

"Frankenstein" and "Caleb Williams"

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and beauty of language, all over spirit and feeling. In the main it is an English heroic poem, the tale of which is borrowed from the Greek" (Griggs, III, 68).

Chapman animated the Romantics and they were moved by the same spirit that inspired Keats to write his sonnet. Their judgments form a pattern as they are in accord that his translation was brilliant, original, and that it read like Homeric English. The difference between the translation of Pope and Chapman was clear. Southey, an excellent echo of Romantic criticism, believed that there was a distinct dichotomy between Elizabethan and Augustan: "The period between Milton and Pope may be called the dark age of English poetry. . . . Under Elizabeth our poetry was like a mountain brook rough indeed and broken, but delighting the traveller with whatever is great, magnificent and sublime. After the Restoration it was the stream that passes by a city and receives its filth."<sup>21</sup> The Romantics noticed this pollution, and Southey's sentiments may be applied to the adversion for Pope's translation (the polluted stream) and the acclamation for Chapman's (the mountain brook). In short Pope appears the villain and Chapman, who was ever a voyage of discovery for the Romantics, the hero.

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21. Robert Southey, "Anderson's *British Poets*," *Critical Review*, 25 (January 1799), 41.

### *Frankenstein and Caleb Williams*

MARY SHELLEY'S NOVEL *Frankenstein* is generally regarded as a prophetic vision of the dangers of the scientific and technological era that was still in its infancy at the time the book was published in 1818. Its eponymous hero has become the very symbol of the human race, which, in its rash pursuit of mastery over Nature, has unleashed forces that threaten to destroy it.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, however, the interpretation of *Frankenstein* as the first novel of the scientific era rests on weak foundations. Despite her husband's youthful amateur dabblings with chemistry, Mary Shelley was no scientist, and her novel has no roots in science. It is true that Professor Rieger has argued that *Frankenstein* owes something to Dr. Polidori's enthusiasm for natural philosophy, and it is no longer possible to accept Mary Shelley's own claim that she thought of the story of *Frankenstein*

1. See M. K. Joseph's introduction to *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* [1831 ed.], edited by M. K. Joseph (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. xiv-xv. See also Brian Aldiss's novel *Frankenstein Unbound* (London: Cape, 1973).

in response to Lord Byron's proposal, "We will each write a ghost story."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the mere fact that Mary Shelley thought it proper to assert in her Preface that her novel was the product of a period of reading "German stories of ghosts" shows that she conceived of it as a Gothic horror novel rather than as anything else. Its continental setting and the name of its protagonist also suggest the Gothic tradition.

Though Victor Frankenstein is made to suggest that he outgrew his early fascination with the theories of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus (*Frankenstein* [hereafter cited as *F*], ch. ii, p. 41),<sup>3</sup> he remains an alchemist, not a chemist. His materials are taken from the charnel house and the abattoir, in the best traditions of the occult (*F*, ch. iv, pp. 54–55). It is hinted that the awakening of his interest in electricity was of some significance in his intellectual development, but the loss of faith in Albertus Magnus and company that followed on from the incident of the thunderstorm is described as being the result of "the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me" (*F*, ch. ii, p. 42). A somewhat unscientific notion this, and one that suggests his interest in the alchemists did in fact return in due course. When he comes to make his creature his laboratory is remarkably small—"a solitary chamber, or rather cell" (*F*, ch. iv, p. 55)—and peculiarly ill-equipped even by the rudimentary technological standards of the day: "my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw . . ." (*F*, ch. v, p. 57). These details do not seem very suggestive of a new scientific era. It is interesting to note that in another story of men who make humanlike creatures, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, published at exactly the time that *Frankenstein* was being written, it is clearly suggested that the creators are alchemists or magicians, though the fact that in *Der Sandmann* the creature Olympia is an automaton, or mechanical robot, rather than an organic living creature like Frankenstein's monster, might well be seen as placing Hoffmann's tale more firmly in the context of an age of scientific and mechanical invention than Mary Shelley's story of a modern Prometheus creating life. Moreover Frankenstein's grisly experiment, in the best alchemical tradition, leads to a *private* retribution. If he had indeed unleashed the forces of science, they might have been expected to affect his whole society, but in fact he is

2. J. Rieger, "Dr. Polidori and the Genesis of *Frankenstein*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 3 (1963), 461–472.

