

## Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain



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*Past and Present*, No. 139 (May, 1993), 90-130.

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*Past and Present* is currently published by Oxford University Press.

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# FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER AND IMAGES OF RACE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

The Black stripp'd, and appeared of a giant-like strength,  
Large in bone, large in muscle and with arms a cruel length.<sup>1</sup>

It is now commonly accepted that the Gothic literary genre of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries represents, if remotely and unconsciously, the central tensions of an age of social liberation and political revolution. The themes of unjust persecution and imprisonment which are central to works like Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth* or Eugene Sue's *The Wandering Jew*, together with the dilemmas of identity facing the liberated which permeate William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, obviously resonate with the events of an age that, as Chris Baldick has finely observed, witnessed humanity seizing responsibility "for re-creating the world, for violently reshaping its natural environment and its inherited social and political forms, for remaking itself".<sup>2</sup> Criticism in this vein has, however, focused almost exclusively on domestic themes — the "demonizing" of the proletariat in an era of industrial and political revolution, or the self-exploration and "nascent feminism" of authors like Mary Shelley and Charlotte Brontë. In contrast this essay will offer a racial reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a third level of interpretation which meshes with the Marxist and the feminist location of the novel in the social and psychological context of the times.

The thesis developed here is that Shelley's portrayal of her monster drew upon contemporary attitudes towards non-whites, in particular on fears and hopes of the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, as well as on middle-class apprehension of a Luddite

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous English ballad inspired by the contest between the British boxing champion, Tom Cribb, and the Negro challenger, Thomas Molineaux, in 1811: see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984), pp. 447-8.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford, 1987), p. 5.



1. "Scene from the Extravaganza of 'Frankenstein: or, The Model Man', at the Adelphi Theatre", *Illus. London News*, 12 Jan. 1850, p. 28

proletariat or Mary Shelley's "birthing trauma".<sup>3</sup> Indeed the peculiar horror of the monster owes much of its emotional power to this hidden, or "coded", aspect, and the subsequent popularity of the tale through several nineteenth-century editions and on the Victorian stage, as well as in satire, derived in large part from the convergence of its most emotive elements with the evolving contemporaneous representation of ethnic and racial "Others". Such an argument necessarily rests on "evidence" that is indirect, circumstantial and speculative. There is no clear proof that Mary Shelley consciously set out to create a monster which suggested, explicitly, the Jamaican escaped slave or maroon, or that she drew directly from any personal knowledge of either planter or abolitionist propaganda. That she did so is certainly not impossible, and there can at least be no doubt that powerful literary images with which Shelley would have been quite familiar — Shakespeare's Caliban or Rousseau's noble savage — also played a significant role in the eighteenth-century image of the Edenic non-white. It is not, in any event, my purpose to prove explicit connections and direct sources. Nor is it my purpose to discover a hidden "key" which will unlock every level of meaning, intended or otherwise, in the novel. What is of interest here is how closely Shelley's fictional creation parallels in many respects the racial stereotypes of the age, and how her exploration of the limits of Rousseau and William Godwin on man and education, surely the most important sub-theme in the novel, mirrors contemporary difficulties in maintaining universal humanistic ideals

<sup>3</sup> For the novel as allegory of the class struggle, see Paul O'Flynn, "Production and Reproduction: The Case of Frankenstein", *Literature and History*, ix (1983), pp. 194-213; and, less convincingly, Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London, 1983), ch. 3, "Dialectic of Fear". For the feminist interpretation, see Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic", in G. Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (eds.), *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel* (Berkeley, 1979), pp. 77-87; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), ch. 7, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve"; Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism", *P.M.L.A.*, xcvi (1980), pp. 332-47; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", *Critical Inquiry*, xii (1985), pp. 243-61. Moers argues that the novel is both a dream of awakening sexuality and of the horror of maternity, while Gilbert and Gubar assert that Mary Shelley took the male cultural myth of *Paradise Lost* and rewrote it as a mirror of female experience. Poovey emphasizes the dilemma of the female artist expected to produce literature with a moral, while Spivak offers a deconstructionist perspective of the novel as "a text of nascent feminism" where the binary opposition of male/female is undone in Frankenstein's womb-laboratory.

in the context of the slave-economy of the West Indies and an expanding empire over non-white populations in Asia and Africa.

## I

### "RACE" IN THE NAPOLEONIC ERA

The relationship of man to the rest of creation, and of European man to others, was a familiar problem posed afresh to the systematizing Enlightenment mind. This is not the place to reiterate the development of the concept of race in the eighteenth century, except to note that these ideas already involved a good deal of projection, to use Mannoni's language, of European fears about their own dark interiors, and that towards the end of the century they acquired a greater "presence" or centrality in the European mind as a result of informal travel, scientific or scholarly investigation and imperial conquest.<sup>4</sup>

Educated Europeans of the early Enlightenment inherited a view of foreign peoples which was part-fantasy and part-hearsay, little more than an exotic fiction with which to expose the venality of European life, as in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, or reportage shaped in such a way as to administer a crude justification for economic penetration and religious conquest, as in Richard Hakluyt or Samuel Purchase. Ironically, however, the hunger for systematic and verifiable knowledge that typifies the mid-century *philosophe* served to reinforce, with a scientific gloss, this Eurocentric perspective. As the fantastic was exchanged for a natural science of plants, animals and foreign peoples, there was an inevitable compulsion to rank not only cultures but also types of people. This in turn encouraged the construction of a system of "races" of men in parallel with the genera and species laid down by Linnaeus for the biological world as a whole. This search for an ordering of Nature by rank no doubt reflects a hierarchical mentality inherent to the aristocratic European tradition.

Rousseau's natural man was an attempt to stand this enterprise on its head by embracing the untutored savage as a model of pre-civilized innocence. It was not, however, a validation of other, alternative, cultures. Rousseau's innocent savage was located within the European psyche itself rather than in the interiors of

<sup>4</sup> O. Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. P. Powesland (London, 1956; 1st pubd. Paris, 1950); Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London, 1965).

Africa or the Americas. Moreover the Edenic tradition never really managed to come to grips with inherent ambiguities about the bestial within man himself — a problem which resurfaced in the late eighteenth century in both the evangelical theology of original sin and Burkean conservatism.

Though it is possible to find some continuity of negative stereotyping in European concepts of the dark “Other”, towards the turn of the century ideas about racial difference were consolidated and intensified. This trend was no doubt encouraged by the reactionary assault on the political ideas of Rousseau, but it reached its full maturity in the mid-Victorian world of a widely accepted pseudo-scientific racism. There are many sources for such a shift in attitudes, but the extent to which the changes in image and their growing importance in popular culture can be located in the era following the French Revolution suggests that middle-class fears of violent revolutionary “beasts” at home played some role. James Gillray’s well-known cartoon of sans-culottes enjoying a meal of dismembered aristocrats brings together precisely these two themes of a bestial and threatening domestic poverty and a cannibalism drawn from the earliest fantasy-pictures of alien savages abroad.

Mary Shelley grew to maturity in a highly charged intellectual and political atmosphere in which revolutionary radicalism was on the defensive. Her parents’ close association with the radical cause, her husband’s radicalism, her own reading of Rousseau and of *Paradise Lost*, another failed revolution, have been widely commented on and *Frankenstein* persuasively portrayed as, in part, an ambiguous rendering of her father’s utopian and universal ideals.<sup>5</sup> If, however, we are to place the novel in the context of the general assault on radical ideas, it may be valuable to bear in mind that the black Jacobins in St Domingue and the parliamentary struggle in England to abolish the slave-trade guaranteed that issues of race played a significant contemporary role in the larger

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Burton R. Pollin, “Philosophical and Literary Sources of Frankenstein”, *Comparative Literature*, xvii (1965), pp. 97-108; James O’Rourke, “‘Nothing More Unnatural’: Mary Shelley’s Revision of Rousseau”, *E.L.H.*, lvi (1989), pp. 543-69; David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau and Mary Shelley* (Chicago, 1988); Lee Sterrenberg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in Frankenstein”, in Levine and Knoepfmacher (eds.), *Endurance of Frankenstein*, pp. 143-71; Christopher Small, *Ariel Like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and “Frankenstein”* (London, 1972); Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London, 1989).

political debate surrounding the capacities and rights of mankind. Nor did a reciprocating awareness of the anti-slavery and the domestic radical movements fade after abolition of the British slave-trade in 1807. In 1814 a proposal was made at the Congress of Vienna to renew the rights of French slave-merchants. Within four weeks some 806 petitions with 1.5 million signatures from towns throughout Britain were sent to parliament opposing it.<sup>6</sup> Negro slavery in the New World provided, if nothing else, a common source of analogy and metaphor in the political polemic aimed at redressing or defending inequality in the Old. Like other radicals, Mary Shelley's parents — William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft — at least tangentially addressed questions raised by the West Indian slavery debate in their own writings.

