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### Never Dead: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

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## REVIEW-ESSAYS

**Nicole Lobdell**

### **Never Dead: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***

Carol Margaret Davison and Marie Mulvey-Roberts, eds. *Global Frankenstein*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, STUDIES IN GLOBAL SCIENCE FICTION, 2018. xxvi+344 pp. \$119.99 hc, \$89 ebk.

Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, eds. *Transmedia Creatures: Frankenstein's Afterlives*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2018. 296 pp. \$29.95 pbk.

Celebrating the bicentennial of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) has taken many forms in the past several years: plays, ballets, festivals, foods, films, books, digital media, lectures, workshops, museum displays, and conferences, among others. In her 25 October 2018 *New York Times* article "Frankenstein at 200," Jennifer Schuessler writes that

The novel's 200th anniversary has inspired a cavalcade of exhibitions, performances and events around the world, from Ingolstadt, the Bavarian home of Victor Frankenstein's fictional lab, to the hell mouth of Indiana, which in a bid to become the epicenter of American Franken-frenzy, has held more than 600 events since January [2018].

There is clearly no lack of interest in *Frankenstein* and the novel remains a wellspring of scholarly and artistic inspiration even after two hundred years. In her foreword to *Global Frankenstein*, Nora Crook points out what every scholar of *Frankenstein* already knows: "the extraordinary proliferation of texts, contexts, and adaptations has surpassed the capacity of any single person to encompass them all" (ix). With such abundance, it truly is impossible to keep abreast of everything *Frankenstein*-related. Not even the most ardent fan of *Frankenstein* could attend hundreds of events in one year. The next best thing, then, are edited collections such as these that "open up spaces where specialism can converse with specialism" (*Global* ix); they offer readers an internationally inspired and global look at *Frankenstein* today.

Together, *Global Frankenstein* and *Transmedia Creatures: Frankenstein's Afterlives* offer thirty original chapters that cover a wide and wild variety of topics from history to the financial crisis, from film to plastic surgery, from video games to children's literature, from steampunk aesthetics to memes, and from music to young adult fiction. In her foreword, Crook writes that as recently as 2009 new research was emerging that may change the way we view the novel: "In 2009, Julia Douthwaite discovered a precursor, Félix Nogaret's political allegory, *Le Miroir des événements actuels* (1790), in which a scientist called Frankénstëin makes a full-sized mechanical man who plays

the flute” (ix). Such a discovery demonstrates that even after two centuries Shelley’s novel is still revealing itself to us.

In their introduction to *Global Frankenstein*, Davison and Mulvey-Roberts acknowledge that their volume “cannot fully convey the ... scope of *Frankenstein*’s worldwide influence or capture the extent of its continued popularity” (8), in part because the collection is comprised solely of work by English-speaking scholars. What *Global Frankenstein* endeavors to do, and in my opinion does very well, “is [to] grant some sense of the novel’s enormous influence across eras, genres, and artistic forms, reconsidering, where and when necessary, the original novel in the contexts of its historical and intellectual roots and its many reverberations—aesthetic, socio-political, religious, and philosophical” (9). Even though the contributors may take as their primary focus adaptations inspired by earlier adaptations, they all trace their lineages back to the “mother-text as they consider its global reach and impact” (9). This lineage is also demonstrated in the identities of *Global Frankenstein*’s seventeen contributors, from emerging scholars to established ones, and in the interdisciplinarity and diversity of their research fields, including but not limited to literature, art, medicine, media studies, aesthetics, film, theater, and video game studies.

In *Transmedia Creatures*, Saggini and Soccio collect a truly international group of thirteen contributors who investigate the ways how *Frankenstein* adaptations traverse media, genre, and national boundaries. In her introduction, Saggini writes that their chapters “attest to this extraordinary plasticity and are designed to unlock new, richer readings of the novel” (3). Saggini makes an important point, and one that we often overlook or forget when thinking about adaptations and the afterlives of texts: “an afterlife may or may not have metatextual import; that is, the afterlife does not inevitably entail a critique of the pretext, as occurs in most postmodern afterings” (3). As a collection, *Transmedia Creatures* sets itself apart from *Global Frankenstein* in two important ways. First, the volume invests itself in a type of media-collaging to examine the ways how adaptations combine different media and modes to create new forms, “quite deliberately stepping aside from the wealth of existing *Frankenstein*-related scholarship: the essays take their cue from it but then follow their own interpretative paths ... mak[ing] it possible to break new ground” (6); and, second, in having a distinct investment in pedagogy. The thirteen chapters consider the ways how educators can bring *Frankenstein* and its numerous adaptations into the classroom, making this volume particularly appealing to instructors looking for innovation in teaching the novel.

