

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

MARY SHELLEY
FRANKENSTEIN



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OR

The Modern Prometheus

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin began to write *Frankenstein*, she was not quite nineteen; yet none of her later novels has achieved anything like the same universal hold on the imagination. Whatever she may have owed to other novelists, particularly to her father William Godwin and to the American Charles Brockden Brown, the novel remains completely original. In spite of her errors, which are those of a novice—particularly her tendency to invent fresh improbabilities rather than to think her way through difficult passages in the story—the central idea is carried through with considerable skill and force.

The unexpected and bizarre success of the novel was due to one of those lucky accidents which, in most writers' lives, happen only once. For two troubled and uncertain years, she had been living with Shelley. Now, in the summer of 1816, they had temporarily escaped from England and were settled in Geneva, among the splendours of lake and mountains, and in the stimulating company of Byron. The germ of *Frankenstein* is to be found somewhere in their wide-ranging nightly conversations, which must have covered, not only gothic terrors and galvanism and current theories on the origin of life, but also the myth of Prometheus and its significance. For Mary subtitled her story 'the modern Prometheus', and this is an essential clue to its meaning.¹

The myth of Prometheus contained two main elements. The first, best known through the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, was the story of Prometheus *pyrphoros*, who had brought down fire from the sun in order to succour mankind,

¹ For the composition of the novel, see the Preface of 1818 and Introduction of 1831, and Appendix A.

and whom Zeus had punished by chaining him to the Caucasus with an eagle feeding on his vitals. The second was the story of Prometheus *plasticator* who, in some versions, was said to have created or recreated mankind by animating a figure made of clay. This aspect of the myth, little used by the Greeks and unknown to Aeschylus or Hesiod, seems to have been more popular with the Romans.

By about the second or third century A.D., the two elements were fused together, so that the fire stolen by Prometheus was also the fire of life with which he animated his man of clay. This gave a radically new significance to the myth, which lent itself easily to Neoplatonic interpretation with Prometheus as the demiurge or deputy creator, but which could also be readily allegorized by Christians and was frequently used in the Middle Ages as a representation of the creative power of God.¹ By the Renaissance, the image was a familiar one, as in Othello's words over Desdemona:

... I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume.

Later still, Prometheus became an accepted image of the creative artist. Early in the eighteenth century a convenient and influential account of Prometheus the creator is to be found in Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*,² which exactly suggests the central ideas and situations in *Frankenstein*, whether or not Mary had first-hand knowledge of the *Characteristicks* at the time she wrote the novel.

Before 1816 Shelley seems to have been unaware of the potent symbolic significance of the myth; it was Byron, to whom Prometheus had been a familiar figure ever since he translated a portion of Aeschylus while still a schoolboy at Harrow, who opened his eyes to its potentialities during that summer at Geneva. That it was discussed at the time can be

¹ See Olga Raggio, 'The Myth of Prometheus: its survival and metamorphoses up to the eighteenth century', in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxi (1958), 44-62; H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (1928), pp. 56, 73; Peter L. Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero* (1962), pp. 112-24.

² For a fuller account of the passages in Shaftesbury, see Appendix B.

inferred from the results: Byron's poem, 'Prometheus', written in July 1818; his *Manfred*, with its Promethean hero, begun in September; and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, in part a reply to *Manfred*, begun later in 1818.¹ But Mary Shelley was first in the field with her 'modern Prometheus', and she alone seized on the vital significance of making Prometheus the creator rather than, as in Byron and Shelley, the suffering champion of mankind. In doing so, she linked the myth with certain current scientific theories which suggested that the 'divine spark' of life might be electrical or quasi-electrical in nature.

In the novel itself, Victor Frankenstein is understandably reluctant to reveal how he gave life to his creature; but there are clues to what Mary Shelley had in mind. In her Introduction she recalls the talk about Erasmus Darwin, who had 'preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion'; but this sounds like an ordinary case of alleged spontaneous generation. 'Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.' She then goes on to describe the half-waking reverie which gave her the beginning of her story, in which 'I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.'² Nor is the story itself without hints: in Chapter II a

¹ Samuel Chew, in *Modern Lang. Notes*, xxxiii (1918), 308-9. In Shelley's *Queen Mab* (1813), viii, 211-12 n., Prometheus is referred to merely as a villain who corrupted mankind by giving them fire and thus enabling them to become meat-eaters. Of *Manfred*, Byron wrote to John Murray: 'The *Prometheus* [of Aeschylus], if not exactly in my plan, has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or anything that I have written.' (Rowland E. Prothero (ed.), *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals* (1900), iv, 174.)

² The 'powerful engine' might denote a powerful galvanic battery, as it did in an early conversation between Shelley and Hogg (R. Ingpen, *Shelley in England* (1917), p. 109).

discourse on electricity and magnetism—the point is more explicit in 1818—turns Frankenstein's mind away from alchemy; and in Chapter V the 'instruments of life' which Frankenstein assembles before infusing the 'spark of life' also suggest an electrical rather than a biological process.

