

**FORWARD:**  
***THE FUTURE OF FRANKENSTEIN***

THE shadow of Frankenstein looms over us far into the horizon. Continually is haunts us in the news.

*We are not Frankenstein-type people!*

SO scientists, after every breakthrough in cloning, feel compelled to reassure the public. But the public is further disquieted by the implicit admission that there *are still* “Frankenstein-type people”!

*Franken food! Frankenfood!*

SO demonstrators shout after each new genetically modified food goes on sale.

*Dr. Frankenstein, Please Call Your Office*

SO runs a page-wide headline in the *New York Times* over a story summing up the case for and against the good intentions of the twenty-first century scientist.

AND everyone understands the allusions: They are clear references to Mary Shelley’s scientist and the monster he created that got out of human control.

BY 2035 – several experts prophesy – gene manipulation will feed the hungry Third World, cure cancer, and even death: gene manipulation may make us immortal. We’ll have low-cost solar energy and super-supercomputers. Maybe even before 2035, we’ll be served by machines not only intelligent, but sentient, by gadgets that maintain and repair themselves, by totally automated factories: that is, factories that even manage themselves.

BUT other scientists warn that humanity may be hurtling toward mass suicide. These rapid advances can, like the Frankenstein experiment or the development of certain antibiotics, simply boomerang, bringing new types of accidents and destructive conditions. The long-range effects of gene manipulation are unpredictable. Super-intelligent machines can evolve with humanity, compete for our resources, “squeeze human beings out of existence.” Some scientists file suits to stop a physics lab from creating an artificial black hole that could – they fear – devour the earth in a few moments. A perennial fear is that some experiment, like creating super-bacteria for benevolent purposes, might leak out of the lab into the hands of terrorists and provide them with new bioweapons. And everyone remembers that Frankenstein himself imagined he could make a creature immortal.

LIKE Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* did give us a name to help identify one of our modern problems, but giving us a much-needed symbol to keep us conscious of the threat of “science run amok” is just one of the many accomplishments of the nineteen-year-old Mary Shelley. She had

intended, in 1816, simply to write a thrilling horror story. But she underestimated herself. Because of her family background, the books she'd devoured and heard discussed, the people she'd talked with, and her own genius in sensing the spirit of modern times, she produced something greater than just a "horror story" – she produced a major novel of ideas. Here's a short list of some of the other cultural achievements of the greatest "horror story" writer ever:

SHE dramatized – on a stage stretching from snow-peaked Switzerland to the popular ice fields – major questions posed by philosophers like William Godwin, John Locke, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And in her implicit rebuttal of the claims of scientist like Francis Bacon and Humphrey Davy, she accurately identified, rather early in studies of the history of ideas, what feminist critics now call "masculine science."

SHE cast a new and sickening light on some of the most sacred aspects of the patriarchal system, from its deepest, unacknowledged animosities toward females to its glorification of its dangerous work ethic and of hierarchy.

SHE insisted on recognizing and coming to terms with the role of the irrational in human affairs – this, mind you, long after Shakespeare's emphasis on it had been down-graded by the Age of Reason and long before Freud, Jung, and Lacan would upgrade it again in modernist times.

SHE not only pioneered what we now (since 1926) call science fiction, she supplied it with one of its perennial themes: right down to Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and last night's science fiction on TV. And the Frankenstein myth she launched has proliferated into dozens of sequels, on film: such as the James Whale/Boris Karloff classic, and in fiction: *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* by Theodore Roszak (another author who gave us a much-needed new word: counterculture).

"The cloud of mine is discharging its collected lightning."

SO Mary Shelley's husband Percy wrote about the growth of democratic sentiment in England. He could just as easily have been describing what happened to Mary one evening in 1816, when all her lifelong sentiments, anxieties, and principals suddenly converged into one lightning bolt of inspiration.

