FRANKENSTEIN
THE GOTHIC
CLASSIC

FRANKENSTEIN
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MARY SHELLEY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DR ANNE DELONG

SERIES EDITOR TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

FRANKENSTEIN

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The Gothic Classic

MARY W. SHELLEY

With an Introduction by
Dr Anne Delong

Series Editor
Tom Butler Bowdon

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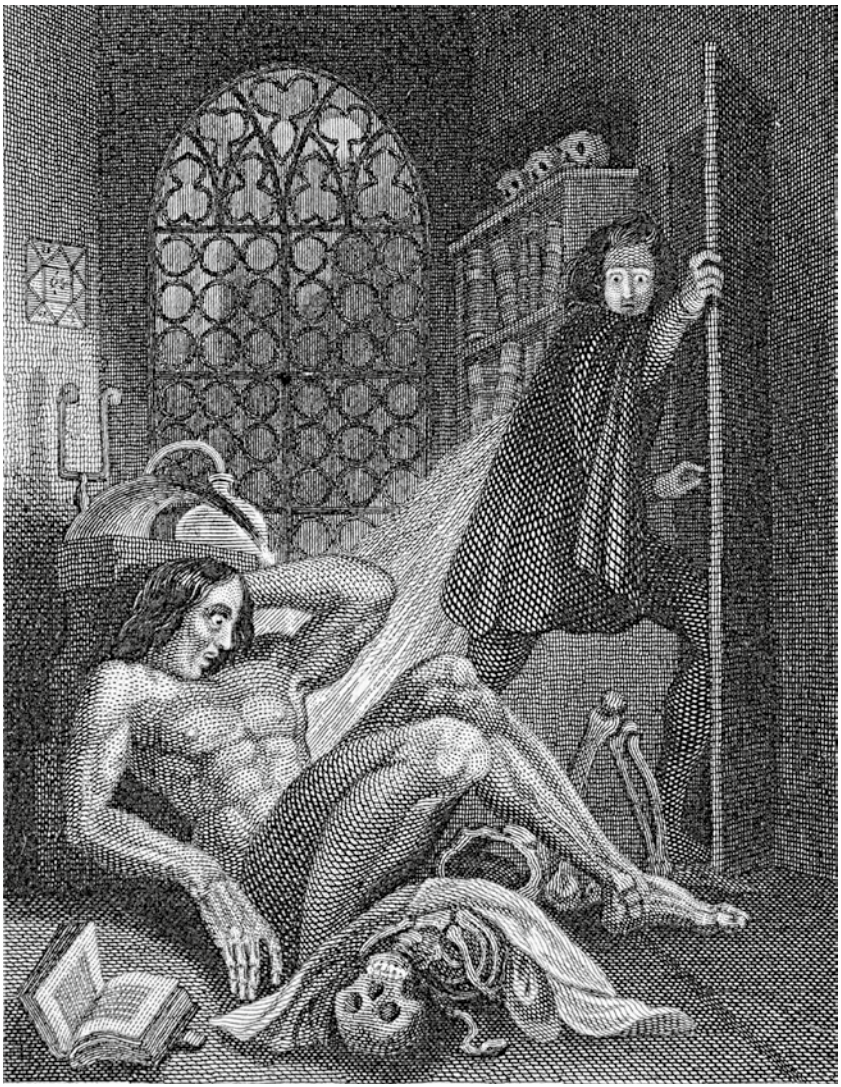
FRANKENSTEIN:
OR,
THE MODERN PROMETHEUS
BY MARY W. SHELLEY
1831



Victor Frankenstein's disgust at his creation. Frontispiece illustration (steel engraved) by Theodor von Holst, 1831 edition (Colburn and Bentley, London) Theodor von Holst/Tate Britain/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain

Contents

Introduction by Dr Anne DeLong	ix
FRANKENSTEIN: OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS	xxvii
Introduction by Mary Shelley, 1831 edition	xxix
Preface by Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818	xxxix
Letters I–IV	xliii
Chapter I	1
Chapter II	9
Chapter III	19
Chapter IV	29
Chapter V	39
Chapter VI	49
Chapter VII	59
Chapter VIII	73
Chapter IX	85
Chapter X	95
Chapter XI	105
Chapter XII	117
Chapter XIII	127
Chapter XIV	135
Chapter XV	143
Chapter XVI	155

Contents

Chapter XVII 167

Chapter XVIII 175

Chapter XIX 187

Chapter XX 197

Chapter XXI 209

Chapter XXII 223

Chapter XXIII 237

Chapter XXIV 247

INTRODUCTION

by Dr Anne DeLong

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is unique in the history of literature, for several reasons.