With thirty original chapters, it is impossible to include a detailed discussion of them all here. I have selected several from each collection that respond to the global, pedagogical, and theoretical concerns surrounding *Frankenstein* today, focusing on discussions of adaptations in film and theater, children’s literature, comics and graphic novels, performance art, music, disability studies, and digital literature. With so many adaptations past,

present, and future, the volumes collectively ask, has *Frankenstein* ever truly died?

Theater and film are arguably the most immediate and commercially popular forms that *Frankenstein* adaptations took after Shelley's novel first appeared in 1818. In *Transmedia Creatures*, Diego Saglia demonstrates the popular influence in France of Richard Brinsley Peake's 1823 melodramatic adaptation *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, which inspired new theatrical productions and a general "*Frankenstein*-mania" that even manifested in such forms as a popular color that became known as "pale green à la *Monstre*" (159, 162). In the same collection, Daniele Pio Buenza breaks down the scenes of James Searle Dawley's popular 1910 silent film *Frankenstein* to analyze the doppelgänger motif; he argues that the monster, who disappears into a mirror at the film's end, is only ever a manifestation of Frankenstein's mind. The double and the mirror, Buenza argues, anticipate and symbolize the work of psychoanalysis as an emerging field of research.

In "The Cadaver's Pulse: Cinema and the Modern Prometheus" in *Global Frankenstein*, Scott MacKenzie argues how films can be and are their own Frankenstein creations. He dissects the ways how *Frankenstein* has been cut, re-cut, and edited in transnational and avant-garde or experimental films to address how "new films [are made] out of old, dead ones" (150). MacKenzie examines the roles that Frankenstein images play in the "revivification" of film, especially the "power of the cut to create new and different meanings through juxtaposition" (152). He points to James Whale's iconic *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and the censorious cutting both films endured that led to differently edited versions being shown simultaneously in America and Europe. He also reveals that the conclusion to Whale's *Frankenstein* was re-cut to change the ending, allowing the monster plausibly to survive the windmill fire in scenes shown at the beginning of *Bride of Frankenstein*. MacKenzie closes with a fascinating examination of Bill Morrison's *Spark of Being* (2010), an experimental, found-footage film made from "forms of decayed film: archival, mouldy, overexposed, chemically stained, tinted, and scratched," and including footage from Ernest Shackleton's incredible Antarctic expedition (1911-1914) and "soft-core porn, old Movietone newsreels, educational films, and other remnants of detritus cinema" (163). The film, argues McKenzie, "is the clearest elucidation of building a new work and bringing it to life through discarded parts of cinematic bodies.... [The] film *is* the Creature" (163-64; emphasis in original). The stitching and suturing endured by Whale's *Frankenstein* and Morrison's experimental film reenact the collaging that Frankenstein enacts upon his creature.

Marie Mulvey-Roberts picks up the (surgical) thread in her *Global Frankenstein* chapter on cosmetic surgery as performance art. In "Monstrous Dissections and Surgery as Performance: Gender, Race and the *Bride of Frankenstein*," she surveys the history of anatomical sciences, creating a lineage of anatomists including John and William Hunter, brothers who conducted groundbreaking research in dissection. The scene in Shelley's novel

in which the Creature observes through a window as Victor begins assembling the female creature draws parallels, Mulvey-Roberts argues, with scenes of medical anatomy dissections. Mulvey-Roberts turns her focus then to ORLAN, a contemporary French artist who uses surgery and body modification as performance art and who has more recently begun a series of digital portraits where she merges her facial features with those of ethnic and racial others. Such an act, Mulvey-Roberts claims, serves as an “empowering symbol of female monstrosity” by “challenging inequalities of gender and race in a celebration of racial and sexual hybridity” (63,70). ORLAN’s performances examine the ways how hybridity can normalize difference.