Godwin was concerned to defend the universality of reason in humankind and its operation in the perfecting of governments and human society generally, and in his best-known work, *Political Justice*, he attacked the familiar theory that climate had created types of men with different capacities. Characteristically, however, he obscured his point by admitting some probable effect of climate on character in extreme cases like the Tropics. Here his reliance on Hume led him to confuse racial and national character and further vitiated his object of demonstrating that it was, by and large, governments which shaped the character of their people for good or bad.<sup>7</sup> Though he was, of course, an opponent of slavery and scorned the argument that it was a tolerable institution because the slaves themselves appeared to tolerate it, Godwin nevertheless, in his rambling asides on Negro character, managed to affirm some of the common theories about Negro "differences" which one can find in the pro-slavery literature, as well as among the armchair theorists generally. Specifically he accepted that Negroes reached sexual maturity earlier, had a more passionate temperament than Europeans, and possessed a natural indolence "consequent upon a spontaneous fertility" of the tropical environment. Moreover Godwin, while denying that racial differences posed any absolute barrier to the spread of political liberty, suggested, as many abolitionists did, that instruc-

<sup>6</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>7</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London, 1985; 1st publ. 1793), pp. 147-53.

tion and guidance over a lengthy period of time would be necessary to prepare such people for freedom.<sup>8</sup>

If, in the flush of optimism of the early years of the French Revolution, a radical such as Godwin could offer only an ambiguous approach to racial equality — and some radicals like Cobbett had no use for “nigger philanthropy” in any form — conservative polemic often encouraged racial, or at least ethnic, stereotyping in its emotional and intellectual response to utopian radicalism. The French wars, the abortive rebellion in Ireland, the spread of the ideals of the French Revolution to Haiti, and armed resistance to British suzerainty in India served to heighten xenophobia and validate ethnic prejudice as patriotic anti-Jacobinism. In this context the assault on slavery, as well as its vigorous defence, established a discourse that served both to highlight inherent cultural and, increasingly, racial differences between the English and the Other, while at the same time offering allusive and metaphorical ammunition to the enemies of domestic radicalism. Those unsympathetic to claims for “universal” humanitarian and egalitarian rights in Europe had only to wave a hand at the patent folly of enfranchising Jamaican slaves, at Tipu’s fanatical followers in India or, for that matter, at “the Hottentot Venus” lasciviously displayed in London in 1810.

The exhibition of this indentured black woman, Saartjie Baartman, to curious crowds in Regency London, the extraordinary interest taken in her physical form by the press, and the way her body was literally disconstructed after death to prove spurious theories about Negro nature,<sup>9</sup> is a reminder of the way in which the cultural prejudices, fears and deep-seated neuroses of the observer may impinge on “science” and literature, and wander from one arena to another. Here the physical “abnormalities” of the South African “Hottentot”, hitherto unknown in England, served through popular caricature to reinforce ideas of polygenesis and racial hierarchy, but also, more subtly, to encourage in a reactionary political climate the views of natural inequality generally. When studying even so bookishly inspired a text as *Frankenstein*, it may be well to bear in mind that a writer — and Mary

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151-3.

<sup>9</sup> Sander L. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature”, *Critical Inquiry*, xii (1985), pp. 204-42. See also Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, iv, pt. 2, *Black Models and White Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 47-56.

Shelley was perhaps less protected from reality than many young women in her milieu — exists within a popular, as well as an intellectual, culture. A journal recording the books she read indicates possible intellectual sources for Mary Shelley's ideas; other influences are necessarily obscure, but not therefore unimportant. A novel is not only a product of inner psychology and private domestic experience, but also of the wider, enfolding, external environment of shifting values, attitudes and observations which impinged upon the writer.

Free American and West African blacks were not unknown in the England in which Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin grew up, nor were they merely the objects of a distant Caribbean philanthropy. In his *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, published in 1805, William Godwin included a tale, "Washing the Blackamoor White", with the aside that "The other day I stopped involuntarily to look at a negro I passed on the street . . . there was nothing brutal or insulting or coarse in his manner".<sup>10</sup> Thousands of mostly destitute Negroes — freed slaves brought to England by their masters, ex-sailors who had manned ships and left them in English ports, as well as those who had fled America — were concentrated in London and the other major ports by the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> If the fashion for little black boys in livery, or black footmen as in Godwin's fable, had waned, blacks as beggars and prostitutes, or in the rougher occupations, were relatively common. In 1810 and 1811 a black boxer from America, Thomas Molineaux, almost defeated the legendary English champion Tom Cribb in two widely publicized matches. These fights, attended by thousands, reported in *The Times*, and portrayed in the popular art of cheap prints and caricature,<sup>12</sup> drew the attention of polite society as well as the gaming world. Even the *Annual Register* for 1811 offered a report, with the justification that it "is so characteristic of the taste of the times, and its subject of so much contemporary importance, that we cannot but think it worth recording". An event such as this inevitably roused a sense of national and racial competition in many: "The Black's prowess was regarded by Cribb's friends with a jealousy which excited considerable national prejudice against him . . . the laurels of a British cham-

<sup>10</sup> Edward Baldwin [pseudonym for William Godwin], *Fables, Ancient and Modern, Adapted for the Use of Children* (London, 1805), p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 68. Estimates run from 10,000 to 20,000.

<sup>12</sup> See Honour, *Black Models and White Myths*, p. 30.

pion was in danger of being wrested from him by a Baltimore man of colour". The victorious Cribb was received by his friends "like a Nelson returning from a naval victory".<sup>13</sup>

It was not merely a case of blacks being in the public eye in Britain from time to time. Mary Godwin had certainly also been exposed at home, through both her father's writings and house guests, to the hotly contested issue of the abolition of slavery. It is reasonable to assume that this provided one source of images and buried themes in *Frankenstein*. William Godwin had covered the debates on the slave trade for the Whiggish *New Annual Register* in the 1780s and 1790s. In April 1791 he was actually present in the gallery of the Commons when Wilberforce's motion was defeated.<sup>14</sup> Although he accepted in *Political Justice* that there were racial differences in character as well as body, his sentiments nevertheless lay with the abolitionists, though not with Wilberforce's Tory evangelicalism. Godwin denied that differences of race or gender had any significant effect on an individual's ability to reason or to be educated. In his novel *St Leon* (1799) a prison turnkey is represented as a Negro with "sound understanding and an excellent heart".<sup>15</sup> The political struggle for abolition and the potential of the freed Negro for improvement would have been common subjects of conversation in the home in which Mary Godwin was educated. Dr James Bell, an admirer of Godwin, was introduced to him there in 1799, for example. Bell was determined to go out to Jamaica "to lighten the woes and diminish the horrors of slavery". He died in the island shortly after arrival.<sup>16</sup>

The prominence of the anti-slavery issue in late eighteenth-century European discourse had a direct impact on the characteristic depiction of the negro in Western art. The visual representation of the black shifted from that of an exotic, often in fancy dress, to the naked or semi-clothed victim, an object of pity.<sup>17</sup> While the intention of the evangelical abolitionists may have been to portray the black slave as "a man and a brother", the actual effect of their propaganda — vividly rendered on canvas, medals and chinaware, in cheap prints and ballad sheets, on memen-

<sup>13</sup> *Annual Register . . . for the Year 1811* (London, 1812), pp. 110-11.

<sup>14</sup> Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, 1984), pp. 76, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Cited *ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, iv, pt. 1, *Slaves and Liberators* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 50-7, 62-6.

toes of all kinds — was to reiterate an image of the Other, a special kind of childlike, suffering and degraded being, rarely heroic, that became part of the common coinage of popular culture. (See Plate 2.) Moreover abolitionist propaganda inevitably drew attention to that of the pro-slavery lobby. The apologists of Negro slavery manipulated scientific argument and injected into English popular culture, as well as into European political and intellectual discourse, the paranoid fears, sexual fantasies and, indeed, the whole range of racist stereotypes already current in Jamaican planter society. This served to create misgivings and ambiguities about race which were not unlike the challenge to Painite liberalism posed by the *émigré* descriptions of Jacobin ferocity in Paris.

Finally, while admitting that Mary Shelley's world was suffused with both positive and negative representations of the black man in public discourse, that her father held strong opinions on the subject which, inveterate educator that he was, he would undoubtedly have communicated to his children, and that there was a real presence of the racial Other in the London of her childhood, it is still legitimate to ask whether there is sufficient probability that she absorbed these images in a way that would lead one to expect them to emerge in her first and most important work of fiction.

There is, in fact, proof that Mary Shelley did have recourse, both before and during the writing of *Frankenstein*, to a reservoir of information about the black man in Africa and the West Indies. Turning to the journal which she kept, and in which she meticulously recorded books she and Percy Shelley read, we find some interesting titles. In 1814 they both read the first two large volumes of Mungo Park's relation of the interior of western Africa, an important milestone in European "discovery" of the continent. They read the third volume, containing the narrative of Park's death, in 1816, the year Mary began to write *Frankenstein*.<sup>18</sup> In the winter of 1814-15 they also read a history of the British West Indies by the wealthy merchant-planter, Bryan

<sup>18</sup> Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa: Performed under the Direction and Patronage of the African Association in the Years 1795, 1796 and 1797* (London, 1799); Mungo Park, *The Journal of a Mission to the Interior of Africa, in the Year 1805* (London, 1815); *Mary Shelley's Journal* [ed. Frederick L. Jones] (Norman, Okla., 1947), pp. 32, 71.

Edwards.<sup>19</sup> Edwards was a relatively liberal Jamaican, though pro-slavery. His work, which narrated the history of the islands up to the late eighteenth century, dwelt upon differences of colour and caste and the supposed racial characteristics of West Indian slaves from different parts of Africa, as well as the horrors of slave rebellions. Mary Shelley appears to have found the work sufficiently absorbing to spend “all evening” and “all day” engrossed in it.<sup>20</sup> Finally, although her journal suggests that the Shelleys finished reading John Davis’s record of his travels through the American South too late (in the summer of 1817, while Murray was considering the *Frankenstein* manuscript) for it to have played a role in the construction of her novel, the themes it treats — musings about the black as natural, Rousseauian man, and the struggle of owners to retrieve fugitive slaves — indicate their continuing interest in the subject of slavery and the Negro race at just the time the novel was being written: “Exposed to such wanton cruelty the negroes frequently run away; they flee into the woods, where they are wet with the rains of heaven, and embrace the rock for want of shelter”.<sup>21</sup> It remains to be seen to what extent the evidence of language and themes in the novel indicates a reflection at some level of the contemporary race debate in the creation and fate of Mary Shelley’s monster.

