

The cover art depicts a man in a heavy, dark winter coat and a large backpack, standing in a desolate, icy landscape. He holds a glowing lantern that illuminates his path and casts a warm glow. In the background, another figure is visible on a snow-covered slope. The sky is dark and stormy, with bright, jagged lightning bolts striking down. The overall atmosphere is one of isolation and danger.

Mary
Shelley

FRANKENSTEIN


GIUNTI CLASSICS


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MARY SHELLEY

Frankenstein

Edited with an Introduction by
Luciana Pirè

 **GIUNTI**

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Introduction

“It is not singular that as daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity I should very early in life have thought of writing”. The “distinguished literary celebrities” mentioned in this posthumous tribute are Mary Shelley’s parents. Her mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, the first committed feminist to analyse the question of roles and of discrimination in her work on *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); her father was the atheist philosopher William Godwin whose major work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) earned him the enmity of the Prime Minister and the praise of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Daringly unconventional, Mary Wollstonecraft was four months pregnant when she secretly married Godwin. Unfortunately their marriage lasted less than a year because she died in August 1797 from complications following the birth of her daughter Mary.

After the death of his first wife, Godwin married Mrs. Clairmont. He was, however, determined that baby Mary should be educated in the way her mother would have wished. In 1783 Wollstonecraft had established a school at Newington Green with the evident aim of using its income to create a self-sustaining community of women. She set out to disprove the contemporary view that women were ‘naturally’ weak, by pointing out that society systematically educated and conditioned them to be so. According to her new and shocking method of education, children – like women and members of the lower classes – needed to be protected against the harshness and disappointments of adult life.

It is not surprising, then, that Mary Shelley’s life was very much an embodiment of the self-sufficiency and resourcefulness her mother urged upon women. Godwin himself never worried about the effects of books on his intelligent daughter. On the contrary, he remained convinced that the most suitable moment to inflame imagination is when minds are young and flexible. Challenging the traditional roles of women in the nineteenth century, Mary enjoyed both reading and writing stories from an early age.

Money might have been short and food plain, but Godwin’s home was full of life and visited by some of the most interesting and famous

men and women of the day. In 1814 Mary became acquainted with Percy Bisshe Shelley, who, like many of the younger generation of Romantic poets, admired the ageing Godwin and asked him to become his literary adviser. Percy was the son and heir of Timothy Shelley, Member of Parliament and himself a baronet. A wealthy young man in Shelley's position was expected to follow his father in a parliamentary career, but he decided to devote himself to poetry. He was already married but had apparently grown tired of his wife, Harriett. In 1814 his marriage collapsed, despite the birth of two children. Worst of all, he fell in love with Mary who was then only seventeen years old.

After a brief agony of indecision, Shelley and Mary fled to Switzerland together, accompanied by Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont. Godwin felt deceived. Later, when the lovers tried to visit his house, they were refused admission. The practical effect of this elopement was a year desperately spent trying to raise credit on which to live and dodging creditors. Uri, by the Lake of Lucerne, although beautiful, was less pleasant than the two fugitives had hoped. Their neighbours were petty-minded and inquisitive. Social disapproval was extremely severe and their domestic situation was increasingly strained. Moreover, Mary had become pregnant and gave birth to a child who died after a few months.

Six weeks of the following summer of 1816 were spent on Lake Geneva where they made friends with Lord Byron. In that same year, Shelley's wife committed suicide under mysterious circumstances. This paved the way for marriage between the poet and Mary. On the day of the wedding, father and daughter met for the first time since she had run away. The social legitimisation of the marriage did not however solve all problems. The Lord Chancellor ruled that Shelley was not fit to take care of Harriett's children, although he had regularised his claim on them by marrying Mary. Angered by this "injustice", Shelley decided to leave England forever and, in 1818, the couple moved to Italy, successively taking up residence in Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples, Florence and Pisa, which became their more or less permanent home until 1822.

Thanks to Shelley's interest in her literary development, Mary had completed *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), the novel by which she is best remembered. In 1819 she finished her second novel, *Mathilda*, never published in Mary Shelley's lifetime. Her father held back the publication thinking its mixture of fact and fiction to be mischievous. During this period Mary became grief-stricken by the loss of her children: her little daughter Clara had died at Venice; then her favourite William died at Rome. Now childless, she suffered a nervous breakdown and tried to seek consolation from an old friend, Maria

Gisborne, who had nursed her as a baby and lived in nearby Livorno. Soon there was a new birth in November 1819 – that of Percy Florence Shelley, who survived his mother.