It has a celebrated origin story, involving two other literary greats, Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. It has an innovative and complicated literary structure that takes it far beyond a traditional ghost or horror story. And perhaps most importantly, it created two enduring anti-hero archetypes: the mad scientist and the sympathetic monster.

Recognised by many literary critics as the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein* combines an investigation of the limits and ethics of scientific progress with unforgettable characters. Yet Shelley's novel transcends its time and place, gaining new relevance in an age of artificial intelligence and robotics. It remains a cautionary tale of the dangers of human ambition.

In this Introduction I will look at the novel's origins and structure, Shelley's influences including her famous parents, and some of the historical, literary, and political contexts in which *Frankenstein* can be appreciated and understood.

FRANKENSTEIN: ORIGIN STORY

One of the most notable and famous aspects of *Frankenstein* is how it came to be written.

In her Introduction to the 1831 edition, Shelley alludes to the "wet, ungenial summer" of 1816 and the visits to Byron at the Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva. It was on one of these gloomy days that Byron made his now-famous suggestion to the party, which included Mary Shelley's poet husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and Byron's physician John Polidori, that "We will each write a ghost story".

In response, Polidori produced a story fragment called "The Vampyr", which was ostensibly modelled on his overbearing client Byron. It would provide Bram Stoker with inspiration for his novel *Dracula*. The short story that Mary produced for the contest would later form the fifth chapter of her novel, the horrific moment when Victor Frankenstein "beh[o]ld[s] the accomplishment of his toils". In a liminal state between dreaming and waking, Mary imagined the first encounter between creator and creature as a horrific confrontation with the unintended consequences of Victor's excessive ambition.

Shelley's Introduction also references the "many and long conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which [she] was a devout but nearly silent listener", including talk of the galvanic experiments of Erasmus Darwin. Shelley herself was well acquainted with the latest scientific innovations of the day, having attended lectures by chemist Humphrey Davy on the feasibility of animating matter by means of electricity. Shelley's self-deprecating tone in her Introduction appears to be an appeasement to her male companions and the patriarchal values of the day, but her scientific knowledge was no less than theirs.

Although the product of a ghost story contest, *Frankenstein* does not seem at first glance to fit neatly into the ghost story genre. As a reanimation of death, Victor Frankenstein's creature functions as a revenant returned from the grave — he is both a haunting reminder of the consequences of hubris and a haunted

fugitive. Like the best ghost stories, *Frankenstein's* themes include revenge, justice, and guilt. Shelley's novel also honours the ghost story genre in giving voice to the voiceless, allowing her monster ghost the opportunity to tell his own story.

FRANKENSTEIN: STRUCTURE AND FRAME

Frankenstein deploys an intricate framing structure to contain and develop the storyline. The novel begins and ends with a series of letters from explorer Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Saville. In these, Walton relates his encounter with the stranded refugee Victor Frankenstein, who slowly reveals his story of misguided ambition and divine retribution. Like Frankenstein, Walton is a revolutionary dreamer, a seeker of fame through discovery, and an ambitious quester who is willing to risk the safety of others to pursue his impossible dreams.

Victor Frankenstein presents his story as a cautionary tale, a warning to Walton and others like him to curb their subversive attempts to test the limits of human ability. Beginning with a description of his idyllic childhood, Victor recounts his studies at university and their culmination in his project to reanimate dead matter. He tells of the unfortunate reaction to his success and his abandonment of the being he created. Victor's parental negligence leads to his creature's destructive rampage, as he wreaks havoc upon Victor's life and loved ones.

