FRANKENSTEIN

MARY SHELLEY

Edited by J. Paul Hunter

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FRANKENSTEIN

THE 1818 TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM
Second Edition

Edited by

J. PAUL HUNTER
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, EMERITUS

Contents

Criticism

The Editor

J. PAUL HUNTER is Barbara E. and Richard J. Franke Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in* Robinson Crusoe; *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance*; and *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction.* He is author of the first nine editions of *The Norton Introduction to Poetry* and the long-time co-editor of *The Norton Introduction to Literature* and *New Worlds of Literature.*

Illustrations

Introduction

I

It is almost two hundred years since *Frankenstein* was first published, and it has now become a standard text in the literary canon, one of the world's most popular, widely read, and celebrated novels. It is also one of the most thoroughly studied and analyzed texts, making it ideal for the college or university classroom in which critical reading, cultural analysis, or literary history are at stake. Its history as a text is, however, more complicated than most, in part because its central narrative of creative overreaching and bitter disillusionment in a sense outgrew the novel itself and became a kind of independent trope or "myth" that invaded other art forms—plays, cartoons, advertisements, comic books, conversations, films. Frankenstein (the name) became a kind of all-purpose watchword for creativity gone wrong and monstrosity gone wild. Just about everyone, even people who do not read at all, knows the basic plot situation and its grotesque outcome: an ambitious and talented young scientist seeks and finds the secret of life itself, and he creates from assorted excavated body parts a giant adult being who turns out to be an ugly and savage (although sensitive) monster. And it is perhaps significant that, as often as not, casual observers confuse the creator with the created: in the novel, the scientist is named Frankenstein and his monster is nameless, but in popular lore the creature often takes on the name of the creator, as if there were no differences in the monstrosity of outcomes. In one sense, then, the story of *Frankenstein* now transcends the novel it came from —but only because its origins in the novel itself are so richly suggestive and evocative of larger issues and so resonant about the ambition and fallings-

short of the human condition. *Frankenstein* is, in one way of putting it, larger than itself, a text that prompts not just close reading but the pursuit of extended intellectual and cultural implication.

How this novel (and this story) came to be is a complex tale in itself, and it can be very briefly or quite lengthily told: there are many subtleties and ambiguities in the process of its creation. The brief version, incomplete and imperfect but suggestive of both the popular, potboiler appeal and the larger seriousness of major scientific, social, literary, and philosophical issues, involves the occasion and moment of the novel's origin. According to its author and to anecdotes from her companions at the time of initial conception, (see pp. 165–70) it sprang from a proposal to engage in a story-writing contest. The situation was this. The author—later to be known as Mary Shelley but then just eighteen years old, already the mother of two children (one of whom had died in infancy), unmarried and still known by her maiden name, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin—was traveling in the Swiss alps. Her companions were her lover and soon-to-be husband (the already celebrated poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was still married to someone else), her infant son William, and her troubled and impulsive stepsister, Claire Clairmont. In the late spring of 1816, they settled into a modest house in the mountains near Geneva—and also near the villa where an even more famous (though just as controversial) poet, Lord Byron, had settled more luxuriously with his personal physician and companion, Dr. John William Polidori. The two groups quickly merged and for weeks spent nearly all their waking hours together, often sailing on Lake Geneva (see map, p. 2) by day, and reading and conversing together in the evenings and on days when the weather was unsettled. And it was often unsettled that summer, the coldest and most consistently stormy European summer on record. Later, when annual charts could be compared, 1816 became famous as "the year without a summer." Those conversations were apparently animated and often informed by wide and adventurous reading—of English and ancient classics, of scientific discovery and speculation, of British and European social politics. Byron and Percy Shelley were the acknowledged leaders in the conversations; they were both bold in their ideas and manner, and they were newly friends and getting to know each other's interests and range. Mary—younger, rather quiet, and natively less assertive and argumentative—could nevertheless hold her own on most topics: she was a voracious and retentive

reader. The conversations seem to have ranged widely, often guided by individual reading and the kinds of popular topics taken up in current periodicals. We don't know in detail what they talked about day by day; but there are indications that they may have debated the nature and origins of life itself and perhaps discussed the myth of Prometheus in its several forms— years before Percy would interpret it lengthily in *Prometheus Unbound* and some while before it left its imprint as subtitle and suggestive allusion on Mary's first significant work.

