



Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*

(1818)

- Graham Allen (University College Cork)

Genre: Gothic & Ghosts, Novel. Country: England.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is today one of the most widely-read and influential of novels. Interpreted in numerous ways by each succeeding generation, the story of Victor Frankenstein's creation of a "monster" and the subsequent power-struggle between creature and creator, has become one of modern society's abiding myths. The numerous theatrical versions of the novel, which began in 1823 with Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption, or The Fate of Frankenstein*, are a powerful testament to the story's popular and mythic qualities, albeit it was not until the 1950s that it began to receive consistent critical attention. Now seen as a myth concerning a fear of the potentially destructive power of modern technology and science, the novel in the later nineteenth century was perceived as a political and social narrative concerning the destructive potential of the conflict between established power and the newly-emergent working class. In the past thirty years, as it has slowly been accepted into the academic literary canon, the novel has been the subject of persuasive feminist and psychoanalytical readings. Above all, the novel has gained its mythic status from adaptations into other media, originally in stage versions, and, in the twentieth century, in the cinema.

The novel that has given rise to this industry of adaptation and critical commentary was born on June 16th 1816 in the Villa Diodati on the shores of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), and those present at the birth where the author, her companion, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord George Byron and his physician and friend Dr Polidori. Byron proposed that each should come up with a ghost story to amuse the group during a spell of wet weather, and Mary, aged a mere 19, came up with the core of the tale which was then converted into a novel over the months to April 1817. During its development it took the impress of works which Percy and Mary were reading at the time, notably John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, George Anson's *A Voyage round the World in the Years 1740-44* (1748), Humphry Davy's *Elements of Chemical Philosophy* (1812) – which describes the decomposition of substances by electrolysis –, William Godwin's first two novels, *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon*, along with his seminal political treatise, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, and Wollstonecraft's *Vindications of the Rights of Woman*. Many other works find intertextual echoes in *Frankenstein*: evidently the discovery of the electrical nature of nervous impulses by Luigi Galvani in 1791 is implied throughout, but other more literary influences include Plutarch's *Lives*, P. B. Shelley, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Byron, Wordsworth, Goldsmith, Dante, Cervantes, Rousseau's *Émile*, Goethe's *Sorrows of the Young Werther* and Volney's *Ruins: A Survey of the Revolutions of Empire*.

In the version as finally published the central narrative about the scientist Victor Frankenstein, citizen of Geneva, who makes a man by sewing together parts of dead bodies and then galvanizing them into life, is approached through a framing story about an explorer called Walton who is bent on a probably-fatal effort to

reach the North Pole. (This part of the story was probably inspired by a mixture of Anson and contemporary efforts to find the north west passage led by Sir John Barrow.) It is conveyed to the reader through four letters written by Walton to his sister Mrs Saville, in the fourth of which Walton describes meeting Frankenstein in the arctic wastes, and how Frankenstein dies after putting into Walton's hands the manuscript of his tale. Frankenstein's tale then follows in 24 chapters (1-7 making volume I, 8-16 making volume II, and the last 7 making volume III). Chapters 1-10 tell of Frankenstein's devotion to his arcane and unholy studies at the university of Ingolstadt, his making of the monster, his mental collapse when he realises what he has done, and how he is recalled to Geneva because one of his younger brothers, William, has been murdered. On his way home he sees the monster rushing past, and it dawns on him that the monster is the murderer, but in the event the family's loyal servant Justine is found to have in her possession a medallion portrait of the boy's mother which was around his neck of the morning of his death, and she is condemned for his murder. In chapter 11 the monster returns, upbraids Frankenstein for his heartless irresponsibility in making and abandoning him, and then tells him (chs 11-16) of the life he has led since he was created. Frankenstein then resumes the narrative from ch. 17 to ch.24, in the middle of which he dies, leaving the remainder to Walton for a closing explanation to his sister and the monster's last words. Technically this structure of embedded narratives is necessary because all are given in the first person – there is no objective authorial position which would serve to stabilize the problematic events – but the pattern can also be seen to have other causes, in different acts of writing and in largely unconscious motivations.

Walton's tale and Frankenstein's tale represent similar over-reachers who are so driven by science that they pursue needless or diabolical objects risking catastrophic effects. Frankenstein, refusing the advice of his father and teachers, goes back to old and forbidden alchemical texts and discovers a way of remaking human life. This hubristic and blasphemous act succeeds in the creation of the monster, from whom Frankenstein recoils in horror and who will later return to demand that Frankenstein make him a female so he can enjoy the pleasures he sees enjoyed by human families. Frankenstein's reluctance, then refusal, sets the monster on a course of revenge. "I will be with you on your wedding-night", he threatens. And indeed, the monster murders his best friend, Henry Clerval, and then does kill his beautiful cousin and wife-to-be, Elizabeth Lavenza, on their nuptial bed.