One of the most interesting ways that adaptations work is to fill in gaps, address what happens offstage, and imagine the future lives of characters beyond the end of their novels. In these two collections, the contributions from Ruth Heholt, Andrew McInnes, and Carolyn Williams address these concerns. In *Global Frankenstein*, Williams examines the role of humor, arguing that Percy and Mary’s editing of the novel removed not only the vulgarities but also the humor: “Thinking about decorum vindicates, or at least explains, passages whose existence seems hard to justify and also casts free light on *Frankenstein* at its best, while critical and creative responses deplore, exploit, and celebrate its multi-faceted generic potential” (92). In editing the novel, Mary toned down “the signs of cheerfulness or amusement” (97). Humor has been largely lost in the novel but not in its adaptations. Williams points to the comedic roles that servants play in dramatic and filmic productions, and to the running joke in *Young Frankenstein* (1974) about the Creature’s enormous size—he “would have an enormous schwanzstucker,” quips Inga, the lab assistant. In thinking about what has been excised from and unacknowledged in the original, Williams encourages us to consider how adaptations can replace what is missing.

One element of the narrative that was lost but has been found again by contemporary adaptations is the theme of adolescence. In “Young Adult Frankenstein,” collected in *Transmedia Creatures*, Andrew McInnes offers a fascinating overview of young adult adaptations that examine teenage subjectivity and all the attendant encumbrances of jealousy, desire, angst, and anxiety. McInnes selects works “fascinated by monstrosity and its dark correlation with adolescence,” works in which “teenagers ... experience desire as lack, provoking perverse actions and violent reactions” (220). McInnes’s survey of three young adult adaptations explores key moments of Victor’s life in Shelley’s original: his early fascination with alchemy and experimentation in Kenneth Oppel’s *This Dark Endeavor* (2011); his travels with Henry Clerval from London to Scotland in Christopher Priestley’s *Mister Creecher* (2011); and, in Kate Horsley’s *The Monster’s Wife* (2014), Victor’s experiments on an Orkney island and their effects on local islanders when a teenage girl goes missing shortly after his arrival. Together these fictions capture Victor’s critically overlooked adolescence and fill in important gaps in Shelley’s original narrative.

McInnes rightly asserts that adolescence is important to the *Frankenstein* narrative, but so too is childhood. Many readers first come to know Frankenstein's "monster" through literature, film, and television aimed at children. *Global Frankenstein* offers three chapters that examine the role and legacy of illustration in *Frankenstein* adaptations. Emily Alder argues that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is invested in many themes and tropes to which child readers respond. One example she holds up is Neil Numberman's *Do Not Build a Frankenstein* (2009), which "could be read as working through childhood anxieties about parental abandonment, as the child protagonists become the 'parent' of the created, from whom they then learn about familial belonging" (217). Retellings of *Frankenstein* for children address many themes that adults recognize and to which they respond, but they consider these same issues from the perspectives of children. In her compelling conclusion, Alder argues that we should "see contemporary retellings of *Frankenstein* for children not as simplifications of Shelley's novel but as texts that answer back to the oversimplification of *Frankenstein* passed down through film and popular discourse" (223). Alder argues that retellings of *Frankenstein* serve a significant role not only for their child readers, but also for the legacy of the novel at large as child readers become adult readers.

The illustration history of *Frankenstein* is vast, beginning with the well-known 1831 frontispiece by illustrator Théodor Matthias von Holst. In their contribution to *Global Frankenstein*, Beatriz González Moreno and Fernando González Moreno survey the illustrated history of Shelley's novel, beginning with von Holst's frontispiece depicting the Creature and the laboratory for the first time; both are accomplishments, given that Shelley's details are rather vague. Through their analysis, Beatriz and Fernando González Moreno demonstrate how illustrations helped early readers understand the novel's complex narrative structure, a feat not easily achievable on the stage or in early cinema. For example, Nick Carbé's 1932 illustrations highlighted scenes important to understanding the novel's frame narrative, such as a scene of Walton's ship, and scenes which had not before been depicted, such as Justine's hanging (232). More contemporary illustrators have incorporated steampunk aesthetics or offered new feminist readings of Shelley's novel alongside the influential events of her own life, as Spanish artist Elena Odriozola does in her 2013 work. The illustrative work done on *Frankenstein* has often sought to rescue it from the oversimplification resultant from more commercial adaptations.