## II

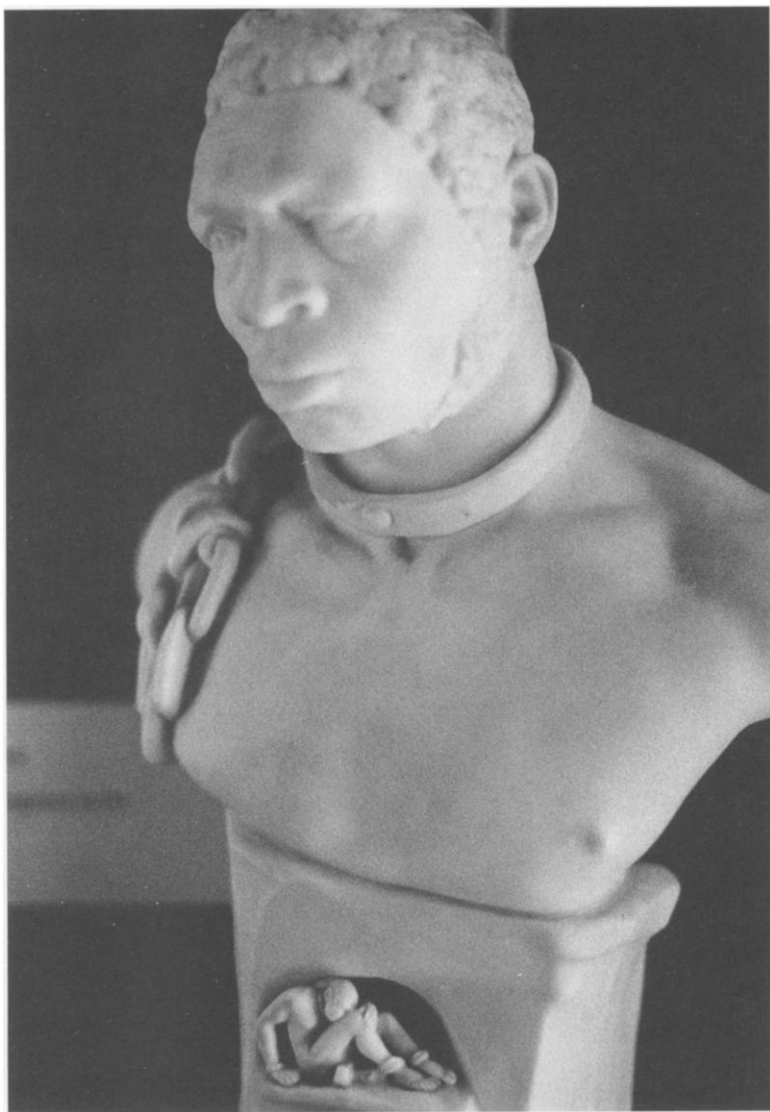
### FRANKENSTEIN

As is well known, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* had its origins at a house party near Geneva in June of 1816 at which the eighteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (she married

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1793).

<sup>20</sup> *Mary Shelley’s Journal*, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> John Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America; During 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801 and 1802* (London, 1803), p. 92. It may also be worth mentioning that, though an apparently obscure and distant “source”, *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* was a childhood reading which the Shelleys continued to dip into when abroad. Black slaves feature in many of the stories, sometimes with a relevant twist, as in that in which “an ugly, tall, black slave” causes a young man to murder his wife: *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments: or, The Thousand and One Nights*, trans. M. Galland, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1814), i, pp. 178–80 ff. *Mary Shelley’s Journal*, p. 47, notes that they read from this in 1815. Godwin recommended it for children: Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, p. 9. Mungo Park claimed that the African stories he had heard bore some resemblance to those of the *Arabian Nights*: Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, i, p. 31.



2. Head of a slave: figurine from the Wilberforce Museum, Hull  
*(By kind permission of the Museum)*

Percy Shelley the following December) was challenged to produce a ghost story. The resulting tale was published anonymously in March of 1818, and was surprisingly successful. In the form of a Gothic horror romance it recounts, through the letters of Walton, an Arctic explorer, the tortured history of Victor Frankenstein, the young son of a Genevan magistrate, who, as a Faustian university student, aspired to create life, and whose creation — his monster, fiend or demon — rejected by his creator, flees to the wilderness where he lives rough on nuts and berries. His appearance, however, produces violent revulsion in all who meet him, in spite of the creature's earnest attempts to make friends and do good. Educated vicariously and surreptitiously, he develops a sense of the injustices heaped upon him and turns to vengeance. He first murders Frankenstein's child brother, then causes the judicial murder of an innocent young woman; finally, half-repentant, he tracks down his creator to demand that he create a mate for himself, vowing that they will live apart from mankind. This Frankenstein at first agrees to do, but he betrays his promise after reflecting on the dangers of a race of creatures arising from the union of two such monsters. The enraged creature exacts a further terrible vengeance, first killing Frankenstein's friend Clerval, and then his bride Elizabeth on their bridal bed. The novel concludes with a determined Frankenstein pursuing his creation into the Arctic, only to die before confronting the monster, who mourns his maker and disappears into the northern darkness with a vow of self-immolation.

A reading of this text which attempts to draw out an embedded racial message must begin where racism itself begins, with physiognomy. The monster, it will be seen, is not merely a grotesque, a too-roughly cobbled together simulacrum of a man. He is, first, larger and more powerful than his maker, and, secondly, dark and sinister in appearance. This suggests the standard description of the black man in both the literature of the West Indies and that of West African exploration. Mungo Park's *Travels*, which Mary Shelley had ready to hand, described the Mandingos as "commonly above the middle size, well-shaped, strong, and capable of enduring great labour". A Negro guide who "mounted up the rocks, where indeed no horse could follow him, leaving me to admire his agility" indicates both great strength and, perhaps, the simian dexterity with which the monster eludes

Frankenstein in the Alps.<sup>22</sup> The Jamaican Bryan Edwards described the Mandingos as “remarkably tall”, while the Eboes were, he averred, a sickly yellow in complexion with eyes that appeared to be “suffused with bile”.<sup>23</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, popular racial discourse managed to conflate such descriptions of particular ethnic characteristics into a general image of the Negro body in which repulsive features, brute-like strength and size of limbs featured prominently. Frankenstein's creature, when we first see him, is defined by a set of clichés which might be picked out of such literature. His eyes are “dull yellow” and “watery”, hair “a lustrous black” and “ragged”, and his black lips contrast with “teeth of pearly whiteness”. His skin was “in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy”.<sup>24</sup> Mummies are, of course, ordinarily dark brown or black in colour, a fact which, following the Napoleonic excavations, led to speculation about the racial origin of the ancient Egyptians. There was already a tradition, drawn from classical authors, that the civilization of ancient Thebes had originated in Ethiopia. Count Chasseboeuf de Volney draws on this in his *Ruins*, a book which Mary Shelley knew, and which she used as one of the monster's textbooks in the novel; Volney wrote of “the black complexion of the Sphinx”.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that Shelley intended to create a specifically Negro monster, elsewhere she writes of the monster's yellow skin,<sup>26</sup> but rather that, reaching into childhood fantasy and imagination, she dredged up a boggyman which had been constructed out of a cultural tradition of the threatening “Other” — whether troll or giant, gypsy or Negro — from the dark inner recesses of xenophobic fear and loathing.

This seems to me to be at least as reasonable a reading as the

<sup>22</sup> Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, i, pp. 21, 239.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, pp. 58, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (London, 1985; hereafter *Frankenstein*), pp. 105, 261. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to *Frankenstein* are to this edition of the 1831 version. This was the edition most commonly available in the nineteenth century; although Mary Shelley made some significant alterations to the 1818 text, they are seldom important for our purposes.

<sup>25</sup> Chasseboeuf de Volney, *Ruins: or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (London, 1795), p. 331. One should also note in this context that Bryan Edwards attempted to associate the West Indian superstition of Obeah with ancient Egyptian sources: Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> Though some writers, as we have seen, drew attention to the yellowish skin and eyes of some Negroes.

claim that the monster is a feminine/masculine composite which transcends gender.<sup>27</sup> In fact there is very little that is feminine in the monster, a point to which I shall return later. Yet another reading maintains that the alien hideousness of the monster reflects bourgeois fears of an unknown but threatening working class. However, the lineaments of the creature hardly suggest the image of the wan, ground-down and bowed pauper or proletarian labourer, often small in stature and poor in health. Frankenstein's monster is robust and larger than life, ostentatiously rural rather than urban. Of course the monster as industrial worker does not have to be a literal image, but rather the enlarged fear of a collective threat. Nevertheless, at the level of physiognomy at least, a racial reading seems to me to be nearer the mark than a Marxist one.

Beyond size and repulsiveness, the most striking physical attributes of the monster are his ape-like ability to scamper up mountainsides and his endurance of temperatures which European man would find intolerable: "I was more agile", he says, "than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame".<sup>28</sup> This description closely parallels the claims of the apologists for West Indian slavery. The Negro, it was said, had more brute strength than the white man and could stand the heat of the Tropics which would enervate, perhaps kill, a European.<sup>29</sup> One might, without stretching imagination very far, see in Frankenstein's futile chase after his creature in the Alps or the frozen waste of the Arctic a displaced image of the white planter's exhausting and, in Jamaica, often futile search for the runaway slave in the opposite extreme of the Equatorial Tropics.<sup>30</sup> Moreover some apologists for slavery

<sup>27</sup> David E. Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London, 1987), p. 60, argues that "the lustrous black hair and pearly white teeth suggest 'feminine' attributes, contrasted with the straight black lips and the prominent musculature, which suggest predominantly 'masculine' traits". See also William Veeder, *Mary Shelley & "Frankenstein": The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 166.

