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Debbie Felton
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Jesse Weiner, Benjamin Eldon Stevens, and Brett M. Rogers, eds.,
*Frankenstein and Its Classics: The Modern
Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction.*

New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. 288. Paper
(ISBN 978-1-350-05487-4) \$29.95.

Frankenstein and Its Classics comprises the first essay collection devoted entirely to classical receptions in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel. As the editors note in their refreshingly jargon-free Introduction, in addition to drawing on the myth of Prometheus, *Frankenstein* engages with ancient authors such as Lucretius, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan, and Apuleius, while Plutarch's *Lives* provides "the single most direct classical influence on the Creature himself" (5). The collection aims to investigate both the nature of what it means to be human and the importance of ethics in our modern technological world, especially as sophisticated and potentially unfriendly AI increasingly become a reality.

The editors divide the collection into two well-balanced parts, each comprising six essays. Part One, "Promethean Heat," explores the novel's "engagement with the past," particularly how Shelley drew from Greco-Roman antiquity (14). Genevieve Lively, in "Patchwork Paratexts and Monstrous Metapoetics," argues that George Sandys's 1632 edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a crucial and highly influential "paratext" with a mixture of translation, commentary, and illustration, helped shape Shelley's reception of Ovid. Lively suggests that Shelley drew on Sandys' versions of Prometheus' creation of humankind and of the earth-born giants, as well as on the illustrations of these episodes, in developing her particular description of the Creature with his "giant size and ghastly appearance" (39).

Of particular interest in Part One may be Martin Priestman's contribution, "Prometheus and Dr. Darwin's Vermicelli," which he begins by noting the differences in how the Edison Studios' and James Whale's *Frankenstein* films depict the "spark of being": the former with "alchemical fluids" and the latter with electricity (43), neither of which has a clear basis in Shelley, although she was indisputably familiar with galvinism. Priestman then investigates the possible origins for Shelley's animating "spark," in a discussion ranging across Hesiodic, Aeschylean, and Ovidian versions of Prometheus, their influence on scientist Erasmus Darwin, and Darwin's

influence on *Frankenstein*. Shelley, familiar with Darwin's works, refers to his "vermicelli experiment," writing that he "preserved a piece of vermicelli [worm] in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion" (50). Whether Shelley recollected the experiment accurately or not, the account of spontaneous generation has antecedents in Lucretius and Ovid, and Shelley, like Darwin, adopted the concepts of "heat" and "moisture" as essential to creation (54).

In "The Politics of Revivification in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and *Frankenstein*," Andrew M. McClellan takes another viewpoint on "the spark that generates life," examining Lucan's extensive necromancy scene (6.413-830) in relation to Victor Frankenstein's creation of life. McClellan argues that Shelley's novel, like Lucan's poem, is set against the backdrop of revolution—in this case, the French Revolution—and that the reanimated corpses in each case may be taken as allegories for the states destroyed and reborn out of civil war. Suzanne L. Barnett's "Romantic Prometheus and the Molding of *Frankenstein*" discusses Promethean allusions in other Romantic-era authors who influenced or were influenced by Shelley, including John Frank Newton, Percy Bysshe Shelley, the aforementioned Erasmus Darwin, Goethe, and William Godwin.

Also in Part One, David A. Gapp's "Why the 'Year without a Summer'?" provides a scientific look at what caused the "dramatic atmospheric backdrop" for the creation of Shelley's story, reminding us that the cataclysmic, record-breaking, climate-altering eruption of Indonesia's Mt. Tambora in April of 1915 resulted in an exceptionally cold, dreary, and stormy year in Western Europe (91). Switzerland, where Shelley and her companions were gathered, suffered incessant rain that confined them to the house for days at a time, while ruined crops resulted in "famine-plagued, displaced, and diseased humanity" in the surrounding areas (99). Closing out Part One, Matthew Gumpert's "The Sublime Monster: *Frankenstein*, or The Modern Pandora" draws an extensive comparison between Victor Frankenstein's process and Hesiod's account of Pandora's creation, suggesting that the Creature could be viewed in some ways not as blasphemous but as miraculous.

