

Frankenstein: History of a Romantic Terror

by Jeffrey Jackson

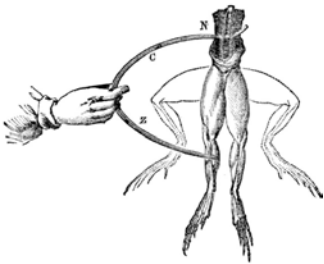
HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Mary Shelley's famous novel has origins based in real people and events:

Late 1600s to early 1700s: "Burg Frankenstein" is a hilltop castle near Darmstadt, Germany, built in the 13th century by a von Frankenstein family. (It still stands today.) There, its most famous resident, Johan Conrad Dippel, conducts infamous experiments in alchemy and human anatomy, robbing local graveyards for his subjects. He is imprisoned for heresy.



The real "Castle Frankenstein"



1783 Italian physician and physicist Luigi Galvani discovers that the legs of a dissected frog twitch when infused with electricity. His experiments lead him to discover bioelectricity—the electric currents that flow through nerves and muscles, dubbed "galvanism." The notion is refuted by religious leaders of the day, who claim that it contradicts the divine edict that the soul is the force which animates the human body.

1798 Giovanni Aldini, nephew of Galvi, conducts sensational and gruesome public exhibitions of his famous uncle's principles. In one, he applies electricity to the various extremities of the corpse of an executed criminal at Newgate in London. The jolts cause the body to twitch, assume intense facial expressions, and, at one point, raise its arm and point to an observer who subsequently faints.



Giovanni Aldini

MARY SHELLEY

Her extraordinary life and her inspirations for Frankenstein:



1797 Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin is born in London to famed feminist and author Mary Wollstonecraft and equally famous (and infamous) philosopher, writer, anarchist, and atheist dissenter William Godwin. Mary's mother dies ten days after her birth of puerperal fever—a complication of childbirth.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

1814-15

At age seventeen, Mary falls in love with renowned poet and free thinker Percy Bysshe Shelley. She had met Shelley two years prior after he struck up a friendship with Mary's like-minded father. Shelley is already married and a father himself, but this does not stop the two from running away to France together in July of 1814. During this trip, they travel by boat along the Rhine, where they are alleged to have visited the "Burg Frankenstein" castle. Stories of its most famous resident, Johan Conrad Dippel, and his dubious work (see above) are doubtless a part of the experience.



Percy Bysshe Shelley

In February of 1815, Mary gives birth to a daughter by Shelley—Clara—but she is born prematurely and dies eleven days later. In March, Mary records in her journal a dream "that my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold and that we rubbed it before the fire and it lived." Despite still being unmarried, Mary and Percy conceive a second child. William would be born in January of 1816.

1816

A LEGEND IS BORN. Much of the civilized world despairs during the "Year Without a Summer." The after-effects of a volcanic eruption in the West Indies cause temperatures to plunge in the Northern Hemisphere and snows are reported in summer, along with near-constant gloomy skies.



Lord George Gordon Byron

It is during these conditions that Mary and Percy holiday in Switzerland at the home of Shelley's friend, Lord Byron, the famous and scandalous poet. One rainy June evening, while housebound on the shores of Lake Geneva, Mary, Percy, and Byron (along with another guest, Byron's physician) conspire to amuse themselves by devising ghost stories. All but Mary quickly contrive ghastly tales—she has trouble coming up with a suitable idea. But she has recently read a book about Galvani and his experiments with electricity and dissected frogs' legs (see above). One night she has what she later describes as "a waking dream" in which she sees "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together—I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion." On this disturbing vision, she bases her contribution to the competition—the "ghost story" that would later become *Frankenstein*.

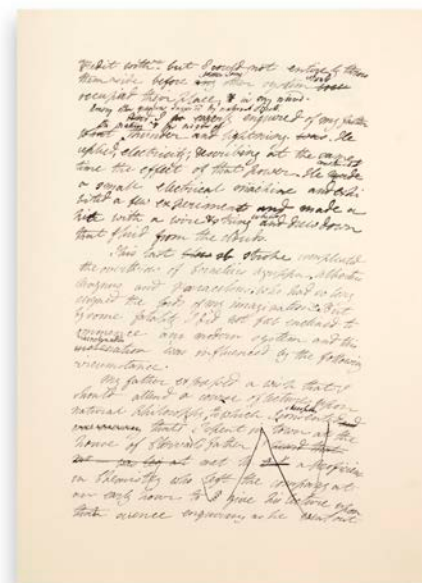
Returning to England in September, Mary and Percy are stunned by two family suicides—that of Mary's half-sister, Fanny, and Percy's wife, Harriet. As Mary continues to develop *Frankenstein*, death and loss would become significant themes. She and Percy Bysshe Shelley are married in December.

