

The True Author of *Frankenstein*

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This year is the bicentennial of *Frankenstein*, the seminal novel of English Romanticism; it was published anonymously on January 1, 1818. Here I'll describe how I, as an independent scholar, disrupted a cherished feminist narrative. I made the case that the true author is Percy Bysshe Shelley, not his second wife, Mary.

My book, *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein* (Pagan Press, 2007), was not the first to reject Mary Shelley's authorship. Before me there was Phyllis Zimmerman (*Shelley's Fiction*, 1998) and long before both of us there were Sir Walter Scott (1818) and an anonymous reviewer of *Valperga* (1824), an historical novel by Mary Shelley.

At Harvard I studied English literature and then switched to Social Relations, a radically interdisciplinary department comprising psychology, anthropology, and sociology. After graduation in 1963 I worked as a market research executive, while engaged in political activism (antiwar and gay rights movements) and writing on the side. After retirement I returned to my first love, English literature.

It was almost by chance that I came to concentrate on Percy Bysshe Shelley (henceforth, Shelley). One afternoon I was in the New York 42nd Street Public Library, comparing translations of Plato's *Symposium*. A catalogue card indicated that a translation by Shelley was in the rare books collection. There I read the book, which in 1931 published Shelley's translation for the first time.

John Lauritsen is a retired market research analyst, now a full-time writer and publisher, who lives in Dorchester, Mass. He received his baccalaureate degree from Harvard College in 1963 and has a dozen books to his credit, including the history of the early gay rights movement *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement 1864-1935* (Pubs Service, 1974). Most recently he has written *The Shelley-Byron Men: Lost Angels of a Ruined Paradise* (Pagan Press, 2017) and *Don Leon & Leon to Annabella* (Pagan Press, 2017), the first scholarly edition of a nineteenth century epic poem. Lauritsen's thesis that Mary Shelley is not the author of *Frankenstein* resulted in his being banned from the NASSR-L list service for scholars working in the field of Romanticism. He has also been prohibited from posting on the subject of *Frankenstein* by the Victoria discussion group for scholars of the Victorian period.

Amazingly, this major work of a great poet had been first suppressed and then bowdlerized for well over a century.

The dialogue of the *Symposium* came alive and I was spellbound. I heard the voices of friends discussing Love with each other, men who had died twenty-four centuries ago. The next day I returned with camera and copy stand to photograph the book. (This was allowed, although photocopying was not.) I decided then to publish the translation, which I finally did in 2001, using my own Pagan Press (founded 1982).

I began reading and rereading Shelley's poems and other works and, for the first time as an adult, read *Frankenstein*. Struck by the novel's ideas and its intense and poetic language, I sensed that Shelley must, at the very least, have heavily influenced his wife, Mary Shelley. This thought stayed in my mind until I read the original 1818 *Frankenstein* in the Rieger edition. More and more I heard Shelley's voice, until I came across the phrase, "I will glut the maw of death." I had a flash of insight: this is Shelley! Immediately I began reading the novel again from the beginning, open to the possibility of Shelley's authorship. When I finished, I knew for sure that *Frankenstein* is his work and his alone.

The next step was to read Mary Shelley's major works. Here there is a problem: in many works attributed to her, she had help—from her husband, from Leigh Hunt, and from her father William Godwin. For example, *Valperga* was edited and rewritten by Godwin. The Italian part of her *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1840, 1842, 1843) was ghostwritten by Ferdinando Luigi Gatteschi, a handsome young man with whom she was enamored, and who later tried to blackmail her. However, we do have many works that were entirely written by her. If she really wrote *Frankenstein*, then we ought to find the *Frankenstein* genius in these writings. We do not. Nowhere is there the slightest trace of the imagination, erudition, and mastery of language that are in *Frankenstein*. Now, this is a statement that can be falsified by bringing forward specimens of Mary Shelley's prose that exhibit the *Frankenstein* genius. It can't be done. After slogging through all of her letters, journal entries, and short stories, as well as her major novels, I concluded that her style is flaccid, sentimental, verbose, clumsy, and sometimes ungrammatical. She could never have written *Frankenstein*.

Any good reader will recognize Shelley's hand through comparison with his youthful novels, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne*, and with his other works. At one point in *Frankenstein* a passage from his "Essay on Love" (1829) is paraphrased. In July 1816 Shelley, together with Mary Godwin and her step-sister, Claire Clairmont, made a journey to Chamonix, a village among the Alps, and from there to glaciers in the mountains. The sublime experience profoundly affected Shelley and formed the basis of his poem,

“Mont Blanc.” Shelley described his Alpine ascent in a long letter to his close friend, Thomas Love Peacock, and then cannibalized the letter, almost verbatim, in describing Victor Frankenstein’s similar trip to Chamonix and beyond. The style of these passages is that found throughout *Frankenstein*. Part of Shelley’s poem “Mutability” appears without attribution, whereas poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge are attributed, a hint that the author of “Mutability” and *Frankenstein* are one and the same.

