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Frankenstein and Radical Science[†]

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is famously reinterpretable. It can be a late version of the Faust myth, or an early version of the modern myth of the mad scientist; the id on the rampage, the proletariat running amok, or what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman.¹ Mary Shelley invites speculation, and in the last generation has been rewarded with a great deal of it.

From professionals, that is. Since 1823, the year when the novel's title, characters and plot first became public property, the general public has seemed remarkably little divided about what the action signifies. A Californian researcher recently employed to find out what the public thinks of scientists was able to summarise his findings wordlessly, with a quick sketch of Frankenstein's Monster. Readers, filmgoers, people who are neither, take the very word Frankenstein to convey an awful warning: don't usurp God's prerogative in the Creation-game, or don't get too clever with technology.

Yet this is by no means what knowledgeable first readers in 1818 were likely to think, or on the evidence of early press comment did think. All three serious reviews in 1818 mention that the novel is topical. No-one appears to discern, as some modern critics do, an allegory of revolution or popular unrest; instead they suspect it of covertly promoting 'favourite projects and passions of the times'. By 'projects' must be meant the novel's network of allusions to contemporary science—not science as formally taught, but current scientific activity as represented to the British public in the 1810s by lectures, newspapers, a few accessible books, above all the serious Reviews.

The idea Mary Shelley famously hit upon in a house rented by Byron beside the shores of Lake Geneva between 16 and 20 June 1816 almost certainly does draw on a scientific dispute, conducted in lectures afterwards published as books, the first of which was the subject of an article in the *Edinburgh Review* the previous year.² The novel which grew from this anecdotal beginning introduces a range of scientific news, reported as such, particularly in the *Quarterly Review*, in the years 1816–18: topics such as electricity and magnetism, vivisection and Polar

[†] From *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 April 1993. Reprinted with permission of the author.
1. See Lowry Nelson Jr., 'Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel', *Yale Review* 52 (1963), 236–57; Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London: Verso, 1983), 83–108; Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London: Routledge, 1988), 40.
2. *Edinburgh Review* 23 (1814), 384–98.

exploration—and the spectre of new radical French work in what became evolutionism.³

After a long, costly European war, these were years of recession, social unrest, and much frantic comment, in moods ranging between outrageous and outraged, in media that included popular papers calling themselves black, red and yellow. From early 1817 the pro-government press, including the leading cultural journal, the Anglican and Tory *Quarterly Review*, published articles calling for press censorship, especially of radical materials intended for a popular readership.⁴ From 1818 the *Quarterly* several times called for the revival of the long-neglected charge of blasphemy against irreverent writings.⁵ In 1819 it for the first time directed this call against a serious book on evolution science—with which, as I shall show, *Frankenstein* itself is directly implicated.⁶

The 1818 *Frankenstein*, which had drawn nourishment, energy, importance from lectures and journals, had lived by the media, and after 1819 might well have died by the media. The public controversy concerning some of the kinds of science represented in *Frankenstein* endangered the book's future, for it read differently after readers became more knowing. It is not so much because of what Mary Shelley thought, but because of what readers thought, that *Frankenstein* became a substantially different and less contentious novel when reissued in popular form in 1831.

However unlike their approaches, modern critics are likely to be looking at the same text of *Frankenstein*. It will be a reprint of this very third edition of 1831, which Mary Shelley not only changed but, in a new Preface, interpreted—as the story of a 'human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world'.⁷ That is not an impression easily left by the novel in its 1818 form. But in 1831 Mary Shelley added long passages in which her main narrator, Frankenstein, expresses religious remorse for making a creature, and it is on such passages of reflection and analysis that the empathetic modern reader is encouraged to dwell. Our current understanding of *Frankenstein* is disproportionately impressed by passages introduced in what

3. See e.g. [John Barrow], 'Capt. Buxton's Memoir . . . on the Question whether Asia and America are Contiguous', *Quarterly Review* 18 (1818), 457–58 and [G. D'Oyley], review of eight works on the vitalist issue, *Quarterly Review* 22 (1820), 1–34.

4. See especially [R. Southey], *Quarterly Review* 16 (1816), 225–78.

5. E.g. article on John Bellamy's translation of the New Testament, *Quarterly Review* 19 (1818), 250–81.

6. Key evidence for this connection appears in the article on vitalism in the *Quarterly* (1820), for which see n. 3 above. That article is reprinted as Appendix C to my edition, *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text* (London: William Pickering, 1993); reprinted as a World's Classics paperback (Oxford, 1994), 229–51.

7. Mary Shelley, Preface to 1931 ed., Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson (eds.), *Mary Shelley Reader* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 170.