IN that sense, her novel *Frankenstein* actually began to "collect" when her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, brilliant author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, gave birth to our Mary in August 1797, and died eleven days later. Daughter Mary would brood all her life on the plight of a person brought up without a real mother: notice how many characters in *Frankenstein* struggle with the problems of the orphan or of the broken family. Her

father, William Goodwin, equally famous author of *Enquiry into the Principals of Political Justice*, gave up trying to be mother and father to Mary and her half-sister, and married a widow who clearly favored her own two children. Mary had plenty of opportunities to reflect on family influence and responsibilities, a major theme in *Frankenstein*.

ALTHOUGH deficient in family feeling, Godwin did help young Mary in several literary ways. The Godwin Juvenile Library, which he founded with his new wife, published Mary's clever 156-line satirical ballad, "Monseer Nongtongpaw," written when she was only eleven! He trained his daughter in the stimulating practice of reading several books concurrently. And he allowed her to sit in on social evenings he'd staged for other literary giants like William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. One awesome evening she actually heard Coleridge read aloud his *Ancient Mariner*. Her impressions of the sailor supernaturally punished for his violation of Nature would clearly influence her conception of her scientist Frankenstein.

USUALLY deprived of her father's intimate company – he often sent her on long visits to Scotland – she nevertheless interacted with his ideas, and her mother's, through her passionate readings of their respective treatises and novels.

GODWIN believed, like Voltaire, in the power of pure reason to solve all social, political, and personal problems. And like Rousseau, Godwin felt that humans are by nature benevolent and become evil only when abused by society. Government, he preached, and other institutions like marriage and the family, impose evil restraints on citizens and must be abolished. But he opposed violence as a means of changing things. Instead, he saw well-educated citizens working toward a better world by repressing emotions and reasoning person-to-person. And so he became the father of philosophical anarchism. His ideas of progress, of the perfectibility of humanity, of perpetual peace through arbitration, inspired writers such as William Wordsworth and Percy Shelley. Godwin's all-out critique of the Establishment lies behind several stinging in *Frankenstein*, as when the monster learns about European life:

[T]he strange system of society was explained to me. I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty, of rank, descent, and noble blood . . . A man might be doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few.

MARY'S mother, in writings published mainly before her marriage to Godwin, defended the French Revolution with an implicit threat that it could spread to England, where, she said, the miseries (an important word in *Frankenstein*) of the poor were radicalizing the workers. She attacked the hierarchical system that required underpaid mechanics to support the rich and idle aristocracy and deprived women of any chance to realize their

human potential. She demanded equal political rights for all English persons deprived of the vote – which meant, at the time, most members of the middle class, all workers, and *all* women regardless of class! “To those familiar with Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*,” says the critic James P. Davis, “Shelley’s debt to her mother for ideas and even for phrasing will be self-evident.”

WHEN beautiful, brilliant Mary returned from Scotland in 1814, she found the handsome, visionary poet Shelley a frequent visitor at her father’s house. Just twenty-two, Percy had already published two horror stories, several inflammatory pamphlets (one had gotten him expelled from Oxford), and *Queen Mab*, a long work in nine verse cantos and seventeen prose notes. The verse attacks the English monarchy, war, and established religion; the prose advocates free love and atheism.

HAVING thus ransacked the ideas of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, Shelley now took their daughter as well. At her mother’s grave, Mary confessed that she returned Percy’s love. Although he was married and a father, they eloped to Europe. They collaborated on a work later to be published as *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*. After his first wife died, Mary became Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

THEY lost their first child, Clara, in 1815, but the following year was their *annus mirabilis*. They now had a son William (a name to figure tremendously for Mary in *Frankenstein*). And that year Percy’s poems included two that would loom important in her thinking about *Frankenstein*: “Mount Blanc,” which helped her with her settings, and *Alastor*, a long poem about a young man who, obsessed with seeking Ideal Truth, unwittingly loses all the benefits of human companionship. *Alastor* dramatizes what would become one of the tragedies of Mary’s ill-fated scientist.

