relationship, Anne K. Mellor insists on Shelley’s feminism. She nevertheless contrasts the two women by arguing that Shelley’s insight lies in her valorisation of family values. For another discussion of the relationship between the two Marys, see Joyce Zonana.

on population growth. His response suggests that one of his central assumptions is that population growth is a desirable thing and, more importantly, that it is an indication of both good government and a perfected social system. Thus Godwin is not radically different from many of the writers of his times who evoke the seemingly low levels of population increase in "savage" and "nomadic" societies as a measure of their limited progress in history. Godwin, however, notes that progress is not always linear. Using the United States of America as an example, he suggests that during certain stages, population grows rapidly. He contrasts this development to the "subsequent stage" exemplified by "the more civilised countries of Europe,"⁵ where the population has stopped growing or even diminished. For Godwin, what acts as a check on growth is the demand for labour. Wherever an increase in population causes a decrease in the demand for labour and subsequently in wages, people will avoid having too large a family. The difference between the United States and Europe is not the demand for labour but the distribution of property, which in turn determines demand and wages. Ignoring the presence of native peoples and of African slave populations, Godwin argues that in the United States, land is unlimited. In Europe, however, a "territorial monopoly" controls subsistence and hence can fix the demand for labour. The "lower ranks" cannot therefore provide for themselves. The consequence is a miserable people and a declining fertility rate.

For Godwin, however, it is not only territorial monopoly that makes people unhappy and population decline, but also the monopoly of women, that is, the control of women by men through marriage. As it presently exists, he argues, marriage encourages men to consider women as their property and to keep guard jealously, despotically and artificially over their "imaginary prize" (762). Just as property laws control the distribution of land, marriage controls the distribution of women among men and hence can be compared to "monopoly" (762), "established administration of property" (735) and "fraud" (762). Godwin argues for a more reasonable state where "each man would select for himself a partner to whom he will adhere as long as that adherence shall continue to be the choice of both parties" (763). These bonds, based on rational friendship and not on social compulsion nor on temporary physical attraction, will undermine the monopoly of women by recognising the subjectivities of both partners. Here, Godwin implicitly recognises the importance of the female partner in such a bond. By using the

⁵ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 768. All further references are to this edition.

gender-specific term “man” to refer to the universal and species (“human” or “person”) and the gender-neutral “partner” or “parties,” however, he effaces the specific contribution of women to population increase.

Indeed, Godwin’s argument functions by denying the importance of the body – gendered or otherwise. For example, in advancing his argument for rational friendship, Godwin is not making a case for promiscuity, uncontrolled sexual passion and carnal pleasure, as many of his adversaries complained. He suggests that promiscuity functions as a form of birth control, on the same order as infanticide and abortion. On the contrary, rational ties will result in reducing promiscuity precisely because they will “come in aid of the sexual intercourse, to refine its grossness, and increase its delight” (764). Friendship rationalizes sexuality by concealing and reforming its physicality. Under such terms, marriage based on friendship creates stronger, more permanent family bonds and thereby more protection for the children, without however instituting a regulated state control. The happy end to this reasonable story is a growing population.

By speaking of population and labour, of monopoly and rationality, Godwin writes a meta-narrative where both good and bad social systems function as agents of history and intervene in natural processes. In these processes, there is a propensity to disease and destruction: the globe is, after all, subject to “decay” and “casualties” do happen (769). This propensity, however, may be accelerated by inappropriate social intervention, that is, intervention which merely reproduces the natural and physical process. Laws which promote territorial monopoly represent a negative intervention because they are responsible for “strangling a considerable portion of our children in their cradle” (735; my emphasis). On the other hand, Godwin figures positive political intervention as a doctor who can improve the social body.

In both cases, however, the actors – the murderers and the doctors – in the narrative of history are not men and women but social systems. Godwin dreams of the disappearance of the body and of the establishment of relations based on rational delight. He also favours the introduction of a rational system which will regulate the actions of each individual. He thereby denies the specific realities of the female body and more particularly the processes of birth and motherhood. Instead the system engenders, embodies and reproduces itself in an unlimited fashion. This highly depersonalised narrative, where promises of remedies to come allay worries about decay, destruction and limits to growth, serves to efface and conceal both the woman’s pregnant body and the child’s growing body.

In his answer to Godwin, Malthus opposes to this triumphant mind the realities of a weak and frail body which serves to remind man of his earthly existence. Much of Malthus' response functions by contrasting what he considers to be the excesses of Godwin's imagination, fantasy and speculation with the reality of immutable laws of nature. "A writer may tell me that he thinks man will ultimately become an ostrich," he writes, "but he ought to show that the necks of mankind have been gradually elongating, that the lips have grown harder and more prominent, that the legs and feet are daily altering their shape."⁶ In using the example of the ostrich, Malthus suggests that speculative philosophy engenders monsters of the mind and refuses to see biological realities.