On some of those inclement nights, they read German ghost stories. One night in late May or early June, someone (perhaps Byron) suggested that they engage in a ghost-story-writing contest—in competition with the stories they were reading and with each other. The rules were loose, but the stories were to involve the supernatural in some way. As a contest, it wasn't much of a success. Percy apparently lost interest quickly and Byron not long after, though a fragment of what he wrote became attached later to one of his poems, *Mazeppa*. Polidori seems to have conceived at first a strange Gothic tale that Mary found ludicrous, though his own accounts differ from Mary's (see p. 169 [Polidori] and pp. 165–69 [Mary]), but then, characteristically, he piggybacked on a Byron idea and went on to publish a vampire story under Byron's name. Claire Claremont seems never even to have begun her story. The only significant result was *Frankenstein*, published nineteen months later anonymously, but with broad hints that it might be by Percy Shelley or Byron. Early reviewers *assumed* that it was written by a man.

Besides the competition, conversation, and human stimulation of that summer of origins, there is also a set of creative issues involving place, setting, and tone, a question of the influence of surroundings, location, visual spectacle, and atmosphere. Mary seems to have been acutely responsive to visual stimuli and especially to the influence of scenery, place-sensitivity, climate, nature's moods, and the breathtaking vistas of remote natural scenery that find their way into the brooding landscapes and Gothic tones the novel pursues and projects in its Scots and Arctic scenes as well as its more dominant continental ones. To be sure, Mary meticulously casts these actual settings in historical terms—she is very careful, for example, to project Victor Frankenstein's scientific training at Ingolstadt back into the eighteenth century, repeatedly dating letters "17—" so as to place the action of the novel at a time when that university not only still existed but operated as one of the

major European symbols of radical experimental science. (The university was in fact closed by the authorities in 1800 because of its associations with the new science and related radical ideas.) But the larger question of mood and spectacle has less to do with probability and representation than with projecting a sense of wonder and sometimes of impending doom. We now know, thanks to climate scientists of the early twentieth century, what the assembled party shivering in Switzerland could not have then even wildly suspected—that the cold and gloomy summer of 1816 was part of a global phenomenon, the spreading of a cloud of volcanic ash over much of Europe and North America from a volcanic eruption in Indonesia half a year earlier —a phenomenon that meant that significant parts of the earth were deprived of sunshine for very long periods, so that the spectacular, sublime craggy beauties of the lightning-illuminated Alps mixed with invasive mountain gloom and mood-altering spells of hazy light and uncertain perception. Mary chose well the wild and untamed mid-European setting for her tale of discovery and uncertainty, and it was one of those strokes of creative fortune that the Romantic taste for the picturesque, the sublime, the striking, and the haunting led not only to recognizable actual settings but also to projected imaginations in remote, exotic, unexplored northern climes still elusive to all but the most daring explorers. No wonder the nearby Sea of Ice (see the cover reproduction of an 1823–24 painting and Percy Shelley's description on p. 299) became a kind of analogical "source" for the scenes of northern exploration that the narrator Walton experiences at the start and end of the novel.

II

Behind the immediate occasion and stimulation of the circumstances and setting of *Frankenstein*'s origins are many cumulative situations and experiences of Mary's earlier life. Two sets of influences in particular can be isolated as having a notable impact on what and how she wrote. One involves the intensity, complexity, and volatility of family relationships in Mary's own life; the other involves her ambitious, adventurous, and voracious reading. The first suggests much about the human issues and interactions that preoccupy the themes of her novel; the second helps us define and isolate some of the ideas and concepts behind the themes of the novel—themes that

include (among others) creativity, ambition, responsibility, duty, family, friendship, authority, education, and social integrity.

