



**“Venturing higher than their lot”: The Guilt of Man in *Paradise Lost* (IX & X)
and *Frankenstein***

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Guilt is a moral emotion, and an uncomfortable one at that. Borne of our sense of conscience, feeling guilty is more than just feeling badly about something. Guilt necessitates an inherent sense of responsibility and regret, often because we have committed some kind of conscious misconduct or sin. It is a reminder that, although our moral compass may not point due North, it remains calibrated. If Joel Slotkin is to be believed, then all readers of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* will be familiar with guilt: 'as fallen humans', we are all too aware of the crimes we have committed.¹

In this essay, I will argue that true guilt is a necessarily human emotion, because it hinges on our conception of redemption and reform: the hope that we might yet make things right. Milton's representation of the Fall of Man as the catalyst for guilt's entrance into Eden (in Books IX and X) is perhaps the most important example of this. Coincident with the entrance of original sin, guilt is often understood to have afflicted humanity first as a consequence of the shame that Adam and Eve felt eating the forbidden fruit. If *Paradise Lost* exists to 'justify the ways of God to men', then it may certainly explain why guilt is such a common human affliction: God uses guilt to teach humans a valuable lesson of obedience.² By contrast, Shelley's *Frankenstein* divorces guilt of its godly origins, attributing its recurrence

¹ Joel Slotkin, 'Poetic Justice: Divine Punishment and Augustinian Chiaroscuro in 'Paradise Lost'', *Milton Quarterly*, 38:2 (2004), p.100.

² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), l.26. All *PL* citations henceforth from this edition.

to the ‘wanderings of disturbed imagination’.³ Shelley affords us the vantage point of guilt via the human creator, rather than humans created. In both texts, guilt comes as a necessary condition of challenging natural order – whether that order is religious or moral – and results in internal ruminations of remorse.

Before discussing guilt as a consequence of the Fall of Man, I must first consider its necessary and theistic negative example. In Book IV, having been sent down from Heaven, Satan doubts his own sinfulness before embarking once more on his crusade against God’s jurisdiction. Looking down upon the beauty of Earth, Satan’s ‘conscience wakes despair that slumbered’: we readers know this despair, ‘the hell within him’, by the name guilt (IV.23-24, 20). Neil Forsyth claims that ‘Hell is defined by damnation, and by the inability to repent’: at very most, then, Satan’s ‘troubled thoughts’ (IV.19) are an analogous predecessor to human guilt.⁴ Given Forsyth’s statement, I do not believe Milton’s Satan can feel truly guilty for either previous or prospective transgressions against God; for Milton, then, characterising Satan as morally guilty remains a redundant procedure if he cannot repent. Of course, Satan briefly considers ‘repentance’, but the ‘dread of shame’ and ‘disdain forbids [him]’ (IV.82). Instead of going back to God, Satan pledges to ‘banish from man’s life his happiest life’ by stripping Adam and Eve of their ‘spotless innocence’ (IV.317-318). He ‘withdraws into the darkness [of which] he has been forewarned’.⁵ Having lost all faith in serving God, and too ashamed to return to him, Satan can conceive of no redemption, so he self-reconciles any doubt over his amorality. Ergo Milton grants not the light of salvation to Satan. Arnold Williams reminds us that Satan’s hopeless motivation is of ‘cardinal importance to *Paradise Lost*’: without it, man ‘would certainly not have fallen’ and guilt would never have reached earth.⁶

Therein lies the necessary difference between the guilt of man and Satan. When Adam and Eve transgress God’s orders by eating the fruit, Milton sustains their guilt as a blossoming

³ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein*, 1831 (London: Penguin, 2012). As with *PL*, all citations from *Frankenstein* henceforth of this edition.

⁴ Neil Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.148-9.

⁵ Stella Revard, *The War in Heaven* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.58.