Victor Frankenstein's story frames the novel's innermost narrative, the tale of his monster's creation and development, related in the creature's own words in Chapters XI-XVI. The creature learns of his origins by reading Victor's journal and develops his own philosophy, partially through reading the works of Milton, Plutarch and Goethe. Craving human companionship, the creature's efforts at connection are continuously spurned, a rejection that motivates his murderous campaign of revenge against the creator who deserted him, Victor Frankenstein. While the reader cannot help but sympathise with the monster's lonely plight, we recoil at his

confession of crimes, including not only the murder of innocents but also the framing of the guiltless Justine.

Shelley thus created an anti-hero who is simultaneously sympathetic and horrific, allowing readers a glimpse into the horror of trauma that manifests further devastation on others. In doing so, she produces a psychological portrait that is surprisingly modern.

MARY SHELLEY: BIOGRAPHICAL AND LITERARY INFLUENCES

In her Introduction to the revised 1831 edition, Shelley attempts to answer a question that she was often asked: "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" Shelley's attempts to answer this question include references to her own literary legacy, her childhood influences, her adult circumstances and, most extensively, to the origin story of the novel at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816.

Born Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin on 30 August, 1797, the woman who would write *Frankenstein* believed herself from a young age to be destined for literary greatness. Both parents were famous for their intellectual genius, literary output and radical philosophies. Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was both celebrated and vilified as a proto-feminist and supporter of revolutionary politics. In addition to her political treatises, *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft also authored numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, including two novels and a travelogue, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796).

Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, was also an intellectual radical, whose best-known works include the nonfiction polemic *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and the novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). In keeping with their subversive philosophies, Godwin and Wollstonecraft maintained separate households throughout their unconventional

marriage. The birth of their child Mary ultimately resulted in the death of Wollstonecraft, who expired eleven days after her daughter's birth from septicaemia, the result of a postpartum infection. Thus young Mary inherited the trauma of her mother's death along with a powerful and somewhat daunting literary legacy.

In 1798 William Godwin made the misguided decision to publish his late wife's autobiography, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hoping to reinforce her posthumous literary reputation, the work instead tarnished it, depicting a woman whose behaviours scandalised the society of the time. While this decision added to young Mary's troublesome legacy, it was Godwin's remarriage in 1801 to Mary Jane Clairmont that fundamentally altered Mary's familial dynamics and upbringing. Clairmont brought her own two children, Charles and Claire, into the Godwin household. Young Mary's blended family also included a half-sister, Fanny Imlay, the illegitimate daughter of her mother's affair with the American ambassador to France and businessman Gilbert Imlay.

In addition to the literary legacy bequeathed by her parents, young Mary Godwin benefitted from the intellectual and artistic influence of her father's social circle, which included Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. At age seven, Mary defied her stepmother's authority to stay up past her bedtime during one of Coleridge's visits. She hid behind the couch as the great poet recited his new poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge was a superb performer, and the poem made a huge impression on Mary. References to the *Ancient Mariner* abound in *Frankenstein*, including the power of mesmeric storytellers, the atmospheric awe of sublime nature, and the channelling of traumatic experiences into cautionary tales.

Mary's tumultuous relationship with her difficult stepmother heavily impacted her early years, as Clairmont tended to favor her own children over her stepdaughter. This tension resulted in Godwin sending his daughter away for a time. During her teenage years, Mary spent several months in relatively remote Dundee, Scotland, staying with the family of her father's friend and fellow radical William Baxter.

She revisits Scotland in her novel when Victor Frankenstein retreats to the islands of Orkney to resume his horrendous experiments.

Upon her return to London in 1814, the teenage Mary began an affair with the married Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. A devotee of her father's political radicalism, P.B. Shelley was a frequent visitor to the Godwin household. He was also a fan of Mary Wollstonecraft's subversive ideas, and some of his early trysts with her daughter reputedly took place on Wollstonecraft's grave at St Pancras Old Church in London. Continuing the family legacy of unconventional relationships, when Mary and Percy ran off to the European continent, Mary's stepsister Claire accompanied them, hoping to rekindle an illicit romance with another married Romantic poet, George Gordon - better known as Lord Byron.

