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**Review of Jesse Weiner, Benjamin E. Stevens & Brett M. Rogers (eds.): *Frankenstein and Its Classics. The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction***

Bloomsbury Academic (London & New York 2018)  
(= Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception), xiv + 273 p.,  
with 14 b/w illustrations. ISBN: 9781350054905, £ 22.99/US\$  
30.95 (pb)/£ 70.00/US\$ 95.00 (hb)

In a 2015 article, Jesse Weiner pointed out striking parallels between Victor Frankenstein's Creature and (a) the concept of 'monstrosity' as defined in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and (b) the reanimation of a dead body as put into practice by Erichtho in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*.<sup>1</sup> His compelling discus-

sion helped spark more in-depth research on classical reception in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's (henceforth MWS) *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), giving rise to the collective volume under review.

<sup>1</sup> Jesse Weiner, Lucretius, Lucan, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in: B. M. Rogers & B. E. Stevens (eds.), *Classical Traditions in Sci-*

*ence Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015) 46–74. Cf. Christian Rollinger's review of the volume in *thersites* 3 (2016) 85–92 (<https://thersites-journal.de/index.php/thr/article/view/33/30>).

As the general introduction makes clear, the volume's focus is "on how *Frankenstein*, some contemporary works that inspired it, and some other works it has gone on to inspire all involve transformations of materials [...] from ancient Greece and Rome" (2). Even though *Frankenstein and Its Classics* is aimed at a wide audience (cf. 14), the present reviewer would have wished for a more thorough discussion of what it means to trace direct and indirect intertextual references across two millennia as well as across various literary genres and media. At times, the introduction (just as some of the subsequent contributions) is somewhat hasty in attributing a wider significance to minor textual cues.<sup>2</sup>

The volume is divided into two parts, the first of which ("Promethean Heat") is devoted to materials preceding *Frankenstein*'s composition, whereas the second ("Hideous Progeny") focuses on subsequent works of art that receive Classics through MWS's novel.

Genevieve Liveley points out episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that

are in a way 'Frankensteinian', inasmuch as they involve characters bringing to life human creatures (e.g. Deucalion and Pyrrha, Medea, and Asclepius). Furthermore, she convincingly argues that MWS probably encountered Ovid's work through George Sandys' 1632 translation and commentary *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished*.

Martin Priestman considers a range of possible interpretations of MWS's subtitle "The Modern Prometheus", referring not only to classical literature (Hesiod, Aeschylus, Ovid) but also to readings by philosophers, alchemists and poets closer to the time of *Frankenstein*'s composition. Special attention is given to the works of MWS's husband Percy Shelley, esp. *Queen Mab* (1813), and of the late eighteenth-century poet and naturalist Erasmus Darwin. Having amassed numerous possible models, Priestman refrains from drawing any precise conclusions. His caution seems highly appropriate, as other contributors (Liveley, McClellan, Barnett, and Rogers) bring further Prometheis into

2 In the context of the Creature's 'education' through Milton's *Paradise Lost* and other writings, the editors refer to "the Creature's confused description of these texts as 'histories'" (5), asking whether "MWS [is] implying that the Creature confused these texts for 'histories'—that is, for factual accounts of human pasts—or is she pointing to the Creature's native tongue, French, in which *histoire*, 'history', also means 'fictional story'?" (20 note 22). Certainly, the latter is closer to the point, as

the use of 'history' in the sense of 'narrative' is not uncommon in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century English texts (cf. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* s.v. "history I.1.b" [access date: 7 May, 2020]). It is used by MWS's other characters in the same sense, e.g., when Victor starts relating his tale to Captain Walton (LETTER IV): "'Listen to my **history**, and you will perceive how irrevocably it is determined.' He then told me, that he would commence his **narrative** the next day" (emphases added).

play, unfortunately largely without taking account of Priestman's findings or *vice versa*.

Andrew McClellan argues that MWS's Victor is partly modelled upon Lucan's Erichtho, without, however, considerably expanding the points already made by Weiner (2015, cited above). When identifying verbal echoes of the *Bellum Civile* in *Frankenstein*, I would have wished for a more cautious (or more transparent) approach, since—as made clear by Weiner (2015, 49–50)—we cannot be sure whether MWS had actually read the *Bellum Civile* in 1818 or whether she only knew it through Dante or Percy Shelley. Subsequently, McClellan discusses the use of body-of-state imagery in Lucan and MWS, arguing that both employ similar metaphors to comment on the violence of the Roman Civil War or the French Revolution respectively. Perhaps most remarkably, he convincingly draws a connection between *Frankenstein's* subtitle and a political caricature by George Cruikshank (1814), depicting Napoleon as a Prometheus figure chained to a rock and pestered by an eagle.

According to Suzanne Barnett, one possible inspiration for MWS's novel is Percy Shelley's vegetarian reading of the Prometheus myth in his poem *Queen Mab*, the roots of which she traces back to John F. Newton, Francis Bacon and ultimately to Horace. Further Prometheis under investigation include Goethe's, Erasmus Darwin's

and William Godwin's, MWS's father. Unfortunately, a considerable part of Barnett's argument reiterates what readers already encountered in Priestman's contribution.

In what seems out of place in a volume on classical reception, David Gapp explains the scientific causes of the famous 'year without a summer' of 1816, the particularly cold and rainy season when MWS first conceived of the novel's basic outline.

Matthew Gumpert aims at refuting the conventional argument that *Frankenstein* is, at heart, about Victor's failed attempt to usurp the divine prerogative of creation. In the first part of his essay, he reads the account of Pandora in Hesiod's *Works and Days* as an *ars poetica*, emphasizing the fact that she is represented as a "superlative, superhuman, *synthetic* artefact" (103). Gumpert then develops a novel reading of *Frankenstein*, regarding Victor as "an artist who succeeds all too well" (106) and the Creature as a sublime work of art unappreciated by its maker. While one might not follow Gumpert on every step of his argument, his approach is no doubt fresh and intriguing.