⁶ Arnold Williams, ‘The Motivation of Satan’s Rebellion in “*Paradise Lost*”’, *Studies in Philology*, 42:2 (1945), p.253.

emotion, rather than a shade of fleeting doubt.⁷ Unlike Satan in Book IV, guilt does not predate Adam and Eve's crime, nor does it dissipate. For Satan, when guilt arises, it is a spark quickly extinguished; for Adam and Eve, it is a slow burn. So slow, in fact, that 'greedily [Eve] engorged without restraint': she revels in her immediate transgression (IX.791). There is not a shred of Eve's guilt to be found at first. Although she 'knew not eating Death', Milton has Eve ask herself an instinctive question: 'what if God have seen/ and death ensue?' (IX.792, 726-727). As Donald Davis notes, 'nothing but the prospect of a lonely death prompts [Eve] to divulge her secret to Adam'.⁸ She is not yet guilty but merely suffers 'change' by the fruit in her fear of capital punishment (IX.818). Her fear gives way to shame as she tries to justify her decision to Adam: her concern lies primarily 'in what sort [she shall] appear' to him (IX.816-7). With this, Milton sets up for Eve's internalisation of shame. Here, she is conscious only of her outward appearance; later, 'in her cheek distemper flushing glowed' as she recounts her 'fatal trespass' (IX.887-9). Eve's 'flushing' indicates that she has absorbed some internal embarrassment; Milton spares her no blushes as she admits conscious misconduct. Eve's fearful anticipation has percolated to a more moral realisation, but importantly, her shame has not yet ripened to guilt. She recruits Adam as an accomplice to her crime: Amanda Holmes confirms that shame 'seems to dissipate when it is made public or when it is shared'.⁹ In Eve's confession there is as yet no repentance; in fact, she selfishly encourages Adam's complicity in a bid to absolve herself of shame.

Adam suffers similarly on his emotional journey to guilt. Upon eating the fruit, Milton indicates his roundabout change in attitude: where before, Adam criticised Eve as 'defaced, deflowered', he now apostrophises her as he might God, praising her 'exact taste' and 'all [her] perfections' (IX.1017, 1031). Russell Smith asserts that, in his transgression, 'Adam wrongly chooses Eve instead of God', worshipping her beauty and prescience with 'amorous intent'

⁷ Though Eve eats before Adam – IX.781 & 1004-5 respectively – they both suffer the same revolution of guilt.

⁸ Donald Davis, 'The Technique of Guilt by Association in *'Paradise Lost'*', *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 37:1 (1972), p.33.

⁹ Amanda Holmes, 'That Which Cannot Be Shared: On the Politics of Shame', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29:3 (2015), p.416.

(IX.1034).¹⁰ In truth, Smith’s argument does not go far enough; Bowers confirms that Adam’s failure to maintain the priority of God’s word over Eve’s charm is the basis for his eventual shame.¹¹ ‘How can [he] behold the face henceforth of God or angel’, knowing his sin was conscious? He is ‘shamed, naked, miserable’ in his decision (IX.1139). Milton makes clear that Adam understands the moral consequence of his actions, in order that Adam might later have room to repent.

However, like Eve, Adam’s shame bears yet no semblance to regretful guilt. In Book X, he prevaricates with the Son about his nakedness when given the chance to confess his sins (X.115-125); as Graham Ward writes, ‘Adam is not ashamed because he is exposed as having sinned’.¹² Indeed, when Adam and Eve are thus called from the grove, their ‘apparent guilt, and shame’ is couched in a convoluted and confused semblance of emotion (X.112-115). They cannot bear to come to terms with – or, more generously, cannot conceive of – their crime. The ‘newcomer, shame’, worms its way into their naked bodies and takes root; their ‘inward nakedness [is] much more opprobrious’ (IX.1097, X.210-211). Despite this, Milton is careful to term their guilt ‘apparent’: it is not yet fully fledged. Even in front of God himself – whom they know to be omniscient – Adam and Eve reject any moral responsibility in mutual recrimination. Adam tattles on Eve – ‘she gave of me, and I did eat’ (X.143) – and Eve dislocates blame from humankind altogether, for the ‘serpent beguiled [her] and she did eat’ (X.162). Perhaps, as Davis suggests, this is the facet of humankind that recommends them over Satan in Book IV: they try to attribute a better motive than that which they acted upon, ‘which Satan would never do’.¹³

Unfortunately, I dispute Davis’s claim of Adam and Eve’s endearment. There still appears no moral repentance to their reaction, which is at best unattractive, and at worst, blasphemous. Their squabbling over blame is that of young children put on trial before a

¹⁰ Russell Smith, ‘Adam’s Fall’, *ELH*, 35:4 (1968), p.527.