Mary Shelley. Miniature by Reginald Easton (1807–93), Bodleian Library, Oxford. Reginald Easton / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

WEIRD SCIENCE

In its examination of contemporary scientific tropes, *Frankenstein* explores both medieval alchemy and nineteenth-century natural philosophy. While Victor Frankenstein's earliest influences, the quasi-magical works of Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus, are dismissed as outdated by both his father and his professors, these sources presumably provide the supernatural element necessary for the animation of Victor's creation. They contain formulas and incantations for raising devils and other forms of necromancy, employing a medieval worldview of mysticism debunked by the science of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment.

The text also engages with cutting-edge nineteenth-century science in Victor's experimentation with galvanism. Even his method of robbing graves and delving into charnel houses accurately portrays the efforts of Victorian-era medical students who were forced to supply their own materials for dissection. Shelley's novel also wrestles with the nineteenth-century materialism vs. vitalism debate. While scientific materialists like William Lawrence, physician and friend to the Shelleys, believed that life was governed purely by biological processes, vitalists such as John Abernethy maintained that life was engendered by a divine spark, an enigmatic process that might be caused by electrical current.

Shelley's novel also engages deeply with the ethics of science and the moral questions concerning the limits of human ambition. The novel's subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, implies a comparison between the titular scientist Frankenstein and the mythical character who bestowed the gift of fire upon humankind. If Victor Frankenstein is a modern Prometheus, then his attempts to improve the human race go horribly wrong. Just as Prometheus is perpetually punished by the gods, Frankenstein agonizes over the results of his gift, torturing himself with guilt and remorse.

FRANKENSTEIN AS BIRTH AND PARENTING MYTH

During the time that she was writing *Frankenstein*, Shelley was beset by various traumas concerning birth and death in her personal life. She suffered multiple miscarriages and the tragic death of her first child, Clara. She writes in a 6 March, 1815, journal entry: "Dream that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived—I awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day—not in good spirits."*

Late in 1816 she learned of the tragic suicides of her half-sister Fanny Imlay and Percy Shelley's first wife, Harriet Westbrook. This unfortunate event nevertheless allowed Percy and Mary to legalize their relationship in marriage. Percy was unsuccessful in his attempts to gain custody of the two children from his first marriage. He and Mary had one child who survived into adulthood and would inherit his grandfather's title to become Sir Percy Florence Shelley. Percy Shelley himself tragically drowned in a sailing accident of the coast of Italy in 1822, leaving Mary devastated.

Given these personal hardships and her struggles with motherhood, it is no surprise that in *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley investigates not only the science of birth and death but also the emotional heartache of parenthood. In her initial conception of the novel, through her protagonist Victor she imagines herself as the failed creator of a monstrous aberration. But as a single mother in the early nineteenth century, the mistress of a married man, and the daughter of a radical advocate for women's rights, she may have also seen *herself* as monstrous. Like Victor's creature, Shelley was nameless and isolated, shunned even by her father, whose own marriage history was less than conventional. Shelley thus transfers her feelings of being unfairly judged and misunderstood to the

*Shelley, Mary, *The Journals of Mary Shelley,* edited by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

creature, channelling his subject position in the novel's narrative. Like the young Mary Godwin, Frankenstein's creature learns and develops through reading classic literature, including John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Plutarch's *Lives* and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Like Mary Godwin, the creature craves a compassionate, loving family that he can only glimpse from the outside.

Shelley channels the voice of the outcast monster to narrate Chapters XI through XVI, the story of the creature's development and education. Several parallels may be drawn between his experience and the development of the human race. He begins by registering the sensations of light and darkness and of hunger and thirst. He first nourishes himself by gathering berries, later moving on to meat after discovering a fire and some cooked leftover animal remains. This discovery of fire represents a pivotal point in the creature's development. Although the novel's subtitle suggests that Frankenstein is "The Modern Prometheus", it is the monster who is Promethean by discovering fire on his own. The creature initially presents himself as sympathetic, intellectually curious and deserving of companionship, but the continuous rejections by humans due to his monstrous appearance eventually drive him to feelings of rage and revenge. His outer monstrosity infects his inner character, as he goes on to murder and frame the innocent members of Victor's intimate circle in order to extract revenge upon his negligent parent.

