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FRANKENSTEIN AT 200: INTRODUCTION

Cassandra Falke and Jessica Allen Hanssen

Derek Attridge says of James Joyce that one can never be a first-time reader of that author's work.¹ The same can be said of Mary Shelley, particularly with regard to her first novel, *Frankenstein: Or The Modern Prometheus*. There cannot be many readers who come to it without prior ideas of what to expect. Images of the creature pervade popular culture, and most English readers know Victor's tale of overweening ambition even if they have not read the novel. The "Frankenstein myth," as Chris Baldick has called it, outstrips the novel itself and reaches readers first.² John Wilson Croker was confident, in 1818, that readers would "wonder and shudder" at the tale and question "after a struggle between laughter and loathing [...] whether the head or the heart of the author be the most diseased."³ In 2018, we are less convinced of what a novel *should* be, and therefore more appreciative of what Shelley shows it *can* be, but as today's readers we have to remind ourselves how daring her subject matter; her direct, impassioned language; and her innovations in narrative form really were.

It is worth trying to regain some of the wonder the first readers must have felt. Looking back at the 200-year period since *Frankenstein's* publication, it is impossible to assess the breadth of the novel's reach or to summarize the history of its reception in popular and academic culture. What this special issue hopes to do instead is celebrate a novel that, after 200 years, continues to pose relevant

¹ Derek Attridge, "Reading Joyce," *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 2.

² Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

³ John Wilson Croker, Review of *Frankenstein: Or The Modern Prometheus*, *Quarterly Review*, 18 (January 1818) 385.

and challenging questions, a novel that continues to prompt critical insights and draw new fans. The scholars who have contributed to this issue cannot claim to come to the novel with fresh eyes – indeed, some of them have taught it for decades – but we do hope to offer fresh readings. We hope the articles contained herein restore some of the wonder of a first reading even if you have read, taught or written about *Frankenstein* many times before.

Frankenstein seems to have a singular role as catalyst for considerations of society from various disciplinary perspectives, and this issue reflects this trend by featuring discussions of ecology, criminal justice, public opinion, and ethics alongside considerations of setting and narrative perspective. A 2016 survey by Columbia University places *Frankenstein* as the fifth most-taught text, and the highest-placing novel, out of nearly one million texts taught at participating colleges and universities.⁴ The other four are telling: they are *The Elements of Style*, *Plato's Republic*, *The Communist Manifesto*, and *Campbell's Biology*. *Frankenstein* takes its rightful place among the most relevant prose, political, economic, and scientific guides in Western culture – perhaps because it draws from each of these areas and shapes them into something new and provocative. This multivalence makes it an ideal novel for exploration within the context of the university, in which students and faculty alike are encouraged to pursue interdisciplinary discourse. Shelley and other intellectuals of her time were not expected to limit their curiosity to one subject, so her reflections on a range of contemporary intellectual discourses exemplify a freedom she shared with other authors of the period, but compared to other frequently-taught Romantic texts, *Frankenstein* seems particularly ambitious in the diversity of topics it takes on. Now that institutional maintenance of disciplinary divisions is weakening somewhat, *Frankenstein* has become a resource for focusing discussions among academics from literature, medicine, law, ecology, and ethics, who perhaps had lost track of the connectedness among different forms of knowledge that precedes our division into academic disciplines.

The novel's status as a text at once popular and canonical also helps make it a favorite teaching text. It carries the weight of the exemplary Romantic novel in many a survey of British literature because it speaks to so many of the themes students are taught to associate with the period – the individual in community, the sublimity of nature, the crucial role of education, the unpredictability of technological advancement, and the fragility of innocence. Because *Frankenstein* enjoys a generic afterlife as an inspiration for modern horror and science fiction,

⁴ *Open Syllabus Project*, Columbia University, 2006, <http://explorer.opensyllabusproject.org/> (accessed 28 November 2018).

