

James Rieger, the editor of the only available reprint of the 1818 text of *Frankenstein*,¹ is so inaccurate and so prejudiced in favor of Percy Shelley that students must be warned against its misleading combination of truths, half-truths, and unwarranted speculations.

As Mary Shelley wrote her story of Frankenstein, she gave it to her husband to edit. She rightly claimed that she "did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling" to Percy Shelley (Rieger 229), with one minor exception: it was Percy who suggested that Frankenstein's trip to England be proposed by Victor himself, rather than by his father. Yet Percy Shelley made numerous corrections, about a thousand in all, on the surviving manuscript pages, almost all of which Mary Shelley accepted.

James Rieger credits Percy Shelley with wording the descriptions of contrasts between the personalities of Frankenstein and Elizabeth and nations, with coining the metaphorical description of the power within Mont Blanc, with conceiving the "idea that Frankenstein journey to England for the purpose of creating a female Monster," with making the "final revisions" of the last pages, and with correcting Mary Shelley's "frequent grammatical solecisms, her spelling, and her awkward phrasing." He then concludes that Percy Shelley's "assistance at every point in the book's manufacture was so extensive that one hardly knows whether to regard him as editor or minor collaborator" (Rieger xviii).

Close examination of the surviving manuscript fragments shows that Percy Shelley's numerous revisions of Mary's original text damaged as well as improved it. To dispose of Rieger's misinformation, Percy did expand, although he did not initiate, the comparison of Elizabeth's character to Victor Frankenstein's; and he did interpolate a favorable comparison of Switzerland's republicanism with the tyranny of other nations. However, the descriptions of Mont Blanc and the Mer de Glace in the novel are based primarily on Mary Shelley's own observations, which she made in July 1816 and recorded both in her journal entries for 22-26 July and in her letters to Fanny Imlay; these letters were later published in her *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817). As already noted, Percy suggested merely that Victor rather than Alphonse Frankenstein propose the trip to England. We might pass over Rieger's annoying habit of referring to Percy Shelley only by his last name and to Mary Shelley by her first, or his failure to acknowledge, in his assertion that Percy corrected "her frequent grammatical solecisms, her spelling, and her awkward phrasing," that Mary's grammatical errors or misspellings were infrequent, while her phrasings were often more graceful than her husband's revised versions. Rieger's concluding suggestion that Percy Shelley can be regarded as a "minor collaborator"

1. Originally published by Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis) in 1974 and reprinted by U of Chicago P in 1982 [Editor].

possibly Shelley himself. Mary's authorship, which was at first intended to be a secret known only to a few friends like Moore and Byron, gradually became common knowledge.

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Choosing a Text of *Frankenstein* to Teach

Which edition of *Frankenstein* should I teach? This question is more complicated than it might at first appear. There are critically significant differences among the manuscript of *Frankenstein* in the Bodleian Library, the first edition of the novel in 1818, and the second and heavily revised edition of 1831. Since current text-editing theory and practice no longer assume that the author's final word is definitive, we cannot select the final edition for that reason alone. Nor should we be unduly swayed by the fact that the 1831 edition in the Signet-NAL paperback costs less than two dollars.

I strongly believe that the text of preference should be the 1818 edition of Wordsworth's *Prelude* to the final 1850 edition. The first completed versions of both works have greater internal philosophical coherence, are closest to the authors' original conceptions, and are more convincingly related to their historical contexts. In *Frankenstein*, these contexts are biographical (the recent death of Mary Shelley's first baby and her dissatisfactions with Percy Shelley's Romantic ideology), political (her observations of the aftermath of the French Revolution in 1814-16), and scientific (the experiments with galvanic electricity in the first decade of the nineteenth century).

The most striking thematic differences between the two published versions of the novel concern the role of fate, the degree of Frankenstein's responsibility for his actions, the representation of nature, the role of Clerval, and the representation of the family. I discuss these issues in more detail later in this essay, but here I must make two preliminary observations. Even the first published text of *Frankenstein* has moved away from Mary Shelley's original style and conception, insofar as we can determine these from the surviving sections of the manuscript in the Abinger Shelley Collection in the Bodleian Library (these sections constitute page 30, line 13, through page 109, line 9, plus page 117, line 17, to page 221, line 12, in the Rieger edition of the 1818 text). Furthermore, the account given of this manuscript by

8. *Quarterly Review*, Jan. 1818; *Edinburgh Magazine*, Mar. 1818; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Mar. 1818. R. Glynn Grylls, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 315-18. From *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein* (New York: MLA, 1990) 31-37. Reprinted by permission of the Modern Language Association of America.

inate equivalents. He is thus largely responsible for the stilted, ornate, putatively Ciceronian prose style about which so many students complain. Mary's voice tended to utter a sentimental, rather abstract, and generalized rhetoric, typically energized with a brisk stylistic rhythm. Here, for instance, is Mary on Frankenstein's fascination with supernatural phenomena:

Not were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was also a favorite pursuit and if I never saw any I attributed it rather to my own inexperience and mistakes than want of skill in my instructors.