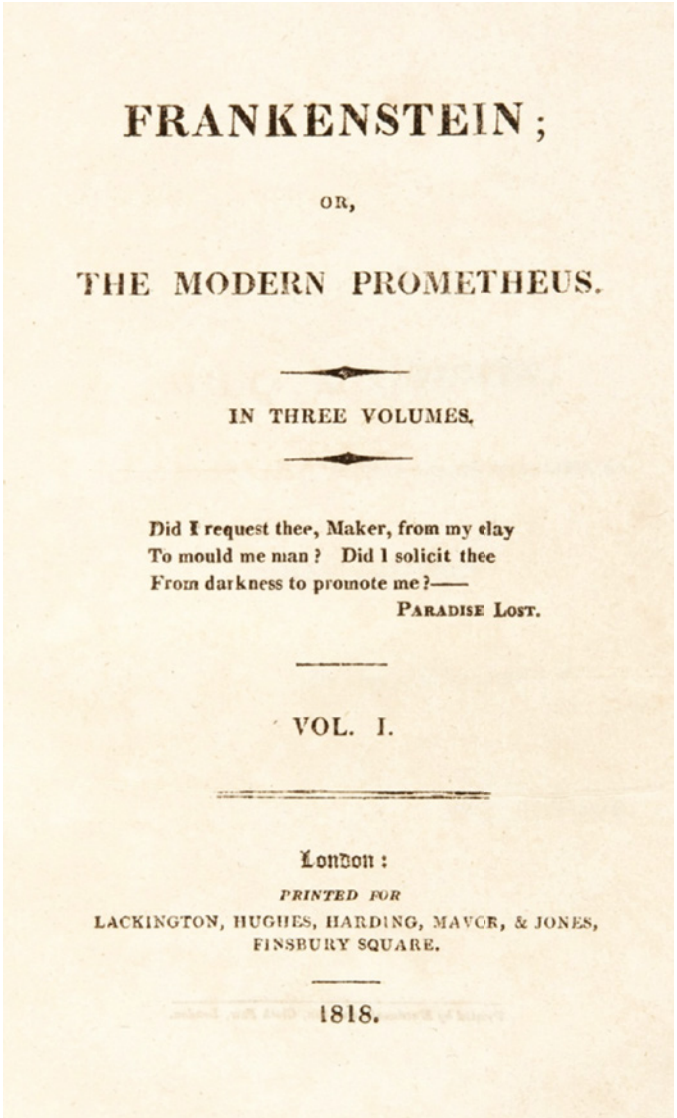
Some literary critics have suggested that Percy Shelley may have served as a model for Victor Frankenstein, given his radical beliefs and obsessive artistic ambitions. P. B. Shelley's compulsive wanderlust and inability to settle in one location may have been at least partly responsible for the deaths of his young children, who were consistently subjected to the risks of nineteenth-century travel and changing lodgings. Percy's ongoing financial difficulties, frequent infidelities and mental health challenges certainly contributed to Mary's anxieties about childrearing during this period. Could parallels be drawn between P. B. Shelley's parental

failings and Victor Frankenstein's? While Victor succeeds at creating a being, he fails at parenting it. His negligence in nurturing his creature stands in stark contrast to the loving home and family of Victor's own childhood. Unlike his own affectionate and caring father, Victor Frankenstein is a "deadbeat dad" who flees from his parental responsibilities.

DOUBLES AND DOPPELGANGERS

Frankenstein abounds in doubles and doppelgangers: characters who mirror and serve as foils for each other. Dr. Victor Frankenstein and his unnamed creation switch roles throughout the text, as the doctor ultimately pursues the fiend who had previously tormented him. Henry Clerval serves as a foil to his misguided friend Victor as an ambitious intellectual who stops short of attempting to imitate divine providence. Explorer Robert Walton shares Victor's daring ambition, but decides not to risk the lives of his crew on a dangerous mission, based on Victor's cautionary tale.