IN their new home in Switzerland, Percy and Mary read voluminously, including John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding*, which guided her with her monster’s psychological development, and Humphrey Davy’s books on chemistry. As Anne Mellor (one of the leading interpreters of Shelley) points out, Professor Waldman’s speeches in *Frankenstein* are drawn largely from Davy. Percy became an enthusiastic supporter of Davy’s program for scientific progress, but Mary made her reservations clear in her novel. A typical disquieting note is Davy’s passage in which he praises “modern masters” who “penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places.” Here Davy is following in the tradition of Francis Bacon, who called on natural philosophers to put Nature on the rack and torture her secrets out of her! This recurrent image of male scientists violating female Nature surely figured – at least subliminally – in Mary’s stunning insight into Frankenstein’s character: he would be a man deeply conflicted between love and misogyny.

THE “cloud of mind” was darkening. On nights famous in literary history, the Shelleys visited their neighbors on Lake Geneva, Lord Byron and his physician, Dr. John Polidori. Some nights Percy and Byron discussed “the principal of life,” a topic in vogue because of sensational experiments with reanimating dead bodies. Galvani, for example, had made dead frogs jerk as though alive by sending electricity through their legs. Hanged men taken down from the gallows has also been made to thrash about. Mary herself suffered from reoccurant dreams that she had massaged her dead baby, Clara, until she was brought back to life. Then on the night of June 15, 1816, they all read ghost stories aloud. And Byron proposed that they each write one.

THE way that Mary struggled with ideas for what could have been a simple tale shows that she felt she needed a chance to bring all her experience together into one great symbolic synthesis. Her anguish as the neglected child of a genius; as the mother of an unanimated dead daughter and of the infant William for whose life she (correctly) feared; her wealth of still unintegrated ideas – some attractive to her, some repugnant – gleaned from the works of her parents, her husband, and other writers; her dread of her father’s impersonal rationalism and her husband’s unconditional love of science – all this was suddenly concentrated and discharged into one bolt of “collected lightning.” One of those evenings, in a deep reverie, she actually envisioned the horrible scene that (in our 1831 edition) opens Chapter 5.

WORKING backward and forward from that germinal fantasy, she finished her book in eleven months. Perhaps she was too exhausted to write a Preface, so Percy wrote it for her. As James Rieger and Mellor have made it clear to us with cogent evidence, Percy also edited her text, changing some of Mary’s simple prose to more elaborate and often stilted “literary” English. (Where she wrote “we were all equal” he rewrote “neither of us possessed the slightest preeminence over the other.” But in his editing had obviously assumed preeminence!) The first edition was published anonymously in 1818, and was widely assumed to be Percy’s work. Odwin put out a second edition in 1824, to take advantage of a stage version that was running in London. But the third edition, issued nine years after Percy’s death, contains Mary’s own byline on the title page, her own “Author’s Introduction,” and her own final revisions. That’s the text that we are discussing here.

MOT of our demonstrators against “Frankenfood,” “Frankenclones,” and other technological innovations doubtless draw their analogies from film or TV versions of *Frankenstein* rather than from the original novel. This kind of thing happens with literary classics that become myths. Most of us hear “To be or not to be” long before we come to read *Hamlet*. And so our readers of this edition of Shelley have probably absorbed the myth before picking up the book. Just to make sure, I checked this out with Brian Taves, Library of Congress expert on both film and science fiction. He assures me that viewing the classic James Whale/Boris Karloff version (1931, syndicated for TV in 1957), is still part of the “rite of passage” of young people today.

AND so our readers might already be puzzled over our references to Shelley's "novel of ideas," seeing little in their experience of the myth to correspond to what we're talking about. We should straighten this out before we go into even deeper discussion of Shelley's masterpiece.

