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Frankenstein's communities

Famously written as a consequence of collaborative literary activities – the ghost story competition proposed by Byron at Lake Geneva, and conversations about science and natural history 'to which' Mary Shelley claimed she was 'a devout but nearly silent listener' (*Frankenstein* [1831] 297) – *Frankenstein* is a novel defined by participation. Born of the shared practices of a particular group, it has since been received into theatrical and cinematic communities, scientific and musical ones. Emerging from a creative collective and preoccupied with the theme of belonging, *Frankenstein* is a work that continues to bring people together, however fixated it might seem on lives torn apart.

Der Roman Frankenstein*, der bekanntlich aus gemeinsamen literarischen Aktivitäten hervorging – dem Geistergeschichten-Wettbewerb, den Lord Byron am Genfer See vorschlug, und den Gesprächen über Wissenschaft und Naturgeschichte, bei denen Mary Shelley, wie sie behauptet, „eine hingebungsvolle aber fast stumme Zuhörerin" war – ist gekennzeichnet durch Teilnahme. Hervorgegangen aus den gemeinsamen Tätigkeiten einer einzelnen Gruppe, ist er seither in Theater- und Lichtspielgemeinden, in wissenschaftliche und musikalische Gesellschaften aufgenommen worden. Hervorgegangen aus einem kreativen Kollektiv, und durchdrungen vom Thema der Zugehörigkeit, ist* Frankenstein *ein Werk, das weiterhin Menschen zusammenbringt, egal wie fixiert es zu sein scheint auf Leben, die auseinandergerissen wurden.*

Frankenstein is a novel concerned with extreme isolation. Yet it is also a text with a lot of friends: the ubiquity it enjoys now, as a pre-eminent part of popular as well as academic culture, is arguably unique for a work of literature. No other text has been claimed by the proponents of such a variety of genres as *Frankenstein*, nor absorbed into so many other media and disciplines. *Frankenstein* has even inspired a power ballad – the 1987 UK number one "China in Your Hand" by pop-rock band T'Pau, with its warning about hubris, overreaching, and unintended consequences, was written after Carol Decker, the band's singer-songwriter, saw a documentary on Mary Shelley (Rogers). The chorus recommends caution, with the lyrics: "Don't push too far your dreams are china in your hand / Don't wish too hard, because they may come true / And you can't help them / You don't know what you might have set upon yourself" (Decker).[1]

I want to explore the paradox represented by the welcome reception *Frankenstein* has been given over the centuries. In the novel, Frankenstein's creature does not belong anywhere, and it is his urgent wish for companionship that generates events in the story. His revenge on Victor is to ensure that he, too, is deprived of his community. But the book that has this incisive exploration of exclusion and alienation at its core belongs everywhere. In many cases its appeal lies precisely in its depiction of solitude, heightening the contradiction at work. In his introduction to the *New Annotated Frankenstein* published

[1] I am grateful to Sharon Ruston for bringing this song's relationship to *Frankenstein* to my attention, during a 2010 conference on William Godwin's Diary.

by Norton in 2017, Guillermo del Toro writes that *Frankenstein* "illuminated the reason I loved monsters, my kinship with them" and views the novel as one that "can reach across distance and time and become a palliative to solitude and pain" (del Toro xvi).

As del Toro indicates, that audiences have adopted the text as they have can be seen to suggest that the isolation experienced by both Victor and the Creature, bewailed by each in turn as something unique to themselves, is in fact very widely recognised indeed. So when Victor tells us "no creature had ever been so miserable as I was; so frightful an event is single in the history of man" (*Frankenstein* [1818/31] 250), or the creature tells Victor "Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine" (ibid. 277), ironically they are describing states of mind that have turned out to be highly relatable.

Community and collaboration are important when considering *Frankenstein* in other ways, too. This article will be divided into three sections. In the first, I want to think about communities of production. The circumstances that brought about the writing of *Frankenstein* are now part of the mythology of the book. The literary coterie at Lake Geneva, featuring Byron and Percy Shelley, and the ghost story competition that ultimately produced Polidori's *The Vampyre* as well as *Frankenstein*, have passed into legend – thanks in part to Mary Shelley's own account of her inspiration in the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*. Another community to which Mary Shelley belonged, as signified by her lineage, as daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, has also been extensively explored. In *England's First Family of Writers*, Julie Carlson has argued particularly effectively for the Godwin/Wollstonecraft/Shelley family to be regarded as a collaborative group, a creative community, as well as a family in the merely relational, domestic sense. So thinking about the genesis of the novel already involves thinking beyond the "myth of the solitary genius" (Stillinger). From an examination of the collective practices behind the writing of *Frankenstein*, I want to move on to the content of the novel. Although memorable for the solitude endured by its protagonists, potential communities recur throughout *Frankenstein*, and if the story can be said to contain a positive moral, then it is about the importance of social ties and participation.