Elsewhere, by referring to horticulture and breeding where an attempt to perfect and improve nature has already met with success, Malthus evokes, in his denial of the possibility of perfectibility, not only physical limits but also formal and proportional ones. For example, in contesting Condorcet's principles of organic perfectibility, he explores the example of the Leicestershire breed of sheep which have been bred with small heads and small legs. The example is calculated to mock not only the experiment but also the speculative philosopher himself. In another passage, Malthus compares the failure of the French Revolution to a blossom altered by the "forced manure" of the philosophers. In doing so, he suggests that the efforts of the enterprising florist who seeks to create a more perfect blossom are "not applicable" because there is always a "greater possible state of perfection" (112). Because there are no limits to perfection, for Malthus, attempting it is always in vain. Worse, such efforts might result in a blossom that is a "loose, deformed, disjointed mass, without union, symmetry, or harmony of colouring" (112).

What is at stake in Malthus' denunciation of perfectibility is the principle of fixed, constant and immutable laws which are embedded in the fabric of being and which cannot be changed or redirected. To imply the contrary, that such limits do not exist, is to produce the grotesque (as in the example of the plant) or the horrific (as in the example of the ostrich). A grotesque which lacks proportion and a horrific which has outgrown recognisable limits: such is Frankenstein's monster. Such too is the threat of population growth for Malthus.

Malthus' description of the state of nature is figured in mathematical terms, a figuration which suggests the constancy and rationality of the

⁶ T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12. All further references are to this edition.

process. He speaks in terms of “fixed laws,” “operations,” “numbers” (13) and suggests that the passion between the sexes may be considered “in algebraic language, as a given quantity” (57). Part of this mathematical figuration are the different ratios he identifies: the geometrical ratio of population growth, the arithmetical ratio of subsistence growth and the ratio between these two ratios. Malthus’ figuration also evokes, however, the sublime horror of the unlimited possibilities of population growth. Indeed, the geometrical ratio of population growth threatens to overwhelm and overcome man’s existence because of its “immensity,” because it is “indefinitely greater” and because it expands “infinitely” (13). By using such expressions, more often applied to descriptions of the “Infinite Power” of God (142), Malthus figures the power of population as the unsayable, unimaginable experience of the sublime.⁷ His mind is filled with horror and astonishment when contemplating the experience of unlimited population growth and cannot comprehend or rationalise it.

Malthus resists this horrific and paralysing experience of the unknown by seeking solace in the known, in what he calls the constancy of nature, in the necessary order of things where men don’t become ostriches and petals don’t outgrow their natural size. Interestingly enough, one of these “constant” laws is the law of physical desire. Responding to Godwin’s insistence on the importance of friendship, Malthus contrasts the experience of reading a book with an encounter with a pretty woman. Despite the interest he may have in reading, he explains, it fails to capture his attention. Quite on the contrary, he has “almost as frequently gone to sleep over it” (107). An evening with a pretty woman, on the other hand, will undoubtedly keep him “alive, and in spirits” (107). In this comparison, Malthus reverses Godwin’s priorities by suggesting that bodily demands override mental ones.⁸ It is, after all, the woman’s body and not the book which arouses him both physically and spiritually. He thus reduces the company of a pretty woman to a reminder of a man’s bodily needs: the “pretty woman” functions here as a sign of the

⁷ By referring to the “sublime,” I am explicitly comparing Malthus to his fellow *Anti-Jacobin* writer and critic of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke. Discussing the passion caused by experiencing the sublime in nature, Burke writes: “In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequences reason on that object which employs it” (57). Malthus evokes this unfathomable emotion when he contemplates population growth.

⁸ For a comparison between Godwin and Malthus in relation to the Victorian regulation of the body, see Catherine Gallagher, “The Body versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew,” *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

return to the natural order of the body. The encounter with the “pretty woman” is the encounter that threatens the existence of mankind by inciting the infinitely expanding, unrationalisable possibilities of population growth.

Given women’s unequivocal relation with the natural, preventing population growth falls to men. Malthus, however, distinguishes between classes of men. Men of the lower ranks have to contain their desires or accept the eventual death of their children. This constraint should ultimately encourage a decision to postpone marriage, a decision based not on the exercise of a rationalised passion, as Godwin suggests, but rather on the threat and fear of impending death. Malthus also provides the example of a gentleman who in marrying risks a decline in status and income, since marriage means more mouths to feed and hence a substantial drainage of wealth. “Can a man consent to place the object of his affection in a situation so discordant, probably, to her tastes and inclinations?” (32), he asks. If, as Frances Ferguson has suggested, Malthus alludes here to the subjectivity of the educated woman of rank and taste, it is not she who makes the decision of whether or not to marry. Moreover, whereas in his discussion of the laws of nature, Malthus speaks of the “passion between the sexes,” here he speaks of “an object of affection,” echoing Godwin’s rational friendship. In contrast to his discussion of the lower class where death is the great rationaliser, here the language of sensibility and rank suggests that it is fashion which is in favour of small families and postponed marriages. “No wonder,” Robert Southey writes in an 1804 review of *Essay on the Principle of Population*, “that Mr Malthus should be a fashionable philosopher! He writes advice to the poor for the rich to read; they of course will approve his opinions” (301).