Illustrations, comics, and graphic novels are important for *Frankenstein* because "prose withholds, even when it seems not to," as Scott Bukatman argues in his chapter in *Global Frankenstein*, suggesting that the visuality of *Frankenstein* is critically important (189). Comics have the ability to synthesize word and image; they can visualize and depict interiority through devices such as thought balloons. Comic book narratives of *Frankenstein* can incorporate literary, filmic, and visual representations of Shelley's novel. Bukatman demonstrates how "comics once more turn [Shelley's] novel into another, rather than the first, iteration of the monster's story" (201),

suggesting that Shelley's novel is not the ur-text of the Creature, but merely one in a string of narratives that co-opt the Creature's story. The Creature's tale, he claims, has transcended Shelley's novel to exist independently of it. In *Transmedia Creatures*, Federico Meschini is similarly interested in "serial narratives in shared universes" (125) where the monster can enter into other imaginative worlds, such as that of the X-Men, who encounter the Creature in issue 40 of *Uncanny X-Men* (Marvel Comics, 1968) or Part I of Roger Langridge's *Frankenstein meets Shirley Temple* (Epic Comics, 1992). Comics allow for an extension of the narrative and give agency to the Creature in ways that neither film nor literature can do. "The comic book narrative," argues Bukatman, can "contain other narratives" (194).

Several contributions in these edited collections are invested in examining embodiment, body hybridity, and disability. In "Monstrous, Mortal Embodiment and Last Dances: *Frankenstein* and the Ballet" in *Global Frankenstein*, for example, Carol Margaret Davidson examines ballet and the mechanical production of dancers' bodies, describing them as "familiarily human yet sublime/uncanny in [their] ability to transgress the boundaries of natural, physical, and human movement" (110). Using dance to engage with grief, sexuality, xenophobia, embodiment, mourning, and artistic expression adapts the "animated body/corpsecentric and embodiment-aware novel" to an art form whose expressive medium is primarily the body (110). Davidson points to choreographers who have used ballet "to meditate on the pains and pleasures, freedoms and limitations, and abilities and disabilities, of embodiment" (115).

From dance to disability studies, *Frankenstein* is a novel that allows readers and artists to think through what Bruce Wyse in *Global Frankenstein* describes as "the tyranny of normative embodiment" (76). In his examination of three variations of *Frankenstein*, Wyse highlights how some adaptations "foreground the nexus of ugliness (or deformity/disability) and sympathy," arguing that Edward Bulwer Lytton's "A Manuscript Found in a Madhouse" (1829) was the first adaptation to do so (78). In particular, Wyse examines adaptations that "clarify [the novel's] subtext of deformity and disability, and explore ways of setting things right for the stigmatised creature" (89). Considering Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*, for example, Wyse persuasively argues that the film "rectifies the original Frankenstein's moral dereliction—his failure to love his creature and to be a responsible creator" (84). Near the end of the film, Frederick Frankenstein risks his own life to save that of his creature in a dangerous "physical-psychic transmission of supplementary humanity" aimed at calming and normalizing the Creature's rotten "Abby Normal" brain (86-87). In Frederick's acceptance of his family name and his subsequent determination to love his Creature, he "redeem[s] the Frankenstein name" (86). Brooks's film is a relatively early adaptation that aims at redemption, a theme that appears frequently in the more recent retellings of Shelley's novel. Wyse gives serious and thoughtful attention to Brooks's film and proposes how we might read it today, in light of disability

studies, as a righting of Whale's original treatment of ugliness, deformity, and disability.

The 2011 National Theater production of Nick Dear's *Frankenstein*, directed by Danny Boyle, figures largely in both collections. In her chapter in *Transmedia Creatures*, Claire Nally aligns disability studies and steampunk aesthetics in readings of the National Theater production and the film *Victor Frankenstein* (2015) directed by Paul McGuigan. Nally's chapter examines steampunk aesthetics through the lens of disability studies because the steampunk movement embraces and even co-opts the disfigured and damaged body (89). "Steampunk creations," Nally argues, "are rendered in visceral, anatomical, and gargantuan terms, metaphorically aligning them with the compositive and monstrous composition of the Creature himself" (89), and this seems true not only of Boyle's theatrical production but of other adaptations in different media as well.

In *Global Frankenstein*, Courtney Hoffman writes about sexual violence in Boyle's production and the ways how Elizabeth's body is sexualized by Victor; she also considers the ways that Elizabeth uses her body as the materialization of feminine sexual power. In Boyle's production, Victor assaults the female creature as the original looks on; this scene is repeated in a mirror image when the Creature assaults Elizabeth. Hoffman stresses that Victor's sexual violence, performed while the Creature looks on, teaches the Creature that "violence against women is, pointedly, intertwined with the desire and need to hurt other men" (144). For Hoffman, the National Theater's *Frankenstein* is ultimately about the production of gender (145).