There are also correspondences among the novel's female characters. Victor's mother, Caroline Beaufort, is rescued from indigent circumstances through her marriage to Victor's father, and this couple will later take in the orphaned Elizabeth Lavenza. This trope of the rescued bride is repeated in the story of the DeLacey family, who incorporate the refugee Safie into their family as Felix's bride. Following Victor's flight from the traumatic witnessing of his creation, he imagines he encounters a beautiful, healthy Elizabeth, only to have her turn into his dead mother while in his embrace. The hapless servant Justine Moritz greatly admires Caroline Frankenstein and even imitates her style and mannerisms. But perhaps the most horrific correspondence lies in the mirroring of Victor's destruction of the partially created bride of the creature and the monster's murder of Elizabeth in her marriage bed on her wedding night.



FRANKENSTEIN;

OR,

THE MODERN PROMETHEUS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?——
PARADISE LOST.

VOL. I.

London:
PRINTED FOR
LACKINGTON, HUGHES, HARDING, MAVOR, & JONES,
FINSBURY SQUARE.

1818.

Title page, 1818 edition.

FRANKENSTEIN AND *PARADISE LOST*

John Milton's seventeenth-century epic poem *Paradise Lost* recounts the Genesis story of man's creation, fall and ejection from the biblical Garden of Eden. Shelley draws several parallels between Milton's plot and characters and her own, beginning with the title page quote from Milton's Book X:

> *Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay*
> *To mould me man? Did I solicit thee*
> *From darkness to promote me?*
> *(Paradise Lost,* 743–745)

Adam's inquiry voices an essential human dilemma regarding creation: the idea that no one asks to be born. Frankenstein's creature certainly has no say in his own creation. These lines and other references to *Paradise Lost* draw parallels between Victor Frankenstein and God, and between his creature and the first man Adam. The creature's fall into the sin of murderous rage corresponds to Adam and Eve's fall into knowledge of sexuality.

Victor and his creature also acknowledge a correspondence with Satan, the villain of Milton's epic. As Victor contemplates his quest for revenge, he reflects: "like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell" (Ch. XXIV). Victor's usurpation of the prerogative of creation is portrayed as a rebellion against God, just as Satan's revolt challenged divine authority. Frankenstein's creature also compares himself to Satan when he recounts the tale of his own corruption. After first comparing himself to Adam, the creature continues: "Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me" (Ch. XV). When the creature declares that, "Evil thenceforth became [his] good" (Ch. XXIV), he is echoing the words of Milton's Satan in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*: "Evil,

be thou my good". Like Milton's Satan, Frankenstein's creature carries his Hell within him, internalizing the monstrosity that others see in him.

FRANKENSTEIN AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Frankenstein is set in the 1790s, contemporaneous with the events following the French Revolution, which began with the storming of the Bastille prison in 1789. While the novel does not mention these circumstances directly, parallels have been drawn between Shelley's tale of revolutionary achievements and their sometimes dire consequences.

The creature's murderous rage has been compared to that of the French mobs who abolished the monarchy through regicide. The resulting power vacuum was quickly filled by an even more tyrannical regime: the Reign of Terror of Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre. Just as Victor Frankenstein's rebellion against the divine and natural authority of human creation was succeeded by his monster's reign of terror, the progressive ideals that defined the French Revolution gave way to the violence of the guillotine and the murder of innocents. In this sense Shelley's novel can be read as a comment on the limits of Romantic idealism and revolutionary politics. While Shelley remained politically progressive throughout her life, extolling liberal Enlightenment philosophies in her literary works, she was also keenly aware of the perils of violent reactionary backlash to radical ideas and acts.

FRANKENSTEIN IN POPULAR CULTURE

It is a supreme irony that in popular culture the name "Frankenstein" has come to be identified with the monster, not with his creator. In the novel the creature remains unnamed and unclaimed by the scientist who fathered him. Victor variously refers to his creation as "wretch," "monster," "daemon," "creature," "spectre," "fiend,"

"devil," "insect," and "being." Victor's failure to give his son a name and identity represents just one aspect of his negligent parenting.