Finally, I will consider communities of reception. *Frankenstein* has found its way into such a vast array of cultural productions that an exhaustive list of all places where its influence can be found is impossible, and I am not going to attempt it. What I do want to suggest is that, even where a Frankensteinian influence might seem quite far removed from Shelley's text, and more a consequence of one of the adaptations, there remains in many cases a recognisable debt to Shelley. Establishing the extent to which Shelley's text itself belongs to these various communities is not straightforward because of the influence of adaptations, notably the James Whale film of 1931 starring Boris Karloff, which has determined the popular image of the monster as square-headed, bolt-necked, mute and lumbering for nearly a century now. As Eddy Von Mueller puts it in a chapter in the recent collection *Frankenstein: How a Monster Became an Icon*, "the image has been unmoored from the idea, the symbol severed from the story. The icon, now a global brand, has become so expansive in potential meaning that it can accommodate even its own negation" (Von Mueller 149). In other words, we cannot by any means claim Mary Shelley's presence any time a 'Frankenstein's monster' appears in a product or a production. However, this doesn't mean that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is absent from all contemporary references to the man-made monster motif, either. In considering *Frankenstein's* communities of

reception, what I want to highlight is how often Mary Shelley's origin text is present in some form, and indeed acknowledged as the source of all things *Frankenstein*, even in places we might think of as being solely influenced by the visual blueprint the James Whale/Boris Karloff film provided.

Mary Shelley's Introduction to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein is perhaps the best place to start in terms of understanding the communities behind the creation of the work. By giving testament to the company she was keeping at the time she was inspired to write *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley establishes the importance of networks and friendships to the production of literature. Her awareness of the role others have played in the writing of an ostensibly individually-authored novel militates against what Jack Stillinger called "the myth of the solitary genius" (vi). This myth is also targeted in the plot of the novel itself, where creation in isolation – an *auteur*'s approach to work and to making, which disallows the input of anyone else – leads only to misery. As Julie Carlson puts it, Victor's extremely solitary process of creation "isolates him from all prior relations – to nature, family, friends, or books", and consequently "The creature's eventual murder of Victor's relations […] is only the visible manifestation of what Victor has already achieved" (Carlson 100). The connection between the exploration of this theme in the novel and Mary Shelley's biographical circumstances has been made in a variety of ways before, and readings of the novel that take Victor's desire for pre-eminence as a reflection on the vainglorious ways of the men in Mary Shelley's life – William Godwin, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron – are frequent. Marilyn Butler went so far as to understand the characterisation of Victor as a satire on "male inattentiveness" (Butler xli). But this matching of the egotism in the book and the egotism Mary Shelley might have observed around her in life can also be reversed. Instead, we can match the author's consciousness of the necessity of collaboration to her project, with the emphasis to be found throughout *Frankenstein* on the positive, transformative qualities of good company.

Mary Shelley's 1831 Preface shows her positioning herself relationally. This begins with acknowledgement of her parentage – she notes that it is hardly surprising that authorship beckoned: "It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing" (*Frankenstein* [1831] 291). This statement occurs early in the Introduction and shows Mary Shelley identifying her own literariness as to some extent a product of her familial proximity to Godwin and Wollstonecraft, as critics continue to do. Gary Kelly, for instance, writes: "In many ways Mary Shelley was a product of the political coterie culture of her day. She spent most of her early years in her father's later circle, [and] she was imbued with the writings of her mother and father and their coterie of the 1790s" (Kelly 153).

The themes of influence and encouragement alluded to early in the introduction, continue as it progresses. We learn next from Mary Shelley that Percy Shelley, "My husband", as she refers to him (rather disingenuously, since Shelley was not Mary's husband at the time she is speaking of) "was from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage […] He was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation" (*Frankenstein* [1831] 292). What one critic has dubbed "the kinship coterie" (Joffe), has expanded to include Percy Shelley, as well as Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Mary herself. We can start to recognise here the potential of family-as-community, and the habits of thinking in the Godwin and Shelley circles that involved – to quote Julie Carlson again – "envisioning family as a public-oriented relation and home as a sphere of enquiry among familiars" (84). Mary Shelley's

possessive assertions about her domestic connections – "*My* husband", "*my* parentage" – are a way of insisting on her membership of a community which is also her family.