Frankenstein's change of interest from alchemy to chemistry and electricity is a circumstance obviously drawn from Shelley himself; and with the mention of electricity as vitalizing force we come, as Carl Grabo has shown, to a central idea of Shelley's which was to emerge, a little later, in the last act of *Prometheus Unbound*. In his eclectic synthesis of ideas drawn from Newton, Volta, Galvani, Erasmus Darwin, and Humphrey Davy (whom Mary was reading in October 1816), electricity became the divine fire, the life-principle, and the physical manifestation of spiritual love—of which Douglas Bush remarks: 'Berkeley and Newton are met together, Plotinus and Edison have kissed each other.' It seems likely that, during the conversations at Diodati, Mary absorbed from Shelley—and perhaps from Polidori as well—the idea of making electricity the animating force, the scientific equivalent of that divine spark which, in the myth, Prometheus had stolen from the sun.¹

Frankenstein is constructed of three concentric layers, one within the other. In the outermost layer, Robert Walton, in his letters to his sister, describes his voyage towards the North Pole and his encounter with Victor Frankenstein. In the main, middle layer, Frankenstein tells Walton how he created the monster and abandoned it in disgust, how it revenged itself by murdering all those he loved and how he finally turned and pursued it. In the very centre, the monster

¹ See Carl Grabo, *A Newton among Poets* (1930), *passim*, and *The Magic Plant* (1936), pp. 280–1, 432–3; also Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (1957), p. 151. For Shelley's alchemical interests, Frederick L. Jones, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), i. 303; for Mary's reading of Davy, Jones, *Journal* (see Bibliography), pp. 67–8, 73; and for Polidori's possible contribution, article by James Rieger (see Bibliography).

himself describes the development of his mind after the flight from the laboratory and his bitterness when men reject him. In spite of her inexperience, Mary Shelley uses this concentric structure with considerable subtlety.

The story of Walton's voyage to the Pole is strange but possible; it mediates by interposing a conceivable reality between us and the more strictly marvellous story of Frankenstein and his monster, which thus remains doubly insulated from everyday reality. Yet there is a parallelism of situation and a strong bond of sympathy between Walton and Frankenstein which they are quick to recognize. Walton is a solitary like Frankenstein and his obsession with the Pole answers to Frankenstein's obsession with life. Sharing something of Frankenstein's Faustian *hybris*, Walton is setting out on a process of scientific discovery at great peril to himself and others. Frankenstein's story is, in fact, narrated as a cautionary tale which serves its purpose in the end by turning Walton back to the world of normal society. At the same time, Walton's voyage through the Frozen Sea towards the Pole, with its conscious echoes of 'The Ancient Mariner', reflects that other world of the Mer de Glace at Chamonix, the setting in which the monster tells his story to Frankenstein.

At the centre of the triple structure is the story of the education of a natural man and of his dealings with his creator, which might be described (with important reservations) as a sort of Godwinian Genesis. The theme is stated plainly at the beginning of the monster's conversation with his maker (p. 100):

Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

The monster is essentially benevolent; but rejection by his creator and by mankind at large has made him first a fallen Adam and then a fallen Lucifer.

In the story of his experiences there are certain improbabilities and some rather obvious contrivance—the convenient chink in the wall of De Lacey's cottage, the providentially lost portmanteau of books, the lessons to the Arab girl Safie which also serve to provide the eavesdropping monster with a kind of crash-course in European civilization. These can be more easily forgiven if we take it that here, in the centre of the book, Mary Shelley is constructing something with the schematic character of a philosophic romance. The story of the monster's beginnings is the story of a child, and at the same time he recapitulates the development of aboriginal man. He awakes to the world of the senses, discovers fire and searches for food. When men reject him, he discovers society by watching the De Laceys in their cottage. Having thus acquired language, from Felix's reading of Volney he learns of human history; having learned to read, he discovers private sentiment in *Werther* and public virtue in Plutarch.

Most of all, it is through *Paradise Lost* that he comes to understand himself and his situation under the double analogy of Adam and of Satan (pp. 127–9). At the same time, through the copy of Frankenstein's journal which he has conveniently carried off in his first flight from the laboratory, he learns that his situation is yet more desperate than theirs, since he has been rejected without guilt and is utterly companionless. 'I am malicious because I am miserable' (p. 145); it is this that turns him against his maker and against mankind. What he demands, not unreasonably, is to be supplied with an Eve of his own hideous kind and to return to the natural life, with 'the vast wilds of South America' for his Eden.