Mary had been writing stories and poems since she was a little girl, very much encouraged in her reading and writing by her famous father. Both her father and mother were not only published, popular authors but celebrated controversialists with disciples of their own; both wrote novels (among other things) but were best known for their radical politics and libertine social views, especially on love and marriage. The mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had been reared in a repressive and abusive family where girls hardly mattered, and she became an articulate and outspoken proto-feminist whose *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) were both praised and vilified, as was her novel *Mary* (1790). The father, William Godwin, who had grown up in a conservative and devout dissenting household, also rebelled against his upbringing and became a leading radical political theorist, fiery in his rhetoric and widely consulted and deeply involved in arguments in the aftermath of the French Revolution. His *Enquiry Concerning political Justice* (1793) was a revolutionary bible for some and an incendiary provocation for others, and his novel, *Caleb Williams* (1794), was a kind of fictionalized version of his philosophy. Godwin and Wollstonecraft were drawn together—she in her late 30s, he just over 40—by their common views and very quickly became lovers after meeting in the winter of 1796–97; the future author of *Frankenstein* was conceived shortly thereafter, and before she was born they married, much to the consternation of some of their friends who felt they had compromised their critique of the oppressiveness of legal institutions such as marriage. But the marriage was short-lived, and the infant Mary was never to get to know her mother: Mary Wollstonecraft died of childbirth complications just eleven days after Mary was born.

Godwin was a supportive father and genuinely encouraged Mary's independence and creativity, but he was feckless in his own emotional and financial affairs—seemingly always out of money and in serious debt, and pretty much helpless in sorting out personal relationships. Not long after the death of Mary Wollstonecraft he married again and took into his household, with his new wife, her two illegitimate children, including a three-year-old daughter, Claire Claremont (who eighteen years later was part of the ghost-story contest in Switzerland). And there was yet another "family" member,

Fanny Imlay, Mary Wollstonecraft's illegitimate daughter from a previous relationship, who had been taken into the household when Godwin and Wollstonecraft married. Still further, in 1803 when Mary was nearly six, an addition of the new Godwin union was born, a new half brother for Mary, William Godwin Jr. So "family" here was a kind of loose and uncertain unit. The new Mrs. Godwin was crude and unpredictable and offered nothing of the intellectual stimulus of her brief predecessor. Young Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (she who was to become Mary Shelley) had ideas, ideals, and aspirations to follow rather than human role models, and her childhood had more clear intellectual directions than emotional ones. If there was a life lesson to be learned from Mary's growing-up years, it was about flexibility and pragmatic responses to circumstances rather than stability and personal security.

And the family she herself began to establish in 1814 with Percy Shelley reflected and replicated in some ways Mary's own childhood: boldly dedicated to intellectual and emotional exploration and speculation, somewhat peripatetic and unpredictable, tolerant of periodic company and lively conversation but fundamentally sedentary and reflective. In the man who became her lover when she was sixteen and her husband at nineteen, she found a fearsome intellect and creative talent, an adventurous explorer both physically and mentally, and a firm holder of lofty ideas and attitudes. His temperament was even more complicated than that of either of her parents— someone who could be an inspiring guide and tutor on matters of philosophy, history, politics, and aesthetics, but whose human impulsiveness and volatility helped settle and clarify her own greater solidity and steadier judgment. Mary Shelley in her early adulthood and motherhood did not always project a sense of cuddly maternity, but she was caring and patient in her character and temperament and in some ways was to her husband as much a steady and stable parent and counselor as she was lover and adventurer.

Percy Shelley's direct influence on the writing of *Frankenstein* is palpable but nevertheless debatable in its precise effects and importance. In late manuscript stages he offered alternative wordings and often rewrote lengthy passages or created whole sentences and paragraphs that ended up in the finished novel. (The manuscript of his emendations is preserved in Lord Abinger's collection [now housed at the Bodleian Library, Oxford] and has

been meticulously sorted into accessible and readable form by Charles E. Robinson and published by the Bodleian Library in 2008.) Once it was popular to argue that he seriously "improved" the manuscript—his word choices were often more lofty, abstract, and consciously "literary" while Mary's were more simple and direct—, but critical opinion now has shifted toward recognizing Mary's more down-to-earth language and her ability to enrich the directness and texture of the story more simply. Scholarly debates about the nature of Percy's contribution (or diminution) show every sign of continuing briskly, and this kind of textual disagreement about influence at a high scholarly level is part of a larger set of scholarly and critical questions about what Mary did with her heritage from her human guides, especially her parents and Percy Shelley. (For a useful account of Mary's intellectual and emotional debts, see the essay by Chris Baldick p. 173. And for a detailed analysis of the whole Godwin-Shelley nexus, see William St. Clair's excellent biography of the two families, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* [London: Faber, 1989].)