But more famous as the impetus behind *Frankenstein* than the Godwin-Shelley 'kinship coterie', is the Byron connection. The fifth paragraph of the 1831 preface brings in the celebrity poet, noting in an interestingly low-key way that: "In the summer of 1816, we visited Switzerland, and became the neighbours of Lord Byron" (*Frankenstein* [1831] 292). "Neighbours of Lord Byron" also familiarizes the connection between the Shelleys and the man who was, then, exponentially more famous than they were. Byron and the Shelleys are simply neighbours; there is little of the sycophancy here that can be detected in accounts of Byron from other contemporaries – Leigh Hunt and Thomas Moore spring to mind. Mary Shelley does celebrate Byron's work here – she talks about drafts of Canto 3 of "Childe Harold" as being Byron's thoughts "clothed in all the light and harmony of poetry" (ibid.), but she also notes the shared context. Byron and the Shelleys are enjoying the same inspirational landscape, and this sharedness is flagged up by Mary Shelley. She draws attention to "the glories of heaven and earth, whose influences we partook *with* him" (ibid., my emphasis). Although Mary Shelley recognises the social hierarchy that designates Byron as a 'Lord,' marking him out as different to the Shelleys, this is an anecdote emphasising the communal experience that brought them together, and informed their work equally. The emphasis, once again, is on "enquiry among familiars" (Carlson 84).

Godwin and Wollstonecraft, Shelley and Byron, have been brought into Mary Shelley's introduction up to this point, partly to establish Mary's credentials, but also to provide a series of contexts for the particular story of inspiration she wants to tell. What she has done is indicate in a general way the communities of belonging that formed her, intellectually and artistically, before she arrives at the precise occasion of collaborative literary practice that would ultimately produce *Frankenstein*. That occasion is described succinctly: "'We will each write a ghost story,' said Lord Byron; and his proposal was acceded to. There were four of us" (*Frankenstein* [1831] 294). It is Byron's idea, and there are four participants in what Mary Shelley portrays as an activity suggested in the spirit of friendly competition.

It is true that by emphasising the others challenged to produce a ghost story, and their failed attempts, Mary Shelley produces the converse effect of drawing attention to the success of her own idea. The stress on the communal element could be regarded as an exercise in false modesty, since what is actually established is that Mary Shelley thought more deeply and more seriously about the task in hand and was then able to bring her much more brilliant idea to fruition in a way "Poor Polidori", and "the illustrious poets, annoyed by the platitude of prose" (ibid. 295), were not. It is also notable that later on she is keen to claim credit for the unique qualities of the text herself, rather than allow any rumour to stand that allows Percy Shelley the acclaim that should be hers: "I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband" (ibid. 299). Many assumed, when the novel was first published, that Percy Shelley was its author. St Clair gives the example of "The Young Thomas Carlyle, who had only read a review", pronouncing on "'Frankenstein, by Godwin's son in law'" (St Clair 360). Some critics still insist that Percy Shelley's editorial additions entitle us to regard *Frankenstein* as having been co-written (see Robinson). However, according to William St Clair, himself drawing on previous studies of the drafts as well as numerical analyses, "[Percy] Shelley contributed about a fortieth [of the text] in terms of words", and his involvement can be seen as

"collaborative help [which] added to and sharpened the draft" (St Clair 357) – in other words, editorial and not authorial.

In her account of the collective response to Byron's suggestion, Mary Shelley cleverly establishes her own originality and the fact that ultimately, it was her story that won the day. Nevertheless, it does not read to me as if the point of mentioning the others is merely to denigrate their efforts. Rather, what Mary Shelley is stressing is that yes, a work of genius might ultimately have one author, properly called, but nothing comes from nothing. In her words: "Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded" (*Frankenstein* [1831] 296). Even in the passage where she denies that the plot and execution of *Frankenstein* was unusually indebted to Percy Shelley (a denial she needs to offer, in order to correct popular misconceptions), she fully acknowledges what he *did* do for her, in terms of urging her to work her idea into a novel. Her assertion of sole authorship is followed by the caveat: "and yet but for his incitement, it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world' (ibid. 299-300). In the contexts of both the ghost story competition and the Shelleys' mutually supportive practice, conversation and fellowship bring about the conditions in which the individual imagination is able to flourish.