This central narrative spine encompasses an episode which seems deliberately added to the main narrative to swell it to the three volumes required for lending libraries of the day, and also enables political and social comment. The episode tells how the abandoned monster learned speech and human ways by spying on the De Lacey family which comprises a kindly old father who is blind, and his son Felix and daughter Agatha. The De Laceys live together in poverty and grace in an isolated cottage. The monster discovers that they had once been prominent citizens of Paris but that Safie's father, a Turkish merchant, having been unfairly imprisoned, the family had lost all in their efforts to liberate him, only in turn to be spurned by the Turk once their fortunes had fallen. Safie, his daughter, having a nobler spirit and having fallen in love with Felix, has abandoned Turkey and come to share a life of poverty with her beloved.

The monster begins to talk directly with the old man, who, being blind, does not realise his monstrosity, but one day Felix, Safie and Agatha return and see him. The women faint and Felix chases him away, enforcing the realisation that the monster is destined to live an outcast from humankind; the De Laceys themselves are soon to be evicted from their modest cottage for non-payment of rent, and their cottage burnt to the ground, compounding the image of human heartlessness. The monster, meanwhile, in flight from humankind, happens on a young child who threatens to have him punished by his father, one M. Frankenstein, so the monster murders him in revenge for his sufferings. This child was Victor's brother William, for whom the servant Justine was executed in Volume I.

The monster's tale enables Shelley to observe how people learn to be human, and what happens when a society decides to spurn someone just because their visual appearance (or gender, or political beliefs) do not allow them

to fit in. The narrative also implies that such men as Walton and Frankenstein are driven to their solitary pursuits because they fear women and simple domestic pleasures, albeit the novel closes with some hope for Walton who is converted by reading Frankenstein's tale and decides to abandon his dangerous pursuit and return to his sister. The word "monster" derives from the Latin *monstrum* meaning a warning or portent, and it is clear that Frankenstein's monster intends a warning about excessively rationalistic men, but the monster's cunning, destructive force and sexuality, and the murder of children, friends and wives, convey a sense that very much more is being pointed to by this return of the repressed. It is particularly interesting to feminist and psychoanalytic critics that Elizabeth Lavenza, Frankenstein's cousin, is brought up in the same household as his sister, that the Frankenstein's mother dies from scarlet fever given her by Elizabeth Lavenza, that Elizabeth's hand is given to Victor by his mother on her deathbed, that William carries the portrait of his mother when he dies and this portrait is used to convict Justine; that William and Elizabeth are then killed by the monster, the latter in a scene which prevents nuptial intercourse. The monster appears to be acting as Frankenstein's alter ego or double, and the narrative and its effects invite modern treatment in terms of the uncanny and the incestuous.

Mary Shelley was three months away from her twentieth birthday when she completed her novel; and yet the confidence with which she produced such a unique and intense literary creation is quite staggering, and doubly so when we register that Mary Shelley's monster was to become a modern archetype, a figure that reminds us that the certainties of the Christian epoch (Dante's externalized cosmology of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell) have been replaced by a disturbingly uncertain secular society in which what is legitimate and what "monstrous" is determined by history and social convention (or power) rather than by nature and divine authority. In this sense, Mary Shelley's monster and the novel he inhabits is a significant moment in that movement we nowadays call Romanticism.

Frankenstein as a text has, until recently, overshadowed Mary Shelley's other works. From the moment it was published, *Frankenstein* was destined to turn its creator into "The Author of *Frankenstein*," the nomination by which Mary Shelley published her subsequent works. For scholars and critics wishing to do justice to the full range and extent of Mary Shelley's literary and non-literary output *Frankenstein* stands as something of a hindrance. Rather than encouraging readers to explore Mary Shelley's oeuvre, *Frankenstein's* dominance of the public and indeed the critical perception of her life and work has tended to obscure that oeuvre. It is difficult, in fact, to avoid the conclusion that such a phenomenon is gender based: had a male author at 20 published a text as historically significant as *Frankenstein* it is difficult to imagine that their subsequent work would have been as neglected critically and culturally as Mary Shelley's, until recently, has been. The current move "beyond *Frankenstein*," therefore, should not be understood as a reaction against the novel itself, but rather as a belated attempt to reclaim a major voice within British and European Romanticism.