FIRST, we must put aside our images of "Doctor" Frankenstein's humpback assistant who steals a "criminal" brain; of Karloff, with a bolt sticking out of his neck, never learning to get out more than a groan or a growl; of his drowning the girl with the flowers; of the windmill burning; of the "happy ending" survival of Frankenstein's bride at the close of the Whale fantasy. *None of these modern icons can be found in Shelley's novel and, worse yet, they all downgrade and pervert the meaning.* While she raised the horror story to the level of intellectual fiction, Whale and the writer Robert Florey (whose work Whale had co-opted without credit) demoted it back to almost pure horror.

WE can cinch this point with just three of the many examples that crowd to mind:

\*Shelley actually tells how the well-meaning monster *saves* the girl from drowning. Then he is shot by somebody too terrified by the looks of an eight-foot creature to grasp the situation. Shelley's message here is that we humans tend to panic at the sight of the strange and different, that we judge others by appearance not character.

\*Whale's simplistic idea that the monster's crimes are caused by his creator's inadvertently giving him an "evil" brain is the opposite of Shelley's intention. She wanted to show that he, according to Rousseau's teaching that she was following, was born virtuous and gentle and that only society's mistreatment of him could turn him violent and malevolent. She was also testing out John Locke's psychology. He'd taught that each human is born a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, and that society, writing indelibly on that slate, determines much of an individual's character.

\*And Shelley – unlike Whale – could not forgive and reward Frankenstein (the symbol of irresponsible science and unacknowledged misogyny) with a wife and ongoing existence, for reasons we must clarify here.

WHETHER we agree or not with Rousseau and Locke, we cannot deny the classic Whale "interpretation" is a crude travesty on Shelley's profound treatment of human development. In fairness to Whale, though, we should acknowledge that Shelley's main message – that science can run dangerously off track – is preserved and popularized in his film. (But only for the sake of horror?)

BRIEFLY stated – just enough to provide a basis for our arguments here – this is Shelley's story:

Polar explorer Captain Walton writes to his sister (whose initials after her marriage are MWS, the same as Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's!) about the confessions of a scientist rescued from an ice flow. Convalescing

from exhaustion, Victor Frankenstein told of his upbringing in Geneva, his parents adopting the orphan Elizabeth, and their growing up together with the family assuming that they would marry. In college, he had secretly sought and found the means of creating life. But when the eight-foot being he had planned to make beautiful proved to be hideous, Victor abandoned him and fell ill. While friend Clerval nursed him back to health, Victor found he could not confide the truth about what had caused his breakdown. From Geneva came news that Victor's young brother William had been strangled and their servant Justine charged with the murder. Although Victor realized who the real murderer was, he still could not talk about the monster, convincing himself that no one would believe the truth, and so Justine was hanged.

Hiking in the Swiss Alps, Victor met the monster, who told of his experiences after he had been abandoned. He had found shelter in an unused shack adjoining a poor farm-family's house. Eavesdropping, he'd learned the use of the language and even how to read. After secretly helping the family by performing chores at night, he'd felt he could approach them as a friend. But his appearance terrified them; embittered by this and other rejections, he set out to seek revenge on Frankenstein's species. Murdering William, he planted the evidence that convicted Justine. But now he offered Frankenstein a deal:

I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend.

Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

If the scientist would create a mate for him, he guaranteed the couple would go far away and leave humanity in peace. Impressed by the monster's arguments that a creator owes something to his creature, Frankenstein at first consented but – working in secret in coastal Scotland – found reasons to renege on his promise and destroyed the monster's mate. In retaliation, the monster killed first Clerval and, on Victor's wedding night, Elizabeth, and then lured Frankenstein into a mad and hopeless chase into the frozen North. At this point the reader, knowing that the monster has “shadowed” his creator ever since the creature has set out for revenge, looks forward to his appearance on board Walton's ship.