One can see in the text of *Frankenstein* many traces of the political and educational ideas of Percy Shelley as well as of her parents—certainly there is constant parading and questioning of contemporary cultural and educational assumptions and practices. But the utopian optimism that sometimes characterizes their writings seems often in question in Mary's work, and in *Frankenstein* the issue of individual responsibility for one's choices is always in play; guilt plays a lot larger role in Mary's thinking and feeling than it does in her teachers'. A lot of theological and philosophical issues in *Frankenstein* remain ambiguous and uncertain, and if "family" is a helpful guide to the nature and range of many of the issues in the novel, the firm predictable positions of her mother, father, and husband are not necessarily always echoed in Mary's own bold and open explorations of issues about education, power, and the uses of imagination. In her adaptations of inherited Enlightenment ideas, there is more darkness and uncertainty, a lot more for readers to have to sort out for themselves. The many critical disagreements that characterize the essays gathered at the back of this volume suggest that many issues in *Frankenstein* remain unsettled, debatable, or capable of fresh interpretation. *Frankenstein* is the kind of text that opens outward rather than closing in upon itself.

Add one more haunting factor to Mary's experiences of "family":

untimely and gruesome death. Not only did her mother die in bearing Mary herself—dramatic enough in itself to emblazon on her consciousness a continuing emotional association of birth and death—but a number of other deaths rudely intruded on Mary's early life before she came to write *Frankenstein.* Her first child, a daughter, was born prematurely in 1815 and died within a few days. (And her second child—an infant when *Frankenstein* was being conceived and written—died at the age of three a year after the novel was published.) Even more hauntingly there were two dramatic suicides in the extended family: Mary's half sister, Fanny Imlay, took her own life in the fall of 1816; and later that winter Percy Shelley's first wife, Harriet, drowned herself in the Serpentine in London; her body was not found for weeks. And then, four years after *Frankenstein* was published, Percy himself drowned in an accident in Italy. It is no wonder that vitality and its opposites preyed on Mary's thinking and that disaster in her novel seems to follow from initiative and creativity.

III

Like her family relationships, Mary's reading is a better guide to her curiosity, topicality, and range of interests than to her own beliefs and considered opinions or to her own comparative writing artistry. In other words, the outreach of her reading tells us a lot about her interests and desires but not necessarily her commitments and conclusions. Obviously, she was guided in her early intellectual and creative choices by her parents' directions (and she found a mostly kindred soul in Percy Shelley); but she did not just read authors and books she agreed with. She was driven at least as much by curiosity about strange and unfamiliar things as by positions, outlooks, or doctrines she found sympathetic. Several of the essays in the appendices to this volume (see especially Richard Holmes, "Mary Shelley and the Power of Contemporary Science" p. 183, and Christa Knell-wolf, "Geographic Boundaries and Inner Space," p. 506) trace the reading and thinking that went into *Frankenstein* and show its implications for understanding the completed novel. One of the most important new directions in *Frankenstein* scholarship and criticism has been to search out and clarify the larger intellectual and cultural context of Mary Shelley's reading and bookishness. Much of the best current work on her fiction—and on nineteenth-century literature in general

—concentrates on the intellectual history of the period and its social and cultural manifestations—especially on developments in science, technology, and exploration, all matters that she was passionately curious about and that influenced the directions her artistry would take.

About Mary's reading at some points in her life we know a great deal, for she kept a faithful journal and a meticulous list of accomplished and projected reading for most of her life. But the journal for the period around *Frankenstein*'s composition has been lost, and so we are left to infer specific sources of information and inspiration from the text itself. Some of these references and allusions are simple and more or less passing glances outward, more a matter of decoration or ornament than structural beams of support. There are, for example, brief, relevant quotations from contemporary poetry —by Charles Lamb, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley himself. All these are appropriately invoked to provide comparisons of atmosphere or tonal support, and they suggest the expansive, resonant practices of reading nineteenth-century novels in a leisurely and outgoing way. Like her contemporaries, Mary engaged in allusive or intertextual practices that invited readers to notice the borrowings and celebrate their own skills of knowing, noticing, and seeing the relevance. Quite a few such passing allusions occur in the course of the book—and they may represent reading done years before as well as reading undertaken during the composition itself. (In this edition, footnotes to the *Frankenstein* text identify several references and allusions that contemporary readers would have readily recognized.)