1817

Mary completes *Frankenstein* in May, likely in some degree of collaboration with her husband. Over the previous years, Shelley has been strongly urging Mary to make her literary mark, like himself, her parents, and many of their famous friends. Later that year, Mary gives birth to the couple's third child, Clara Everina.

1818

Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus is published in London—anonously. Mary fears that its bold subject matter may embarrass the good Shelley name. But she dedicates the



A page from Mary Shelley's original manuscript

book to her father, leading many to believe it was written by his disciple, Percy Shelley. Only 500 copies are printed and the book is generally reviled by critics as grotesque and absurd. Yet it captivates the imagination of its readers and soon is one of the most talked-about books in England. In October, the Shelleys' second daughter, Clara, dies of dysentery.

1819- Mary's only surviving child, William, contracts malaria and dies on June 7th. Mary gives birth to their fourth child, Percy Florence Shelley—their only offspring to survive into adulthood. She would miscarry a potential fifth child in 1822 and almost die herself from internal hemorrhaging. Percy Bysshe Shelley dies by drowning when his ship is lost at sea in July, 1822. By the time she was twenty-six, Mary Shelley had buried three children and was now a widow.

Frankenstein is published again in 1826—again anonymously—in a two-volume set edited by Mary's father. In 1831, after her other works establish her reputation as an author, Frankenstein receives its third issue, finally under Mary Shelley's name. For this edition, she rewrites key passages, placing her own stamp firmly upon the story and creating the version that is published today. She includes a now-famous preface explaining the story's origins—partly.

In February, 1851, Mary Shelley died at the age of 53. Frankenstein—her “hideous progeny,” as she affectionately called it—will live forever.



Inside cover of the 1831 edition

EARLY STAGE ADAPTATIONS

Within five years of its initial publication—before its authorship is even known to the public—Frankenstein becomes a stage sensation:



T.P. Cooke is the first to portray Frankenstein's monster onstage.

1823 Before its true authorship is widely known, *Frankenstein* is adapted for the stage by Richard Brinsley Peake as *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*—a play with songs. The work takes great liberties with Mary's story, changing characters, settings, and relationships. Most notably, Peake robs Frankenstein's creature of the power of speech, turning him into a grunting, lumbering zombie—a precursor of the Hollywood version that would follow a century later. The play is a success for the English Opera House and causes the more timid in attendance to scream and faint upon the Creature's appearance. The production is vigorously protested as atheistic. Mary herself attends the August 28th performance.

Four other stage versions debut around Europe the same year: *Frankenstein; or, the Demon of Switzerland*; *Hungumtion; or, Dr. Frankenstein and the Hobgoblin of Hoxton*; *Presumption and the Blue Demon*; and *Another Piece of Presumption*, again by Peake.

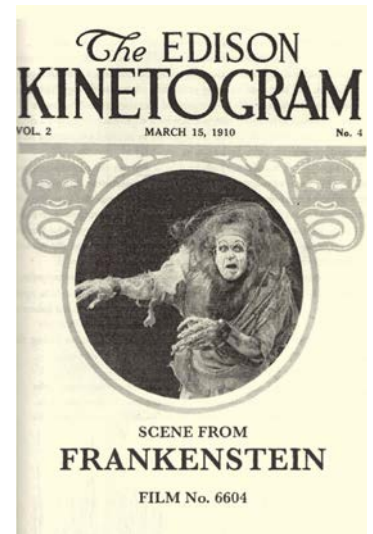
1826 A French adaptation, *Le Monstre et le Magicien* (“The Monster and The Magician”) is presented in Paris at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin for a run of 96 performances. An English translation premieres in London later the same year. *The Demon of Switzerland* is revived at the Royal Coburg Theatre (the original name of today's “Old Vic” in London).

1849 *Frankenstein; or, The Model Man*, by William and Robert Brough, opens at the Adelphi Theatre. Four decades later, it would be adapted into a comic burlesque by Richard Butler and H. Chane Newton—a foreshadow of things to come.

