



Book Review:  
*Frankenstein and Its Classics: The Modern Prometheus  
from Antiquity to Science Fiction*

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Weiner, Jesse, Benjamin Eldon Stevens, and Brett M. Rogers, eds. *Frankenstein and Its Classics: The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. ISBN 978-13500-5487-5.

*Frankenstein and Its Classics* is the result of a 2016 conference celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Frankenstein's* conception. Weiner, Stevens, and Rogers organised the conference and then turned it into this book. As a result, the book is easy to read, has a wide variety of topics, and makes some excellent points. Unfortunately, also as a result of its production history, some of the essays are either too short or underdeveloped. Scholars and teachers already familiar with *Frankenstein* will find a lot to love in this book, however, and its affordability makes it a perfect supplement for a special-topics undergraduate class. Its overarching thesis is that *Frankenstein* was a site of reception for Greek and Latin classical literature, particularly stories of Prometheus. The novel experiments with these classical works in many ways, and *Frankenstein*, as a source of what we now see as science fiction, injected these classical works and their philosophical questions into the bloodstream of early SF. This argument may be the most interesting. Several authors in the book rectify various oversights in previous *Frankenstein* scholarship, using information from Mary Shelley's biography, the popular culture of the time, and other sources to demonstrate how this book interfaces with more classical works than commonly supposed, which the editors point out has been too sparsely handled in previous criticism (3). The book also invites readers and scholars to continue to explore, through Shelley's classic, SF's classical background, arguing that these classical influences affect the way the Shelley's novel works. The collection succeeds in whetting one's appetite for the topic and hopefully will lead to a productive new avenue for future scholarship – although, even as an “invitation”, the book doesn't

cover as much as one might wish, focusing on literature and film almost exclusively when it could have as easily discussed music or video games as well.

Essays throughout the book make use of a dichotomy set up by the editors: Prometheus as either the thief of fire (*pyrphoros*) or as the creator of humanity from dirt or mud (*plasticator*) (3). The essays often provide passages in Latin with accompanying translation. This makes it easier to read for scholars not necessarily versed in Latin, while including the original source quotations for anyone who wants to see what the author is using for interpretation. This makes it a good source for courses.

The book is split in two parts. The first, “Promethean Heat”, delves into the sources of the novel. The usual culprits appear, including Ovid, other Romantics, and modern scientific discourse. This section includes essays of several types, but it focuses especially on factual and historical information. For instance, the primary goal of Genevieve Liveley’s “Patchwork Paratexts and Monstrous Metapoetics: ‘After tea M reads Ovid’” is to demonstrate which classical sources Mary Shelley knew and when. Liveley does an excellent job here, picking over Shelley’s journals and the translations of Ovid available at the time. The argument is, ultimately, that Shelley most likely used a translation by George Sandys titled *Ovid’s Metamorphosis Englished*. Here is where a reader’s expectation comes into the equation: the essay does not really say much about why this conclusion matters for us when we read the novel. Its argument is historical and biographical as much as textual.

Martin Priestman’s essay “Prometheus and Dr. Darwin’s Vermicelli: Another Stir to the *Frankenstein* Broth” notes how daunting it can be to study such a “well-explored” work but that the “classical hinterland” offers fresh possibilities, particularly when coupled with a study of the scientific discourse of the day (42–43). One of this essay’s major points is that the common image of Victor Frankenstein sewing the creature out of disparate parts is not necessarily supported by the text, or at least not exclusively supported. Priestman also points out that Victor only says he intends to “infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing which lay at [his] feet” (43) and that it is not demonstrably true that he uses lightning or electricity. Priestman’s goal, or at least one of them, is to combat the popular visions of *Frankenstein* engendered by film adaptations. This essay works well, juxtaposing “dry” and “wet” theories of the creature’s creation by examining Prometheus narratives and the ways in which classical literature influenced the work – scientific as well as poetic – of Erasmus Darwin, whose work influenced Mary Shelley.

“The Politics of Revivification in Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” by Andrew M. McClellan compares the stories of Sextus and Victor Frankenstein. Sextus was Pompey’s son and, in *Bellum Civile*, visits the witch Erichtho to discover his fate. There, he witnesses a soul infused into a body in order to give prophecy. McClellan argues that Mary Shelley mirrored this narrative with Victor’s revivification of the creature and his subsequent abandonment. He goes on to argue that both narratives make use of the metaphor of “state as body” to talk about civil and political violence. This essay makes good use of political imagery from Shelley’s period, and effectively argues for the connection between states and bodies, as well as both Lucan’s and Shelley’s interest in the metaphor. The essay may try to do a little too much, though, as a few of the points are underrepresented. By the time this fifteen-page essay has discussed Lucan’s work, its political import, *Frankenstein*, its political import, the political art of George Cruikshank, and the political situation of Napoleon’s banishment and return, the reader may not easily see how everything

connects. The point is obscured by the sheer volume of things that, by necessity, appear briefly. The point is made, but not made very clearly.

