Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the Guillotine, and Modern Ontological Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins by examining the rhetorical significance of the guillotine, an important symbol during the Romantic Period. Lacefield argues that the guillotine symbolized a range of modern ontological juxtapositions and antinomies during the period. Moreover, she argues that the guillotine influenced Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* through Giovanni Aldini, a scientist who experimented on guillotined corpses during the French Revolution and inspired Shelley's characterization of Victor Frankenstein. Given the importance of the guillotine as a powerful metaphor for anxieties emergent during this period, Lacefield employs it as a clue signaling a labyrinth of modern meanings embedded in Shelley's novel, as well as the films they anticipated. In particular, Lacefield analyzes the significance of the guillotine slice itself—the uneasy, indeterminate line that simultaneously separates and joins categories such as life/death, mind/body, spirit/matter, and nature/technology.

Lacefield's interdisciplinary analysis analyzes motifs of decapitation/dismemberment in *Frankenstein* and then moves into a discussion of the novel's exploration of the ontological categories specified above. For example, Frankenstein's Creature, as a kind of cyborg, exists on the contested theoretical "slice" within a number of antinomies: nature/tech, human/inhuman (alive/dead), matter/spirit, etc. These are interesting juxtapositions that point to tensions within each set of categories, and Lacefield discusses the relevance of such dichotomies for questions of modernity posed by materialist theory and technological innovation. Additionally, she incorporates a discussion of films that fuse Shelley's themes with appeals to twentieth-century and post-millennium audiences.

Frankenstein scholarship commonly acknowledges the novel's origins in the creative synergy surrounding Mary Shelley during the summer of 1816 in Geneva. Shelley writes of the conversations—"many and long"—she witnessed between her husband and Byron concerning the nature of life and consciousness (27). Mary Shelley's retrospective introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* notes that her circle was particularly fascinated by galvanism: she writes that Percy and Byron often pondered the possibility that "perhaps a corpse would be reanimated," since "galvanism had given token of such things" (65). The theory of galvanism was developed by Luigi Galvani, an Italian physicist and physician who had attained widespread fame in Europe for his experiments in what he termed *animal electricity*. Galvani's experiments demonstrated a connection between electricity and the nervous system's response, suggesting that the animating life force of human existence might be a physical phenomenon rather than a spiritual one. For this reason, galvanism was a flashpoint of controversy between its proponents and religious leaders of the period.[1]

Scholars often acknowledge Galvani as an important source for *Frankenstein* but neglect to credit his nephew and successor Giovanni Aldini, who was better known to the British public than his uncle due to his fluency in English and his notorious experiments on the dead (his uncle had merely experimented on animals). Aldini travelled throughout Europe conducting sensationalized public experiments on corpses, and these experiments were covered widely in newspaper reports (Gay 30–52). He first achieved notoriety during the French Revolution for frequenting guillotine executions and experimenting with the severed heads of the condemned: he tested the heads post-execution for facial expressions and other signs of residual life, and he also attempted to re-animate them with electricity. Like Victor Frankenstein's use of corpses for scientific research in *Frankenstein*, Aldini searched for the key to life in his experiments on the dead. In fact, it is partly due to Aldini's experiments that guillotine execution attained a distinctive mystique in the popular Romantic imagination (Kershaw 98–99).

Aldini preferred to utilize corpses of the guillotined because of the mechanized precision of guillotine execution: there was a clarity to the guillotine in that it reduced the act of execution to a single moment—a sudden shift from life to death (Gay 51–52). Rather than a more extended process in which the instant of death was difficult to discern (as with a hanging, for example), the guillotine presented death as a distinct,

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[1] See a first-hand account by Giovanni Aldini and Robert Hooper, *An Account of the Late Improvements in Galvanism,* originally published in 1809 (Ulan 2012).

mechanized switch-point from animation to lifelessness. This aspect of guillotine execution accorded with galvanism's notion that life might be generated or halted abruptly with the application or withdrawal of a single electrical charge. Conversely, popular reports of severed heads exhibiting expressions post-guillotining implied that some residual force or "charge" might exist for a time after the execution. For Aldini, guillotine execution reinforced galvanic notions about life and death processes.