What is common to both Godwin and Malthus is their exclusion of woman as a subject in the narrative of population growth. The terms of this exclusion differ, however: Godwin denies the specificity of the female body whereas Malthus reduces woman to her body. Mary Wollstonecraft contrasts with both of them. She insists on the contributions of the rational mother to the Republic and thinks of women in relation to both body and mind. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft demands that women be made equal citizens with the same political rights as men. Part of her argument lies in explaining that women do fulfil a contractual bargain with the state and as a result deserve the rights of political membership in exchange. She suggests, however, that women’s contributions will be different. To Rousseau’s scoffing remarks that women cannot “leave the

nursery for the [military] camp”⁹ and that this failure to participate in military duty is the basis for denying women equal citizenship in the public sphere, Wollstonecraft answers by suggesting that women have a parallel but different function as rational citizens. Their duty to the state lies in being good mothers, wives and neighbours. Provided with a guaranteed public education, in the company of men, women will better educate, manage and assist their children, household and neighbours.

While such an insistence implies a gendered distinction between the public and the private spheres, it is nevertheless important to emphasise Wollstonecraft’s demand for the wife’s/mother’s autonomy. This autonomy should be guaranteed to women because of their gender-specific contribution to the state, that is, the social function of motherhood. Wollstonecraft discusses this social function in terms of both women’s reproductive rights and the management of young children. She does not, however, argue that domestic patriarchy be exchanged for that of the state. In discussing governments’ reproductive policies, for example, she is more attentive to the special health needs of the female body and mind than to possible pro-natalist policies of the state:

For Nature has so wisely ordered things, that did women suckle their children, they would preserve their own health and there would be such an interval between the birth of each child, that we should seldom see a houseful of babes. (315)

Here, Wollstonecraft’s ideal of “natural” motherhood is not one where women are merely responsible for the biological and social reproduction of children. It is, instead, in the very action of mothering, of suckling children, that reproductive choice is placed in the hands of women themselves. For although suckling is part of nature’s biological distinction between men and women, it nevertheless requires that women *ration* and hence *rationalise* their milk.

In insisting on the importance of breastfeeding, Wollstonecraft propagates a new ideology of motherhood and introduces the rational mother. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, aristocratic women sent their children to a wetnurse (whereas peasant women breastfed their own children).¹⁰ In the

⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 258. All further references are to this edition.

¹⁰ Dorothy McLaren, “Fertility, Infant Mortality and Breast Feeding in the 18th Century,” *Medical History* 22 (1978): 378-96. Historians have argued that such a technique probably

mid-eighteenth century, partly as a result of Rousseau's glorification of maternal milk, this practice began to change.¹¹ Wollstonecraft's first published book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, begins by insisting on the importance of breastfeeding in establishing strong maternal bonds and assuring the health of the infant. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on rational motherhood contributes to the emergence of the family ethos, characterised by an interest in fewer but healthier children, an ethos which we saw informing Godwin's writings on population. Where Wollstonecraft differs from Godwin and proponents of Republican motherhood, however, is where she insists on the mother's own physical and mental health and her independence with respect to the state and her husband. For her, women are not passive objects producing children for the paternal state. They are rational beings with rights and responsibilities. "Make women rational creatures and free citizens," she proposes, "and they will quickly become good wives and mothers – that is if men do not neglect the duties of husbands and fathers" (299). By insisting here on the duties both of the state and of men, Wollstonecraft is inscribing women as independent agents and actors in the social contract, making motherhood an essential condition of the social pact. Or rather, unlike Rousseau, who makes a sexual contract of the mother's subordination to and dependence on the father a necessary and natural precondition for the social contract, Wollstonecraft makes the social contract and the recognition of women as citizens and as mothers a necessary precondition for social reproduction. Included in this precondition is rational motherhood.

If Wollstonecraft insists on the importance of the rational mother, however, it is through a narrative and figuration of the unnatural, irrational monster that woman is in present society. To tell the story of irrational aristocratic mothers, Wollstonecraft relies on an Orientalist discourse and a fiction of the seraglio which recounts how male sexual desire attempts to

served as a means of birth control. Whether this is conscious technique, however, is debatable, although seventeenth-century writers on maternal care did mention the adverse effects of breastfeeding on population growth. William Petty, for instance, warns mothers against it, explaining that "long suckling of children [...] is a hindrance to the speedier propagation of mankind" (cited in McLaren, 1978, 380). Thus while Wollstonecraft and Petty are informed by the same empirical observations on the relation between breastfeeding and birth control, they argue differently. Petty considers the interests of the species as outweighing those of the individual mothers; Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, is attentive to a woman's health needs.