FRANKENSTEIN ON FILM

From the early days of film, Frankenstein is a favorite topic of movie-makers, with literally hundreds of adaptations made during the 20th century. The following are most notable, either for their popularity or their significance in furthering and preserving the Frankenstein myth:

1910 Thomas Edison films the first motion picture version. A 15-minute “Kinetogram,” *Frankenstein* is filmed at Edison Motion Picture Studios in the Bronx, New York. As the popularity of motion pictures grows, so does the attention they receive from moral crusaders and reform groups, who decry the new medium as being dangerous and encouraging of immorality. The very story that produced righteous outrage in the previous century is now employed by Edison as the perfect choice to represent a more respectable approach to filmmaking. Edison bills the production as a moralistic story that depicts the dangers of tampering in God’s realm. The company’s catalog assures exhibitors that “we have carefully omitted anything in Mrs. Shelly’s story which might shock any portion of the audience.”



From the Edison film catalog

1915 *Life Without Soul* by Joseph Smiley is the second film adaptation of *Frankenstein*, after Edison’s. It features a doctor who creates a soulless man. In the end, it turns out that the young man has dreamed the events of the film after falling asleep reading Mary Shelley’s novel.

1920s Three German films debut that would have a great influence on future film versions of *Frankenstein*. *The Golem* (1920) by Paul Wegener depicts the ancient Jewish legend of a Rabbi who models a man from clay, only to have the man come to life as both protector and scourge. (It is quite possible that Mary Shelley is familiar with the legend when she conceives the original story.) *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) employs monster makeup that sets a clear precedent for later Frankenstein depictions. And Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) lays the visual foundation for the technological excesses of later Frankenstein adaptations.



1931 Universal Pictures’ *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale, explodes into the consciousness of movie-goers worldwide, most memorably in the form of Boris Karloff, whose surreally square-headed, bolt-necked makeup would form an indelible image of the monster. Ironically, the film is based less on Shelley’s novel than on a stage adaptation of it that appeared in London in 1927, to which Universal purchased the rights. Like in *Presumption* (the 1926 stage adaptation; see above), this Creature is an inarticulate, lurching ghoul. It is this image of Mary Shelley’s brilliant, romantic, tragic Creature that, regrettably, lives on in the public imagination.

Actor Boris Karloff



Actress Elsa Lanchester

The film is both an artistic and commercial success, and spawns a follow-up. *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) is widely regarded as the best of the series, both for its high camp (e.g.: Elsa Lanchester's lightning-striped fright wig) and for the depiction of Mary Shelley herself in a bookend segment (also portrayed by Lanchester). But Universal follows with a series of increasingly weak sequels—*Son of Frankenstein* (1939), *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *Frankenstein Meets The Wolfman* (1943), and *House of Frankenstein* (1944, in which Karloff sadly reprises the role he made famous), *House of Dracula* (1945), and finally *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948) in which the series surrenders to complete farce, effectively killing it.

1957 Hammer Studios of England brings *Frankenstein* back to the screen after a nine-year absence with a new series of films. Beginning with *The Curse of Frankenstein*, Hammer takes full advantage of color film and better special effects—and a relaxed production code that permitted more gore and titillation. As a result, these films stray even further from Mary Shelley's themes and characterizations, with the Creature reduced to murderous prop and Peter Cushing portraying its maker as sadistic and criminal. Six more *Frankenstein* films would follow from Hammer through the 60s and 70s, with mixed artistic and commercial results.



Poster for Hammer's first *Frankenstein* film

THE GROOVY YEARS : NEW, OLD, AND OFF-THE-WALL

The 1960s and 70s bring new imagination to the *Frankenstein* myth—both on stage and in film:

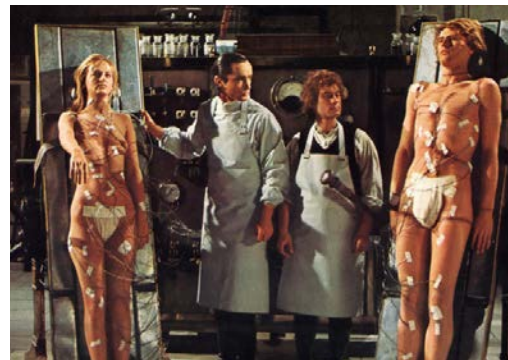
1966 The Living Theater Group, a New York acting troupe on the run from the IRS, tours Europe with a bold, new stage interpretation of *Frankenstein* that is wildly impressionistic. In it, *Frankenstein's* creation of a “new man” is embodied by the entire company. The story plays out on a three-tiered set constructed of metal tubes, with each actor occupying a cubicle within the structure and representing a different aspect of the Creature. While far too unconventional for many audiences, the production is the first to suggest a positive side to Mary Shelley's anti-hero—that Victor *Frankenstein's* endeavor is not just a Faustian power grab, but a noble quest to heighten the human condition.