¹¹ Fredson Bowers, ‘Adam, Eve, and the Fall in ‘Paradise Lost’’, *PMLA*, 84:2 (1969), p.273.

¹² Graham Ward, ‘Adam and Eve’s Shame (And Ours)’, *Literature and Theology*, 26:3 (2012), p.308.

¹³ Davis, ‘The Technique of Guilt’, p.33.

parent. Milton is clever to introduce their reactions as I have described above: as the seedling of fear, which sprouts into shame. Adam and Eve are afforded multiple opportunities to weed out their tendency to sin, yet at every turn they remain obstinately (or perhaps, merely fatuously) committed to an unrepentant path. Milton uses the gradual growth of this emotion to present Adam and Eve like students in need of a teacher, or indeed a 'gracious judge without revile' (X.118). It is only by the firm hand of God's punishments that Adam and Eve are humbled into regret. Thus enters Edenic guilt: with 'the instant stroke of death denounced that day', Adam and Eve have a lifetime to confront their own emotional positionality (X.210). Encumbered with mortality and the 'sorrow' of childbirth and agriculture (X.195, 201), their guilt flowers under 'God's continued mercy to human consciences'.¹⁴ He might have killed them immediately, but has instead offered (or rather, necessitated) that they repent. Adam and Eve feel bad because God is yet so good, even though they have wronged him. Once 'immovable' in their shame, Adam and Eve are liberated by 'peace obtained from fault acknowledged and deplored'. Their prospects of salvation hinge upon a sense of responsibility, and so they now truly repent, 'with tears watering the ground' from which their guilt grows (X.1111-1112).

Their eventual guilt is a useful device for Milton, for the express reason that Adam and Eve are faithful. In necessary antithesis to Satan, Adam and Eve believe in God's omnibenevolence and forgiveness, and so Milton weathers them with the process of guilt to allow them ultimate expunction and redemption. Where Satan is stoic, 'beyond the pursuit of virtue', Gerald Schiffhorst argues that Adam and Eve demonstrate a 'readiness to accept adversities' in order to 'perfect and mature' their faith.¹⁵ Although Schiffhorst is correct – Adam and Eve's guilt is a journey of faith – I am hesitant to call it a 'ready' development. Ultimately, it was in the shadow of punishment that they regretted their crimes; admittedly, they come to

¹⁴ Joshua Held, 'Eve's "paradise within" in *Paradise Lost*: A Stoic Mind, a Love Sonnet, and a Good Conscience', *Studies in Philology*, 114:1 (2017), pp.189-99.

¹⁵ Gerald Schiffhorst, 'Satan's False Heroism in "Paradise Lost" As a Perversion of Patience', *Christianity and Literature*, 33:2 (1984), p.16.

regret nonetheless. Although Eden is now a *Paradise Lost* to them, Adam and Eve retain in faith that not all is lost; there is yet promised a ‘paradise within,’ (XII. 581-587) one of ‘faith, virtue, patience, and temperance’.¹⁶ In this way, Milton legitimises God’s punishments as an act of pedagogical love; he confirms guilt as a necessary consequence to the faithful wrongdoer. Paradise can, in fact, exist outside of Eden; it exists in man’s good conscience and obedience to God.¹⁷