Other essays in this section tackle topics such as the image of Prometheus molding humanity from clay, the geological causes of the “year without a summer” in which Mary Shelley began to compose the novel, and the sublime. In the last essay of the section, Matthew Gumpert compares the creature to Pandora, calling attention to the issue that “critics have been unable to see the Creature, the ‘monster’ ... as the sublime itself” because the sublime is supposedly unseeable (102). The creature is crafted much as Pandora was, particularly in Hesiod’s work, and this connection allows Gumpert to convincingly argue that the point of the creature’s grotesque visage is that it offers an example of sublimity that Victor Frankenstein cannot handle. The first section, overall, is an excellent dive into how classical sources influenced Mary Shelley, triangulating a variety of topics such as politics, science, and artistic sensibilities. Some essays may be unclear individually, but they do work together to give a picture of the underrepresented nature of classical sources in the scholarship on *Frankenstein* and suggest ways that scholars may be able to expand this topic from this point forward.

The second section is titled “Hideous Progeny” and focuses on the ways that the novel influenced other works and traditions. The first two essays, “Cupid and Psyche in *Frankenstein*” and “The Pale Student of Unhallowed Arts”, feel transitional, as they are as much about *Frankenstein* and its sources as any products of the fusion that come afterwards. This section also contains my personal favorite: an essay on how *Frankenstein*, Prometheus, and the other classical sources of the novel affected the work and writing of Timothy Leary. Neşe Devenot argues that Leary depicted the Frankenstein narrative as a negative overreaction to humanity’s technology-assisted growth; people disturbed by the psychological implications of drug use are like Victor Frankenstein, disturbed by the medical advance he has made. Leary, according to Devenot, consciously used Prometheus to undermine this cultural narrative and try to make a new one that would convince people to forget about, or at least relax, the status quo and depart from convention. Devenot calls Leary’s work a “literary ‘remix’” of *Frankenstein* (167). This essay syncs well with a previous essay by Matthew Gumpert that uses Hesiod and Kant to work out the ways Frankenstein’s creature is sublime and why it seems to be grotesque instead. Devenot uses the grotesque to delve into the reactions Leary recorded in his books. One specific instance is when Leary took LSD alongside prisoners in an experiment. Each participant felt their partner was grotesque, but, instead of being repulsed, finally came to accept that grotesqueness. Devenot contrasts this with the typical reaction to convicts in the same way Gumpert contrasts Victor’s reaction to the creature against the possible reaction one might have if one realised the creature were sublime.

Also, with the understandable caveat that no one book can discuss everything worthwhile, the emphasis by this collection on literary texts and films shortchanges relevant work in other fields. For example, despite a very good reading list of literary and cinematic works, video-game studies have been left out entirely. The recent spat of cyberpunk games certainly experiments with classical influences in the post-*Frankenstein* SF tradition, perhaps with *Deus Ex* at the forefront. *The Talos Principle* focuses on this topic, down to the creator abandoning their creations to fend for themselves. For instance, games scholar Jonathan Tuckett has recently and adeptly argued that *The Talos Principle* plays with questions of what constitutes the human, what isn’t human, what the relationship is between non-human and creator,

and how all of this complicates common Eurocentric assumptions about religion. Although Tuckett recognises the importance of the classical stylings and allusions in the game, he does not directly refer to the *Frankenstein* narrative. That demonstrates a possible site of synthesis, an opportunity for more work, so there is a lot of possibility in the ground between the classical study of *Frankenstein* and video games. It's understandable that *Frankenstein and Its Classics* focuses on a handful of genres, particularly if people are inspired to write more on the topic because of this collection – its stated goal. However, that very narrow focus should have been stated, as otherwise it appears that other genres may have been excluded because no one considered them or felt they were appropriate for study.

Despite this (perhaps unavoidable) flaw, Weiner, Stevens, and Rogers have nonetheless produced a good essay collection, worthwhile to readers at several levels. The variety of topics within the focus of each section demonstrates the wealth of potential inherent to studying *Frankenstein* from a classical perspective. Authors write about textual interpretations, biographical data, film technique, philosophy, and cultural mores tied to drug use. If there are more classical avenues to consider, such as in game studies, then let's hope people contribute their own work to the growing niche of how *Frankenstein* imagined the classical world – and how we imagine it because of that novel.

*Biography:* Gregory Conley received their PhD in Gothic and Science Fiction literature from the University of Memphis. They study evolutionary science in weird fiction and the relationship between literature and occultism. They teach comparative humanities and English composition at Eastern Kentucky University and Bluegrass Community and Technical College.

## Works Cited

Tuckett, Jonathan. "The Talos Principle: Philosophical and Religious Anthropology." *Implicit Religion*, vol. 20, no. 3. 2017, pp. 259–77.