Actor Bo Svenson

1973 The first made-for-TV version, *Frankenstein*, is produced by ABC for its late-night programming. The two-part presentation features Bo Svenson in a remarkably deft performance as the Creature, and is perhaps more faithful to the Shelley novel than any film before or since. Unfortunately it is overshadowed by a prime-time production that airs later the same season. *Frankenstein: The True Story*, produced by Universal TV, features James Mason and Michael Sarazin. Despite its title, it takes some great (and ill-advised) liberties with Shelley's story.

1974 sees the debut of three memorable—and strange—film versions: *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*, filmed in 3-D, not surprisingly gives us the most bizarre and excessive filming of the story, with sex and gore at the forefront. Not without its redeeming values, the film's avant-garde veneer belies a conventional view of science as evil and destructive. This Victor Frankenstein is cold-hearted and perverse, more interested in creating a sex object than in conquering death.



A creation scene from the Warhol film



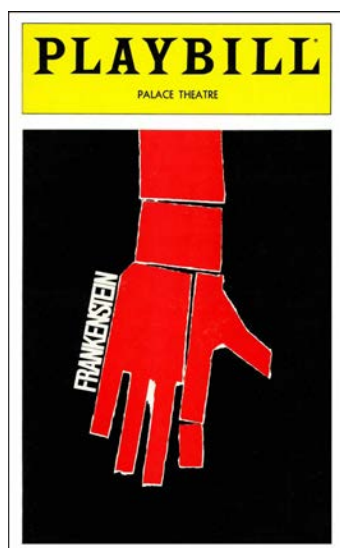
Young Frankenstein, Mel Brooks' wildly popular film spoof, is a direct descendant of the Universal/Boris Karloff films of the 1930s, serving as both parody and loving homage to those Hollywood icons. The film wisely makes no attempt to reinterpret the story, but simply sends up familiar, old film images with hilarious results, thanks largely to the comic genius of stars Gene Wilder, Madeline Kahn, and Marty Feldman. To make the association with the Whale films even more clear, Brooks goes as far as to resurrect the lab set from the Universal films.

The Rocky Horror Show stage musical and its subsequent film version, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) takes elements of the Frankenstein myth and mixes it with other horror movie staples

in an androgynous blender to create a highly sexual, transgender musical farce. The film spawns a cult of devoted denizens who attend midnight screenings in costume and armed with props. However, like *Young Frankenstein*, this is hardly an adaptation of the original story at all, and has as little to do with Mary Shelley's original novel as Frankenberry breakfast cereal (which debuts around the same time).



BACK ON THE BOARDS... BRIEFLY



1981 Despite its solid stage roots, *Frankenstein* yields one of the greatest flops in Broadway history in 1981. Victor Gialanella's play is, at the time, the most expensive non-musical in theatrical history (\$2 million) and features fantastic sets and overblown special effects. Most fatally, this production, too, takes questionable liberties with the original story, relying on its technical fireworks to carry a script that Frank Rich calls "talky and boring." Produced by Tony®-winner Stewart F. Lane, it closed after a single performance.

A RETURN TO THE SCREEN



Actor Robert DeNiro as the Creature

1994 British Shakespearean filmmaker Kenneth Branagh tries his hand at a faithful adaptation of the original novel, going so far as to credit its author in the title of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. While the film resurrects many key elements of the book (an articulate creature in Robert DeNiro, the chase to the Arctic), Branagh, like so many others, rewrites many key elements of the story, making the film's title somewhat ironic.

In nearly 200 years since its original publication, nearly every interpreter of the story feels compelled to “correct” Mary Shelley’s masterwork. Is this because the universality of the Frankenstein myth lends itself to personal expression—or does everyone simply believe they can out-think a teenage girl of an earlier century?