Within the novel itself, Victor Frankenstein never achieves a creative practice which involves or recognises others the way Mary Shelley's own methods did. Similarly, his creature is never able to participate in domestic, neighbourly, or intellectual discourse with like-minded others. Their reasons are obviously different – Victor would be able to flourish in communal contexts but does not try to, the creature tries to join in and associate with others, but is not able to. But the point is that the potential for membership of a group, and assimilation into co-operative forms of sociability, is there for both characters throughout the novel. In fact it is highlighted. This makes the various failures to accommodate the companionable needs of the two protagonists all the more painful – the possibility of belonging is continually presented, before being cruelly withdrawn. The most memorable instance of this is the episode depicting the creature's observations of the De Lacey family, followed by his cautious overtures to "the blind old man" (*Frankenstein* [1818/31] 172). The sudden reversal that occurs when the younger De Laceys and Safie discover the creature in their cottage, assume the worst, and attack him, makes for traumatic reading largely because what the De Laceys represent for the creature is so positive. They are his "beloved cottagers" (ibid. 167). The creature tells us that as winter succeeds to autumn:

> I turned with more attention towards the cottagers. Their happiness was not decreased by the absence of summer. They loved, and sympathized with one another; and their joys, depending on each other, were not interrupted by the casualties that took place around them. The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures: to see their sweet looks turned towards me with affection, was the utmost of my ambition. (*Frankenstein* [1818] 171)

Until he finds himself mistreated at their hands, the De Laceys are role models for the creature. This is not just a matter of imprinting – of him feeling attached to them because they are the first people he has seen long enough to be attached to – neither is it simply their status as a family that he admires. The

creature knows from hearing Safie's story (and indeed, from his own experience) that the bonds of duty and biology are not enough for relationships to function. What he admires in the De Laceys is their commitment to mutuality and respect for intersubjectivity. He is impressed because "they loved, and sympathized with *one another*". It is this requitedness that strikes him – the way regard given out is returned, the manner in which the De Laceys are genuinely "with *one another*", "depending on *each other*".

Finding such a community for himself remains the creature's 'utmost ambition' for the duration of the novel, and it is the thwarting of this ambition that leads him to act monstrously. The creature's aim to belong among others is in stark contrast to Victor Frankenstein's ambition for singularity. While the creature wishes to stand out less, and mingle more, Victor is defined by "love of distinction" – the phrase is Godwin's, used in an autobiographical fragment to describe himself (Godwin, "Autobiography" 16). In another autobiographical fragment Godwin describes himself as someone "inextinguishably loving admiration and fame" (Godwin, "Analysis" 55). This, too, works as an assessment of what drives Victor Frankenstein. He becomes interested in the idea of the elixir of life because to discover something of the sort would bring fame, explaining: "wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" (*Frankenstein* [1818/31] 45). There is no "we" envisioned here – Victor wants to be able to say, like Coriolanus, "alone I did it" (*Coriolanus* V.vi.132).

Even so, the instinct that drives Victor to act in isolation, in pursuit of glory that only he can claim, is counterbalanced by his descriptions of the relationships he most values, and those he wishes he had pursued or attended to properly. Even his personal ambition is conflicted – he craves renown for himself, but it must be renown based on his public endeavours. His goals are community-oriented and utilitarian in nature to start with – Victor describes his youthful aspirations as "bright visions of extensive usefulness" (*Frankenstein* [1818/31] 40). Frankenstein's account of the way he, his siblings, and Elizabeth were brought up reads as a philosophical-anarchist utopia in miniature: "Neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other; the voice of command was never heard amongst us; but mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other" (*Frankenstein* [1818] 50). This is a vision of equality and reciprocal care, the same qualities that draw the creature to the De Laceys' circle. While the creature can only enjoy these in anticipation, Victor only appreciates them in hindsight.

Victor and his creature are also differentiated by the opportunities they are given to participate in social life. The De Laceys are the creature's first hope, while his last hope is expressed when he demands of Victor: "create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being" (*Frankenstein* [1818/31] 185) – the emphasis once again on "interchange" and "sympathy". The chances Victor has for communal engagement are much more numerous. He has a loving and idyllic family in Geneva, but also friends and equals at Ingolstadt. Victor describes M. Waldman, his chemistry lecturer here, as "a true friend" (ibid. 74). It is Waldman's lecture on the collective achievement of chemists in the plural that inspires Victor: "they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers" (ibid. 67). This "they" – chemists and chemistry students – represents another community to belong to. By making the decision he does, to pursue a solitary project "separated from all" (ibid. 80), as

he puts it, Victor misses his opportunity to assimilate into the science community.