3. In addition to citing the chapter of *Caleb Williams* and *Frankenstein* in which the relevant passages appear, I give page references to the recent Oxford University Press editions: *Caleb Williams*, ed. David McCracken (1970), and *Frankenstein*, ed. M. K. Joseph (1969).

singled out as a special victim. His brother, his friend, his wife, who are murdered by his creature, die still ignorant of the creature that Frankenstein alone knows exists. It is Frankenstein alone who is haunted by his monster. What he has unleashed is not a new scientific reality, but a private bogey.

It is also worth noting that in writing her supposed novel of the new scientific age, Mary Shelley does not place her action in the present, let alone in the future, but in the past. Frankenstein was written in 1816–17; Walton, whose letters begin and end the novel and who comes on the scene subsequent to the greater part of the action, dates his first letter “Dec. 11th 17—.” It is true that too much attention should not be paid to the few stray hints of datable events in the novel. Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is referred to by Walton in his letter of 28th March 17— (*F*, letter ii, p. 21) and is quoted in his narrative by Frankenstein (*F*, ch. v, p. 59). This is evidently a thoughtless anachronism. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was published in September 1798, and though Walton might conceivably have read the poem before setting off on his journey, Frankenstein had presumably left England months before *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* appeared, so that it was quite impossible for him to be familiar with the poem at a date not later than July 1799, especially when he had been engaged for the past several months in his obsessive pursuit of his creature through the Russian wastes. Goethe’s novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, first published in 1774, which is mentioned as part of the creature’s library (*F*, ch. xv, p. 127), seems a more deliberate suggestion of the timing of the action. It is possible too that in the character of Walton Mary Shelley had in mind another man of the 1770s, Captain the Honorable Constantine Phipps, who in 1773 led an expedition to try to find the Northeast Passage to India. It is not clear from *Frankenstein* precisely what Walton is trying to do, but it appears that he is trying not merely to reach the North Pole (as is frequently assumed) but actually to reach the Pacific *via* the Pole. The fact that he departs from Archangel indicates that he too is sailing *east*, which is interesting in that the best known attempts to find a polar route to India, including the celebrated expeditions of Frobisher and Davys, involved the *Northwest* Passage. Phipps’s attempt to go east was however still remembered in Mary Shelley’s day if only because one of the then popular Baron Munchausen stories is set on board Phipps’s ship,<sup>4</sup> and because the young Horatio Nelson,

4. See ch. xiii of the enlarged 1786 edition of R. E. Raspe’s *The Singular Travels, Campaigns, Voyages, and Sporting Adventures of Baron . . . Munchausen* (London: M. Smith, 1786). The first edition is a pamphlet of forty-nine pages containing chs. ii–vi; the enlarged second edition, also published in 1786 (as were the third and fourth editions), contains in addition chs. vii–xiv. A short history of publication appears in William Rose’s introduction to *The Travels of Baron Münchhausen*, Broadway Translations (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1923), pp. 5–17.

who was still fresh in all Britons' minds as a naval hero, had accompanied Phipps as a coxswain and had had an adventure with a bear that had become famous as one of the earliest incidents of his legend. Mary Shelley obviously made no specific attempt to fix the chronology of her story, but the reference to *Werther* and Walton's polar expedition suggest that she had a *general idea* of the action occurring about twenty years before her own birth. If this is so, it is a further indication that she saw no especial topicality in her theme.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to snipe pedantically at the mythic superstructure that has grown up on the foundation of Mary Shelley's novel, but to suggest that if we clear our minds of the conventional view of *Frankenstein* as a prophetic representation of the new scientific era, we may see that it has other features, which, though perhaps less ambitious, are not altogether without interest.