And so, to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Perhaps the most important difference to observe in this discussion is that the guilt of man in *Frankenstein* is that of the maker, of Victor Frankenstein himself; in *Paradise Lost*, human guilt is that of the made. Despite this clear distinction, Frankenstein is ‘deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge’, as is Eve. ‘Curiosity’ and ‘earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature’ govern his childhood and career at university; Eve’s thirst for knowledge sustains her. In Frankenstein’s attempt to transgress the ‘ideal bounds’ of ‘life and death’ (83), Goldberg reminds us that, ‘like Eve (and her precursor, Satan), Frankenstein is tempted by the secrets of heaven and earth’.¹⁸ Characters from *Paradise Lost* and *Frankenstein* alike commit crimes against natural order: Satan against his Heavenly superior; Eve ‘against God and [Adam]’ (X.931); Frankenstein as he embarks of the ‘creation of a human being’ from the ‘unhallowed damp of the grave’ (47). Satan, as I have established, operates outside the realms of human guilt, because he is damned. Eve suffers the guilt of man, but as the creation of God. Frankenstein plays creator himself, and so the guilt he feels is completely different to Eve’s. In an unfortunate irony of his own creatorship, his guilt is not productive; it is paralysing. When William and Justine are claimed the ‘first hapless victims to [his] unhallowed arts’, Frankenstein is wracked with ‘remorse, horror, and despair’, descending into ‘deep, dark, deathlike solitude’ (83, 87). Where Adam and Eve are united at the repentant destination of their guilt, Frankenstein is isolated by his own. The

¹⁶ Wilma Armstrong, ‘Punishment, Surveillance, and Discipline in *Paradise Lost*’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 32:1 (1992), p.106.

¹⁷ Held, ‘Eve’s “paradise within”’, p.183.

¹⁸ M. A. Goldberg, ‘Moral and Myth in Mrs. Shelley’s “Frankenstein”’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 8:1 (1959), p.30.

'breathless horror and disgust' that prompted Frankenstein to abandon the creature gives way to an emotion impossibly graver, even 'to the extent of his madness'.¹⁹ Shelley highlights that guilt operates on a social plane, as well as moral: as creator, you are, at pains, responsible for the society your creation affects.

Jason Robert observes that, in his guilty withdrawal, Frankenstein is socially 'irresponsible' and, importantly, a 'bad parent' to the creature.²⁰ I hasten to agree. Leslie Tannenbaum says that Frankenstein, 'in his attempt to assume godlike creative powers, becomes a distorted version of Milton's God', and that his relationship to his creation, by comparison, 'is found wanting'.²¹ When we consider that Frankenstein is to the creature as Milton's God is to Adam and Eve, his devolvement of responsibility for the creature's welfare and actions is despicable. God in *Paradise Lost*, watchful yet uninvolved in his creation's sin, provides teaching, consequences, discipline to his charges even when they disappoint him. Though firm, he is even-handed in his parenthood. Frankenstein, on the other hand, deigns to divorce himself from his creation. God is merciful, pedagogical; Frankenstein is scornful, 'fierce' in his detestation and dismissiveness (102). I might suggest this owes to God's inherent omnibenevolence, but Laura Claridge goes further. She posits that 'Frankenstein's brutal disregard of any parental duties' is not because he is unaware of parental responsibility, but because he is selfishly uncaring. Claridge's damning statement goes far in explaining why the creature becomes a 'cursed and hellish monster': Frankenstein is too paralysed by his own guilt to deliver any kind of social or moral prescription to the creature's misguided sin.²²

Yet we must afford Frankenstein credit where it is due. Unlike Adam and Eve, he is immediately convinced of the moral ablation of his transgression; no God is present (or indeed, necessary) to cultivate his guilt. Shelley presents Frankenstein's guilt as self-imposed, an

¹⁹ John Dussinger, 'Kinship and Guilt in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', *Studies in the Novel*, 8:1 (1976), p.47.

²⁰ Jason Robert, 'Rereading *Frankenstein*: What If Victor Frankenstein Had Actually Been Evil?', *The Hastings Center Report*, 48:6 (2018), p.22.

²¹ Leslie Tannenbaum, 'From Filthy Type to Truth: Miltonic Myth in "Frankenstein"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 26 (1977), p.105.