students often feel that there is something very contemporary about it, and yet its engagement with early nineteenth-century science, exploration, politics and law makes it an ideal basis for helping students think about the huge gaps between Shelley's historical horizon and our own. It is also worth mentioning that *Frankenstein's* genesis marks the height of the Byron-Shelley circle's celebrity, and the youth and daring of that group only adds to the novel's allure. Students are alternately inspired or intimidated to learn its author was younger than them when she wrote it.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that a novel so closely tied to Romanticism's historical moment has relevance within the university walls, but its endurance outside the university calls for another explanation. The creature tops the charts in *The Guardian's* compilation of gothic characters' television and movie appearances. The clumsy and inarticulate monster beloved of visual media testifies to the same desire to control what we create that Victor feels. Unlike the creature of the novel, the green monsters of the screen confirm viewers' humanity by stressing the creature's difference. However, like the novel that spawned them, these screen-creatures foreground the enduring question of who deserves to be treated as a human. The prefix "Franken-" itself has entered the English lexicon to denote combinations of previously uncombined foods, technologies, and even genes, showing the novel's undiminished ability to capture anxieties surrounding innovation beyond a dimly-sensed natural order. There are frankenfoods and frankenwords: the 2005 British parliamentary report about choosing a baby's sex, was termed "the Frankenstein report." As Susan Wolfson chronicles in her Longman Cultural Edition of the novel, it seems there is no field without its own composite monster.⁵

In a roundabout way, all of these academic and popular references and allusions to *Frankenstein* lead back to the same question: why does *Frankenstein* endure? The question has been asked repeatedly since its original publication, but each succeeding decade of readers discovers different answers. The novel's confidential tone gives the impression of transparency, but the unwieldy structure and sheer boldness of conception introduce ambiguity at every turn. And so, we scholars continue to poke and prod at it, with our various instruments and scopes. In doing so we feel the power of the surgeon's scalpel, or of Galvani's electrodes, and perhaps this is where its enduring scholarly appeal comes in: our ambitious analytic processes echo the plot of the book itself, drawing us closer to both Victor and to the creature. At an even more

⁵ Susan Wolfson, "Frankentalk: *Frankenstein* in the Popular Press of Today," *Frankenstein: Or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Susan Wolfson (London: Pearson Longman, 2007) 402-24.

fundamental level, however, *Frankenstein* retains its force for students and for scholars, inside and outside the university because it speaks to basic human longings to make a meaningful narrative of one's life and for someone to hear that story.

Contributions to this volume reach across the spectrum of literary criticism to engage the novel in diverse and provocative ways. Rather than attempt one overarching theme, this issue, in the spirit of the creature itself, presents a 'stitched-together' assemblage of approaches, and thus discovers new commonalities and insights through their grouping.

The first three contributions explore *Frankenstein's* presentation of actions as unfolding in a matrix of unforeseeable consequences. Here we understand the novel as a conflict of humanity's responsibility for preserving the world as we know it against the obligation we feel for advancing our situation through emerging technologies and worldviews. Helena Feder, in "Transhumanism, *Frankenstein*, and Extinction" explores the idea of technology itself as a "creature" of human design, which, once unleashed, cannot accept responsibility for its ecological or social impact. Her reading situates *Frankenstein* as a commentary on the dangerous consequences of failing to honor the contingency, the entanglement of all things in the pursuit of knowledge. Likewise, Stephen Dougherty, in "Victor's Responsibility and the Monster's Favorite Books: Allegory, Technology, and Romantic Ideology in *Frankenstein*," takes humanity's obligation to our creations as a point of departure, but through his examination of the novel's blurred lines between fable and allegory, he discovers a singularity in Victor's engagement with the creature that speaks to our resistance to responsibility, and also speaks to the human condition we inhabit. Moving still further into the realm of the creator's social accountability, Erin Goss argues that *Frankenstein* illuminates a model of masculinity that can only survive if the female bodies it creates and imagines do not. Her article, "*Frankenstein*, Dismembered Women, and What It Takes to Be a Man," interprets Victor's desecration of the female body as a condemnation of a fragile masculinity that cannot survive the imagination of an active female will. Taken together, one can understand from these articles how *Frankenstein* reveals multiple forms of social hypocrisy by highlighting the characters' embeddedness in a complex ecology of ways of life existing together.