The starting point of Benjamin Stevens' discussion is Victor's wedding night, in which he discovers that his beloved Elizabeth has been killed by the Creature. Stevens compares this 'bedroom tableau' to the scene in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in which Psyche enters Cupid's bedchamber to discover his true identity. Referring to MWS's journal,

he argues that the structure of MWS's scene might be considered a deliberate reception of Apuleius, or that, at least, *Frankenstein's* bedroom tableau points backward to antiquity as well as forward to Horror and Science Fiction. The analysis of *intratextuality* is superb, whereas there remain questions as to the role of Apuleius' text.<sup>3</sup>

Carl Rubino addresses Victor's role as an adherent of 'natural philosophy', which he equates with Newtonian mechanics and the general conviction that every part of the world can be explained in terms of universal laws. The opposing view, i.e. that the world is determined by chaos and that absolute certainty is but an illusion, is traced back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and to Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. Rubino asserts that, as Victor started his work on the assumption of universal natural laws, his

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3 The question is whether MWS might have encountered the bedroom tableau elsewhere and whether the criteria established by Stevens (awake, asleep, third party, light, weapon [130]) are too generic to concede the structure's 'invention' to Apuleius. The present reviewer cannot help but think of a central scene in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), where we find a similar arrangement of characters and objects (chapter 16): Clara (awake) enters her bedroom with lamp (light) and penknife (weapon) in hand, and finds Catharine ('asleep') murdered in her bed. Carwin (the 'monster') is present in the form of a letter, while Clara will only find out later that the true 'third party' behind the murder is her own brother, Catharine's husband, Wieland.

creation was doomed from the very beginning. Unfortunately, his contribution is the shortest one in the volume, and the present reviewer would have wished for elaboration on several issues, particularly on whether MWS was familiar with the philosophical views in question and engaged with them of her own accord.

Neşe Devenot's essay is dedicated to the writings of Timothy Leary, known for his promotion of psychedelic drugs in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. Leary rejects what seems to him a negative portrayal of the Prometheus myth in MWS's *Frankenstein*: While the novel purports to be a cautionary tale against human overreach, he claims, it really reaffirms prejudices against socio-political change. As Devenot neatly observes, Leary casts himself as a Prometheus figure in the Aeschylean vein, claiming that he was unjustly punished for spreading knowledge (psilocybin) to the masses so as to free them from the oppression by established powers. The contribution's strengths lie in the psychoanalytical readings of both *Frankenstein* and Leary's autobiography *High Priest*; its weakness is that it pushes classical reception far into the background.

Jesse Weiner looks back to antiquity to inquire what exactly is 'monstrous' about Victor's Creature, elucidating his point with reference to *Spark of Being*, the 2010 film adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Just as Victor's Creature is made up of discordant, decaying parts, *Spark of*

*Being* is an assemblage of rare archival footage. Firstly, both the novel and the film present the story through the eyes of the Creature, thereby illustrating the derivation of ‘monster’ from *monstrare*. Secondly, their emphasis on the Creature’s ‘hybridity’ is in line with ancient definitions of monstrosity (Empedocles, Lucretius, Horace, Isidore).<sup>4</sup>

Emma Hammond investigates gender configurations in the 2015 film *Ex Machina* through the lens of *Frankenstein*. She points to the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus as related by Plato and Hesiod, asserting that both Victor and Nathan, the film’s protagonist, fit the (sub)title of a “Modern Epimetheus” on account of their lack of forethought. Both eventually fall victim to their personal Pandora, to the Creature and to the cyborg Ava respectively. Unfortunately, Hammond assumes MWS’s notion of Prometheus to be essentially Ovidian (cf. 191), ignoring the wide-ranging possibilities discussed in this volume. The strongest part of her contribution is the discussion of gender in the three works under scrutiny: What was a binary of male/female in *Works and Days* and of male/Creature

in *Frankenstein* is reimagined in *Ex Machina* as a “dynamic in technological (and science fictional) terms as male/cyborg, natural/machine, and original/copy” (199).

Brett Rogers analyses two ‘postmodern’ adaptations of the Prometheus myth: The 2012 film *Prometheus* and the comic book series *Ody-C* (2014–). The movie is found not only to draw on the same figures as *Frankenstein* (Prometheus, Adam, Eve, and Pandora), but also to mirror the novel in that these multiple roles are constantly subject to change. The comic book series is characterised by a shift in gender identity for all its characters and by the introduction of a third sex. By ‘making thinkable’ reproduction across different species or reproduction among members of the same sex, Rogers intriguingly argues, these contemporary adaptations not only challenge our notion of ‘human’ beings, but may also reshape our perspective on their ancient (and modern) forerunners.

Rounding off the volume, Samuel Cooper offers an annotated list of more than 30 books, films and TV series that were not only inspired by *Frankenstein* but also display further engagement with material from ancient Greece and Rome.

Overall, the volume’s most serious shortcomings stem from the reluctance of several contributors to openly address methodological problems and from the fact that they seem largely ignorant of the other essays in the volume. Despite

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of related issues, cf. Dunstan Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2015). Cf. also Florian Köhler’s review of the title in *thersites* 5 (2017) 190–197 (<https://thersites-journal.de/index.php/thr/article/view/61/71>).

these reservations, the volume succeeds in offering a wide range of scholarly approaches to *Frankenstein* and the Graeco-Roman material underlying it, expanding the horizon of students and scholars of Classics, Romanticism and modern cinema alike.

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