

Maria Parrino, Alessandro Scarsella and Michela Vanon Alliata (eds) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* **1818-2018**

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Two hundred years after the publication of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818; 1831), Mary Shelley's wish that her "hideous progeny" might "go forth and prosper" acquires a prophetic tone (Shelley 2003, 10). When she wrote the introduction to the second edition of the novel, its first adaptation, Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, had already been staged at the English Opera House. Quite amused by the play, Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt that "Frankenstein had prodigious success as a drama" (Shelley 1980, 378), but she could not imagine the extent to which her 'Creature' would become a staple of our culture, spawning countless revisitations and fuelling an inexhaustible scholarly debate. Stemming from an international conference held at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice in 2018, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, 1818-2018* contributes new insights to the existing scholarship, confirming the status of the novel as a contemporary classic. Edited by Maria Parrino, Alessandro Scarsella and Michela Vanon Alliata, this collection of essays is organized into three sections that investigate the literary, historical, and cultural context of the novel, its manifold remediations, and its persistence in visual culture.



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The first part, “Reading *Frankenstein*”, foregrounds Mary Shelley’s extensive and multicultural reading, and the ways in which her work responds to various literary and aesthetic concerns. As a story about creation, *Frankenstein* rests on mythological foundations that are pagan as well as Christian, but as Lia Guerra convincingly argues, classical mythology is in fact a “dominant isotopy” of Shelley’s writing (11). The binary structure of *Frankenstein*, which is based on a series of oppositions and contrasts, is typical of ancient myths, such as Cupid and Psyche, but it also shapes the narrative of *Genesis*. The use of dual categories is also a recurring feature of Shelley’s oeuvre, from *Mathilda* to *Proserpine* and *Mida*. At the same time, *Frankenstein* is also a novel about destruction: Victor’s ambition causes his downfall, while the Creature seeks revenge by destroying the scientist’s happiness.

Michael Hollington’s essay reads *Frankenstein* in the context of eighteenth-century French “ruinism”, which is epitomized by Volney’s *Les Ruines*, one of the key texts in the Creature’s education. Shelley ponders both the positive and negative aspects of Volney’s views, thus giving the Creature a “markedly dualistic” view of human history (43). Despite his actions, as Hollington fascinatingly remarks, the Creature does not embody Walter Benjamin’s “destructive character”, but a “paradoxical intertwining and doubling of destruction and creation” (45).

Victor Sage perceptively examines the rhetoric of the sublime to foreground the dialogic nature of *Frankenstein*. Its Alpine setting is based on “contingent discourses” (19) that range from de Buffon’s and de Saussure’s scientific interest in the Mer de Glace to Percy’s and Mary’s responses to Mont Blanc in 1816. The sublime is “a palpable presence in the novel” (23), but the succession of flashbacks and first-person narrations, as Sage contends, exposes unreliable subjectivities that “misread” sublimity and its emotional impact. Another key discourse shaping the textual fabric of *Frankenstein* concerns justice and the administration of the law. Victor helplessly witnesses Justine’s execution, which he defines as a “wretched mockery of justice” (Shelley 2018, 56). This comment, as Antonella Braidà illustrates, is reminiscent of William Godwin’s concerns in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, but also of Cesare Beccaria’s *Dei delitti e delle pene*. Shelley reasserts “the importance of civil and political rights” against “the arbitrary nature” of law (26), entrusting her message to Elizabeth’s criticism of retributive justice and the inadequate legal representation of women.

The last two chapters in the first section examine Shelley’s use of the conventions of the epistolary novel, but also the strategies she resorts to in order to engage readers aurally. Alessandro Scarsella analyzes Walton’s letters in the 1818 and the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, and traces Shelley’s debt to Francesco Algarotti’s *Viaggi di Russia*. Algarotti arrived in Saint Petersburg in 1739, and his work

illustrates his voyage to the Baltic Sea through the impressions of the whalers. Like Walton, Algarotti incorporates the conventions of the journal in his letters, but Scarsella also highlights the influence of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, which includes reports of letters without reproducing them in the text. These elements further testify to Shelley's extensive reading while bringing to light the "family romance" embedded "in the intertwining plot" (60) of her novel. Maria Parrino focuses on a different but complementary aspect, that is, the role and function of the voice. Walton begins his narration by assuring his sister that she "will rejoice to hear" (Shelley 2018, 7) what he is going to relate, thus placing specific emphasis on listening. Parrino interestingly analyses the "oral/aural features" (64) that shape the Creature and his education, and the connections that such elements establish between bodies and sounds. From this perspective, *Frankenstein* reveals Shelley's engagement with "aural literacy", but also the epistemic function of the spoken/heard word.

The second section investigates the many afterlives of *Frankenstein*. Peake's *Presumption* is the first recorded work inspired by the novel, but Michelle Faubert's essay convincingly argues that its first adaptation was Shelley's *Mathilda*. The novella is a story of loss, incest and suicide, and like *Frankenstein* it explores "the perceptual nature of monstrosity" (89). Whereas the Creature is perceived as malformed by those who look at him, Mathilda and her father are aware of their own monstrosity because of their guilt. For certain, the success of the novel was immediate both in England and abroad, as its influence on nineteenth and twentieth-century American writers suggests. Elisabetta Marino's essay insightfully traces echoes and allusions to *Frankenstein* in various short stories and novellas. Central to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and "Rappacini's Daughter", but also to Stephen Crane's *The Monster* and H.P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West: Reanimator" is "the mad scientist trope" (100). All three writers exploit this theme in order to dwell on various issues concerned with historical contingency, gender, and race. While Hawthorne is preoccupied with the threats that changes in gender relations might pose to social stability, Crane's *The Monster* explores the relationships between blacks and whites, raising questions that are still relevant today.