By recognizing Aldini's influence on *Frankenstein*, we can see more clearly how Shelley's novel activates associations with the guillotine; that is, *Frankenstein* evinces the very anxieties and tensions symbolized by the guillotine. I argue that viewing Victor as a displacement of Aldini allows for a reading of *Frankenstein* with reference to the guillotine and offers interesting new ways of interpreting Shelley's novel. My analysis emphasizes the historical context that produced Shelley's narrative, specifically the constitutive influence of three particular developments of the Romantic period: (1) the emergence of materialist theories in science and medicine; (2) the intrusion of modern technology into natural biological processes; (3) and grotesque reports of the violence in revolutionary France. Due to the guillotine's association with all three historical developments, I view it as a powerful signifier of the period's modern anxieties and therefore quite instructive in better understanding themes in *Frankenstein*.

The Guillotine and Ontological Paradoxes of Modernity

Prior to the introduction of the guillotine in France in 1792, executioners performed beheadings with a sword or axe. Sometimes it required repeated blows to completely sever the head, and it was very likely for the condemned to bleed to death slowly from his or her wounds before the head could be severed. The victim or the victim's family would sometimes pay the executioner to ensure that the blade was sharp in order for a quick and relatively painless death. Hanging was another common type of execution, a form of death that could take minutes or longer. Other more gruesome methods of executions were also used, such as the wheel or burning at the stake. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opposition to these punishments slowly grew, due mainly to the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire and Locke, who argued for more humane methods of execution.[2]

The guillotine may have been similar in form and function to other older devices, but it broke new ground. To the leaders of the French

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[2] For a more extensive discussion of Enlightenment attitudes toward capital punishment, see Pagden (46–58).

Revolution, the guillotine was "the technological perfection of impersonal violence" (Janes 45). It was designed to inflict a fast and painless death upon anyone, regardless of age, sex or wealth—an embodiment of such concepts as equality and humanity. In much of Europe prior to the guillotine's approval by the French revolutionary government, generally only the upper classes received the privilege of an execution by decapitation. This class differentiation in execution continued to be the case in much of Europe; however, France's guillotine was available to all. And for the first time, an entire country officially adopted this decapitation machine for all of its executions. The government shipped the same design out to all regions, and each was operated in the same manner, under the same laws; there was to be no local variation.

The committee that developed the guillotine for the French National Assembly was influenced by earlier execution devices such as the Scottish Maiden and the Halifax Gibbet. While these prior instruments usually crushed the neck or used blunt force to take off a head, the committee's new device used a crescent blade and a lunette (a hinged two part yoke to immobilize the victim's neck). The system was operated via a rope and pulley, while the whole construction was mounted on a high platform. The testing of the guillotine took place at a hospital, where three carefully chosen corpses—those of strong, stocky men—were successfully beheaded. The first execution took place on April 25th, 1792, when a highwayman called Nicholas-Jacques Pelletier was killed. After an independent report recommended further changes, a number of alterations in the design occurred: metal trays to collect blood were added, the famous angled blade was introduced, and the designers abandoned the high platform—now replaced by a basic scaffold.

It is easy to see why the quick, methodical movement of the machine should have interested the public. Executions tended to involve a fountain of blood from the victim's neck, and the sheer number of people guillotined could create red pools, if not actual flowing streams. Where executioners once prided themselves on their skill, speed now became the focus. While only fifty-three people were executed by the Halifax Gibbet between 1541 and 1650, some French guillotine executions exceeded that total in a single day (Janes 72). The guillotine even appears to have enjoyed some affection in France for a time. Indeed, popular nicknames like "the national razor," "the widow," and "Madame Guillotine" seem to be more accepting than hostile. In this respect, the guillotine offered yet another set of contradictions, as popular representations of it often reinterpreted a gruesome death-machine as a fashionable and even comical symbol. Very quickly it became a cultural icon affecting fashion, literature,

and even children's toys. In the early years of its use, its symbolism of the Revolution made its popular incarnations as toys and fashion a kind of patriotic act, much like the rise in popularity of flag-pins in America post-9/11. Moreover, executions by guillotine were often an entertainment that attracted great crowds of spectators (although this was not unusual for previous methods of execution). Vendors would sell programs listing the names of those scheduled to die, and people would come day after day and vie for the best seats. Knitting female citizens—famous to us from Dickens's Madame Defarge—formed a cadre of hardcore regulars. Parents would bring their children. Toward the end of the Terror, however, attendance thinned considerably. It thinned, perhaps, because the guillotine in daily use seemed to betray its first purpose as a humane instrument: very quickly, it became a symbol of the sanguinary aspect of the Revolution.