Part Two, "Hideous Progeny," focuses on *Frankenstein's* role in "mediating the reception" of classical literature in subsequent works of art and literature, including cinema (16). Opening this section, Benjamin Eldon Stevens' "Cupid and Psyche in *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley's Apuleian Science Fiction?" argues that Shelley draws on and modifies Apuleius's "Cupid and Psyche" to "emphasize darker themes of fragmented personhood and frustrated love" (16). Focusing on what he calls the 'bedroom tableau' in reference to the scene in which Victor discovers on his wedding night that the Creature has murdered his new bride, Elizabeth, Stevens suggests

that this and other bedroom tableaux in *Frankenstein* draw on a tradition of such scenes reaching back to classical antiquity, especially the episode in Apuleius’ “Cupid and Psyche” when Psyche approaches her as-yet-unseen, sleeping husband with the intent to kill him. Some of Steven’s comparisons in this essay seem stretched, but his speculations are engrossing and, as he admits, his “readings are provisional and raise further questions” (138).

In “Frankenstein, Aristotle, and the Wisdom of Lucretius,” Carl A. Rubino briefly discusses how *Frankenstein* engages with the ethical philosophy of Aristotle and the atomic philosophy of Lucretius. Nese Devenot’s “Timothy Leary and the Psychodynamics of Stealing Fire,” which focuses on Leary’s autobiography *High Priest*, explains that “psychedelic activist” Leary, who identified as a modern-day Promethean figure, believed himself to be disseminating “a mind-altering technology to humanity for the democratic purpose of restoring individual agency and self-determination” (153-4). Leary therefore “blamed the ‘Frankenstein myth’ for reinforcing a resistance to novel experimentation within the wider culture” (154). Working to fight against this reading of *Frankenstein*, Leary, aligning himself with Victor, “felt sure of his unique significance within the history of science” as he intentionally thwarted the conservative, conventional status quo (157).

The rest of Part Two turns toward cinematic receptions of Shelley’s novel. Jesse Weiner’s “Frankenfilm: Classical Monstrosity in Bill Morrison’s *Spark of Being*” does not require the reader to have seen Morrison’s 2010 film adaptation of the novel in order to understand and appreciate it. Splicing together frames from archival film stock including Frank Hurley’s original footage of Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition, Morrison’s final product forms a close adaptation of *Frankenstein* while being itself a “discordant assemblage of parts” like the Creature itself (171), allowing for a meditation on hybridity and constructions of monstrosity that draws on classical sources including Empedocles, Lucretius, and Isidore. In “Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* or The Modern Epimetheus,” Emma Hammond demonstrates that Garland’s film, so readily compared to *Frankenstein* from the moment of its 2015 release, owes at least as great a debt to Hesiod’s Pandora stories. Here, rather than pointing to yet another Prometheus-figure, Hammond suggests that *Ex Machina*’s AI creator, Nathan, despite explicitly referring to “his own creation process as Promethean” (195), more resembles Epimetheus in his lack of foresight as to the ramifications of having Ava, his gynoid AI, pass the Turing test. Moreover, whereas the Creature’s “inhuman appearance” allows him to only partially pass an equivalent of the Turing test (193), both Pandora and Ava pass theirs, to the detriment of mankind.

The final essay, Brett M. Rogers’ “The Postmodern Prometheus and Posthuman

Reproductions in Science Fiction,” poses a number of questions regarding the ongoing shifts in humankind’s relationship with technology, principally the question of how biological reproduction can be complicated by technoscience, requiring significant shifts in determining the definitions and boundaries of what is ‘human.’ Rogers takes as examples Ridley Scott’s *Prometheus* and the comics series *Ody-C*, both of which present disturbing technoscientific takes on pregnancy: the former with its hybrid human-alien semen introduced into an unwitting female crew member, the latter with the annihilation of males and the creation of an entirely new sex.

Frankenstein and Its Classics should appeal not only to classicists and other academics but to members of the general public interested in learning more about the reception of classical literature in Shelley’s novel as well as about the continuing influence of *Frankenstein* and its classical antecedents on later works. The volume’s essays complement each other extremely well, forming a highly coherent discussion about the nature of the ‘human.’ Throughout the collection, the authors draw comparisons with other ‘artificial’ beings from classical literature, such as Pandora, Talos, and Pygmalion’s statue. (This book came out prior to Adrienne Mayor’s 2018 *Gods and Robots*, which focuses on artificial life as envisioned in antiquity.) As the editors say, “For two centuries now, *Frankenstein* has served as an important link between antiquity and modernity, suggesting that ongoing discussions of contemporary issues in science, society, technology, and more will continue to be enriched by ancient materials” (14). As in their previous collaborations, the editors have produced an insightful and engaging volume highlighting the importance of Greco-Roman antiquity to later art and literature.

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Debbie Felton
University of Massachusetts Amherst