<sup>29</sup> A point made by, among many others, John Davis, *Travels in the United States of America*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> An inversion perhaps suggested to Mary Shelley by her father's discussion of the impact of climate on character: "In their extreme perhaps heat and cold may determine the character of nations, of the negroes for example on the one side, and the Laplanders on the other": Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, p. 151. It may also be relevant to note that Edwards described the snow-covered mountains of South America in his history of the West Indies, and the lesser mountains of the islands which "have

defended a subsistence slave diet of maize and water with the claim that the Negro race did not require the white man's luxuries of meat and drink. This draws on a long European tradition which imagined wild men or natural men of the woods as (like Frankenstein's monster) colossal vegetarians, images which the eighteenth-century naturalists helped to merge with that of more primitive races of men abroad far down the ladder of racial hierarchy. Mungo Park commented on the largely vegetable diet of many Negroes.<sup>31</sup>

Shifting from the image to the story, however, we see that Shelley's monster is no mere ape-man. He has an innate desire for knowledge, a capacity to learn, and feelings of right and wrong. Notwithstanding his hideous appearance, he is a man dreadfully wronged by a society which cannot see the inner man for the outer form. Here one might argue quite plausibly for an abolitionist rendering of the image of the monster as "a man and a brother". However, Shelley's creature is, if not a masculine and feminine composite, a compound of both sides of the slavery debate. He *is* wild and dangerous, unpredictable and childlike, but at the same time has perhaps been made such by the circumstances of an unjust exclusion, as the creature himself says. Yet the depth of his rage and destructiveness seems to stem from more than environment and frustration; it suggests an inherent bestiality lurking somewhere. How much the monster's excitable character is the result of his unique physiology, and how much of his environment, is an ambiguity which exactly parallels the central conundrum of the anti-slavery debate. Something of this ambiguity might even be said to be buried unconsciously in Godwin's own good-natured telling of the fable about washing the blackamoor, which he intended no doubt as an abolitionist homily that skin colour mattered only to the ignorant. But it would more commonly have been read with another meaning, that the black could no more be educated into whiteness than a leopard could change his spots, that there were basic and ineradicable racial differences for which skin colour

(n. 30 cont.)

never yet, that I have heard, been fully explored": Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, i, p. 20. Davis in the American South alludes to the Alps when in sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains, associating both with escape and melancholy: Davis, *Travels in the United States of America*, p. 376.

<sup>31</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "'Face to Face': Of Man-Apes, Monsters and Readers", appendix to Levine and Knoepfelmacher (eds.), *Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 319; Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, i, pp. 279-80.

was but an outward sign.<sup>32</sup> The story was an old one. In 1776 the Revd Henry Bate's comic opera, "The Blackamoor Wash'd White", was performed at Garrick's Drury Lane Theatre. It contained a song with the lines:

No, you're not an earthly creature  
 But death's shadow in disguise!  
 See him stamp'd on ev'ry feature!  
 What a pair of rolling eyes!  
 Don't come nigh me,  
 Let me fly thee,  
 Or I faint — I fall — I die!  
 See death yonder! —  
 Now I wonder  
 Who outruns, the ghost, — or I?<sup>33</sup>

Violently contradictory and unbridled emotions are characteristics which were commonly associated with the Negro. Mungo Park, who was killed by natives in the upper Niger region, related numerous examples of violence — "The Jaloffs (or Yaloffs) are an active, powerful, and warlike race" — and "savagery": "The Negro carried the body [of a deceased boy] by a leg and an arm, and threw it into the pit with a savage indifference, which I had never before seen". Edwards describes the blacks of Jamaica who originated on the Gold Coast, "the genuine and original unmixed Negro", as having a "firmness of body and mind; a ferociousness of disposition; but withall, activity, courage, and a stubbornness . . . of soul, which prompts them to enterprises of difficulty and danger; and enables them to meet death, in its most horrible shape, with fortitude or indifference".<sup>34</sup> Many writers, such as John Leyden in 1799, made much not only of the violence of native Africans and slaves, in particular their thirst for revenge, but also their contrasting capacity for gratitude and affection: "The understanding is much less cultivated among the Negroes than among Europeans; but their passions, whether benevolent or malevolent, are proportionately more violent . . . Though addicted to hatred and revenge, they are equally susceptible to

<sup>32</sup> [Godwin], *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, pp. 165-8.

<sup>33</sup> Revd Henry Bate [Sir Henry Bate Dudley], *Airs, Ballads, &c* in "The Blackamoor Wash'd White" (London, 1776), pp. 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, i, pp. 16, 235; Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, p. 59.

love, affection, and gratitude".<sup>35</sup> It will be apparent how closely Leyden's choice of description — passionate revenge and loving gratitude — echoes Shelley's own characterization of her monster. It was a common theme which Mungo Park voiced in his observations, for example, of the "Feloops" near the Gambia River: "They are of a gloomy disposition, and are supposed never to forgive an injury . . . This fierce and unrelenting disposition is, however, counterbalanced by many good qualities: they display the utmost gratitude and affection toward their benefactors". This combination of vengefulness and affection was in fact a stereotype commonly applied to any savage or primitive race, as when Edwards described the extinct "Caribbees" of the West Indies: "they will be considered rather as beasts of prey, than as human beings", were prone to brood over "past miscarriage" and possessed an "implacable thirst of revenge". "But among themselves they were peaceable, and towards each other faithful, friendly and affectionate."<sup>36</sup>

Mary Shelley's addition of *cruel* vindictiveness to the portrait of the natural savage accords with a contemporary shifting of attitude from that of Dr Johnson's savage ("a man untaught, uncivilized") to the egregiously cruel as well as ignorant black well established in mid-nineteenth-century opinion.<sup>37</sup> Writing in the 1790s Edwards ascribed a particular cruelty to both the ancient Caribbees (an "unnatural cruelty") and the mulattos and Negroes of his time:

it serves to some degree to lessen the indignation which a good mind necessarily feels at the abuses of power by the Whites, to observe that the Negroes themselves, when invested with command, give full play to their revengeful passions; and exercise all the wantonness of cruelty without restraint or remorse.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> John Leyden, *Historical and Philosophical Sketch of the Discoveries and Settlements of the Europeans in Northern and Western Africa at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1799), p. 98, quoted in Curtin, *Image of Africa*, p. 223.

<sup>36</sup> Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*, i, pp. 15-16; Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, i, pp. 31-6.

<sup>37</sup> See Douglas Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1978), p. 147, citing Joseph Hooker [to John Tyndall, 15 Feb. 1867 (Huxley Papers, Imperial College, London)]: "It depends on the definition of the term 'SAVAGE'. Johnson defined savage as 'a man untaught, uncivilized'; in general parlance the world now superadds CRUELTY to the above. Now I hold the Negro in W. Africa and Jamaica is untaught, uncivilized and CRUEL TOO".

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, i, pp. 33-6, and ii, p. 74.

In contemporary abolitionist representation it is possible to find positive images of the black as a powerful force for *justifiable* vengeance rather than a mere supplicating child, though this perspective remained somewhat exceptional. In 1811 the abolitionist artist George Dawe exhibited at the British Institution a larger-than-life painting, *A Negro Overpowering a Buffalo*, which depicted a massive black body tensed with brute strength. A few years earlier Henri Fuseli, also an abolitionist, had given the public a towering, elemental and heroic black in his *The Negro Revenged*. If Dawe's message was oblique, Fuseli's was direct, suggested perhaps by lines from Thomas Day's poem "The Dying Negro": "For Afric triumphs! — his avenging rage/ No tears can soften, and no blood assuage". In Fuseli's painting a black male, larger than the white woman clinging to him, erect rather than kneeling, calls down the wrath of God on a foundering slave ship.<sup>39</sup> (See Plate 3.) More commonly, however, the image of the black as a destructive force — with a suggestion of irrational bestiality — was drawn from the propaganda of Jamaica's planter class, and was echoed by their parliamentary defenders. For example, in 1796 the *Parliamentary Register*, the *Annual Register* and, presumably, other London publications all gave ample space to Henry Dundas's reply in the House of Commons to humanitarian concerns over the use of bloodhounds to hunt down Negro men, women and children in Jamaica:

The Maroons were accustomed to descend from their fastnesses at midnight, and commit the most dreadful ravages and cruelties upon the wives, children, and property of the inhabitants, burning and destroying every place which they attacked, and murdering all who unfortunately became the objects of their fury.<sup>40</sup>

One might note here the coincidence that Shelley's implacably vengeful monster murders both a woman and a child, and burns the De Lacey cottage to the ground. Such images were common to the literature on the West Indies with which Mary Shelley was recently familiar. She would, for instance, have read Edwards's rather more explicit description of the horrors of a slave rebellion that saw, he claimed, widespread "death and desolation":

they surrounded the overseer's house about four in the morning, in which eight or ten White people were in bed, every one of whom they butchered

<sup>39</sup> Honour, *Slaves and Liberators*, p. 93; Honour, *Black Models and White Myths*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>40</sup> *Parliamentary Register*, xlv (London, 1796), pp. 337ff.



