

# Boundary CROSSING 1818

# The TRANSFORMATION of a MONSTER

ON A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT in 1816, Mary Shelley began writing a story that posed profound questions about individual and societal responsibility for other people.

## FINDING *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

More than a simple parable of science gone mad, *Frankenstein* uses scientific themes as a framework for exploring larger political issues of power, responsibility, and justice in society.

To make her point, the young novelist used the scientific advances of her era and the controversies surrounding them as a metaphor for issues of unchecked power and self-serving ambition, and their effect on the human community.

Since that time, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* has become one of the Western world's most enduring myths. The story provides a framework for discussions of medical advances that challenge our traditional understanding of what it means to be human.

# The BIRTH of FRANKENSTEIN



Fig. 2  
*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, 1818  
Author: Mary Shelley (1797-1851)  
Courtesy Singer-Mendenhall Collection, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania

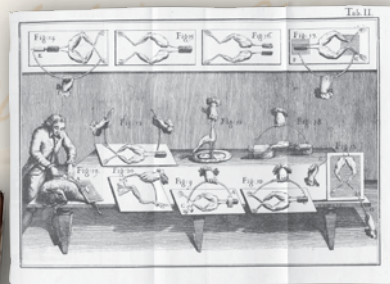


Fig. 1  
Illustration from *De viribus Electricitatis in Motu Musculari Commentaries* (Commentary on the Effect of Electricity on Muscular Motion), 1792  
Author: Luigi Galvani (1737-1798)  
Courtesy National Library of Medicine

Luigi Galvani, a professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna, performed an extensive series of experiments in "animal electricity" or "galvanism" in the 1780s and 1790s.

*With feverish excitement, Victor Frankenstein pursues nature to her hiding places. Working alone, he gathers the pieces of bodies he needs from the charnel house and the graveyard to create a living being. Although he finds his solitary preoccupation repulsive, he is not deterred from his quest to restore life.*

*The Tragedy of Victor Frankenstein and his creature begins and ends beyond civilization in the icy regions of the frozen north where the scientist and monster meet their fates.*

Untitled from *Northern Exposure*, 1827  
Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library

IN HER NOVEL, MARY SHELLEY did not provide detailed descriptions of the process her protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, used when he "bestowed animation on lifeless matter." But Victor's references to the power of electricity and his infusion of "a spark of being into the lifeless thing" make clear that Mary, like many of her contemporaries, was fascinated by the boundary between the living and the dead and the scientific search for the principle of life.

*Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* began a process of simplifying and distorting Mary Shelley's novel. In the play, many characters are eliminated and the monster becomes a speechless and remorseless killer.



Fig. 1  
T. P. Cooke as the monster in *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*  
Artist: Thomas Charles Wageman (ca. 1787-1863)  
Lithographer: Nathaniel Whittock (1791-1860)  
Courtesy The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelly and His Circle, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Playbill from *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, Opening night, July 28, 1823  
Courtesy Harvard Theater Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, bpf TCS 63 (English Opera House 1823-1826)



Fig. 2  
*The Edison Kinetogram*, March 15, 1910  
Courtesy US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Edison National Historic Site



Fig. 3  
Poster for *Frankenstein*, 1931  
Courtesy Universal Studios Licensing LLC

*Mary Shelley gave her monster feelings and intelligence. Only after he is denied human relationships and acceptance by society does he turn to rage, revenge, and murder.*

An  
EXTRAORDINARY  
LIFE



Fig. 1  
Portrait of Mary Shelley, ca. 1851-1893  
Artist: Reginald Easton (1807-1893)  
Courtesy of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford



William Godwin, oil on canvas, 1802  
Artist: James Northcote (1746-1831)  
Courtesy © National Portrait Gallery, London



Mary Wollstonecraft, oil on canvas, ca. 1797  
Artist: John Opie (1761-1807)  
Courtesy © National Portrait Gallery, London

Mary Shelley's education stressed the development of the imagination; she was introduced to great works of literature, history, and mythology, and studied French and Latin. Her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, were noted progressive thinkers and political theorists.

*In Frankenstein, the intelligent and sensitive creature created by Victor Frankenstein reads a copy of John Milton's Paradise Lost. The monster mourns how he is so unlike the Biblical Adam and is abandoned by his creator.*

Boundary  
CROSSING  
1931

THE MYTH OF FRANKENSTEIN continues to resonate. Although many welcomed changes caused by scientific advances, some worried about society's ability to retain control of technologies that challenged their understanding of what it means to be human.



Fig. 1  
Dolly, the world's first adult sheep clone, 1997  
Courtesy Science Source Images, © 2012 Photo Researchers, Inc. All Rights Reserved

Contemporary scientific advances raise difficult ethical and policy questions. Although the scientist Victor Frankenstein failed to take responsibility for his misbegotten monster, Mary Shelley has for two centuries offered the Promethean possibility that humanity could make responsible choices.

*In both the subtitle of her novel and through Frankenstein's dying words, Mary Shelley suggests that the scientist's misfortune did not arise from his Promethean ambition of creating life but from the mistreatment of his creation. Frankenstein's failure to assume responsibility for the miserable wretch he fathered in his workshop is his real tragedy.*

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FRANKENSTEIN:

PENETRATING *the*  
SECRETS *of* NATURE



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