WALTON'S presence in the story serves several artistic functions (not exploited in the film versions until Kenneth Branagh's courageous *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, 1994). Walton's polar expedition provides a dramatic, enhancing framework for Frankenstein's confessions. It also supplies a foil and a parallel for Frankenstein's own exploits. The explorer's work, like the scientist's, is bold and risky. But at least Walton is the Baconian scientist, whose work is public and offered for the general benefit of humanity. Frankenstein represents the Faustian scientist, working in dark secrecy, ostensibly for public good but largely for personal power (as master of a super race), and concealing all responsibility for his action. Walton's struggles are more objective, external; Frankenstein's deeply subjective, internal. Finally, Walton's expedition makes it easier for Shelley to drive home one of her main points, and with a magnificent twist of irony. Early in his stay on board, Frankenstein told his rescuer how he regretted having neglected family, friends, and fiancée to finish his years-long project:

If only the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.

THIS and many related passages constitute one of the strongest attacks on the patriarchal “work ethic” we have in Western literature. (It will not be surpassed until Paul Auster writes his *New York Trilogy*.) To show how deeply this self-destructive trait is ingrained in the Western male, Shelley first has the scientist condemn it, as above, and then *relapse* into it. In Frankenstein’s dying hours – in one of Shelley’s most bitter scenes – he tries to shame Walton’s crew into pursuing their goal against hopeless odds, even using the patriarchal tactic of accusing them of not being real men.

SHELLEY extends her attack on the system by showing what it means for women. The Greeks, with their simple talent for acknowledging the unacknowledged (witness Sophocles on how both men dream about sleeping with their mothers), knew well that the macho male would *prefer to do without women entirely*. Euripides, for example, in his *Medea*, has Jason shout:

If only children could be produced in some other way,  
Without females! If there were no females  
Human life would be relieved of all miseries!

ARISTOTLE and his Christian disciple Thomas Aquinas were more subtle, more “civilized,” more “rational” in their put-down of put-aside of women. They “proved” that in any event women are almost nonexistent in the reproductive process. They saw the fetus as entirely a male creation; the woman adds nothing to it but nine months’ shelter! Even as late as the nineteenth century, the respectable English pundit Herbert Spencer) who invented “social Darwinism” over Darwin’s objections) propagated this utterly tendentious and absurd idea that there is really only one parent: the father.

BUT Frankenstein goes all out to relieve Jason of his historic agony. *Frankenstein invents the ultimate technique for siring heirs without having to love a woman*. And his new race would be superior to any children produced in collaboration with women! This Shelley highlights this deep masculine jealousy of women’s reproductive power by pushing it to its extreme with magnificent hyperbole.

DIGGING beneath the unacknowledged to the very unconscious itself, Shelley portrays Frankenstein as first dreaming that he is going to cause Elizabeth’s death and then ignoring what his own mind has told him. Typical Age of Reason mentality (Godwinian, as Mary saw it?), he refuses to listen to his inner voice, he fails to realize the significance of the dream – the “irrational” – until he’s on his deathbed. Notice, too, that when the monster

tells him “I will be with you on your wedding-night,” Frankenstein’s reaction is to take precautions for himself, but not for his bride. University-trained genius, he is unable (or unconsciously unwilling?) to see the monster’s obvious strategy: to punish Frankenstein not by hurting Frankenstein, but by killing those close to him. We might attribute his blindness to his unconscious commitment to fulfill Jason’s classic patriarchal wishes.

MOST women in *Frankenstein* act just as mother Wollstonecraft says the system conditions them to act: as servants to men, wholly dependent on men, grateful for a decent arranged marriage, passive. *Frankenstein almost completely controls Elizabeth’s adult life, mainly by keeping her waiting and in total ignorance.* He nullifies her courtroom defense of Justine simply by maintaining an overpowering silence. The monster, for all his liberating insights as the Outsider, also assumes *he* will make all decisions for the mate he expects to possess. She will be created not to work out her own needs and preferences, but to play out a destiny that the monster and his creator have outlined for her. When Frankenstein realizes she might tear up the script, he tears her up instead.