Frankenstein is moved to pity; it is only when he revolts and destroys his second, half-formed creature that the monster finally becomes a fallen angel, a Satan bent on mischief, as he acknowledges at the end, over the dead body of Frankenstein. 'Evil thenceforth became my good,' he says, again recalling Milton; '. . . the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil' (pp. 220–1). His final suicide by burning at

the North Pole will reconcile the novel's central images of fire and ice, of life and desolation, of Promethean heat and the frosty Caucasus.

Yet Frankenstein himself is also both a fallen Adam and a fallen Lucifer: '. . . the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope' (p. 189); '. . . like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell' (p. 211). There is a strict parallel between the role of each in his own story, and we are drawn to complete the equation for ourselves: as the monster is to Frankenstein, so perhaps is Frankenstein to whatever power created man. The clue to the monster's predicament—benevolence corrupted—may also be the clue to Frankenstein's.

Frankenstein disowns but cannot free himself from his monster, which thus takes on the character of a *doppelgänger* or a Mr. Hyde. Their interdependence is evoked with considerable power in the last part of Frankenstein's narrative in which Frankenstein, from being the pursued, becomes the pursuer; yet, by a sort of complicity, he is also lured on willingly by the monster across the snowbound landscape of Russia, in an atmosphere of dream and delirium, towards the Frozen Sea. It is, in fact, only at the very end of the book, when Walton encounters the monster grieving over Frankenstein's body, that we can at last be quite sure that the whole story is 'true' and not a madman's hallucination. Yet the monster is, in a literal sense, a projection of Frankenstein's mind, and an embodiment of his guilt in withdrawing from his kind and pursuing knowledge which, though not forbidden, is still dangerous. He is also a reflection of Frankenstein's own situation, and the quotation from *Paradise Lost* which appeared on the original title-page—the accusing words of fallen Adam to his creator—might apply to both:

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

The implications of Mary Shelley's 'ghost-story' go much

further than she or any of her circle seem to have understood, though there are hints of uneasiness in Shelley's Preface of 1817. With unassuming originality, her 'modern Prometheus' challenges the whole myth of Romantic titan-ism, of Shelley's Neoplatonic apocalypse in *Prometheus Unbound*, and of the artist as Promethean creator. One of its themes is solitude—the solitude of one who turns his back on his kind in his obsessive pursuit of the secrets of nature. Frankenstein sins against the Godwinian ideal of social benevolence; in describing him, Mary probably had in mind the proem to Shelley's *Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude*, in which he described his own vigils in the charnel-house:

Like an inspired and desperate alchymist
Staking his very life on some dark hope . . .¹

Prometheus was also an accepted metaphor of the artist, but when Mary Shelley transfers this to the scientist, the implications are radical. If Frankenstein, as scientist, is 'the modern Prometheus', then science too is creative; but whereas the world of art is ideal and speculative, that of science is real and inescapable. It must then take the consequences: the scientist, himself a creature, has taken on the role and burden of a creator. If Frankenstein corrupts the monster by his rejection, which is good Godwinism so far, we are left asking a question which demands another kind of answer: what has rejected and corrupted Frankenstein? And if Prometheus, in the romantic tradition, is identified with human revolt, is the monster what that revolt looks like from the other side—a pitiful botched-up creature, a 'filthy mass that moved and talked' (p. 147), which brings nothing but grief and destruction upon the power that made him?

Mary Shelley wrote in the infancy of modern science, when its enormous possibilities were just beginning to be foreseen by imaginative writers like Byron and Shelley and by speculative scientists like Davy and Erasmus Darwin. At

¹ Shelley, *Alastor*, ll. 23–34. *Alastor* was published early in 1816, only a few months before *Frankenstein* was written.

the age of nineteen, she achieved the quietly astonishing feat of looking beyond them and creating a lasting symbol of the perils of scientific Prometheanism. Her success is shown by the simple fact that her tale has acquired a kind of independent mythic life, like that of Quixote or Crusoe.

Frankenstein has appeared in numerous editions and in translations which have recently included Japanese, Russian, Urdu, Arabic, and Malayalam. A few years after it was first published, it underwent its first highly successful translation to the stage.¹ In an age which has learned to 'mock the invisible world with its own shadows', the tradition has been carried on in two series of films, in the first of which (from 1931 onwards) Boris Karloff, despite the fantastications of the story and its sequels, created a monster which had something of the pathos of the original. It seems to have earned for Frankenstein's monster a lasting place in folk memory as well as providing a proverbial image of scientific aims pursued in reckless disregard of human consequences. It is ironic but entirely appropriate that, in the process, the nameless monster seems to have usurped the name of his creator.

¹ See Lyles, *Bibliography*, Appendix III, 'Theatrical, Film and Television Versions of Frankenstein'.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

Frankenstein was first published anonymously in three volumes in 1818. The second edition of 1823 is simply a page-by-page reprint of the first, rearranged in two volumes; its publication was arranged by William Godwin in order to follow up the success of *Presumption*, the stage version of the novel. The third edition of 1831 was extensively revised by Mary Shelley, especially in the earlier sections, and has been used as the basis of the present edition, which is printed from the British Museum copy.