After a life of wandering, the Shelleys settled at Casa Magni near Lerici, where at last they could find some peace together. But worse was to follow. On 8 July 1822, Shelley went offshore in a small boat and was drowned when a sudden storm broke out. His body was recovered and his friends burned it on the beach at Viareggio, in a characteristically romantic fashion. *The Last Man* (1826), Mary's other remarkable novel, which describes the extermination of the human race by plague in the twenty-first century and explores the ultimate desolation of the last man left on earth, may be a reflection of Mary's own feelings of loneliness after Shelley's death. Now a widow, she decided to come home.

Mary established herself in London, helping the family finances by writing tales, articles and novels in profusion (*Valperga*, 1823; *Perkin Warbeck*, 1830; *Lodore*, 1835; and *Falkner*, 1837). One of her short stories, 'Transformation', published in *The Keepsake*, retains certain echoes of *Frankenstein*, although the later work proves far less enigmatic in its concerns over the existence and nature of the soul. Her *Rambles in Germany and Italy, in 1840, 1842 and 1843* (1844) was well received.

As she pointed out more than once, her name would always be Shelley, and she devoted herself to the task which she had seen as a sacred duty long postponed: to prepare a full edition of her husband's poems. In 1839 Mary supervised the publication of Shelley's *Poetical Works*, with extensive biographical and critical annotations. In 1844 her son Percy Florence unexpectedly inherited his grandfather's fortune and title. Rich at last, Mary Shelley was able to live a life of some comfort and she stopped writing. She travelled widely through Europe in later years, dying in London in February 1851.

Frankenstein

One of the world's most popular stories of horror was first published anonymously in three volumes in 1818. William Godwin rearranged the second edition of 1823 in two volumes, in order to follow up the success of *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*, the stage version of the novel. Mary Shelley herself extensively revised the third edition of 1831. Its subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, concerns two legends which are associated with Prometheus – that he stole fire from heaven, and that he made a man from clay and used fire to give it life. Mary Shelley not only seized the vital significance of making Prometheus the

creator, but also caught the spirit of the age, linking the myth with the result of the scientific discovery and the exciting possibility of bringing back to life parts of a dead body by means of electricity. The concept of electrical current, in its power, universality and mystery, was a particularly potent motivator in Romantic awareness.

The preface to *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* was written by Percy Shelley, without whose incitement, as she later recognised, “it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world”. Moreover, during the same years in which she was writing her novel, her husband was composing his lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, in which he combined the story of Prometheus the fire-bringer with his view of Satan as a hero.

She herself has narrated the genesis of *Frankenstein*. In her ‘Author’s Introduction’, Mary Shelley recalls that the story was conceived in the summer of 1816 in Geneva. The cold and rainy weather there “often confined us for days to the house”. Mary, Percy Shelley and two other friends, Lord Byron and John William Polidori, used to spend the time reading German ghost stories. One evening by the fire they agreed to Byron’s proposal that each should write a tale of the supernatural. Meantime Mary had been listening to “many and long conversations” between Byron and her husband, who was fascinated by the most up-to-date scientific theories concerning “the nature of the principle of life”.

Mary goes further in her account. “I busied myself to think of a story – a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak of the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart... I thought and pondered – vainly... *Have you thought of a story?* I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative”. Finally, a half-waking reverie gave her the beginning of her story in which she saw “the horrid thing... with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes... Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow. On the morrow I announced that I had *thought of a story*. I began that day with the words, *It was on a dreary night of November*, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream”. *Frankenstein* was the only tale completed. Polidori’s novelette, *The Vampyre*, was published later.

Mary Shelley tells the story of a brilliant young scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who succeeds in fulfilling the romantic dream of creating life from inert matter. Using original technical skill, the novel is told from three points of view. The first comprises a group of letters writ-

ten from Russia by a British explorer, Robert Walton, to his sister in England. In his letters, Walton describes his dangerous expedition to discover the North-west Passage and his meeting with Victor Frankenstein. The second is Frankenstein's story of how he created the monster and abandoned it on the very night when he brought it to life, and how it turned to murder and revenge, killing Frankenstein's friend Clerval, his brother, and his bride Elizabeth. The central narrative is the story of the monster itself. The creature recounts his own adventures: how he learned to talk, how he educated himself by studying the literary classics, and how his attempts to enter human society by means of kind deeds were always repulsed by people horrified at his ugly appearance. Finally, after months of torment, he murdered his creator.