And here is Percy's revision:

Not were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistakes, than to a want of skill or fidelity in my instructors. (Rieger 34)

Percy's preference for more learned, polysyllabic terms was obsessive; in addition, he rigorously eliminated Mary's colloquial phrases, as the following lists indicate.

Percy Shelley's revision

possess
desire, purpose
derive their origin from
a representation
station
sufficient
period
endured
confidence
experienced
remain
extinguish
conversed
inflamed
minuteness
extinction
within
fatiued
perish
omit
augment

Mary Shelley's manuscript

have
wish
caused
a painting
place
plenty of
time
felt
hope
had
stay
took away
talked
hot
smallness
end
inside
tired
leave out
add to

or even as one of the two authors of the novel (xlv) is not only unjustified by the evidence. It is also, as we can now recognize, explicitly sexist, since it implies that Mary Shelley could not have created her story alone. Rieger thus does a great disservice to Mary Shelley's genius.

Percy Shelley did improve the manuscript of *Frankenstein* in several minor ways: he corrected three factual errors, eliminated a few grammatical mistakes, occasionally clarified the text, substituted more precise technical terms for Mary's cruder ones, smoothed out a few paragraph transitions, and enriched the thematic resonance of the text. But Percy Shelley misunderstood his wife's intentions. He tended to see the Creature as more monstrous and less human than Mary did, and he frequently underestimated the flaws in Victor Frankenstein's personality. Furthermore, he introduced into the text his own philosophical and political opinions, opinions that were often at variance with his wife's beliefs. For instance, throughout her manuscript Mary assumes the existence of a sacred animating principle, call it Nature or Life or God, which Frankenstein usurps at his peril. But Percy undermined her notion that Frankenstein's pursuit of his Creature was "a task enjoined by heaven" by adding his atheistic concept of a universe mechanistically determined by necessity or power, "the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious" (Rieger 202). Percy also introduced all the references to Victor Frankenstein as the "author" of the Creature (see Rieger 87, 96) and thus may be largely responsible for recent discussions of Mary Shelley's anxiety of authorship (see Gilbert and Gubar 49; Poovey, chs. 4 and 5).

More important, Percy changed the last line of the novel in a way that potentially alters its meaning. Mary had penned Walton's final vision of the Creature thus:

He sprung from the cabin window as he said this upon an ice raft that lay close to the vessel & pushing himself off he was carried away by the waves and I soon lost sight of him in the darkness and distance.

But Percy changed this to

He sprung from the cabin-window, as he said this, upon the ice-raft which lay close to the vessel. He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance. (Rieger 221)

Mary's version, by suggesting that Walton has only lost sight of the Creature, leaves open the troubling possibility that the Creature may still be alive, while Percy's flat assertion that the Creature is lost provides the reader a more comforting closure of the novel's monstrous threats. By far the largest number of Percy's revisions were stylistic. He typically changed Mary's simple, Anglo-Saxon diction and straightforward or colloquial sentence structures into more refined, complex, and Lat-

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who transgress against its sacred rights, that Victor is morally responsible for his acts, that the Creature is potentially good but driven to evil by social and parental neglect, that a family like the De Lacey's that loves all its children equally offers the best hope for human happiness, and that human egotism causes the greatest suffering in the world — are all rejected in the 1831 revisions.

In the 1818 version, Victor Frankenstein possessed free will: he could have abandoned his quest for the "principle of life," he could have cared for his Creature, he could have protected Elizabeth. But in the 1831 edition, he is the pawn of forces beyond his knowledge or control. As he comments, "Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction" (Rieger, app. 239). Elizabeth also subscribes to this rhetoric of fatalism: "I think our placid home, and our contented hearts are regulated by the same immutable laws" (Rieger, app. 243).

In the 1831 edition, Mary Shelley replaces her earlier organic conception of nature with a mechanistic one. She now portrays nature as a mighty machine, a juggernaut, an "imperial" tyrant (Rieger, app. 249). Since human beings are now but puppets ("one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being," says Victor [Rieger, app. 241]), Victor's downfall is caused not so much by his egotistical "presumption and rash ignorance" as by bad influences, whether his father's ignorance or Professor Waldman's Mephistophelian manipulations. Victor's only sin is not his failure to love and care for his Creature but his original decision to construct a human being. His scientific experiments themselves are now described as "unhallowed arts" (Rieger, app. 247).