IN spite of the monster’s conventional views about women, he is often seen as a symbol of rebellion against the Establishment. No real surprise here: most rebels in the past were fighting for the rights of *man* in the narrow sense. According to the principals of Locke and David Hartley that guided Shelleys, the monster first knew sensations, then made connections and formed ideas on the basis of his treatment by society and learned to express his conclusions. His “misery-made-me-a-fiend” speech is an echo of Wollstonecraft’s famous phrase about the “continual miseries” of the poor and disadvantaged that would result in revolution.

MANY critics think of the scientist and his creation as two sides of the same (split) personality. It’s not so simple as saying that one is the Ego, the other the Id (as it might be with Beckett’s Didi and Gogo), because each of them acts with a full, dynamic combination of Ego and Id. *Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that the monster is an extension of certain of Frankenstein’s powers that he is unwilling to take responsibility for.* This would include intellectual forces *and* savage, instinctive forces he is afraid to recognize in himself. (As professor Bloom makes clear in his *Afterward*, the monster surpasses his creator in both.)

CERTAINLY we have to consider Frankenstein as the ultimate cause of the monster’s misdeeds. Moreover, starting with the murder of William, Frankenstein was morally obliged to reveal his secret. His refusal to do so, with rationalizations convincing only to himself, makes him an accomplice. What he can only *dream* of doing – killing Elizabeth – he in effect allows the monster to *do*.

WHILE readers will differ in their view of Frankenstein’s complicity in the murders and terror, there can be little disagreement that Shelley was pioneering what we would later call the alter ego, the doppelganger, the

double, the Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. The literary use of the concept goes beyond Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* to the postmodern idea of "multiple selves" as in Auster's *New York Trilogy*.

SOME critics even see Shelley's splitting of character as manifest again in Harry and Victor: Henry as modeled on the social, sweetly creative Percy, Victor as Percy's more uncontrollable, wild, destructive side. (This reminds us again of the Whale/Florey irresponsibility: Shelley dubbed her scientist "Victor" for the ironic value of the name, but in the 1931 film, Clerval's and Frankenstein's first names are actually switched!) Other critics, considering the monster as the victim of neglect by a genius, think, Shelley unconsciously extended herself into the tragedy of the miserable creature.

IN any event, note how the popular imagination accepts the idea of the "double" in the very name of "Frankenstein": our protesters, as we implied at the start of our discussion, could well be thinking *either* of the scientist *or* of the monster *or* of both as they shout their "Frankenstein" slogans.

AFTER *Frankenstein* appeared, Mary's life was a mixture of new tragedy and muted triumph. Her second daughter, Clara Evelina, and her son William, were dead by 1819, the same year that Percy Florence was born. Mary's fifth pregnancy miscarried in 1822. She was saved from bleeding to death by her science-minded husband: he sat her down in an ice bath until the doctor arrived. Three weeks later he was heading home from his skiff *Ariel*, sailing off the coast of Viareggio and – as Mary tells us in her brilliant and sensitive notes to his poems – he was "wrapped from sight" by a thunderstorm, and when the "cloud of the tempest passed away, no sign remained of where" he had been. Ten days later his body washed ashore and cremated.

WIDOW Mary returned to London to groom her sole-surviving child to inherit the baronetcy of his grandfather, Sir Timothy Shelley. Meanwhile she supported self and son by producing a steady stream of short tales, encyclopedia articles, and novels, along the way turning out landmark editions of Percy Shelley's works. She resigned herself to the fact that Percy Florence, son and grandson of great talents, had no ambition beyond being called Sir Percy. Exhausted and paralyzed by strokes, she died in 1851, at age fifty-three. With symbolism rarely so well achieved in cemeteries, she is buried in Bournemouth between mother, Wollstonecraft, and father, Godwin. Most of her major works are always in print now, she is the subject of hundreds of critical studies, and her *Frankenstein* lives on as a great cautionary tale – and a major novel of ideas.

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