One medium that has not received much critical attention of late is sound. *Transmedia Creatures* features two chapters that think about the significant roles that music and sound play in Shelley's novel and in contemporary adaptations. Enrico Reggiani offers three case studies wherein musico-literary strategies reveal an underexplored area of research in connection with Shelley's views on music, *Frankenstein*, and the novel's afterlives. The Creature's self-described "uncouth and inarticulate sounds" connect indirectly, Reggiani argues, with "the model of the Rousseauian savage" on which Shelley relies (145). Reggiani situates Shelley's phrases "uncouth" and "inarticulate sounds" in the works of authors often read in conjunction with *Frankenstein*, including Walter Scott and Joseph Conrad, suggesting the need for a larger discussion about the function of such words and phrases. Reggiani offers a fascinating close reading of Shelley's piano metaphors in the scene where Victor describes his meeting with Professor Waldman: "one by one *the various keys* were touched ... *chord after chord* was sounded" (Shelley qtd. Reggiani 146; emphasis added by Reggiani). In the second half of his essay, Reggiani creates a "tentative typological map" that begins with Richard Brinsley Peake's 1823 "melodramatic opera" and traces a lineage of the novel's afterlives in art music, ending with Australian composer Richard Graham Meale's opera *Mer de Glace: An Opera in Two Acts with Prologue* (1991), with libretto by Australian writer David Malouf (147).

Janet Larson's chapter in *Transmedia Creatures* on the multimedia afterlives of Margaret Atwood's revision of *Frankenstein* investigates the digital reimaging of Atwood's poetry collection *Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein* (1966), which was re-released in 2012 as an enhanced ebook for iPad. Although the 2012 digital edition loses the tactile sensations of Atwood's original book, which was handmade in a limited edition of fifteen copies, the ebook offers readers a new aural and visual experience. In writing an experimental piece, Atwood engages Shelley's model but, according to Larson, Atwood adds her own "carefully calibrated sound system—orchestrated chimes and clashes, beats, pauses, and repetitions—paired with her visual effects" (212). Atwood presents Frankenstein's interiority through a series of monologues in which the protagonist slips between past and present, masculine and feminine, first person and second person, moving from "I" to "you" to "thing." Larson argues that "both scientist and his creation are fe/male and humanimal ... represented in Frankenstein's interior monologue.... We don't see or hear from the creature 'in person' until the poem's end, and even then as an elusive presence. S/he/it may be silenced or absent, a figment of Frankenstein's imagination, or a dialogue partner" (206). In Atwood's piece, the collaging of voices comments on the separate but inseparable relationship between Victor and his creature.

Adaptations are invariably separate but inseparable from their originals. Each of these adaptations is a risk, an experiment, that pushes boundaries. Victor destroys the female creature in an effort to prevent a new race of monsters, but he has not succeeded, not entirely. Two hundred years of adaptations, remediations, retellings, and "sequels" have produced texts that Shelley could not have imagined. Imaginative creatures that have procreated across genres, media, language, and digital barriers now exist alongside and outside of their parent text. As these thirty chapters attest, they are as important as the original. The last lines of Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* are: "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" (221). In the last few years, a Frankenstein internet-meme, one of many, has appeared. The power of memes, suggests Shannon Rollins in her essay in *Global Frankenstein*, "The Frankenstein Meme," is in their ability to replicate, spawn, and influence. This meme is a close-up photo of the last page of the novel with the following words, written in dark ink in the space below the last line:

As he drifted away[,] I could just make out his final words.  
 "It's ok if you just call me 'Frankenstein' instead of 'Frankenstein's Monster.'  
 I really don't mind."  
 The End

Its origin and creator are unknown, but since first appearing a few years ago online, this meme has continued to evoke laughter, and new readers discover it every year as online users share it again and again. It also signals our relationship with Shelley's novel. *Frankenstein* really does not mind what we

call it or what we do with it. The novel and its characters have always been adaptable to our desires, needs, and wills, serving generations of readers as a cultural touchstone and bringing readers together to examine our collective humanity. The afterword to *Global Frankenstein* is David Punter's "Meditation on the Monster, A Poem." Punter's poem offers a poignant ending to the collection:

But now I see the world anew; I have not died,  
I rampage through the wild realms of fantasy,  
I am continuously reincarnated, it seems. (ll.129-31; qtd. *Global* 322)

Has *Frankenstein* ever truly been dead? No. In fact, it has never been more alive.

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