Specimens of *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man*

From *The Last Man* (1826)

Allow me in some degree to explain my feeling; without that, we shall both grope in the dark, mistaking one another; erring from the path which may conduct, one of us at least, to a more eligible mode of life than that led by either during the last few weeks . . .

Common affection might have been satisfied with common usages. I believed that you read my heart, and knew its devotion, its unalienable fidelity towards you. I never loved any but you. You came the embodied image of my fondest dreams. The praise of men, power and high aspirations attended your career. Love for you invested the world for me in enchanted light; it was no longer the earth I trod—the earth, common mother, yielding only trite and stale repetition of objects and circumstances old and worn out. I lived in a temple glorified by intensest sense of devotion and rapture; I walked, a consecrated being, contemplating only your power, your excellence.”

From *Frankenstein* (1818)

Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured, and I threw myself on the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain; I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams. I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel.

The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein has three theses: 1) *Frankenstein* is a great work, which has consistently been underrated and misinterpreted, 2) The real author is Percy Bysshe Shelley, and 3) male love is a central theme. Not all who have read the book have agreed with the first and third theses, but virtually all have been convinced by the second.

The extra-textual evidence for Mary Shelley's authorship is flimsy. For example, her advocates have assumed that whenever she used the word "write" in her journal she meant writing *Frankenstein*—a delusion that is punctured by her entry of July 13, 1817: "[Shelley] translates *Promethes Desmotes* and I write it." Perhaps he dictated his translation to her, perhaps she copied from his handwritten manuscript, but either way, she was transcribing, not composing.

Frankenstein is an episodic work. At times it has the deceptive simplicity of a fairy tale; at times, as in the animation of the monster, the intensity of Edgar Allen Poe; and at times, as in the famous dream sequence in Chapter IV, it anticipates surrealism. The best passages are prose poetry of the highest order.

Frankenstein is a moral allegory about the evil effects of intolerance, to the victims of intolerance and to society at large. This was the opinion of Shelley himself, who in a posthumous review of his own novel—yes, authors did that and still do—wrote that the moral of the book is: "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked." A central theme of *Frankenstein* is male love, broadly conceived as comprising love, sex, and friendship. Pairs of loving friends include Captain Walton and Victor Frankenstein, Frankenstein and Henry Clerval, and Frankenstein's father and an intimate friend named Beaufort ("My father loved Beaufort with the truest friendship.") The poor monster craves friendship, but never finds it.

A brief publishing chronology: shortly before the anonymous publication of *Frankenstein*, Shelley, perhaps fearing that the novel revealed too much about himself, began to fob off authorship on his wife. He died in 1822. The hoax went into high gear in 1823 when Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin, prepared a second edition of *Frankenstein* to coincide with a play that was planned for the London stage. Acting entirely on his own, Godwin made 123 substantive changes to the work. Crucially, Godwin ensured that the advertisements and title page named the author as his daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

In 1831 Godwin and daughter prepared a revised (or bowdlerized) edition, which eliminated or greatly reduced political radicalism, religious skepticism, homoeroticism, and a hint of incest. A keen interest in science was replaced by a soppy religiosity. Stylistically, the 1831 changes were always for the worse.

The 1831 edition is notable for its "Introduction," which created a famous myth: In 1816, Mary Godwin, a teenaged girl, takes part in a ghost story contest

in Geneva, with Lord Byron, Byron's personal physician, Dr. John William Polidori, and her companion, Percy Bysshe Shelley. For several days the gentlemen wait impatiently for her to come up with a story. Finally, she has a nightmare which inspires her to write a story, "which would frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night!"

None of it is true. Byron was not fond of Mary Godwin; he would invite Shelley to dinner, pointedly not inviting her. Polidori's diary (1816) indicates only one occasion when Mary and her step-sister, Claire Clairmont, stayed the night in Byron's palazzo. The preface to *Frankenstein*, written by Shelley and published in all editions, suggests that the participants in the ghost story contest were Byron, Polidori, and himself—three brilliant young men who were already accomplished writers. The writer of the preface states that the competition involved him and "two other friends" who shortly after the contest "left me on a journey among the Alps"—and Byron and Polidori did indeed take an Alpine journey a few weeks after the contest. Shelley and Byron represent one of the great literary friendships. Although Byron knew Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley), it's doubtful he ever considered her a friend.

Polidori attended the University of Edinburgh, wrote his thesis on sleepwalking, and received his doctor of medicine degree at the age of nineteen. In his diary entry of June 15, 1816, Polidori wrote: "Shelley and I had a conversation about principles—whether man was to be thought merely an instrument." This conversation may represent the origin of *Frankenstein*. Polidori later wrote the seminal novella, *The Vampyre*.

The 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* bears no resemblance to anything Mary Shelley ever wrote or to the *Frankenstein* prose, but it closely resembles the writing of William Godwin, both in style and ideas. Godwin wrote it from his daughter's standpoint, acting as ventriloquist, with her as dummy. He was a good novelist—*Caleb Williams* (1791) is a page turner—and his introduction is an enduring work of fiction.