Beyond its political significance, the guillotine generated a number of ontological anxieties. The designers of the guillotine regarded the replacement of the human element (the executioner) with a machine as a humane improvement, but it also replaced the emphasis on an interpersonal act between the condemned and the executioner with a technological act, transforming a natural process (death) to a mechanized one, suggesting an emerging modern tension between the categories of nature and technology. The mechanization of execution also had the effect of intensifying the focus on the moment of death itself—a distinct, clearly delineated, and exact point that captured the popular imagination. As Mike Dash notes, "It was so quick, so clean, so bloodily final that it was hard for an execution-going public accustomed to the protracted struggles of [earlier execution methods] to believe that life could be extinguished quite so swiftly" (128). This aspect of swiftness elicited a particular anxiety, as it seemed, unnaturally, to compress death into a single second. And while guillotine execution itself occasionally required more than one release of the blade—especially if the machine was faulty or the blade lacked the requisite sharpness—the replacement of a swordsman by a machine created a perception of guillotine execution as a clinical, instantaneous event rather than a humanized process. Moreover, the collection of heads that accrued beneath the guillotine instilled a sense of the victims as headless, lifeless dolls—a disturbing image to those many who preferred to think of human identity in terms of spiritual subjectivity rather than biological materiality.

Paradoxically, the guillotine also aroused fears of a protracted agony. The blade cut quickly enough so that there was relatively little impact on the brain case, and perhaps less likelihood of immediate unconsciousness than with a more violent decapitation, or long-drop hanging. Execution witnesses told numerous stories of blinking eyelids, moving eyes, movement of the mouth,

and even an expression of "unequivocal indignation" on the face of the decapitated Charlotte Corday when the executioner slapped her face post-decapitation (Dash 76). Such reported facial expressions post-execution suggested that consciousness might continue for seconds or even minutes after head was severed, and this possibility generated considerable anxiety and speculation. After an execution, it was not uncommon for the head of the condemned to be picked up and turned toward the body so that the last image the condemned would see as he/she exited this world would be blood flowing from his/her severed neck. This debate over the consciousness of the condemned also informed perceptions of guillotine execution in England and colored the ways in which expatriates living in France during the Revolution and the Terror depicted the guillotine in their reports back to England.

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Scientists in several countries have tried to perform definitive experiments on severed human heads as recently as 1956. Inevitably, the evidence is only anecdotal. What appears to be a head responding to the sound of its name, or to the pain of a pinprick, may be only random muscle twitching or automatic reflex action, with no awareness involved. It is also possible that the massive drop in cerebral blood pressure would have caused victims to lose consciousness in several seconds.

In the decades following the guillotine's installation in revolutionary France, a number of European physiologists conducted experiments to determine what the condemned were capable of perceiving post-execution. The expanding controversy over the possible persistence of consciousness in severed heads was fueled by such research and by sensationalized news reports. An intriguing study was performed in 1803 in France on seven guillotined criminals (Kershaw 76–81). Physicians, surgeons, pharmacists, and medical students comprised the research team. Two of the students stood directly beneath the scaffold during and after the execution. It was their task to check for any signs of consciousness immediately after decapitation. One student held the head firmly in both hands for concentrated observation of the face, while the other shouted, "Do you hear me?" in the ears. Alternating tasks, they did this with seven heads whose stationary eyelids varied from total retraction to total occlusion. In no instance did the researchers observe any reaction. Ultimately, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century physiologists were unable to settle the question of whether the condemned retained some degree of consciousness after execution, and speculation persisted within the scientific community and the wider public.

The guillotine thus seemed to suggest an indeterminate ontological state, what Rebecca Comray calls a "transitionless transition" that "simultaneously reinforces and erodes the distinction between dying and living"

(97–98). She explains that guillotine execution rendered death "at once punctual and precise, and radically indeterminate: both incontestable and yet infinitely uncertain" (Comray 98). Some British expatriates in France described gruesome guillotinings that heightened physical expressions of the condemned post-execution, thus provoking British readers' doubts about the device's alleged "humanitarianism." The often sympathetic and sentimental descriptions of the condemned added to the abolitionist spirit of the age, which Mark Canuel discusses at length in his book on the death penalty and the abolition movement.[3] Concerns about guillotine execution also corresponded to the emphasis on sensibility in the eighteenth century (Vila 66). Offering a new paradigm for thinking about human consciousness, the interest in *feeling* made torture and execution seem more heinous than before and intensified concerns over the execution experience.