3. Henry Fuseli, *The Negro Revenged*, Hamburger Kunsthalle  
(By kind permission of the Kunsthalle)

in the most savage manner, and literally drank their blood mixed with rum . . . [they] then set fire to the buildings and canes. In one morning they murdered between thirty and forty Whites, not sparing even infants at the breast . . . <sup>41</sup>

This nightmare Edwards put into verse which, like Fuseli's canvas of 1807, may also echo, if in a more sinister tone, Thomas Day's poem:

Now, Christian, now, in wild dismay,  
Of Afric's proud revenge the prey,  
Go roam th'affrighted wood; —  
Transform'd to tigers, fierce and fell,  
Thy race shall prowl with savage yell,  
And glut their rage for blood!<sup>42</sup>

This Gothic image of frenzied blacks drinking the blood of their victims (Frankenstein accuses the monster of being "his own vampire")<sup>43</sup> is a common trope for a depraved and irrational lust for vengeance. It brings together two of the commonly supposed characteristics of the primitive: a manic preoccupation with avenging grievances and cannibalism. The apparent contradiction between the European image of the vegetarian wild man and that of the cannibalistic savage may be related in some way to that other contradiction thought to exist in savage natures between affectionate gratitude and indifferent, casual cruelty. In the late eighteenth century the European tradition of widespread cannibalism among savages abroad, passed down from well-elaborated and largely fanciful sixteenth-century accounts, and lodged in the popular mind by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (recommended by Godwin for the education of children),<sup>44</sup> appeared to receive corroboration in explorers' accounts of the South Pacific and Africa. Bryan Edwards, who believed that cannibalism had been widespread in the West Indies, drew attention to the debate on the extent of the practice in his *History*.<sup>45</sup>

While Mary Shelley's monster cannot actually be charged with cannibalism, the subject is certainly raised, if obliquely, in the novel. William Frankenstein, the child whom the monster strangles, his most horrific crime, charges him at first sight with

<sup>41</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, pp. 60-1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, i, pp. 29-30, where he attempts to refute Labat's claim that cannibalism had been rare.

this savage intention: "Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me and tear me to pieces".<sup>46</sup> The charge is, of course, unjust and part of the prejudice which the creature meets wherever he turns. Though Victor Frankenstein metaphorically associates his monster with vampirism, it is Frankenstein himself who takes on the character of the savage. He is the cannibal who tears "to pieces" both the corpses from which he assembles his creature and the female mate he began to construct. Similarly he also takes on the savage's thirst for vengeance, dedicating himself to revenge the deaths of his brother and bride, in relentless pursuit of his own creation. As Anne Mellor and other critics have noted, Frankenstein and his monster become indistinguishable, "the creator has become his creature".<sup>47</sup>

Dissection in Frankenstein's laboratory is, as with the scientific dismemberment of "the Hottentot Venus", a horror directly mirroring that of savage myth. A racially prejudiced combination of vengeance and cannibalism via dissection (in this case vivisection) already existed in Shakespeare's Shylock, just as a metaphorical cannibalism was, as we have seen, xenophobically associated with the Parisian mob. The Burke and Hare murders later established more firmly in the popular mind the association of cannibalism/dismemberment with godless science. One Victorian edition of *Frankenstein* was published together with a work entitled *London Medical Students*. Ultimately the clandestine and illegal search for human flesh for medical school dissection was conflated with the Frankenstein story itself on stage and in film.

Another aspect of the monster's physical appearance and character is worth emphasizing in any search for a racialized image. A strong tradition, already familiar by the late eighteenth century and insisted upon by racist propagandists for slavery like Edward Long, had it that the Negro was both particularly libidinous and possessed of unusually large genitalia. William Godwin himself had written: "The heat of the climate obliges both sexes [of the Negro] to go half naked. The animal arrives sooner at maturity in hot countries. And both these circumstances produce vigilance and jealousy, causes which inevitably tend to inflame the passions".<sup>48</sup> Edwards related that Negroes were promiscuous and possessed a strong sexual passion, which "is mere animal

<sup>46</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 187.

<sup>47</sup> Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 135-6.

<sup>48</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, p. 152.

desire”.<sup>49</sup> The threat that white women might be brutalized by over-sexed black men of great strength and size became a cliché of racist writing, ready for appropriation in the creation of Gothic horror and given an extra charge by the recently dramatized and exaggerated stories of the plight of white women in revolutionary Haiti.

Mary Shelley’s monster, because of his great strength and unpredictable moods, his alternate plaintive persuasiveness and fiery rage, is suffused with a kind of dangerous male sexuality. In the film *Young Frankenstein* Mel Brooks equipped his monster with a monstrous “Schlange”. Beneath this juvenile satire is a valid, even perceptive, extrapolation from the original. Shelley describes her creation as not only eight feet tall but “proportionably large”. Frankenstein’s shocked reaction to his first sight of the living creature seems to evoke the image of a great, engorged and threatening phallus: “Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath”.<sup>50</sup> A similarly threatening masculinity may be suggested in his later awakening to find the monster nakedly towering above him as he lay in his bed.

The murder of Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s bride, seems almost certainly to draw, consciously or otherwise, upon the classic threat of the black male. The sharp contrast between the hazel-eyed, auburn-haired, high-browed, fragile white woman and the dark monster was sharp in the 1818 version, but was made much starker in Mary Shelley’s revision of 1831. Here we can see the construction of both race and a vulnerable femininity, the “angel in the house”, progressing together towards the Victorian age. Elizabeth is described in this third edition as not only of aristocratic, but of stereotypically northern, Teutonic beauty:

Her hair was the brightest living gold . . . her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless . . . none could behold her without looking on her as of a distinct species, a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features . . . Her mother was a German.<sup>51</sup>

It is this master-race maiden whom the monster — her racial negative; dark-haired, low-browed, with watery and yellowed eyes — violently assaults in her bedroom and strangles, just as

<sup>49</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, p. 76.

<sup>50</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 105.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83. For the 1818 description, see Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 31.

Othello smothers Desdemona. The scene is emotionally and suggestively that of rape as well as murder, or rather, as murder in lieu of rape.

Finally, the threat of terrible violence which over-sexed "Others" would carry to the whole white race is made explicit in Frankenstein's hesitation to create a mate for his monster:

Even if they [the monster and his bride-to-be] were to leave Europe [as the monster had suggested] and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations?<sup>52</sup>

Two interesting allusions are possible here. First, the idea of the racial Other's exile from Europe to a new Eden, where he would be left free to manage on his own, was already available from the beginning of the Sierra Leone experiment in sending destitute blacks "back to Africa". By the time Mary Shelley was writing, this much-advertised experiment had come to be regarded largely as a failure. More pointedly, there was a strong parallel with the fear of an autonomous "race of devils" in the recent history of Haiti and in highly exaggerated stories about the escaped or freed slave communities of mulattos in the West Indies and the threat they posed to the white planter society, and in particular to its women. Once again this was a fear which the slave-owning class encouraged in their loud protests against humanitarian intervention. The year Shelley began her novel there were reports that rebellious blacks in Barbados flew a flag which portrayed "a black chief, with a white woman, with clasped hands, imploring mercy".<sup>53</sup>

The image of blacks free from the discipline of the white master, in an environment where nature provided unlimited sustenance, breeding like animals at a rate unrestrained by decency or prudence, was already available well before Carlyle's essay on the "Nigger Question". In it lay much of the basis for the prediction of the inevitability of race war which preoccupies so much late nineteenth-century racist literature. *Frankenstein* prefigures this racial Armageddon as much as it does the mad scientist of twentieth-century fiction and film.

<sup>52</sup> *Frankenstein*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>53</sup> *Annual Register . . . for the Year 1816* (London, 1817), p. 77.

## III

## EDUCATION AND MORAL DILEMMA

The education of Frankenstein's monster occupies an important, indeed central, part of the story, involving a complicated and lengthy sub-plot at the De Lacey cottage. This has drawn the attention of literary critics who see in it more than a mere digression that allows Mary Shelley to parade her grasp of Lockean ideas on the acquisition of knowledge by sensory association, the monster as *tabula rasa*, but also a sophisticated means of introducing the Rousseauian critique that true instruction must engage the emotions and requires loving contact. It is precisely this, of course, which the monster is denied both by his creator and ultimately by the family from whom he secretly learns language and history. This is a reasonable view which accords well with what we know of Mary Shelley's own reading of both Locke and Rousseau. It should not, however, preclude an examination of the novel as at some level also a comment on sharply focused and pragmatic contemporary issues as well as on earlier educational theory.

The success of Victor Frankenstein's hubristic experiment immediately poses the central problem of the novel, the hinge upon which the moral of the tale turns. This is the dilemma of whether he is willing to acknowledge his responsibility to nurture and educate his creation in the ways of humankind, thus not only making his progeny safe for society but admitting the fact of his paternity and responsibility to both himself and the world at large. This he cannot bring himself to do, and his flight from moral obligation has terrible consequences for all concerned. This ethical problem can be generalized. Can any parent, slave-master, patron or employer escape, without retribution, the moral obligation of providing for the welfare and education of those who are dependent upon him and who have, in some sense at least, been called into being, shaped and perhaps deformed to serve his needs? This is a powerful and demanding issue, which not only hints at a common critique of Rousseau's own notorious avoidance of the obligations of paternity, but directly targets a central, perhaps *the* central, social question of the post-Revolutionary, early-industrial age.