Mary Shelley dedicated her novel to her father, William Godwin, the "Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, &c," and her literary debt to Godwin has long been recognized by critics. Professor Pollin for example had suggested that many of the philosophical themes of *Frankenstein* were derived from Godwin's novels.<sup>5</sup> Yet, however much the conceptual and ideological framework of *Frankenstein* interests modern scholars, the continuing fascination of the novel *as a novel* must rest on other foundations. If we turn from the ideological content of *Frankenstein* to its dramatic structure we will find its debt to Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* even more striking. Both *Frankenstein* and *Caleb Williams* are essentially novels of *pursuit*: the pursuit of Caleb by Falkland and the pursuit of Frankenstein by his creature (and later of the creature by Frankenstein) achieve the symbolic urgency of human archetype. In both novels the pursuer and the pursued have a crucial symbiotic relationship with each other. In *Caleb Williams* Caleb admires Falkland and seems to regard him as a substitute father, and is overcome with remorse when finally he brings him to justice. In *Frankenstein* the monster acknowledges Frankenstein as its creator and when Frankenstein dies plans to cremate itself. Falkland and Frankenstein who thus play the same role as "father" are strikingly similar in character. Frankenstein "is so gentle, yet so wise; his mind is so cultivated; and when he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence" (F, letter iv, p. 27). This could stand as a description of the noble, cultured, suffering Falkland. In both novels the rejection of the "son"—Caleb and the creature—by the "father" plays a crucial role. "You shall continue in my service, but can never share in my affection. I will benefit you in respect of fortune, but I shall always

5. B. R. Pollin, "Philosophical and Literary Sources of *Frankenstein*," *Comparative Literature*, 17 (1965), 97-108, especially 99.

hate you," Falkland tells Caleb (*Caleb Williams* [hereafter cited as *CW*], II, ch. vi, p. 136). In *Frankenstein* the rejection is even more dramatic: "Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room" (*F*, ch.v, p. 57). Both Caleb and the creature respond to their rejection by ultimately destroying the "father" they love. The ambivalence of the two relationships is further indicated by the way in which the roles of pursuer and pursued are interchangeable. Falkland pursues Caleb, till at last Caleb turns on Falkland and succeeds in exposing him. The creature pursues Frankenstein, till at last Frankenstein turns and pursues the creature. In both cases, though the pursuit is set in train by the rejections of the "son" by the "father," the whole process of pursuit actually has its origin in an antecedent act, the awful irretrievability of which gives both novels much of their nightmare quality. In *Caleb Williams* the antecedent act is Caleb's discovery of Falkland's secret: once he learns the secret he can never unlearn it, and is therefore doomed. Frankenstein's irretrievable act is the creation of life: once his creature has been brought to life there is no escape from it. In both cases the motivation of the fatal act is identical. "My offence had merely been a mistaken thirst of knowledge. Such however it was as to admit neither of forgiveness nor remission," says Caleb (*CW*, II, ch. vi, p. 133); and Frankenstein points the moral of his tale when he tells Walton, "You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been" (*F*, letter iv, pp. 29–30). Curiosity—thirst for knowledge—the driving force of both Caleb and Frankenstein, is represented at first as a beneficent and commendable instinct, but is at last revealed as the inevitable cause of tragedy and ruin.

Yet the action of *Frankenstein* does not merely parallel that of *Caleb Williams*: in certain significant ways it reverses it. It is Caleb's curiosity that leads to the tragedy of *Caleb Williams*, whereas in *Frankenstein* it is the curiosity not of Caleb's counterpart the creature, but of Frankenstein himself. In *Caleb Williams*, despite some long self-revelatory speeches by Falkland, it is Caleb who is the narrator, and with whom the reader identifies. In *Frankenstein*, six chapters, certainly the most ideologically interesting but in dramatic terms the weakest part of the book, are devoted to the creature's narrative, but it is Frankenstein himself who is the focus of the reader's involvement. Arguably both embattled pairs, Falkland and Caleb, Frankenstein and his creature, blight each other's lives equally, but it is on the ruin of Caleb's happiness and of Frankenstein's that the two plots turn. It is as if *Frankenstein* is a symbolic rewriting of *Caleb Williams* from Falkland's point of view. Again there is the difference that the immensity of Falkland's power in *Caleb Williams* has no real counterpart in any great resources of Frankenstein, the comfortably endowed Genevese bourgeois, while the impo-

tence of Caleb himself is matched by the invincible physical strength of Frankenstein's creature.