One of the most significant aspects of guillotine execution was its evocation of emerging materialist theories in science and philosophy. While materialism is most often associated with late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century neuroscience, it emerged centuries earlier in Enlightenment-era philosophy and science. Moreover, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as proto-materialist theories began to take shape, they generated a great deal of controversy due to their contradiction of religious notions of the soul. The idea that identity was nothing more than mere matter was anathema to those who believed in a spiritual dimension to life and hope for an afterlife. Guillotine execution often elicited popular anxiety precisely due to the focus it generated on the relationship between the head (brain) and the body and the questions it raised about consciousness. It is therefore no surprise that a scientist such as Giovanni Aldini whose experiments sought to prove that life could be generated through solely physical means (electricity) was also fascinated by guillotine execution. In his notorious experiments widely publicized throughout Europe, Aldini sought to regenerate the bodies of the guillotined with electricity.

The multifaceted, complex kinds of interest generated by the guillotine point to fundamental anxieties about modernity, anxieties exemplified by the dichotomies *mind/body*, *matter/spirit*, *life/death*, and *nature/technology*. Guillotine execution represents such modern antinomies in an especially powerful way and signifies a theoretical paradigm of juxtaposition and asyndeton, as opposed to the paradigm of organicism commonly associated with Romanticism. This disruptive pattern appears pervasively but unpredictably in Gothic literature and, I would argue, is a significant symptom of modernity.

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[3] See Canuel (30–36, 55–61, and 63–65).

Theoretical Slices in *Frankenstein*

My points of focus in this essay are the four theoretical juxtapositions evoked by the guillotine—head/body, matter/spirit, life/death, and nature/technology—and their manifestations in *Frankenstein*. In particular, I enlist the image of the guillotine *slice* as a metaphor for the line that paradoxically separates and joins opposing sides of the ontological dichotomies listed above. I would argue that *Frankenstein* interrogates these theoretical *slicings* by simultaneously blurring and sharpening the boundaries between categories.

The most apparent antinomies employed by Shelley's novel are tech/nature and head/body. The problematic relationship between technology and nature emerges in Victor's use of electricity to generate artificial life, while the head/body dichotomy is represented in the novel's description of the Creature as an assortment of disparate parts, which presumably indicates that his head is, in a sense, disconnected from his body. However, I want to move beyond these apparent themes to examine some of the more subtle juxtapositions in *Frankenstein*, one of which is life/death. I would argue that Shelley's novel merges categories of life and death through repeated descriptions of its characters as barely alive or death-like while at other times emphasizing the sharp discordance between life and death. (We can also see this paradox functioning in John Polidori's *The Vampyre* as well, which germinated alongside *Frankenstein* that fateful summer in Geneva and which engages in categorical juxtaposition with its invention of the *undead* aristocrat, the forerunner of *Dracula* and the vampire of modern cinema.) This descriptive collapsing of the line between existence and death suggests the same preoccupation with boundaries underlying many works of Gothic literature and modern horror.

One such juxtaposition in *Frankenstein* appears in Victor Frankenstein's discussion of his early research, which involves studying corpses and observing processes of biological decay. In one passage in particular, Victor explains the rationale for his morbid scientific approach:

> Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? . . . To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. I observed the natural decay and corruption of the human body . . . I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted. I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation from life to death, and death to life . . . (Shelley 62)

Victor here emphasizes death as the key to understanding life, a paradox juxtaposing two seemingly antonymic states. He focuses on the grotesque "corruption of the human body" and "pauses" over the "causation

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from life to death, and death to life"; in effect, he asserts that understanding death is necessary for understanding life (Shelley 62).

Mary Shelley also presents this problematic life/death dichotomy in categorizing the Creature. Neither human nor inhuman, the Creature exists on the metaphorical edge between antithetical categories, in an indeterminate zone somewhere between life and death. In the sense that he is sentient, he is very much alive; but as the derivative product of lifeless corpses, he is ontologically inauthentic. This combination of disparate parts birthed by electricity resembles a machine and foreshadows the cyborgs of modern science fiction. Taken as a whole, Shelley's novel regards the Creature as neither completely dead nor alive and yet both at the same time, blurring the line between two seemingly exclusive states of existence.