There is also a great discrepancy between the creature's physical appearance and abilities in the novel compared to more popular, recent renditions. Shelley's creature is portrayed as monstrous in appearance, being larger than the average human and retaining a look of death in his watery eyes, shriveled complexion and straight black lips. But unlike the clumsy, inarticulate, zombie-like incarnation of the Frankenstein monster in screen and stage adaptations, the creature of Shelley's novel displays superhuman powers of speed and agility. Moreover, the creature's own portion of the narrative presents an articulate, thoughtful, intellectual being with the ability to philosophise and analyse both his individual plight and that of the human species from which he is ostracised. In Shelley's creature can be seen the origins of the anti-hero, the sympathetic villain who provides compelling motivations for his crimes. The second enduring archetype she creates (in Dr. Frankenstein) is that of the mad scientist, the obsessive genius whose superhuman ambitions lead to disaster. He knows not what he has unleashed on the world.

Shelley's novel also anticipates the science fiction genre. Beginning with realistic scientific hypotheses that incorporate the most advanced experimental techniques of the day, Shelley imagines both their implementation and the potentially drastic consequences that would ensue. Her depiction of galvanism as life-inducing anticipates modern defibrillation as well as electrotherapy.

MARY SHELLEY'S OTHER WORKS

Frankenstein may be Mary Shelley's greatest legacy, but her output in the remainder of her life was impressive. It encompassed historical romance, apocryphal science fiction, and biography. In addition to her novels *Valperga: Or, the Life and Adventures of Castrucchio, Prince of Lucca* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck, A Romance* (1830), *Lodore* (1835),

Falkner, A Novel (1837), and *Mathilda* (published posthumously in 1959), Shelley authored travel literature, short stories, numerous essays and reviews. She edited and published a collection of her husband's poetry, *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1824) and wrote *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842 and 1843* based on her European travel with her son Percy Florence.

Less known and appreciated is the major contribution Shelley made to the three-volume *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain and Portugal* (1835–37), in which she provides incisive biographies of Boccaccio, Petrarch, Machiavelli, and Lorenzo de Medici, among others. Shelley also contributed biographies of Pascal, Montaigne, Voltaire, Madame Roland and Madame de Staël for *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France* (1838–39). She was paid well for these commissions, but she believed in their value. They echoed her father's belief that historical biography was an important teaching tool.

1818 vs. 1831 *FRANKENSTEIN*

The text in this edition is of Mary's Shelley 1831 third edition of *Frankenstein*, including the Introduction discussed above. The 1831 text is considered truer to Shelley's original intent since it removes some of the influence of Percy Shelley seen in the 1818 edition, which he heavily edited. Mary Shelley's 1831 revision is also more accessible for the modern reader, as it simplifies the language of the original in a way that is more engaging and less densely verbose. Thematically, Shelley's 1831 revisions place a greater importance on the role of fate, thus partially exculpating Victor for both his dangerous ambitions and his negligent lack of reaction to his own folly. The blame shifts to the creature, who is portrayed more sympathetically in the 1818 edition.

Another significant revision made by Mary Shelley for the 1831 edition involves altering the relationship between Victor and

Elizabeth, who in 1818 are depicted as cousins. While they call each other "Cousin" in their letters in the third edition, Shelley adds a back story for Elizabeth that involves her adoption as a ward of the Frankensteins rather than a blood relation. Additionally, Shelley reduces the roles of both Elizabeth and Justine, who employ greater voice and agency in the 1818 first edition. Shelley may have been influenced to temper the novel's more radical ideologies to comply with a more conservative social climate, possibly to appease her father-in-law in order to secure her son Percy's inheritance.

While the 1818 edition displays the more direct influence of revolutionary ideals, the 1831 edition incorporates a more mature perspective on the need to moderate radical impulses through reason, compassion and community. The earlier edition indicts Victor's misguided ambition more directly. The later acknowledges the helplessness of humans to defy the larger concepts of fate, divinity and their individual circumstances.

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ABOUT ANNE DELONG

Anne DeLong is Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, and has a PhD from Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Her research interests include nineteenth-century British literature, the Gothic and women writers. She is currently completing a book project on ghost stories by Victorian women writers. Her other books include *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: The Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity* (2012), *Classic Horror: A Historical Exploration of Literature* (2018), and *The Victorian World: A Historical Exploration of Literature* (2018). She is managing editor of *The Journal of Dracula Studies*.

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