Frankenstein seems nowadays a stable fixture within the literary canon. A text which, more than perhaps any other imaginable, fosters critical and historical study along with the study of modern cultural mythology, Mary Shelley's most famous novel has never seemed so relevant and so resonant. It is interesting, indeed, now that *Frankenstein* seems to be part of the teaching curriculum to explore the relationships between teaching and Mary Shelley's text. *Frankenstein*, amongst the myriad of meanings which have been excavated from it, is a text which explores the question of education in significant and hugely challenging ways. The monster's gaining of an education by stealth, whilst hidden from the De Lacey family, is a well-known set-piece of the text. However, throughout the novel the question of education, what it might consist of, and, most significantly, where it might be derived from, forms a fundamental structural motif. The frame-narrator, Walton, locked amidst the iceflows, seeks for a "friend" who will instruct him. Frankenstein's whole career as family member and then as isolated scientist hinges on the unstable nature of his education. The monster's request for a companion, a "friend," is, finally, denied by Victor Frankenstein when he contemplates the possibility of a monster left with sole responsibility for the education of a female monster. As Victor thinks through the ethics of creating a female creature, he states :

I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. (Volume III, Chapter 2)

The echo of the creation story, Eve being manufactured after and out of Adam, takes us back to Wollstonecraft's critique of masculine theories of education, in particular those associated with Rousseau's *Émile*. But the fundamental problem posed by Mary Shelley's text may well concern the lack of guarantee in any form of animation, whether it be scientific or simply educational. Who is, after all, in the position to act as teacher, "friend", and thus animator of the mind? How is education, if it is indeed a form of animation (a giving of form to the infant or nascent mind), ever guaranteed in its outcome? Such questions are crucial to the forms of Enlightenment educational theory being articulated in the period within which Mary Shelley wrote her novel. They are crucial questions for both her parents, Godwin in *Political Justice* and *The Enquirer* and Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, along with a host of eminent philosophical and literary writers. In our present cultural and social climate, in which we tend to attribute problems of animation to purely scientific scenarios, *Frankenstein* is a compelling reminder that the problem or question of animation (the creation of, or informing of, a mind) lurks, often silently, beneath all modes of education. It is a novel, that is to say, which can still prompt within us challenging questions concerning our collective cultural responsibility for the education of present and future citizens.

James Whales's first two adaptations, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), provide the iconic image of the monster in the portrayal by Boris Karloff, and it is nowadays difficult to conceive of Mary Shelley's monster without Karloff's lumbering, gigantic presence entering into one's mind. However it should be noted that Mary Shelley's monster, though huge, is also extraordinarily (inhumanly) athletic, a physical attribute referred to many times during the novel:

I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of a man . . . I perceived, as the shape came nearer, (sight tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. (Vol II, Chapter 2)

The novel's cinematic history is now, of course, extraordinarily complex and is worthy of study in its own right. Widely divergent in their distance or proximity to Mary Shelley's original text, the numerous cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* attest to the central and abiding problem posed by the novel – the figure of the monster himself. Alien and yet eminently human in its needs and desires, terrifyingly other and yet worthy of pity, Mary Shelley's "monster" is a figure who demonstrates that monstrosity is a human concept reserved for that which does not fit our cultural and social norms. The monster learns that it is monstrous from the human world into which it enters, and, as Victor Frankenstein sporadically realizes, monstrosity is an idea which emanates from those who would figure themselves in opposition to that concept. Film versions such as the British Hammer House of Horror series, which return the monster to a lumbering, disfigured, inarticulate brute, exemplify a reaction which would refuse or repress such a realization. Versions such as Whales's second version or Kenneth Branagh's variously successful *Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"*, which present the monster as a figure in search of knowledge and companionship, are truer to the spirit of Mary Shelley's text.

The novel was subsequently revised for its appearance in 1831 as the ninth volume of Colburn and Bentley's Standard Novels series (see *The Novels and Selected Writings of Mary Shelley*, 8 Vols., *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, Vol. 1, ed. Nora Crook, London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996) for a collation of both editions, plus the second 1823 edition, for which Godwin made over 120 minor changes. See also Charles E. Robinson, ed. *The Frankenstein Notebooks: A Facsimilie Edition of Mary Shelley's Manuscript Novel, 1816-1817 [with alterations in the hand of Percy Bysshe Shelley] as it survives in draft and fair copy deposited by Lord Abinger in the Bodleian Library, Oxford [Dep.c. 477/1 and Dep.c.534/1-2]*, 2 Vols., New York and London: Garland Pubs., 1996). There has been a tendency in recent years to argue that the earlier version displays a political and social radicalism tempered and even repressed in the latter version. Such arguments, intentionally or not, tend to return us to the traditional reception of Mary Shelley as an author interesting only during the lifetime of her more illustrious male companions. More adequate attempts to deal with the variations between the versions tend to look at Mary Shelley's work as a coherent and intellectually independent endeavour and thus serve to challenge received ideas about her later conservatism, after the deaths of P. B. Shelley and Byron. Nora Crook, for example, argues "for parity of esteem between the two texts." She adds: "They differ, I believe, less than has been contended, and very little as regards ideology" (Nora Crook, "In Defence of the 1831 *Frankenstein*," *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From "Frankenstein" to "Falkner"*, ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra, London: Macmillan, 2000: 3-21).

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