Frankenstein's refusal either to admit responsibility for the creature he has made or to help it achieve full integration into

the society of men, coupled with the potential threat of the monster's brute strength, has led some critics to view the story as a metaphor for domestic class relations in the era of early mechanization and Luddism. In such a reading, Frankenstein's refusal to ameliorate the condition of his monster roughly anticipates the coming liberalism of the age of *laissez-faire* and individualism. The monster's later discovery of social injustice through his attempt at self-education comfortably conforms to this interpretation. However, these issues of accountability and paternalism, together with the dangerous self-awareness of a subordinate class, emerge with equal if not greater and more immediate force in nineteenth-century race relations.

Like Frankenstein, the white, gentlemanly abolitionist sought to give reality to an ideal, the potential humanity of the degraded slave. In the eyes of some philanthropists, the slave, like the monster, was indeed a *tabula rasa*, a cultureless creature ready to receive their moral teaching and their theology. In the optimism of the movement, others assumed that the abolition of the institution of slavery alone — in Frankenstein's story, the mere act of creation — would be followed by inevitable improvement, as the liberated black man found his place as a fully responsible, self-improving citizen. By the time Mary Shelley was writing, however, there were already deep misgivings about these expectations. In Sierra Leone the projectors of a free and self-respecting black colony had had to retrench their expectations, impose discipline and withhold self-governance. By the second decade of the century there must have been many, even among the abolitionist camp, who also harboured doubts at least about the immediate consequence of wholesale abolition in the West Indies, and who were ready, emotionally at any rate, to retreat from their own responsibility for any resulting horror. Retreat and denial is of course Frankenstein's first reaction to his own creation. Furthermore leaving the monster to his own devices in the wilderness results in brooding grievance and childlike rage. Already malformed by his creator, he does not rise to full humanity but reverts to the beast, in part because of the prejudice of those he encounters, in part because real self-improvement, without an education involving discipline and a nurturing paternalist connection, was as unlikely for him as — to many — it seemed to prove unlikely for blacks in the West Indies.

Here it will be seen that *Frankenstein* resonates strongly with a great and pressing social concern much in the mind of the

upper- and middle-class public. As with Frankenstein's monster, the problem of education in the early nineteenth century had a dual aspect: the advancement, moral well-being and happiness of those to be educated, on the one hand; but also, on the other, the safety of the society to which, to some extent, the new urban citizen of the "dangerous classes" or the freed slave of the plantation was to be admitted.

In Mary Shelley's world, the double issues of responsibility and discipline were sharply debated. The same evangelicals who advocated abolition and missionary activity abroad pressed for Sunday schools and philanthropic instruction at home. The issue of the education of factory children, of women, and of slaves in the West Indies emerged in much the same terms. Where did responsibility lie? What should be taught? What was the (clearly anomalous) social role of an educated black, an educated worker or an educated woman? Clearly the problem facing the rejected monster, how should he educate himself, and the disappointment he experienced on realizing that his efforts at self-tuition were of little use in winning acceptance, closely approximates the issues raised both by abolitionists and domestic educational reformers whether of Benthamite, radical or evangelical persuasion. Behind this lay the frustrations inherent in the formal education of subordinate persons in a society that remained intensely patriarchal, class-bound and colour-prejudiced.

Like race prejudice and class snobbery, the racial and domestic educational issues were inextricably intertwined. The two discourses drew from and reinforced each other; they shared the key questions of appropriateness, responsibility, social control and social danger. The historians of education in this period have neglected the degree to which the "problem" of Negro education — a debate that raged, at least in abolitionist and pro-slavery quarters, from the late eighteenth century until well after the American Civil War — influenced the tenor and substance of the domestic European debate over the educability of the poor and women. Some further consideration of aspects of the novel in this light will therefore be of interest.

In the first place, it is appropriate to recall that the issue of whether black slaves ought to receive any education, enough, at least, to read the edifying homilies of religion, had long been a bone of contention between the Jamaican planters and the humanitarians. Knowledge is power, and the withholding of instruction was a highly symbolic entrenchment of the master-slave relation-

ship. This suggests another debate over whether slaves ought to be baptized into a Christian church, which would bring them into the brotherhood of Christ and pose problems with regard to their disposal as chattels. It is not unduly far-fetched to see some reflection of these issues in Frankenstein's refusal either to instruct or to name his creature. Mary Shelley's monster is not only denied education; he is also denied a Christian name.<sup>54</sup> Frankenstein thus retreated from a commitment to a relationship, an attachment of sentiment and parentage, which was as repugnant to him as it would have been to the white slave-master. The monster's thirst for knowledge is in fact a thirst for deliverance from the condition of "a vagabond and a slave". What little education he could glean from the conversation of the De Lacey (such as a "house-nigger" might pick up from those whom he served) taught him that one such as himself, lacking "unsullied descent" or even a name, was "doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few!"<sup>55</sup>

It might be thought that the monster's articulateness, his precocious quickness of intellect in learning second-hand from overheard conversation, belies any close comparison with the slave stereotype. Certainly the most brutal stereotype — from, say, the pages of Edward Long — would deny the Negro sufficient intelligence to learn, but liberal opinion, of the kind read by Mary Shelley, held otherwise. Edwards claimed that "he had been surprised by such figurative expressions [from his slaves], and (notwithstanding their ignorance of abstract terms) such pointed sentences, as would have reflected no disgrace on poets and philosophers . . . Negroes have minds very capable of observation".<sup>56</sup>

"Observation" is the monster's only means of self-education. Like the Negro slave, he is kept an outsider. In what is clearly a sense of self-recognition, he responds with weeping to the Count de Volney's tragic history of "the helpless fate" of the native inhabitants of America.<sup>57</sup> However, he not only identifies with the sufferers of this racial injustice but, though protesting that

<sup>54</sup> This was emphasized by the posters advertising the popular stage adaptation of the novel in 1823, where the monster is designated only by "\_\_\_\_\_".

<sup>55</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, p. 78.

<sup>57</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 165. The De Lacey read Chasseboeuf de Volney's *Ruins*.

“mine shall not be the submission of abject slavery”, finally acknowledges to himself his own inferiority and despairs:

I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am . . . I abhorred myself . . . I was the slave, not the master . . . I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on . . . Your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself.<sup>58</sup>

His response is at first rebellion, but this turns to despair and, ultimately, to suicide. The monster’s “education” has taught him self-contempt just as the little education given the plantation black or freed slave served merely to reinforce his own awareness of inferiority. This mentality conforms to that observed by Edwards of the mulatto in Jamaica, where an official system of racial classification and discrimination “tends to degrade them [freed blacks and mulattos] in their eyes, and in the eyes of the community to which they belong”.<sup>59</sup>

It was a commonplace of the literature of slavery that the recently enslaved experienced deep depression and, particularly those from some proud, warlike tribes, were prone to either rebellion or suicide. Edwards remarked on the frequent suicides among the Eboes of West Africa, and elsewhere commented that it was a widely held belief (though one with which he disagreed) that “Negroes consider death not only as a welcome and happy release from the calamities of their condition, but also as a passport to the place of their nativity”.<sup>60</sup> The monster’s intended self-immolation brings together three clichés of this tradition: the low self-regard of the slave, slave suicide (a form of impotent rebellion) and destruction by fire (the common image of real rebellion).

From overheard conversations and readings the monster also learned the ethnic stereotyping of which he himself, as an alien, ironically was also a victim — of slothful Asiatics, degenerate Romans and *ungrateful*, wicked Turks.<sup>61</sup> Indeed the idea of gratitude, and its opposite, a corrosive sense of resentment, feature strongly throughout the novel. There is the story of the Christian Arab Safie and her Turkish father, who unnaturally rewards his Christian deliverer with treacherous ingratitude. When Justine, a poor relation living as a servant in the Frankenstein household, is

<sup>58</sup> *Frankenstein*, pp. 159, 262-4.

<sup>59</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70, 80.

<sup>61</sup> *Frankenstein*, pp. 164-5, 171.

unjustly accused of the murder of Frankenstein's brother, the charge of murder was made more horrible in the eyes of the public by the suggestion of "ingratitude" to the Frankenstein family which had protected her. There is also the monster's own repeated assertion that, if he were treated with kindness by someone, he "would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude" at his acceptance; "my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal", for his heart, the creature says, "was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy".<sup>62</sup> Again, this is a theme that features prominently in the literature with which Mary Shelley was familiar on the African and West Indian black. Edwards, like others, was eager to affirm that, however violent and passionate the black or mulatto might be, there was a counterbalancing tendency to affection. He speaks of "their disinterested gratitude and attachment where favours are shown them"; "if their confidence be once obtained, they manifest as great fidelity, affection, and gratitude as can reasonably be expected from men in a state of slavery".<sup>63</sup>

This projection of gratitude invokes the classic colonizer mentality, evident in the middle-class humanitarian as well as in the paternalist slave-holder. The recipients of liberation, protection or education in the Christian virtues of patience and forbearance are expected to return benevolent condescension with self-abasing thankfulness and loyalty. The cardinal sin in this system is "ingratitude", a failing which Mary Shelley herself at one point calls "blackest ingratitude",<sup>64</sup> and which the Victorians were later quick to ascribe to sepoy troops or Jamaican freed slaves. This discloses the paradox at the centre of the humanitarian, abolitionist enterprise: that while the *gift* of liberation transforms the slave into a free man, it does so only through the good offices of white, middle- and upper-class patrons, rather than by self-help. In this relationship the idealized black, though a "man and a brother", is inevitably still on his knees as a grateful man and a younger brother.

#### IV

##### THE VICTORIAN FRANKENSTEIN

Though Mary Shelley wrote five more novels before her death in 1851, none succeeded with the public nearly as well as *Frank-*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131, 190, 192, 262.