Communities are there in *Frankenstein*, representing the highest good in humanity, and remaining just out of reach of both monster and maker. But if Frankenstein and his monster miss their opportunities to join the club within the novel itself, perhaps the afterlife of Mary Shelley's book makes up for it through the many doors opened for them elsewhere – into genres of literature such as horror and science fiction, disciplines like politics and genetics, and the worlds of theatre, cinema, music and comedy.

In a recent interview with Mel Brooks about his 1974 comedy, *Young Frankenstein*, Kevin LaGrandeur asked Brooks: "if Mary Shelley were here right now, what would you say to her?" (LaGrandeur 102). Brooks' reply is typically effusive and amusing, but also revealing, I think, of the debt that is still owed to Mary Shelley's original work, even where we least expect it. Brooks answers:

> "I'd probably say, 'Miss Wollstonecraft, you're a genius, and whatever money Fox gives me, you're in for a third. It's a third for Gene Wilder, a third for me, and a third for you.' I would hug her, and kiss her, and tell her what an inspired story she wrote and what a genius she was, to write something so imaginative and creative and profound, at such an early age. I would tell her how grateful we all are for her genius, her gift. That's what I would have said." (102)

Elsewhere in the interview Brooks insists that despite the obvious visual and stylistic debt in *Young Frankenstein* to James Whale's 1931 film and Boris Karloff's monster therein, *Young Frankenstein* is paying equal homage to the novel. Brooks tells LaGrandeur: "We were saluting the book. We were true to the book […] We tried to make a comedy that was faithful to both James Whale and Mary Shelley. It was difficult, but I think we succeeded. Shelley's story provided the spirit of the thing, and the emotions, and the very genius of it" (91f.). Brooks' open admiration for Mary Shelley, and recognition of what is owed to her, is a salutary corrective to the view that "Almost all the visual and narrative metaphors associated with Frankenstein in contemporary culture derive from the 1931 film version rather than Mary Shelley's novel" (Lieberman 72). This is an overstatement because we cannot completely divorce Mary Shelley's novel from the adaptations that followed. The level of faithfulness to the original waxes and wanes, and is mediated by any adaptations that have intervened in the meantime – the 1931 Frankenstein owes a great deal to the stage history of *Frankenstein* in both the UK and the US, for instance (St Clair 370f.).

I would suggest that it is rarer for Mary Shelley's novel to be entirely absent from its after-effects than is generally understood, though its presence might sometimes be a subtle one. For instance, I have been arguing that community is an important theme in the novel, and according to Carol Colatrella this theme is also central to Tim Burton's animated film of 2012, *Frankenweenie*, in which: "Victor Frankenstein is a young boy who uses electricity from lightning to reanimate his beloved dog, a scientific endeavour creating chaos but one that brings together his *community*" (Colatrella 173, my emphasis).

We might also think, to give another example, that Boris Karloff as the monster does not look like the character Mary Shelley describes. However, Jack Pierce, the make-up artist on the James Whale film; "began by reading the novel and then plunged into the study of anatomy". Interviewed in 1939, Pierce

explained:

> My anatomical studies taught me that there are six ways a surgeon can cut the skull in order to take out or put in a brain. I figured that Frankenstein, who was a scientist but no practicing surgeon, would take the simplest surgical way. He would cut the top of the skull off straight across like a potlid […] That is the reason I decided to make the monster's head square and flat like a shoe box. (Hitchcock 150)

I'm not sure I follow Pierce's reasoning here, but he was thinking it through via his knowledge of the novel, trying to approach the thing as the Victor Frankenstein he found in Mary Shelley's book might have approached it. Like Mel Brooks, he took his creative decisions after communing with the novel and its characters. Meanwhile, the combined effect of Jack Pierce's makeup and Boris Karloff's acting can itself be regarded as another community of production, akin to the collaborative practice that first brought the novel into being. Eddy Von Mueller draws attention to "the subtlety of Karloff's expressions and the virtuosity of Jack Pierce's appliances and makeup", adding that "The men worked closely together" (143), and concluding:

> The monster is, like most of the characters we see on-screen, a hybrid creation, arising from the collaborations and collisions of multiple technologies, technicians, and creators, the writer, the director, the editor, and the actor all play pivotal roles in crafting the ultimate experience of the performance. (Von Mueller 149)

Communities of reception themselves become new communities of production – or to put it another way, communities of production have always also been communities of reception. Or rather, to paraphrase Mary Shelley once more, "invention does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos".

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