Victor, too, exists on this line between categories: enervated, lifeless, and outside of strict ontological categories—neither fully alive nor dead. In one typical passage, Victor bemoans this sense of indeterminacy:

> The blood flowed freely in my veins, but a weight of despair and remorse pressed on my heart, which nothing could remove. Sleep fled from my eyes; I wandered like an evil spirit. . . . This state of mind preyed on my health, which had perhaps never entirely recovered from the first shock it had sustained. I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; solitude was my only consolation—deep, dark, deathlike solitude. (Shelley 93)

Victor's internal sense of his indeterminacy corroborates the observation of an outside observer, Walton:

> Margaret, if you had seen the man who thus capitulated for his safety, your surprise would have been boundless. His limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition. We attempted to carry him into the cabin; but as soon as he had quitted the fresh air, he fainted. We accordingly brought him back to the deck, and restored him to animation by rubbing him with brandy and forcing him to swallow a small quantity. As soon as he showed signs of life we wrapped him up in blankets . . . (Shelley 36–37)

Shelley thus introduces Victor as a barely-conscious, emaciated body wrapped in blankets like a corpse clothed in burial cloths.

Shelley consolidates the representation of Victor as half-alive, ever on the verge of slipping entirely into death, in order to emphasize his figurative burial under a weight of depression, guilt, and despair. In effect, she suggests that psychologically Victor exists in a liminal state between life

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and death—physically barely alive and yet always ill, conscious and yet always suffering emotionally, frequently yearning for death. Incidentally, Victor's suicidal ideation is congruent with a different antinomy: idealism/horror. His abrupt shift from youthful optimism to its inverse, horror, functions as a photographic negative, with despair juxtaposed in sharp relief against the character's earlier idealism. We see this juxtaposition in Victor's abrupt attitudinal change after the Creature's "birth":

> The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. . . . I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. . . . I slept indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest of dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death . . . I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel. (Shelley 58–59)

This passage presents a distinct discordance between ardent idealism and "breathless" horror that correlates with its juxtaposition of the antonymic states of life and death.

Significantly, Victor's focus on life's materiality in the above passage evokes an anxiety about the ontological dichotomy matter/spirit. In effect, *Frankenstein* emphasizes a materialist view of life to the exclusion of a spiritual perspective, in which graphic terms like "corpse" and "grave-worms" and Elizabeth's sudden decay from a youthful girl into a rotting corpse trump any notion of an extra-material reality. Victor's materialism also informs his preoccupation with "the natural decay and corruption of the human body," in accordance with his father's "greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. . . . a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which from being the seat of beauty and strength had become food for the worm" (Shelley 58–59). Even after Victor regrets giving life to the Creature, he does not venture into theological arguments or give consideration to whether the Creature might have a soul; spiritual considerations are absent from the novel, save for occasional references to the Creature as an "abomination" and a "demon" (Shelley 102). Victor's motivation for despising his creation seems not to be religious guilt but a basic, involuntary feeling of revulsion. A materialist view also underlies

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Victor's responses to the deaths of Elizabeth and Henry Clerval: he does not speculate on their existence in an afterlife but instead refers to them as merely corpses, a description he also invokes when discussing his dead mother and William. For Victor, the "soul" does not figure into life and death processes, nor does any divine giver of life. He asserts a theoretical equivalency between life and death as interchangeable aspects of an exclusively material biological cycle.

An anxiety about ontological categories also underlies Mary Shelley's subtle allusions to slavery in *Frankenstein*.[4] The most famous reference to slavery occurs in this passage where the Creature declares that he will not submit to "abject slavery" and Victor's fear of the subjugation of the human race:

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> Even if [the Creature and his mate] were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. (Shelley 107)

In addition to their political resonance, I stress that allusions to slavery reinforce the novel's larger anxieties about ontological categories. For just as the Creature in *Frankenstein* exists in an indeterminate, contested space between seemingly distinct categories (life/death, human/inhuman), so does the slave, historically speaking. We see this in the political and philosophical debates about slavery during this period, which often focused on the slave's ontological status—human or subhuman.