<sup>63</sup> Edwards, *History, Civil and Commercial, of the West Indies*, ii, pp. 25, 69-70.

<sup>64</sup> *Frankenstein*, p. 131, with reference to public opinion of Justine.

*enstein*. Only months after it appeared in the spring of 1818, Thomas Peacock could write to Percy Shelley that “*It seems to be universally known and read*”.<sup>65</sup> The three-volume edition of that year was followed in 1823 by a two-volume version, apparently to take advantage of the popularity of stage adaptations. A cheaper (one-volume) third edition, with revisions and illustrations, was aimed at a yet wider public in 1831, and this was often reprinted.<sup>66</sup> There was in fact either a new edition of the novel or an authorized reprinting in each decade of the century, and two in the 1830s, 1880s and 1890s, in addition to the versions included in collections of horror stories, in pirated (often American) editions, and in foreign translations. A one-shilling pocket edition appeared in 1888.

The successful stage adaptation of 1823 which helped spread and sustain the novel’s popularity in fact sparked a number of other dramatizations (at least fourteen in the following three years). Some of these were in fact burlesques, testifying to the work’s having achieved a certain place in the popular mind. The first and most successful of the stage adaptations, Richard Brinsley Peake’s “*Presumption: or, The Fate of Frankenstein*”, was received with “*tremendous enthusiasm*” and achieved an “*enduring popularity*”. Thomas Cooke, who made a speciality of weird and villainous roles, made the part of the monster his own, and played it to packed houses for some 350 performances in London and Paris.<sup>67</sup>

On the Victorian stage the Frankenstein story was inevitably altered to fit the melodramatic expectations of audiences of the time. On the one hand, demonic and alchemical elements were emphasized; on the other, songs and dancing were interpolated in some versions, and a comic element was occasionally introduced

<sup>65</sup> Peacock to Shelley, Aug. 1818 (emphasis in original), quoted in Radu Florescu, *In Search of Frankenstein* (London, 1975), p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> In 1839, 1849, 1856, 1882 and 1886, not counting unauthorized and American printings of this edition: see *The British Library General Catalogue of Printed Books to 1975*, ccc, p. 382; Donald F. Glut, *The Frankenstein Catalogue* (Jefferson, N.C., 1984).

<sup>67</sup> Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama, 1800-1850*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1930), i, p. 96, and ii, pp. 261, 346, 454; Victor Leathers, *British Entertainers in France* (Toronto, 1954), pp. 55-7; Steven Earl Forry, “Dramatizations of Frankenstein, 1821-1986: A Comprehensive List”, *Eng. Lang. Notes*, xxv (1987), pp. 63-79; Steven Earl Forry, “The Hideous Progenies of Richard Brinsley Peake: Frankenstein on the Stage, 1823 to 1826”, *Theatre Research International*, xi (1986), pp. 13-31.

to lighten the story. Catastrophic storms, the burning of the cottage, and avalanches provided spectacle, while the subtler tones of the novel were sacrificed to a simplified drama of innocence versus demonic terror. Mary Shelley's ambiguities disappeared. Cooke's monster, effectively mimed, lost its articulateness and became the mute beast, tameable only by music. As Steven Forry has recently observed,<sup>68</sup> the monster was "Calibanized", though this is surely only an extension of the densely present, if buried, associations already linking Mary Shelley's monster to the Caliban-like slave. By turning the creature into even more of a caricature, the Victorian stage enhanced its utility as stereotype, as image of the dark "Other". It may be significant, for instance, that both the popularity of a variety of burlesques on the Frankenstein story (still being played as late as the 1880s), as well as the introduction of comic song into even the more serious versions, coincides with the emergence of "Nigger Minstrels" as an enduring entertainment in London music-halls and theatres. In any event the image of the creature swaying to the charms of music at least suggests the caricature of the "singin' and dancin'" Old South slave.

From the 1830s there was another type of association available to public view, one which completes a triangular relationship of images of animal, monster and Negro, in the exhibition of the first large ape-like creatures from Africa at the Regent's Park zoo. Tommy the chimpanzee captivated audiences in 1835, and displayed what seemed to be the learning ability of at least a child. He was followed two years later by a much-publicized orang-utan. Many contemporaries, one assumes, responded like Queen Victoria herself, who commented: "He is frightful & painfully and disagreeably human".<sup>69</sup> About the same time Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) brought to the public what Frankenstein's monster had already suggested, a homicidal simian.<sup>70</sup>

One would like to know more about the performances of the

<sup>68</sup> Steven Earl Forry, *Hideous Progenies: Dramatizations of "Frankenstein" from the 19th Century to the Present* (Philadelphia, 1990), p. 22.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Wilfrid Blunt, *The Ark in the Park: The Zoo in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1976), p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> For a recent essay on the anthropological treatment of apes, monkeys and humans, and its relationship to the construction of race and gender in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London, 1990).

various stage adaptations and whether the available racial and simian associations of the creature were introduced on the stage, as they were in parliamentary debate and magazine caricature. Cooke probably darkened his skin for his performance of the satanic Samiel in an 1824 version of *Die Freischütz* to suggest the darkness of evil. Similarly he, like others after him, used blue greasepaint in his portrayal of the monster,<sup>71</sup> not with the intention of creating a racial villain, but to suggest both the lividity of a corpse and a sinister Otherness. A blue-skinned monster would inevitably, however, have suggested on the one hand an Othello, on the other a “nigger minstrel” — Negro tragedy and Negro farce. (See Plate 4.)

However this may be, the story clearly found its way quickly into popular metaphor and caricature, and such allusions seem to follow, not the publication of the three-volume novel in 1818, but the London stage plays of 1823. In March 1824, for example, in a parliamentary debate over Thomas Fowell Buxton’s motion that the children of West Indian slaves be freed on achieving the age of majority, Canning explicitly connected the Frankenstein myth with the dangers of abolition:

In dealing with the negro, Sir, we must remember that we are dealing with a being possessing the form and strength of a man, but the intellect only of a child. To turn the negro loose in the manhood of his physical strength, in the maturity of his physical passions, but in the infancy of his uninstructed reason, would be to raise up a creature resembling the splendid fiction of a recent romance; the hero of which constructs a human form, with all the thews and sinews of a giant; but being unable to impart to the work of his hands a perception of right and wrong, he finds too late that he has created a more than mortal power of doing mischief and himself recoils from the monster which he has made.<sup>72</sup>

Canning here seized upon three important racial parallels: first, the childishness of monster and Negro slave; secondly, a supposed lack of moral judgement (this reading obviously derives from the stage plays rather than the novel, where the monster has an acute sense of right and wrong); and finally, an implied sexual threat — the “maturity of his physical passions”. Coincidentally, the play at this time was accompanied in a double bill at Covent Garden by another called *The West Indian*.<sup>73</sup>

This temptation to use the image of the monster in the portrayal

<sup>71</sup> Forry, *Hideous Progenies*, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> *Hansard*, new ser., x, 16 Mar. 1824, col. 1103.

<sup>73</sup> Handbill reproduced in Florescu, *In Search of Frankenstein*, p. 164.



4. "T.P. Cooke as the Creature in *Le monstre et le magicien*, Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, 1826", Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris  
(By kind permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale)

of “uncivilized” and non-white peoples abroad inevitably wandered into domestic politics. As Chris Baldick has noted, Canning was “reclaiming the monster as a Burkean bogey figure”, and in this enterprise the dumb, mimed figure of the stage fiend served to better purpose than the articulate reasoner of Mary Shelley’s original creation.<sup>74</sup> The monster in caricature was commonly used as a metaphor for radicalism during the Reform agitations of the early 1830s and the mid-1860s, and during the Chartist period. If these were not Negro monsters, they often suggested ethnic prejudice in associating the creature with the Irish working man. “The Irish Frankenstein” in fact became something of a cliché in mid-Victorian humorous magazines, and was used to comment on O’Connell in the 1840s (*Punch*), the Fenians in the 1860s (Matt Morgan in *The Tomahawk*) and the Phoenix Park murders in 1882 (John Tenniel in *Punch*).<sup>75</sup> (See Plate 5.)

This is not to claim, of course, that there must always be a racial or ethnic component in Victorian appropriation of the Frankenstein metaphor. The story worked its way down into popular culture, to become a kind of mythic or iconic element that was drawn up again into serious literature, as in *Middlemarch* where Lydgate’s search for the life source in primitive tissues clearly draws from Frankenstein’s laboratory.<sup>76</sup> In *Mary Barton* Elizabeth Gaskell compared the uneducated radical working man to “a Frankenstein”, in what had possibly become a commonplace allusion. That she received the idea from popular “knowledge” of the Frankenstein story rather than from a direct reading is indicated by the careless way in which she (along with many others) confused Frankenstein with his monster, while the misreading of the monster on the popular stage as an inarticulate child served her desire to represent the working class as child-like.<sup>77</sup> Pip’s fear that Magwitch has become his own Frankenstein’s monster<sup>78</sup> seems free of racial association as well, though his acute embarrassment over the possibility of public knowledge

<sup>74</sup> Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*, p. 60.

<sup>75</sup> See Forry, *Hideous Progenies*, pp. 43-54; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London, 1985 edn.), introduction by Maurice Hindle, p. 37; Lee Sterrenberg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*”, in Levine and Knoepfelmacher (eds.), *Endurance of Frankenstein*, p. 166; L. P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot, 1971).

<sup>76</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London, 1965; 1st pubd. 1871-2), pp. 177-8.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (London, 1970; 1st pubd. 1848), pp. 219-20. See also Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*, pp. 86-7.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London, 1965; 1st pubd. 1861), p. 354.



