Shelley’s FRANKENSTEIN

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells his disciples the parable of the prodigal son. Christ describes the travails of an immature young man who demands and receives his inheritance from his doting father and then wastes every bit of it on high living and self-aggrandizement. When his funds are exhausted and his fair-weather companions have vanished, he finds himself isolated in a foreign land, dwelling in squalor among strangers who do not care about his plight. Eventually, his situation becomes so desperate that he is forced to take the vilest job imaginable for a Jewish male: He becomes a herder of swine, the keeper of a Gentle’s filthy pigsty: “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. […] And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him” (Luke 15.14–16). Because swine are, according to Old Testament Jewish law, unclean and therefore unholy in the eyes of God, the prodigal son has not simply fallen on hard economic times. Rather, by living with and touching forbidden animals, he has degraded himself, defiled his family, and betrayed his faith. This wayward son cannot fall any farther from grace.

Like most of the writers in her literary circle, from Lord Byron to Doctor Polidori, Mary Shelley—self-educated and one of the best-read women of her time—was intrigued by old tales and ancient myths concerning lost and outcast wanderers. Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son fits perfectly into the Romantic notion of the isolated soul, the tortured, wandering loner who is, by fate or circumstance, cast adrift on a sea of loneliness and despair. In chapter 11 of Frankenstein—the first chapter narrated exclusively by the monster—there is a very subtle yet unmistakable allusion to Christ’s parable.

Within hours of being animated by Victor Frankenstein’s unnatural “spark of being,” the creature—confused and frightened by all the unfamiliar sensations around him—abandons Victor’s apartment and begins to wander aimlessly through the forests of southern Germany (Shelley 52). After a few days of foraging for sustenance, he encounters a village of modest but well-kept cottages. Suffering from the intense hunger pangs of a giant man-child, he innocently enters one of the dwellings, drawn by the aroma of freshly cooked food, and he is shocked when the occupants scream, faint, or scatter in terror. The entire village is quickly roused into action, and the monster is viciously and repeatedly attacked until, “‘grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons,’” he flees for his life, finally reaching the safety of the pathless forest (110). After putting many miles between himself and his attackers, the creature finds humble refuge “‘in a low hovel, quite bare, and […] wretched’” (110). This cramped shelter has a dirt floor, and icy winds whistle through large chinks in the walls. The hovel, barely large enough for his huge
frame, is attached to the rear of the De Lacey cottage. But most important, the monster’s shed is “surrounded on the sides […] by a pig-sty and a clear pool of water” (111). This is Mary Shelley’s faint but telling echo of the parable of the prodigal son. Like the biblical figure, Dr. Frankenstein’s creature has reached bottom. Literally, the monster now lives with pigs, and because he gathers roots and berries in the forest by night and brings them back to his hovel to eat while he hides during the day, he dines with swine as well. He is an outcast, dirty, unloved, unwelcome, and penniless. He is far removed from his father, Victor, who is still back in Ingolstadt, oblivious to the vile squalor into which his young son has fallen.

Although both the prodigal son and the monster are on the verge of starvation, they choose not to kill and eat the pigs that keep them company. The prodigal son will not eat them for religious reasons. The monster will not eat them for moral reasons, explaining, “My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” (157). In another parallel, the creature learns bitter lessons about humanity during his solitary suffering by the pigsty; eventually he will undertake a difficult pilgrimage back to his father in hopes of a warm welcome. For the monster, however, that welcome will prove violent; he will not be accepted back into the embrace of familial love, because the creature’s father is not a forgiving man. Unlike the good father in the Bible, Victor offers hatred in place of affection, violence rather than acceptance, and vengeance instead of understanding. Throughout the entire novel, Victor is portrayed as the antithesis of a good father, whereas in the parable, the father is held up as a model parent, loving his wayward son unconditionally: “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke 15.22–24).

Mary Shelley’s many overt biblical references, which serve to layer and enrich her novel with echoes of archetypal figures, have been explicated at length in the nearly two centuries since the publication of her cautionary tale of science gone horribly awry. Yet often it is the subtle allusion—a familiar image, a fleeting turn of phrase, a telling echo in a sentence—that catches the reader’s attention, tweaks the curiosity, and demands another perusal.

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