The force of Mary Shelley's adducing slavery vs. freedom to her novel's antinomies is clearer if we examine the under-studied fact of Matthew Lewis's visit to Geneva in 1816 when *Frankenstein* was conceived. An owner of a large estate of plantations in Jamaica (inherited recently from his father), Lewis devoted much of his time to the management of his estate and of its numerous slaves. At the time of his visit to Geneva, Lewis was preoccupied with his Jamaican plantations; in fact, his stay in Geneva occurred between two separate voyages he made to Jamaica to oversee his extensive estates. While in Geneva visiting Byron and the Shelleys, Lewis added to his will a codicil stipulating that his heirs were to visit the plantations regularly and were expected to maintain his humanitarian reforms. The codicil was witnessed by Byron, Shelley, and Polidori, who apparently were willing to countenance Lewis's continued support of slavery's continuance. By recognizing Lewis's importance, I will complicate the more

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[4] See Ball (31–58) and Machow (26).

familiar narrative of *Frankenstein's* origin in ghosts, dreams, and thunderstorms and argue that references to slavery in *Frankenstein* are intentional and historically significant.

Lewis's connection to West Indian slavery also provides deeper insight into the Creature's agreement to a permanent exile in Latin America in exchange for a wife. By recognizing Lewis's influence, we can see an implicit allusion in Shelley's novel to the West Indian slave revolts, specifically the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, the only successful slave rebellion antedating *Frankenstein's* composition (Censer and Hunt 124). The Haitian Revolution began as a violent uprising against plantations and slaveholders led by the notorious Jamaican-born voodoo priest Dutty Bookman, who was said to have initiated the revolt with a voodoo ceremony that included an animal sacrifice and the drinking of human blood. According to reports widely circulated in Europe, Bookman controlled his army using voodoo "black magic," apparently a sort of group hypnosis. Bookman's army of slaves raided 1800 plantations in seven days, killing over a thousand slaveholders and constituting, for the European public, a deliberate campaign of "pillage, rape, torture, mutilation, and death" (Censer and Hunt 124). When the Haitian rebellion succeeded in 1804 under Toussaint Louverture (also reported to be a voodoo practitioner), fears abounded in England that its territory in the West Indies—particularly Jamaica—might undergo a similar violent revolution.

One key element of the Haitian Revolution rarely mentioned by scholars was its reliance on the machete as the slaves' primary weapon. At the time, the machete had acquired a horrific mystique in the popular European imagination. Much like today (with its link to genocidal atrocities on the "dark continent" of Africa), the machete carried a particular set of racial connotations. I would argue that the machete's symbolism of revolutionary atrocity in the Romantic Period, along with the fear specifically inspired by its blade—with its power to slice, maim, and decapitate—makes it a symbolic cousin of the guillotine. That is, while both the guillotine and the machete were associated with Enlightenment-era revolution, the mechanized, modern aspects of the guillotine separated it from the supposed primitiveness of the West Indian slave revolts. Perhaps the machete's primitive connotations account for its popularity in narratives that foreground apocalypse and human savagery; we see this dynamic quite markedly in the popular zombie film genre, for example.

The zombie film genre is surprisingly relevant to *Frankenstein*. Those astute scholars who have noted Mary Shelley's allusions to slavery have still missed an important implication of this historical connection. Because Europeans during this period associated the West Indian slave revolts with

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voodoo magic, I would argue that Shelley's implicit allusion to the Haitian uprisings entails a related notion of voodoo. Of particular significance to me is the term popularly applied to those believed to be controlled by voodoo hypnosis: "zombies." The term "zombie" originated within the voodoo tradition and still carries this particular connotation among those familiar with voodoo practices. A 2012 Halloween-inspired article in *The New York Times,* entitled "A Zombie is a Slave Forever," explains the significance of the zombie in voodoo and the way that it came to symbolize the horrors of slavery in the West Indies:

> Most people think of them as the walking dead, a being without a soul or someone with no free will. This is true. But the zombie is not an alien enemy who's been [produced] by Hollywood. He is a New World phenomenon that arose from the mixture of old African religious beliefs and the pain of slavery, especially the notoriously merciless and cold-blooded slavery of French-run, pre-independence Haiti. . . . [S]uicide was a frequent recourse of the slaves, who were handy with poisons and powders. . . . And yet, the fear of becoming a zombie might stop them from doing so. . . . To become a zombie was the slave's worst nightmare: to be dead and still a slave, an eternal field hand. It is thought that slave drivers on the plantations, who were usually slaves themselves and sometimes Voodoo priests, used this fear of zombification to keep recalcitrant slaves in order . . . (Wilentz)

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Historically, then, the figure of the zombie functioned symbolically in two distinct ways with respect to slavery: as the article explains, the threat of being rendered a zombie discouraged slaves from suicide and revolution, while simultaneously the popular perception of the Haitian revolutionaries as unconscious voodoo victims endowed them with a powerful, frightening mystique. As I noted earlier, the Creature shares with the historical figure of the slave an indeterminate, contested position between ontological categories of life/death and human/subhuman. The voodoo zombie also exists indeterminately between these ontological categories. In fact, the zombie's ontological indeterminacy is more pronounced than the slave's, since a zombie—depicted as unconscious, ghoulish, and corpse-like—exists even more uneasily on the line between ontological categories.

Beyond the issue of ontological status, I would argue that the implicit allusions in *Frankenstein* to slavery and the Haitian Revolution are ultimately significant because they allow us to identify the Creature as a literary ancestor of one of the most popular "monsters" to later emerge in modern cinema—the sci-fi zombie. That is to say, Mary Shelley's association of the Creature with the slave rebellions in Haiti also functions as

a link between her futuristic theme of technological danger and the traditional zombie mythology of Haitian voodoo. This connection—however unconscious on the author's part—of the novel's central science-fiction concept with an historical event associated with voodoo is intriguing in its prescience, insomuch as it anticipated the way in which twentieth-century horror films would one day re-conceptualize the notion of the zombie, transforming it from the traditional slave-ghoul of voodoo superstition into a modern bio-monster born of scientific hubris.

Emerging Obstetrics Science and Ontological Anxiety in *Frankenstein*

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Abortion and infanticide are familiar motifs in *Frankenstein* criticism, resting chiefly on the Creature's self-description as "the miserable and the abandoned" and "an abortion," as well as on Victor's abortion-like destruction of the female "mate" he creates for his deformed progeny (Shelley 185). What is significant to me about these allusions is that abortion and infanticide necessarily point to the indeterminate ontological status of the fetus and infant, just as the Creature occupies a contested position on the boundary between human/inhuman, alive/dead. The fact that the Creature presents the same kind of categorical uncertainty as the fetus explains why zombie and vampire films—the modern-day versions of "undead" monsters—often include a subplot involving abortion and infanticide. Just like the zombie, the vampire, and Frankenstein's Creature, the fetus exists on the slice within ontological antinomies.

Mary Shelley had only recently given birth to her second child, William, prior to arriving in Geneva that summer. The presence in Geneva of Claire Clairemont, several months pregnant with Byron's child, reinforced a preoccupation with reproduction. It is a truism of *Frankenstein* scholarship that the novel is deeply engaged with reproductive anxieties, not only the current ones but the longstanding factor of Wollstonecraft's death in childbirth from puerperal fever. Ellen Moers initiated the view that *Frankenstein* should be read as "a birth myth" due to Mary Shelley's "chronic and chaotic experience with motherhood":

> Pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years; yet not a secure mother, for she lost most of her babies soon after they were born; and not a lawful mother, for she was not married—not at least when, at the age of eighteen, Mary Godwin began to write *Frankenstein*. So are monsters born. (92)

Treating the novel as a displaced autobiography, Moers reads the monster's birth as a metaphor for distraught young, middle-class woman's anxiety about failed motherhood (92).