A copy of the novel, annotated by Mary Shelley for a possible new edition, was presented by her to her friend Mrs. Thomas in 1823; it was not used for the edition of 1831, and is now in the J. Pierpont Morgan Library.

Portions of two manuscripts of *Frankenstein* are in the collection of Lord Abinger. These comprise a rough copy, with corrections and amendments by Shelley, which is almost complete except for Walton's introductory letters; and a substantial portion of a fair copy, amounting to about the last one-sixth of the novel.

Some misprints and irregularities have been corrected (where possible, by reference to the first edition of 1818); but otherwise occasional idiosyncratic spellings and irregularities of punctuation or syntax have been allowed to remain unchanged, except that double quotation marks have been changed to single throughout. Most editions, like this one, follow the text of 1831; the edition by J. Rieger (see Bibliography) is based on that of 1818, with a full collation of the 1831 variants, and includes in the text the manuscript notes in the Thomas copy.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF MARY SHELLEY

		<i>Age</i>
1797	(30 August) Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin born at The Polygon, Somers Town, daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, who dies ten days later	
1807	Godwin family move to Skinner Street, Holborn	10
1812	(June) Goes to stay with the Baxter family at Dundee. Beginning of friendship between Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley	14
1814	(May) Returns to Skinner Street; meets Shelley again (28 July) Mary, accompanied by her step-sister, Claire Clairmont, elopes with Shelley. Travel through France and Switzerland, and return to England (August-September)	16
1815	(February) A girl-child born prematurely to Mary and Shelley, but dies a few days later (August) Settled with Shelley at Bishops Gate, Windsor	17
1816	(January) A son, William, born (May) Mary and Shelley, with Claire Clairmont, leave England for Geneva, where they meet Lord Byron (who has already formed a liaison with Claire) and his physician Dr. Polidori (June) Mary, Shelley, and Claire settle at the Maison Chapuis, at Montalègre, close to Byron at the Villa Diodati at Cologny, near Geneva. <i>Frankenstein</i> begun (July) Expedition to Chamonix and the Mer de Glace (September) Return to England (October) Suicide of Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister (December) Suicide of Shelley's first wife, Harriet. Mary and Shelley married at St. Mildred's Church, Bread Street, London (30 December)	18
1817	(March) Move to Marlow. Shelley refused custody of his children by his first marriage (May) <i>Frankenstein</i> completed (September) Daughter Clara born <i>History of a Six-Weeks' Tour</i> published	19
1818	(March) Mary and Shelley, with Claire and the children, leave for Italy. <i>Frankenstein</i> published	20

	Age
1818 (June) Settled for two months at Bagni di Lucca	
(cont.) (September) Move to Este. The baby Clara dies in Venice.	21
Visits to Byron in Venice	
(November) Journey south to Rome	
(December) Settle in Naples for the winter	
1819 (March) Return to Rome, where her son William dies	21
(June). Departure for Leghorn	
(September) Move to Florence for approaching confinement	22
(November) A son, Percy Florence, born	
1820 (January) Move to Pisa and (June) to Leghorn	22
(August) Move to Bagni di San Giuliano, near Pisa	
(October) Driven out of San Giuliano by floods, the Shelleys move to Pisa	23
1821 (April) Return to Bagni di San Giuliano for the summer	23
(October) The Shelleys move to Pisa, with Edward and Jane Williams and with Byron as near neighbour	24
1822 (May) The Shelleys settle with the Williamses at Casa Magni, near Lerici	24
(July) Shelley and Williams sail to Leghorn to meet Leigh Hunt but are lost at sea on the return journey	
(September) Mary joins the Hunts and Byron at Genoa	25
1823 (February) <i>Valperga</i> published	25
(August) Returns to London	
1824 (June) Shelley's <i>Posthumous Poems</i> published, but withdrawn on the insistence of Shelley's father, Sir Timothy	26
1826 (February) <i>The Last Man</i> published	28
(September) Percy Florence becomes heir to the Shelley title and estate on the death of Charles Bysshe, Shelley's son by his first wife Harriet	29
1830 <i>Perkin Warbeck</i> published	32
1832 (September) Percy Florence entered at Harrow	35
1835 <i>Lodore</i> published	37
1837 <i>Falkner</i> , her last novel, published	39
(July) Percy Florence entered at Trinity College, Cambridge	
1839 Publication of Shelley's <i>Poetical Works</i> , with notes partly replacing the unwritten biography	41
Publication of Shelley's <i>Essays and Letters</i>	
1840 (June–November) Continental tour with Percy Florence and friends	42
1841 (February) Percy Florence graduates	43