The Ordeal

Before *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein* was published I was warned that I would be attacked and was admonished, rather piteously, that my book could hurt the reputations of some highly regarded scholars. I went ahead, acting on the imperative to tell the truth. Still, I wasn't quite prepared for what ensued.

Camille Paglia wrote a favorable review in Salon.com (March 14, 2007): "Lauritsen's book is important not only for its audacious theme but for the

devastating portrait it draws of the insularity and turgidity of the current academy. As an independent scholar . . . he can fight openly with myopic professors and, without fear of retribution, condemn them for their inability to read and reason.”

Following Paglia's review and a front page news article in the *Sunday Times* (March 25, 2007), bloggers, none of whom would read my book, accused me of being a homosexual, a misogynist, a geek, a schlub, or a bully. Previously, in 2001, I had joined the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR) and begun to participate in its discussion group, NASSR-L. I found that major reputations were at stake, that graduate students and junior professors were terrified to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy. I encountered truculence, dishonesty, and just plain stupidity, but I also made some good allies, who privately offered moral support and practical advice. One of them wrote me a long apology, in which he stated: “I am one of those junior scholars who would happily make a public defense of your work and an argument for taking it as seriously as it deserves, if I did not entertain the very real fears you suppose—i.e., being ostracized and having one's budding career sabotaged by small minded people who prefer sacred cows to threatening new ideas.”

I attended three NASSR conferences, at which I had a mixed reception. Some people were friendly, while others were afraid to be seen in my vicinity. On one occasion, a graduate student and I were engaged in an amiable discussion; when he found out who I was, he abruptly turned around and ran away.

I could write more on my NASSR experiences, but will focus on one point—the “handwriting-authorship fallacy”—which illustrates, *pars pro toto*, the difficulty of debating *Frankenstein* authorship.

Mary Shelley advocates rely heavily on the *Frankenstein Notebooks* (Routledge, 2016), a nearly final draft of the novel in the collection of the Bodleian Library, in which the late Charles E. Robinson attempted to distinguish the handwritings of Mary Shelley (“MWS”) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (“PBS”) and prepared an enormous, two volume edition where her words are in one typeface and his in another. Robinson believed that one could thereby distinguish MWS's words from the editorial changes made by PBS. Alas, his immense labor is rendered otiose by the fact that MWS routinely acted as copyist for her husband and other writers; therefore, handwriting is irrelevant to determining authorship. Time and again I pointed out the “handwriting-authorship fallacy” in NASSR-L; no one argued against

me, but like the monsters in horror films, the fallacy kept springing back to life. In exasperation I posted the following on November 16, 2016:

Charles Robinson's *Frankenstein Notebooks* puts forward the thoroughly discredited handwriting-authorship fallacy—the belief that all of the words in Mary Shelley's handwriting were composed by her, and that the only words composed by Percy Bysshe Shelley himself are those in his own handwriting. This belief is falsified by the knowledge that Mary routinely acted as copyist for Shelley and other authors. There exist manuscripts where all of the words are in Mary's handwriting, but none were composed by her.

“Mary Shelley transcribed for the press most or all of Acts I-III [of *Prometheus Unbound*] between September 5 and 12, 1819, and all of Act IV in mid-December 1819. As was his usual practice, Shelley appears to have corrected the press transcripts, making a series of small final revisions to prepare the poem for the press.” (Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Norton 2002, 204)

There we have it: Mary would prepare a nearly final draft from Shelley's handwritten drafts and from dictation. Then Shelley would make corrections and revisions for the press copy. This is what we see in the *Frankenstein Notebooks*: the 4000 or so words in Shelley's handwriting are his nearly final corrections and revisions to his own composition.

Although no manuscripts exist for many of Shelley's works, the “usual practice” (Mary transcribes and Shelley revises and corrects) was followed, according to Reiman and Fraistat, for the following: *The Mask of Anarchy*, *Peter Bell the Third*, *The Witch of Atlas*, *The Cenci*, *The Sensitive Plant*, and *The Mask of Anarchy*.

I believe that I have thoroughly dealt with the arguments for Mary Shelley's authorship of *Frankenstein* in TMWWF [*The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein*]. When viewed knowledgeably, the handwriting evidence in the *Frankenstein Notebooks* points to Shelley's authorship, rather than that of his second wife and amanuensis, Mary.

Two people grudgingly agreed with me on the handwriting issue. Robinson died four days later. One eulogy after another attested that he was a kind and helpful scholar.

With their reputations at stake, Mary Shelley scholars have intransigently refused to debate *Frankenstein* authorship. But why have the other Romantic

scholars failed to grasp the self-evident? I suggest they exhibit the “protective stupidity” of George Orwell's 1984:

Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments if they are inimical to Ingsoc, [English Socialism] and of being bored or repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. Crimestop, in short, means protective stupidity.

Whether my endeavors seem quixotic, amusing, or enlightening, they raise serious questions. Should there be free and open debate in academia? Should scholars be committed to objective truth or just select whatever narratives they like the most? Should truth be determined through the reasoned use of evidence or determined by politics, ideology, or emotion?