The moral implications of a science taken beyond normal limits are here explored with acute awareness of the dangers involved. By the time Victor Frankenstein completes his undergraduate training at Ingolstadt University on the upper Danube, his scientific aspirations and ambition have overreached themselves. While engaged in his creation, he forgets all other ties of human affection, forgets his family, and passes into a state of obsessive absorption in the task on hand. The cold rationalism with which Victor pursues nature "in her hiding places" is also reflected in his account of the research he has undertaken in order to discover "the cause of generation and life". He recreates each stage of his actual construction of the monster from the basic skeleton, through the "muscles and arteries", to the facial complexion. Victor's hope of "infusing a spark of being" into the lifeless body in his workshop finds its success heralded by "a convulsive motion, (which) agitated its limbs". The being he creates, however, proves less tractable than he had hoped.

On the one hand, whereas throughout his reign of terror over Victor's family and friends the nameless monster reveals very little by way of moral values, on the other, some spiritual qualities do appear before he consigns his remains to the sea. At the end the monster feels no sense of triumph but only an overwhelming regret. He had demanded a female partner from his maker, promising to go and live with her in exile; but Frankenstein, after starting to make one, had destroyed it and the monster had been thereafter doomed to a life of solitude and, in consequence, of crime. The creature tells of his own misery at being rejected by human beings: "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous." Early experiences of rejection by his creator and by mankind must have played a large part in turning him into "the malignant devil" which he had become.

Emphasising in a very modern way the need for responsibility in

scientific matters, Mary Shelley wants us to understand that Frankenstein's creation is not evil in itself, but has been made that way by circumstances. The mixture of sympathy and horror with which the monster is portrayed so deeply reverses the unquestioning notion of good and evil that many people still think that Frankenstein is the name of the monster. Yet, whatever popular culture may have made of it, the figure of Victor Frankenstein persists as the archetype of the scientist who probes forbidden secrets in his search for knowledge.

Mary Shelley's personal experience is deeply rooted in *Frankenstein*, which was dedicated to her father. Autobiographical elements would include the killing of Victor's younger brother, William, which may relate to Mary Shelley's fears for the survival of her own son, also called William (who did in fact die in childhood); the comparisons between Victor Frankenstein and Mary's husband; the settings – all of which had been visited by Mary Shelley – including the Alps, the Scottish Highlands, the rivers of Germany and the Swiss lakes. In any event, of greatest significance is the fact that none of her later novels achieved the same universal hold on the imagination as this fascinating story in the gothic genre, written by a girl who was not quite nineteen.

VOLUME ONE

Letter I

To Mrs. Saville, England

St. Petersburg, Dec. 11th, 17–

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday; and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare, and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking.

I am already far north of London; and as I walk in the streets of Petersburg, I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves, and fills me with delight. Do you understand this feeling? This breeze, which has travelled from the regions towards which I am advancing, gives me a foretaste of those icy climes. Inspirited by this wind of promise, my day dreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendour. There – for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators – there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. Its productions and features may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle; and may regulate a

thousand celestial observations, that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent for ever. I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river. But, supposing all these conjectures to be false, you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite; or by ascertaining the secret of the magnet, which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine.

These reflections have dispelled the agitation with which I began my letter, and I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven; for nothing contributes so much to tranquillize the mind as a steady purpose – a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye. This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. I have read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the pole. You may remember that a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas's library. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes were my study day and night, and my familiarity with them increased that regret which I had felt, as a child, on learning that my father's dying injunction had forbidden my uncle to allow me to embark in a seafaring life.

These visions faded when I perused, for the first time, those poets whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to heaven. I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated. You are well acquainted with

my failure, and how heavily I bore the disappointment. But just at that time I inherited the fortune of my cousin, and my thoughts were turned into the channel of their earlier bent.

Six years have passed since I resolved on my present undertaking. I can, even now, remember the hour from which I dedicated myself to this great enterprise. I commenced by inuring my body to hardship. I accompanied the whale-fishers on several expeditions to the North Sea; I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep; I often worked harder than the common sailors during the day, and devoted my nights to the study of mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventure might derive the greatest practical advantage. Twice I actually hired myself as an under-mate in a Greenland whaler, and acquitted myself to admiration. I must own I felt a little proud, when my captain offered me the second dignity in the vessel and intreated me to remain with the greatest earnestness, so valuable did he consider my services.