The contemporary metamorphoses of *Frankenstein* bear witness to its inexhaustible repertoires of themes, issues and concerns, which are sociopolitical as well as literary. David Punter examines Susan O'Keefe's *Frankenstein's Monster* (2010), a sequel to Shelley's novel that refashions the conventions of the Gothic. After Victor's death, the story is related from the point of view of the Creature, an adult whose relationships with women are unsuccessful. His tentative disenfranchisement rests on his ability to perceive "the world outside his narcissistic concerns" (109), thus acquiring a new voice, but al-

so coming to terms with his feral side. Maria Elena Capitani focuses instead on Liz Lochhead's *Blood and Ice*. The two-act play debuted at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1982 and brings to the stage the relationship between Shelley and her literary creation. By following the conventions of Gothic theatre, *Blood and Ice* is a "palimpsestic text" (120) that rewrites the genesis of *Frankenstein* in the form of the biographic psychodrama. Within this multifarious context, Anya Heise-von der Lippe investigates the ways in which the adaptations of *Frankenstein* engage with the issue of authority, an aspect that is crucial when one considers that the book was first published anonymously. Even today, what most literary, dramatic and cinematic adaptations of Shelley's novel reveal is that her "authority" as a writer is repeatedly "undermined by a process of cultural obliteration" (132).

Over the past two centuries *Frankenstein* has certainly gained a life of its own, and Agnieszka Łowczanin investigates its politically charged reception in contemporary Poland. The novel was first translated into Polish only in 1925, but it is in the 1990s that new translations and poetic and theatrical adaptations contributed to its surge in popularity. Because of the changing economic and ideological context, *Frankenstein* became a powerful political metaphor "to express the forging of a fundamentally new post-communist identity" (137). Another fascinating case of 'dislocation' is Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which has received a lot of critical attention ever since its publication in 2013. The novel is set in Iraq during the American occupation, when Hadi collects dead body parts in order to give life to his Creature, "Whatsitsname". His monster, as Angiola Codacci Pisanelli argues, is a living embodiment of Iraq, torn apart by the conflict. Unlike Victor, Hadi is not moved by ambition: his desire is to give a dignified burial to his countrymen, which partly rewrites the myth of Osiris. By conflating Western *topoi* with allusions to Muslim culture, Saadawi does not simply adapt Shelley's novel, but appropriates "the entire *Frankenstein* *imaginarium* formed by two hundred years of novels, movies and cartoons" (158).

There is no doubt that Shelley's Creature is deeply rooted in our imagination, so much so that *Frankenstein* is often wrongly assumed to be his name. From the earliest caricatures to the theatre, cinema, TV and new media, the Creature has been a constant presence in visual culture, to which the third section of this book is devoted. Jennifer Debie examines the possible role of waxworks, which were an integral part of the eighteenth-century study of anatomy, as Shelley's visual sources. Like the "anatomical Venus" that Mary saw at the Gabinetto di Fisica in Florence in 1820, the Creature and his story hint to a knowledge of wax "manufactured people" (175) that adds a new dimension to the intermedial nature of the novel. Michela Vanon Alliata discusses another classic of our times, Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* (1974). Central to Brooks' parodic effect is incongruity,

which resorts to a cognitive strategy – the perception of contrasts – to elicit laughter. At the same time, the movie also responds to several tenets of psychoanalytical theory, which Vanon Alliata convincingly investigates with reference to Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). A much different perspective shapes *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the movie directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1994. The genitive in the title claims for fidelity to the novel and its circular structure, but as Gilles Menegaldo argues, Branagh makes several amendments that suggest an intertextual relationship with other films, such as James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Moreover, Branagh's Victor does not disown his offspring because of loathing, but because of misunderstanding. From the big to the small screen, Greta Colombani examines the remediation of Victor in the TV series *Penny Dreadful*. Its creator, John Logan, was especially drawn to the porous boundary between human and monster. Victor multiplies his offspring by giving life to other characters, and their overwhelming sense of loneliness foregrounds crucial issues such as "the disintegration" (227) of families, social isolation, and the need for alternative affective bonds.

Beatriz and Fernando González Moreno discuss the illustrated editions published in Spain with a focus on their representation of female identities. Curiously, Victor and the Creature were absent from Francoist illustrations, which focused on Elizabeth as embodiment of candid femininity. The cruellest aspects of the novel were given visual prominence in the 1980s, in an edition illustrated by Fernando Aznar that nevertheless foregrounds the role of female characters such as Justine and Safie. The essay concludes with an examination of Elena Odriozola's 2006 edition, which draws on Shelley's introduction to the second edition of *Frankenstein* to provide "a visual reading" (218) of the circumstances in which the novel originated.

Thanks to its enduring appeal, the "Modern Prometheus" may be viewed as a multimedia franchise. *Frankenstein*, its story and characters are constantly refashioned across new media and genres, and John Garrad's essay concludes this volume by exploring role playing games inspired by the novel. In boardgames such as *Advanced Dungeon and Dragons* and computer games like *Planescape. Torment*, the Creature claims for a new status as an avatar, inviting players to complete his "moral journey" in new, fascinating itineraries. Again, whereas David Punter rightly points out the reasons why the definition of *Frankenstein* as a "classic" should not be taken at face value, the literary and intermedial "rambles" offered by *Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", 1818-2018* testify to the everlasting fascination of an icon of our culture. By bringing fresh perspectives to consolidated critical tracks, the volume offers a multifarious and scholarly sound illustration of Italo Calvino's statements on "Why Read the Classics" (1991). Every reading of *Frankenstein* is, in fact, also a re-reading.

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