5. "The Irish Frankenstein", *Punch*, v (1843), p. 199

of the criminal's patronage suggests something of the horror of the discovery of "bad blood", of a "white" having to recognize black relations.

*Frankenstein* endured in print, on the stage, and as metaphor in a way that belies the weaknesses of its literary construction. Indeed the critical response then and later was slight and mixed, with some praise from a minority of critics and much deprecation of the "immorality" of its apparent message. It is reasonable to assume that it survived partly because of the resonances it evoked and because of its usefulness in reinforcing racial and ethnic prejudice. Seen simply as a somewhat immature and certainly backward-looking exercise in Gothic horror, with a message drawn from reflections on Enlightenment ideas about the perfectibility of man — that is, from the preoccupations of the dated late eighteenth-century radicalism of Godwin — the story's enduring success seems odd. One can attempt to explain it, as with any critical failure and popular success, in terms of the appeal of mere sensationalism to an uncritical public. The rise of the vulgarly educated mass consumer of cheap literature in the nineteenth century offers this answer, but it is not, I think, a sufficient one. Some works which are "in tune" with changes in contemporary mentality achieve a larger-than-life stature, and are "read" by the public in a way not perhaps originally intended. The nineteenth-century development of the *Frankenstein* story in drama and burlesque reflects this process.

The idea that the story is about science run amok, a critique of the godless, mad professional in the sense that later became standard fare, was one such "reading" not exactly intended in the original but quite quickly developed on the stage.<sup>79</sup> The change from the highly articulate monster of Shelley's creation into the mute horror pursued by villagers, the manufactured zombie with a deformed and criminal brain, is another later interpretation, reflecting perhaps the craniological and neurological concerns of mid-nineteenth-century science, as well as the requirements of stage and film sensationalism.

At a deeper and less obvious level, however, the real explanation for *Frankenstein's* enduring appeal lies in the conjunction of

<sup>79</sup> Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 89-114, I believe, somewhat exaggerates Shelley's intention in this direction, though Shelley did, in attempting to improve the morals of the tale for the edition of 1831, herself shift emphasis to this aspect: see O'Flynn, "Production and Reproduction", p. 201.

certain readily appropriable images which stirred deep popular anxieties — about revealed religion versus science, the place of women in the masculine world of empire and the professions, the danger of proletarian revolution, or the threat of non-white races. Here it is that the sub-text of racial image and character is important in explaining the attraction of a story which helped formulate a popular emotional response to increasing contact with and threats from non-white cultures abroad. The Indian Mutiny, the Jamaican rebellions of 1831 and 1865, the countless little wars fought by Victoria's armies against Maori, Ashanti, Zulus or Canadian Métis all contributed to the emotional appeal of a text which presented the Other as a rebellious and ungrateful child that owed its very existence to a white male patron. The story loops around and what began as a series of ambiguous images, inspired in part by the noble savage as well as the abolitionist/proslavery discourse of the late eighteenth century, plays a role in reifying and entrenching racialist and colonialist values in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## V

### A CONCLUSION

As developed in this essay, the Frankenstein story has three levels of interest. First, it reveals a deeper kind of signification than is at first apparent. The "Other", the outsider, the racially foreign, is probably buried within the genre of Gothic horror as a whole. Secondly, while in the novel this embedded message reflects contemporary ambiguity or confusion about the racial Other, it entered popular culture at a time of shifting racial and ethnocentric attitudes, and in this context inevitably lent its weight to the construction of sensational (and more firmly pejorative) aspects of "race" in the popular nineteenth-century mind. Finally, the text and its subsequent development reveal inherent linkages between race and the other evolving concepts of class and gender.

A close reading of *Frankenstein* demonstrates how a well-known work of fiction depended in part at least for its inspiration and for its effect on the coded language of contemporary racial prejudice, as well as on a deeply embedded cultural tradition of xenophobia. It is necessary, in consequence, substantially to amend Ann Mellor's judgement that "Mary Shelley created her myth single-handedly. All other myths of the western or eastern worlds,

whether of Dracula, Tarzan, Superman or more traditional religious systems, derive from folklore or communal ritual practices". Nor can one entirely accept that the creature should be seen as "a sign detached from a visual or verbal grammar, without diachronic or synchronic context, without precursor or progeny".<sup>80</sup> *Frankenstein* did not spring fully formed from the feminine imagination, but owed much of its language and power to Jamaican and Haitian slave rebellions and to uncertainties over the consequences of abolition. In this context it displaced overtly xenophobic and racial fears to another, imaginary field. A mid-twentieth-century parallel can be found in the way American science-fiction literature and film, for example *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, offered a strikingly similar displacement of contemporary fears of Communist subversion and invasion. As a result of the familiarity it achieved with the reading public, on stage and in common discourse, *Frankenstein* attained the status of an icon of popular culture and thus itself became a source, albeit oblique, for the reinforcement of ethnic and racial stereotypes, a reservoir of emotional ammunition which could be deployed against the Other both within Victorian England and beyond.

In some sense the story of *Frankenstein* itself, the construction of the monster, is the fictional equivalent of the simultaneous "construction" of both race and racial prejudice. It is not merely a case of the unknown portrayed as evil. Ironically the monster lives up to the expectations imposed upon him. "By reading his creation as evil", Anne Mellor has observed, "Frankenstein constructs a monster".<sup>81</sup> She sees this as Mary Shelley's own comment on the dangers of romantic imagination. Surely, however, race itself is, in its most emotive sense, a construct of romanticism. Imagination literally gave birth to reality. Prejudice, like the imperialism which is its crudest manifestation, worked to produce the abject degradation and dependency which it expected to find in the Other.

As the nineteenth century progressed, both cultural and scientific racism became ever more widely diffused and achieved an acceptability, almost a consensus, in educated society as well as at deeper levels of popular culture. As a result, what was unconscious or only obliquely hinted at in a work like *Frankenstein*

<sup>80</sup> Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 38-9, 128.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

could surface with semantic explicitness in Victorian literature. For instance, there is the problem of "bad blood". In *Wuthering Heights* the savagery of Heathcliff, a "dark-skinned Gypsy" in appearance, "black as Satan", is linked to his darkly suggested origin as a Lascar orphan on the docks in Liverpool, while *Jane Eyre's* madwoman is a passionate West Indian, with "a goblin appearance . . . long dishevelled [black] hair" and a "swelled black face".<sup>82</sup> Moreover what was buried in the Gothic novel often became overt in the late nineteenth-century adventure story. William Harrison Ainsworth's popular *Rookwood* of 1824 produced a repulsive old woman with blackened yellow skin "like an animated mummy" for sensational effect; fifty years later H. Rider Haggard achieved the same less allusively with the withered old Negro witch Gagool in *King Solomon's Mines*. Both recall elements of Godwin's malignant old robber woman in *Caleb Williams*, whose "swarthy" complexion, "the consistency of parchment", "uncommonly vigorous and muscular" arms and "savage ferocity" lend a further racial colouring to her avowed intention to "drink your blood!"<sup>83</sup>

As suggested in the Brontë novels, there is another level of significance in the deployment of racial allusion. This is the way in which it meshes with class and gender. In Heathcliff, threatening masculinity, vindictiveness and sadism are somehow linked to what we have seen to be one of the supposed characteristics of the non-European, a childlike vengefulness and cruelty combined with a strong need for affection. In Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason, we encounter perhaps a combination of feminine and racial stereotype, the hysterical, uncontrollably passionate woman and the drunken Jamaican "White" Creole who, in her madness, burns down Rochester's house just as the monster destroys the De Lacey cottage, and commits suicide, just as the monster intends to do. In class terms, moreover, both Heathcliff and the madwoman occupy an uncertain, suspect and barely respectable position as a result of their obscure, non-British origins.

<sup>82</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London, 1965; 1st pubd. 1847), p. 77; Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London, 1985; 1st pubd. 1847), p. 313.

<sup>83</sup> William Harrison Ainsworth, *Rookwood* (London, 1824); H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (London, 1958; 1st pubd. 1885), p. 121, "the wizened monkey-like figure . . . [with a face] made up of a collection of deep yellow wrinkles . . . the whole countenance might have been taken for that of a sun-dried corpse"; William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (London, 1988), p. 222.

Though I have emphasized the racial aspects of Frankenstein's monster, other critics have pleaded for a class-based and gender-based reading. In fact these issues of class, gender and race are all present and intricately interwoven in the novel. The monster — unnaturally conceived without woman; oversized, over-sexed and physically repulsive; economically and socially marginal — encompasses three confused elements of middle-class nightmare: racial, sexual, and proletarian.

The fifty years that followed the French Revolution saw a hardening of social definition and categorization among the educated classes. This involved the "construction", although not from entirely new materials, of an emerging (and threatening) urban working class, a segregated and subordinated second sex, and racially inferior colonized peoples. This triple evolution, and integration, of attitudes at a deep level of the popular mind was an intimately interconnected response to changing social conditions — to industrialization, the separation of work from family, and the outward expansion of the economy and the state. Each of these prejudices had, of course, a long and distinct history, but they were welded together in the early nineteenth century in a mutually reinforcing tripartite structure that could endure because, like the triangular supports of a geodesic dome, each offered its own resistance to pressure on the others. This strength rested on a common-sense invocation of science, nature, economic necessity and tradition, as well as on shared metaphors appropriate to each area of social, sexual and racial domination. Here, diffuse but heavily charged sources, such as popular romance and sensational theatre, played a clandestine role in confirming the white, English, upper-class male in the empire, the work-place and the home.