More significant to the total effect are especially emphatic or insistently repeated thematic underpinnings of the novel. Such, for example, are the several quotations from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (see pp. 42, 92, 95, 97, and 146), including the epigraph on the title page (photographically reproduced on p. 3):

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
> To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me?

This is Adam's protest against his lot and the basic "why" question of human existence; it connects the Creature's puzzlement to enduring human questions

about basic meanings and origins of life. Similarly, the subtitle on the title page—"The Modern Prometheus" recalls classical (and later) myths of creativity and destruction. Together, the two allusions claim a firm cultural heritage in both the Judeo-Christian and ancient classical tradition of origins and human purpose—not necessarily claiming a belief system but ensuring that this modern story is positioned in a revered tradition of ideas and questions.

Similarly, in only the second paragraph into the novel, Mary Shelley has Walton's first letter from the beginning of his Arctic excursion speak of his extravagant idealistic expectations for his exploratory quest. He phrases his hopes in mythic, paradisal terms, imagining beyond the bitter cold and ice-locked sea, a vision of perfection:

> There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible; its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There . . . snow and frost are banished, and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. Its productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? (p. 7).

The reference here is not to a specific text. Mary Shelley is drawing on popular belief or at least desire—pretty much distrusted in her time but still part of the mythic landscape of scientific possibility—that beyond the rigors of exploration and the pursuit of geographical knowledge lay a place with treasures of prelapsarian bliss in a perfect climate and utopian world. The passage thus sets up the comparison between kinds of scientific quests and dreams that later will contextualize Frankenstein's hubris and set up the story-within-a-story, box-within-a box structure of interlocking narratives. Walton's exploration of the unknown is just as wide-eyed, ambitious, and unreliably utopian as is Frankenstein's quest for the secret of life, and through experiments with points of view (with Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature successively presenting their perspectives), we get both a shifting sense of authority and doubts about the reliability of authority itself.

IV

The text of *Frankenstein* printed here is that of the 1818 first edition, published in London in three volumes by Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, and Jones. Only glaring typographical errors have been corrected; otherwise the text reproduced here is that read by *Frankenstein*'s first readers, except that explanatory notes have been provided with the needs of modern students in mind. Until the late twentieth century, the tradition had been to use the third-edition text of 1831, which Mary Shelley revised carefully—but from a later perspective when she was considerably older and more detached from the original conception. Scholarship now strongly prefers the first edition; for the issues involved see the essays by M. K. Joseph on p. 170–73 and Anne K. Mellor on pp. 204–11.

A wealth of *Frankenstein*-related documents and interpretive materials are appended to this edition, beginning on p. 165. They are arranged into four sections. The first gathers a series of contemporary texts related to the creation of the novel. Here are passages from the Book of Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as contemporary poems by Percy Shelley, Byron, and Charles Lamb. The second section contains documents and texts related to the circumstances of *Frankenstein*'s creation and revision, including critical accounts of early influences on Mary's thinking. The third section contains responses to *Frankenstein* over the years, including early reviews of the novel and accounts of later adaptations and variations.

Finally, there is an extensive collection of critical materials, suggesting a variety of ways of reading the novel that raise all kinds of critical approaches. As Lawrence Lipking says in one of these essays, *Frankenstein* "furnishes a testing ground for every conceivable mode of interpretation" (p. 416). I have not tried to represent every "school" of criticism in these selections, but I have tried to choose essays that open up a wide range of readings of the novel. Represented quite heavily are the influential essays of the 1970s and 1980s that are largely responsible for the resurgence of *Frankenstein*'s popularity and importance. Later essays suggest a variety of new emphases— especially on the history of science—that have characterized more recent criticism.

In preparing this edition, I have been blessed over time with help and guidance from many colleagues and correspondents. I wish especially to acknowledge the generous sharing of work and knowledge by Sylvia

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