The next three articles view the novel in light of broader discussions of the meanings of justice and mercy. Cassandra Falke juxtaposes the novel's scenes of one-on-one listening with its scenes of institutionalized justice and argues that the presentation of stories as both something to be shared and something to be judged points to a reader's relationship to a novel more generally. "*Frankenstein's*

Reader as Judge and Confidant” discusses the novel’s evocation of each of these forms of reading and uses the ideas of Emmanuel Lévinas to clarify the ethical tension that arises between our reception of a story as though face-to-face with the teller and our reception as judges empowered to compare one ethical dilemma with another. David Sigler intensifies this focus on justice by discussing the novel’s resistance to any argument for the death penalty. “‘Doomed to Live’: Reading Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and ‘The Mortal Immortal’ with Derrida’s *Death Penalty Seminars*” reads the “life penalty” of “The Mortal Immortal” alongside Justine’s death penalty and suggests that both texts problematize the equivalences drawn between people when any penalty becomes “capital.” The final article in this section by Brecht de Groote is entitled “‘Old Familiar Faces’: *Frankenstein*, Anachronism, and Late Style.” De Groote shifts the focus from the incomparability of people or situations to compare Shelley to her fellow Romantics in terms of lateness. He suggests that the alterations to temporality critics have associated with the Romantic period arise from period authors’ sense that they come too late to their topics or even their lives. Mary Shelley, he argues, exemplifies this more than any other author, and although she was only eighteen when she wrote it, writes *Frankenstein* as though the moment of death were already rendering her reflective about the passing of her community and her own lifetime.

Finally, the last three contributions explore *Frankenstein*’s unique position as an enduring critical and discursive catalyst. In “*Frankenstein*: The Elements of Setting,” Frederick Burwick investigates settings pertinent to the novel’s thematic arc by relating the historical past of these settings to the relationship of Victor and his creature. Jessica Allen Hanssen, in “‘Unnatural’ Narratology, Frame Narrative, and Intertextuality in *Frankenstein*,” moves the critical gaze from setting to structure, exploring how the narrative framing makes *Frankenstein* a significant early example of “unnatural narratology,” which expands the boundaries of “naturally” possible storytelling. The tension Shelley creates between realistic and unrealistic forms of storytelling leads to a heightened awareness of readerly complicity in the creature’s estrangement. Finally, Stephen Behrendt also considers readerly complicity, but from the unique vantage point of having taught the novel in the university setting over four decades. In “‘All men hate the wretched’: Teaching *Frankenstein* in 2018,” he describes unsettling shifts in students’ sympathy for Victor and the creature. These shifts, he argues, indicate the novel’s powerful resonance with geopolitical movements in 2018, but also expose rising feelings of otherness and alienation.

Despite its apparent eclecticism, a certain metanarrative of creativity and reflexivity begins to emerge from the organization of the articles in this

collection. They are all connected – whether thematically, structurally, or philosophically – to the basic notion that Shelley’s novel, her *creation*, remains an unpredictable source of interpretative possibilities, in spite of its having been the focus of critical examination for 200 years. Because she herself so deftly held a magnifying glass to her own society, moving it up and down, and side to side, in her pursuit of truth and significance, Shelley invites her readers to examine her output with the same level of intensity and discovery. Although clearly a product of its time, *Frankenstein* rewards the most forward-reaching of critical outlooks. Working with the novel gives its critic a feeling of intense connection to the subject that rivals what Victor Frankenstein must have felt when he discovered – but couldn’t adequately describe – the electrical impulses that changed his life forever. This energy pulls readers forward and inspires continued inquiry, and whereas no monsters were made in the process, the articles contained herein do represent an intellectual inventiveness that recalls the Romantic scientific spirit.

The editorial team is grateful to our colleagues at *Litteraria Pragensia*, especially the chief editor Martin Procházka, for allowing us this unique opportunity to engage new critical responses to *Frankenstein*, and to our respective university faculties for supporting our work. We are indebted to the Keats-Shelley Society of America, led by Neil Fraistat who sponsored the Frankenreads initiative that inspired this and many other bicentennial celebrations. Finally, we thank our contributors and readers, and we hope that this issue of *Litteraria Pragensia* will inspire new responses to this enduring work.