21ST CENTURY ADAPTATIONS

2004 Hollywood revisits the legend by pairing Frankenstein’s monster with horror movie sibling Dracula in *Van Helsing*, a lavish, effects-laden, tongue-in-cheek action movie starring Hugh Jackman. Appearing as the monster is Tony®-winner Shuler Hensley. Ironically, Hensley shares a strong bond with two New York stage productions bearing the Frankenstein name. In 2007, he would assume the Peter Boyle role of the monster in Mel Brooks’ musical adaptation of his own film spoof, *Young Frankenstein*. But he also lent his voice to early demo recordings of a serious, Mary Shelley-inspired musical adaptation that would premiere off-Broadway at the same time (below).



Actor Shuler Hensley in *Van Helsing*



Actors Hunter Foster and Mandy Bruno

2007 Mary Shelley’s masterpiece returns to the New York stage—for the first time as a musical—in one of the most faithful adaptations ever. *Frankenstein, A New Musical*, with music by Mark Baron and book and lyrics by Jeffrey Jackson, pushes the boundaries of theatrical convention while, ironically, sharing the spotlight with the Broadway bow of *Young Frankenstein*, a transfer of Mel Brooks’ film spoof of the old Hollywood scarefests. Featuring a cast of Broadway luminaries led by Tony Award® nominees Hunter Foster (*Urinetown*, *Million Dollar Quartet*) and Christianne Noll (*Jekyll & Hyde*, *Ragtime*) with Steve Blanchard (*Beauty & The Beast*) as The Creature, the production was hailed by the Associated Press for “bringing the classic tale thrillingly to life,” while Bloomberg Radio raved that it was “riveting... totally exciting... I hated to see it end,” and Gannett Newspapers called it “consistently engaging, with surprising tenderness.”



Harry Treadaway as Victor Frankenstein and Rory Kinnear as his Creature in *Penny Dreadful*

2014

A new “Golden Age of Television” sees edgy cable TV shows routinely overshadow motion pictures in their boldness and creativity. One such case is the Showtime series *Penny Dreadful*—an imaginative mashup of every famous gothic horror story all converging in 19th-century London. Featured among the many crisscrossing story lines are Victor Frankenstein and his forsaken Creature. Despite sharing the screen with updates of *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and even *Dorian Gray*, this Frankenstein story is remarkable in its inclusion of many core themes from the Mary Shelley classic and the sympathetic performance of Rory Kinnear as the Creature, who shares many traits with the character depicted in the original novel.

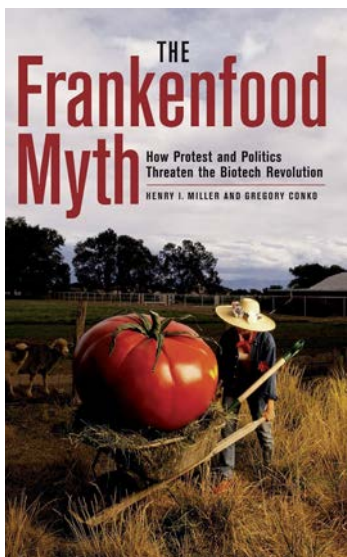


2015

Hollywood tries a new angle on the classic with *Victor Frankenstein*, a film starring James McAvoy in the title role. This very loose adaptation owes more to the movies of the mid-20th century than to the original novel, with Daniel Radcliffe of *Harry Potter* fame portraying Igor, the faithful helper whom Victor cures of his hunchback and promotes to partner in scientific adventurism. The film was not well-received by either critics or the public.

FRANKENSTEIN AS A CONCEPT

Today, *Frankenstein* has grown far beyond the literary and dramatic arenas to become an entrenched concept in worldwide public consciousness. An entry in every major dictionary of the English language, the word is commonly accepted to mean “an agency or creation that slips from the control, of and ultimately destroys, its creator.” The name “Frankenstein” is frequently invoked in news stories and political rhetoric on a wide range of topics including genetic engineering, cloning, and artificial intelligence.



Book jacket depicting one of the many journalistic uses of the word “Frankenstein”

In this way, Mary Shelley’s fiction has become reality, and her tragic protagonists, Victor Frankenstein and his Creature, more like historical figures than imagined characters—living metaphors for modern passions.

One of the great ironies that persists around the story is that people continue to mistakenly refer to the Creature as “Frankenstein.” Of course, that name rightly belongs to his creator, Victor Frankenstein, who neglects to give his progeny a proper name. But the misnomer sticks, in no small part to our perception of the maker and his monster as two parts of one whole—yin and yang, mirror images of the creative and the destructive in all of us.

There is little doubt that our assessment of these two tragic figures—and of Mary Shelley’s timeless allegory—will continue for many generations to come. ■



Political cartoon