Both Falkland and Frankenstein's creature play the part of nemesis, punishing the intellectual presumption of their novels' protagonists. They may be regarded as symbols, externalizations of Caleb's and of Frankenstein's inner guilt. (By a characteristic piece of role-doubling, Caleb also acts as the externalization of Falkland's guilt.) But the inextricable relationship of Falkland and Caleb, of Frankenstein and his creature, does not derive its fascination merely from its neatness as a psychological symbol. I have argued elsewhere that the power of *Caleb Williams* comes from its mythic quality as a representation of man's basic predicament, trapped, alone and defenseless in the face of society.<sup>6</sup> *Frankenstein* operates on the reader in a similar way, but more feebly. Society, so dramatically evoked in *Caleb Williams*, is replaced in *Frankenstein* by an extravagant piece of pseudoscientific experimentation. Caleb's relationship with Falkland is seen in the context of society as a whole, whereas Frankenstein's relationship with his creature is essentially private, existing apart from the rest of human existence. Thus Frankenstein appears, not the inevitable, archetypal victim of society, as Caleb is, but merely the victim of himself, a man hunted down, not by fate, not by social forces, but merely by a bogey of his own creation. Where Caleb's tragedy is his isolation within society, Frankenstein regards society as of little importance. Caleb laments that he "was cut off from the friendship of mankind. I can safely affirm, that poverty and hunger, that endless wanderings, that a blasted character and the curses that clung to my name, were all of them slight misfortunes compared to this. . . . 'I called aloud, but there was none to answer; there was none that regarded' " (*CW*, III, ch. xiv, p. 308). Frankenstein on the other hand is provided with family, friends, and fiancée and deliberately isolates himself from them: "the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent" (*F*, ch. iv, p. 55); and later, "I determined to visit some remote spot of Scotland, and finish my work in solitude. . . . I traversed the northern highlands, and fixed on one of the remotest of the Orkneys as the scene of my labours" (*F*, ch. xix, p. 163). In pursuing his creature into the "everlasting ices of the north" he is merely seeking the ultimate solitude (though even here he finds a friend in Walton). The creature can even be seen as a symbol of man's desire for isolation, for the freedom to seek his spiritual destiny unhampered by others: the product of solitary researches, the creature merely acts to extend Frankenstein's separation from society to a point that even Frankenstein finds intolerable, and once ir-

6. A. D. Harvey, "The Nightmare of *Caleb Williams*," *Essays in Criticism*, 26 (1976), 236-249.

remediably cut off by the consequences of his own instinct for solitude, Frankenstein can only long for the society of which he has deprived himself: "in sleep I saw my friends, my wife, and my beloved country; again I saw the benevolent countenance of my father, heard the silver tones of my Elizabeth's voice, and beheld Clerval enjoying health and youth. Often, when wearied by a toilsome march, I persuaded myself that I was dreaming until night should come, and that I should then enjoy reality in the arms of my dearest friends" (*F*, ch. xxiv, p. 204). Thus in the end Frankenstein suffers from his isolation perhaps as much as Caleb, but it is an isolation of his own deliberate making and not, as with Caleb, an isolation forced on him as an awful and altogether undeserved fate. The moral of *Caleb Williams* is that all men are essentially isolated in society. *Frankenstein* makes no such general statement: it deals with an individual detached from society and rather implies that a man is free to choose whether or not to be detached. In leaving out society and concentrating on the individual, *Frankenstein* achieves a special sharpness and clarity of focus, but fails to equal the dimension and ultimate pessimism of *Caleb Williams*.

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### Louise Duvillard of Geneva, the Shelleys' Nursemaid

INTERESTING IN AND OF ITSELF to Shelley scholars, the identity of Elise, the Shelleys' nursemaid, has been part of the debate over more serious questions in Shelley biography. It is now possible to clarify Elise's age, background, and experience at the time of her employment by Percy B. Shelley and Mary Godwin in Geneva in 1816.

Elise is not to be found in Genevan records under the name Romieux, the surname of her mother. Conflicting statements about her were made by two persons who knew her, R. B. Hoppner and Claire Clairmont. Hoppner, in a published letter of May 1869, stated that in 1818–19 Elise, then Allegra's nurse in Venice and for some months in his home, was "a young Swiss girl who . . . had no kind of experience as to the care of children."<sup>1</sup> Claire, ca. 1870 (perhaps to contradict Hoppner's account), wrote Trelawny that when she sent Allegra to Byron in Venice, "I had provided as her nurse a very superior Swiss woman of about thirty, a mother herself; this person I had kept with me many months in

1. Iris Origo, *Allegra* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935), p. 39 fn.