Not only is Frankenstein portrayed in 1831 as a victim rather than an originator of evil, but Clerval — who had functioned in the first edition as the touchstone of moral virtue against which Victor's fall was measured — is now portrayed as equally ambitious of fame and power, as a future colonial imperialist who will use his "mastery" of Oriental languages to exploit the natural resources of the East (Rieger, app. 243, 253). Furthermore, the ideology of the egalitarian and loving bourgeois family that Mary Shelley had inherited from her mother's writings and that sustained the first edition of *Frankenstein* is now undercut. Material love is identified with self-destruction when Caroline Beaufort de-liberately sacrifices her life to nurse Elizabeth. And Elizabeth Lavenza has become a passive "angel in the house," no longer able to speak out in the law courts against Justine's execution.

By coming to constitute nature in the 1831 edition as only Waldman and Frankenstein had done in the first edition, as a mighty and amoral machine, Mary Shelley significantly decreased the critical distance between herself and her protagonist. In the "Author's Introduction" added to the novel in 1831, Mary Shelley presents herself as she now repre-

Mary Shelley's manuscript

poverty
mind
ghost-story
about on a par
we were all equal
it was safe
the danger of infection was
past
be persuaded to part
employ it
eyes were shut to
do not wish to hate you
wrapping the rest
it was a long time
had a means
how my disposition and habits
were altered
whatever I should afterwards
think it right to do

neither of us possessed the
utlity
of nearly equal interest and
a tale of substitution
understanding
penury
slightest pre-eminence over
the other
the danger of infection was
past
be persuaded to part
employ it
eyes were insensible to
will not be tempted to set my-
self in opposition to thee
depositing the remains
a considerable period elapsed
possessed a method
the alteration perceptible in
my disposition and habits
whatever course of conduct I
might hereafter think it right
to pursue
what manner to commence
the interview

I wish to claim not that Mary Shelley is a great prose stylist but only that her language, despite its tendency toward the abstract, sentimental, and even banal, is more direct and forceful than her husband's. (For a more detailed discussion of Percy Shelley's revisions of the manuscript of *Frankenstein*, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, ch. 3 and app.)²

Turning now to the differences between the first and second published editions of *Frankenstein*, we must recognize that between 1818 and 1831, Mary Shelley's philosophical views changed radically, primarily as a result of the pessimism generated by the deaths of Clara, William, and Percy Shelley; by the betrayals of Byron and Jane Williams; and by her severely straitened economic circumstances. These events convinced Mary Shelley that human events are decided not by personal choice or free will but by an indifferent destiny or fate. The values implicitly espoused in the first edition of *Frankenstein* — that nature is a nurturing and benevolent life force that punishes only those

2. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988) [Editor].

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sents Frankenstein, as a victim of destiny. She is "compelled" to write (Rieger 222); her imagination "unbidden" possessed and guided her (Rieger 227). She ends with a defensive lie: "I have changed no portion of the story, nor introduced any new ideas or circumstances" (Rieger 229). Thus in the final version of her novel, Mary Shelley disclaims responsibility for her hideous progeny and at the same time insists that she has remained passive before it, "leaving the core and substance of it untouched" (Rieger 229). For invention "can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (Rieger 226). Imperial nature, the thing-in-itself, is now triumphant. Before it, Mary Shelley's human imagination can only mold shapeless darkness into a hideous monster. Like Victor Frankenstein, she has become the unwilling "author of unalterable evils." (For a more detailed description of Mary Shelley's revisions of *Frankenstein* in 1831, see Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, ch. 9.)

The remarkable shifts in both diction and philosophical conception between the three versions of *Frankenstein*—the manuscript, the 1818 edition, and the 1831 edition—make this an ideal text for use in courses in either text editing or the theory of the text itself. From the perspective of deconstructive literary criticism, *Frankenstein* exemplifies what Julia Kristeva has called "the questionable subject-in-process," both a text and an author without stable boundaries. For students who have time to consult only one text, the 1818 text alone presents a stable and coherent conception of the character of Victor Frankenstein and of Mary Shelley's political and moral ideology. It is a pity that the significantly higher price of the Rieger edition often proves decisive in persuading teachers to opt for the cheaper editions of the revised 1831 *Frankenstein*, editions that cannot do justice to Mary Shelley's powerful originating vision.

CONTEXTS



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