²² Laura Claridge, 'Parent-Child Tensions in "Frankenstein: The Search For Communion"', *Studies in the Novel*, 17:1 (1985), p.20.

instinctive condition. In a narratological sense, this checks out: Frankenstein’s story is predated by Adam and Eve’s cardinal sin and hence, a knowledge of its Miltonic consequences. When we consider this intertextual relationship, Frankenstein’s crime is a strange iteration – or indeed, a botched amalgamation – of the original guilt story in *Paradise Lost*. Frankenstein as creator is the guilty foil to Milton’s righteous God; in his creation of the creature, he personifies Death through Sin, as Satan does in Book II (II.758-760); he shares in the guilt of Adam and Eve for having acted against natural order. It comes to pass that Frankenstein, like his very monster, is the guilty progeny of Milton’s characters. ‘Like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence’, like man, made mortal, ‘he is chained in an eternal hell’ by guilt from all aspects of his person (218). Whether knowingly or subconsciously, Frankenstein makes a monster of himself from guilt, because he believes his crime is of biblical proportions. Tang Soo Ping establishes that Frankenstein’s monstrous guilt, thus contextualised ‘in relation to the fall of man, is to be regarded not so much as a tragedy but as a fitting end to human pride’.²³ Drawing association to the subjects of Milton’s ‘just and righteous’ God (X.643-644), Shelley presents guilt as an inevitable affliction; since there is no God to dole out punishment to Frankenstein, his must be self-imposed.

When the creature returns to ask for a companion, Frankenstein appeals to all but God: he ‘kneels on the grass’, as if to pray, but instead apostrophises the ‘earth’, the ‘Night’, ‘the spirits of the dead’ (209). Frankenstein seems aware that he has offended God in his deathly parody of creation; he knows not to call on God, for he will remain silent. Frankenstein understands that he must navigate the ethical issues of creating a companion alone. The ‘spirits of the dead’ will not judge him for this as God will; Shelley ensures that Frankenstein’s guilt remains godless. When eventually he decides to forswear the making of another monster, Joyce Oates suggests, despite everything, that Frankenstein’s motivations remain self-interested.²⁴ Destroying the creature’s companion is not a moral undertaking in the sense that

²³ Tang Soo Ping, ‘Frankenstein, “Paradise Lost”, and “The Majesty of Goodness”’, *College Literature*, 16:3 (1989), p.259.

²⁴ Joyce Oates, ‘Frankenstein’s Fallen Angel’, *Critical Inquiry*, 10:3 (1984), p.553.

it puts an end to blasphemous humans playing god. It merely absolves Frankenstein of any further guilt. His guilt has, and always will be, man-made: to cease in the act of creation is to cease fertilising his guilt. Frankenstein is far more selfish (and not far enough religious) than to consider the greater morality of creation. I believe it is simply the fear of unintended consequences, after the first creation, that stops him. With this, Shelley entreats that a guilt in fear of the thing you have made, rather than the thing that made you, is far more injurious to man.

It comes to pass, then, that guilt and punishment are inherently linked in *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost*. Guilt comes as a necessary condition of ‘venturing higher than [one’s] lot’ (IX.690) into sin; oftentimes, the emotion’s uncomfortableness is a punishment in itself. When guilt is in the presence of concrete punishment, though, a far more organic sense of redemption is witnessed: the narrative may end more resolutely and resolvedly, for the characters have truly undergone the process of reform. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve’s ‘sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek’ (X.1115) is the natural and correct response to their transgressions, incited only by their guilt and punishment. By Milton, man is put on what is ostensibly a divine naughty step; they must learn, like children, from their guilt. In *Frankenstein*, guilt is equally a punishment for the sinful: rather than being doled out by a higher power, it causes insurmountable internal conflict.²⁵ Both Shelley and Milton employ guilt to vanquish acts of ‘wanton’ self-interest (*Frankenstein*, 136; *PL* IX.517). In both texts, guilt is used as a means of conceptualising obedience to natural order, however hard the characters try to resist it; guilt is a reminder of that which is bigger than oneself. Of course, it can be expunged or expiated by repentance, but it does not guarantee absolution of punishment or natural consequences. Ultimately, Milton and Shelley ensure that guilt leaves a necessary and didactic shadow where once it loomed, to effectively demonstrate that true catharsis must inevitably come at a cost.

²⁵ Josh Bernatchez, ‘Monstrosity, Suffering, Subjectivity, and Sympathetic Community in *Frankenstein* and “The Structure of Torture”’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 36:2 (2009), p.209.

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