If we look more widely than Mary Shelley's own life, we see that *Frankenstein* was published at a time when traditional attitudes about reproduction were being supplanted by obstetrical theories and practices that originated in France and spread to other European countries.[5] This new "scientific" perspective understood childbirth as a medical condition that required the oversight of male physicians—obstetricians—who gradually replaced traditional female midwives. Obstetricians asserted that the profession required extensive medical expertise and the use of surgical instruments, such as the recently invented *curette*, a surgical tool used to remove the uterine lining or its contents by scraping and scooping. *Curettage* remains the second step of the common D&C procedure (dilation and curettage) still performed after miscarriages and abortions. The supplanting of midwifery by obstetrics and its instruments loosely resembled galvanism's goal of generating life artificially through technological intervention. This period also saw a considerable increase in the publication of childbirthing manuals, a trend which scholars such as Alan Bewell largely attribute to the emergence of modern obstetrics (Bewell 105–28). These obstetrics manuals all stress the importance of a knowledge of anatomy and physiology; they also give advice on the symptoms and diagnosis of pregnancy, the disorders peculiar to pregnant women, and various ways to determine the sex of an unborn child. Delivery methods are frequently dealt with in detail, often with plate illustrations of the different kinds of births that a midwife may confront. Some books also comment on the lying-in period and on the diseases of new mothers and their infants. My argument for the surprising metaphoric convergence of obstetrical instruments with the guillotine is strengthened by an under-studied feature of Luigi Galvani's career: before he conducted his famous electric experiments, he was one of Europe's pioneer obstetricians, serving as the Chair of Obstetrics at the University of Bologna's Institute of Sciences and later as the Institute's president.

The rise of obstetrics coincided with the emergence of modern permissiveness about birth control and abortion, especially in France.[6] By superseding church law, the French Revolution legalized practices that had previously been forbidden, including birth control, non-procreative sex acts, and pornography. Of course these had all existed before, but they had

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[5] See Porter.
[6] See McLaren.

been legally suppressed. Respectable young girls in France in 1785 were as limited in their knowledge of sex and birth control as their counterparts in Britain. However, in 1796, that had changed. It was now perfectly legal to sell condoms openly and to instruct buyers on how to use them, as well as to inform the public about the rhythm method or about non-procreative sex acts; pulpy novels featuring such subjects also became legal (Darnton 65–68).

While the French proceeded in one direction regarding abortion, the British moved in another, explains R. Sauer: "The view that the fetus was alive from conception gained in popularity" (85–87). This sentiment resulted in the 1803 passage of the Ellenborough Act, which prohibited abortion after "quickening"—when a woman first feels fetal movement (16–20 weeks)—and established the death penalty for those convicted (although this penalty was rarely sought in abortion-related prosecutions). In 1837, the government extended the Ellenborough Act by removing the distinction between abortion conducted before and after quickening. Such measures indicate the controversy at the time about the status of the fetus, but then—as today—the British public was hardly uniform in its opinion on the subject. In fact, a number of historians suggest that abortion (frequently illegal) as well as infanticide occurred far more often in Britain at this time than the political climate of the time suggests.

What is significant to me about the allusions to abortion and infanticide in *Frankenstein* is that they suggest ontological paradoxes of modernity related to questions about what constitutes a legitimate life. We see this concern even in today's debates about abortion, which foreground arguments about who possesses the more important ontological status, the fetus or the mother. I would also note that the unique relationship between mother and fetus—in which the fetus is not totally separate from but in fact is interrelated with and dependent on the mother—offers an interesting challenge to the idea of stable ontological categories; in this sense, the fetus and mother exist on their own metaphorical slice somewhere between two seemingly oppositional states (self/other, life/death). Perhaps this indeterminacy is one reason why the figure of the monstrous mother is so popular in Gothic literature and modern horror cinema.

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Frankenstein is widely recognized as a seminal work of Gothic literature and proto-science-fiction, a narrative that not only captured certain modern ideas of its time but also prophesied the anxieties that would emerge fully almost two centuries later in response to accelerating technological

and scientific developments. Additionally, *Frankenstein* is also widely credited as the progenitor of a set of modern fiction genres—bio-horror, tech-horror, and the mad-scientist narrative, for example—tremendously popular in literature and film today. Some prominent examples are *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *The Fly* (1958/1986), and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—all of which inspired numerous sequels and remakes—and the more recent *28 Days Later* (2002), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Human Centipede* (2010), and *World War Z* (2013), as well as the popular television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–2015). All of these films emphasize the particular anxieties explored in *Frankenstein* and employ similar themes and motifs.

By recognizing Giovanni Aldini's role in *Frankenstein*, we can see more clearly how Shelley's novel activates associations with the guillotine, connections which suggest anxieties about problematic theoretical juxtapositions. Moreover, I would argue Shelley's novel is representative of themes in the wider Gothic and horror genres, which seek to engage with the very same modern paradoxes symbolized by the guillotine.

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