¹¹ See Mary L. Jacobus, "Incorruptible Breast-feeding and the French Revolution," *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara Melzer and Leslie Rabine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), for a discussion of the figuration of maternal milk in Rousseau's narrative of the Republic.

reduce women to commodities and objects of consumption by maintaining them in a state of semi-innocence. Wollstonecraft's discussion of irrational and monstrous motherhood is not, however, limited to the aristocratic woman of display. In "A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution," she also discusses the consequences of the irrationality and bestiality of the *poissarde*. Wollstonecraft's commentary on the murder of Foulon and his son-in-law Bertier de Sauvigny by the Paris mob on 22 July 1789 suggests that irrational motherhood and female monstrosity are guilty for this murder:

Strange, that a people, who often leave the theatre before the catastrophe, should have bred up such monsters! Still we ought to recollect, that the sex, called the tender, commit the most flagrant acts of barbarity when irritated. So weak is the tenderness produced merely by sympathy, or polished manners, compared with the humanity of a cultivated understanding. Alas! – It is morals, not feelings, which distinguish men from the beasts of prey! [. . .]. Since, however, we cannot "out the damned spot," it becomes necessary to observe, that whilst despotism and superstition exist, the convulsions, which the regeneration of man occasions, will always bring forward the vices they have engendered to devour their parents.¹²

In this passage, Wollstonecraft develops three images of femininity and motherhood gone wrong. She implicitly compares the people to women by referring to the social function of motherhood: the people breed up.¹³ Here, however, the result is not generative, but rather degenerative: they have produced monsters and parricides, violating the image of nurturing motherhood. This unflattering image of motherhood is also alluded to in a reference to Lady Macbeth. Wollstonecraft, however, distances herself from the Shakespearean heroine by claiming that it is not possible to "out the damned spot." Finally, she draws a contrast between what women are called – "tender" – and what they actually are – responsible for acts of barbarity.

In his nightmarish reveries of the dangers of creating a female monster that has been excluded from the social contract, Frankenstein alludes to Wollstonecraft's figuration of the monstrous mother un-controlled by rational bonds. His reverie, however, explicitly situates this problem in the context of the population debates between Godwin and Malthus not only by relying on the rhetoric of decay, disease, deformity and horror discussed

¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution," *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), vol. 6, 125-6.

¹³ In fact, the prepositional verb "breed up" suggests both the biological and social function of motherhood.

above, but also by specifically referring to the monster's reproduction. Frankenstein, however, articulates these references in the context of a racial politics. The direct consequence of an attachment between the two monsters would be that "a *race* of devils [...] be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the *species* of man a condition precarious and full of terror" (165, my emphasis). Moreover, rational, European mothers are present in *Frankenstein* and contrast with the monstrous demon mothers.

Given this emphasis on racial politics, the family politics of Mary Shelley, then, cannot be read only in terms of white women but should also be situated in the context of British debates on the "natural monstrosity" of families of non-Christian, non-Europeans (whether they be African slaves or Hindu and Moslem subject races). In the debates of the period the need to implement the rationality of a Christian marriage was repeatedly argued. William Wilberforce, for example, who in Parliament defended the need for both the abolition of colonial slavery and the evangelisation of India, insisted that marriage, the "moral cement of civilized society" (17), would regulate slave population. It would encourage a family ethos and thereby produce both healthier children and an increase in the local population. It would concomitantly prevent the *unnatural* and excessive increase of slave population which had resulted in the "monstrous" outbreaks in Saint Domingo and Demerera.¹⁴

The first recorded instance of Frankenstein's monster leaving the pages of the novel to enter public discourse is in 1824. George Canning, William Godwin's old enemy of the *Anti-Jacobin*, mentioned the novel in a parliamentary debate on whether or not slaves should receive total and unconditional freedom or whether instead, they should be subject to a system of apprenticeship (in fact, nothing less than forced, unpaid labour). He compared the dangers of immediate emancipation to those

described in the romance which was published some time back, [where a man] constructed a human form with limbs of more than mortal mould, into which he infused passions and strength which was to it only the power of doing mischief; but, being unable to impart it a soul, he found that he had created only a savage giant, from which he himself recoiled with horror. (27)

As Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* suggests, family politics were not only part of the population debates in England, but at the very monstrous heart of imperial population politics.

¹⁴ See Ronald Kent Richardson, *Moral Imperium: Afro-Caribbeans and the Transformation of British Rule, 1776-1838* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

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