And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? My life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path. Oh, that some encouraging voice would answer in the affirmative! My courage and my resolution is firm; but my hopes fluctuate, and my spirits are often depressed. I am about to proceed on a long and difficult voyage, the emergencies of which will demand all my fortitude: I am required not only to raise the spirits of others, but sometimes to sustain my own, when theirs are failing.

This is the most favourable period for travelling in Russia. They fly quickly over the snow in their sledges; the motion is pleasant, and, in my opinion, far more agreeable than that of an English stage-coach. The cold is not excessive, if you are wrapped in furs – a dress which I have already adopted; for there is a great difference between walking the deck and remaining seated motionless for hours, when no exercise prevents the blood from actually freezing in your veins. I have no ambition to lose my life on the post-road between St. Petersburg and Archangel.

I shall depart for the latter town in a fortnight or three weeks; and my intention is to hire a ship there, which can easily be done by paying the insurance for the owner, and to engage as many sailors as I think necessary among those who are accustomed to the whale-fishing. I do not intend to sail until the month of June; and when shall I return? Ah, dear sister, how can I answer this question? If I succeed, many, many months, perhaps years, will pass before you and I may meet. If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never.

Farewell, my dear, excellent Margaret. Heaven shower down blessings on you, and save me, that I may again and again testify my gratitude for all your love and kindness.

Your affectionate brother,
R. Walton

Letter II

To Mrs. Saville, England

Archangel, March 28th, 17—

How slowly the time passes here, encompassed as I am by frost and snow! yet a second step is taken towards my enterprise. I have hired a vessel, and am occupied in collecting my sailors; those whom I have already engaged, appear to be men on whom I can depend and are certainly possessed of dauntless courage.

But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy; and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil. I have no friend, Margaret: when I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy; if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection. I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. I desire the company of a man who could sympathise with me; whose eyes would reply to mine. You may deem me romantic, my dear sister, but I bitterly feel the want of a friend. I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans. How would such a friend repair the faults of your poor brother! I am too ardent in execution, and too impatient of difficulties. But it is a still greater evil to me that I am self-educated: for the first fourteen years of my life I ran wild on a common, and read nothing but our uncle Thomas's books of voyages. At that age I became acquainted with the celebrated poets of our own country; but it was only when it

had ceased to be in my power to derive its most important benefits from such a conviction, that I perceived the necessity of becoming acquainted with more languages than that of my native country. Now I am twenty-eight and am in reality more illiterate than many schoolboys of fifteen. It is true that I have thought more, and that my day dreams are more extended and magnificent, but they want (as the painters call it) *keeping*; and I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind.

Well, these are useless complaints; I shall certainly find no friend on the wide ocean, nor even here in Archangel, among merchants and seamen. Yet some feelings, unallied to the dross of human nature, beat even in these rugged bosoms. My lieutenant, for instance, is a man of wonderful courage and enterprise; he is madly desirous of glory: or rather, to word my phrase more characteristically, of advancement in his profession. He is an Englishman, and in the midst of national and professional prejudices, unsoftened by cultivation, retains some of the noblest endowments of humanity. I first became acquainted with him on board a whale vessel: finding that he was unemployed in this city, I easily engaged him to assist in my enterprise.

The master is a person of an excellent disposition, and is remarkable in the ship for his gentleness and the mildness of his discipline. This circumstance, added to his well-known integrity and dauntless courage, made me very desirous to engage him. A youth passed in solitude, my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage, has so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste to the usual brutality exercised on board ship: I have never believed it to be necessary, and when I heard of a mariner equally noted for his kindness of heart and the respect and obedience paid to him by his crew, I felt myself peculiarly fortunate in being able to secure his services. I heard of him first in rather a romantic manner, from a lady who owes to him the happiness of her life. This, briefly, is his story. Some years ago he loved a young Rus-

sian lady of moderate fortune; and having amassed a considerable sum in prize-money, the father of the girl consented to the match. He saw his mistress once before the destined ceremony; but she was bathed in tears, and, throwing herself at his feet, intreated him to spare her, confessing at the time that she loved another, but that he was poor, and that her father would never consent to the union. My generous friend reassured the suppliant, and on being informed of the name of her lover, instantly abandoned his pursuit. He had already bought a farm with his money, on which he had designed to pass the remainder of his life; but he bestowed the whole on his rival, together with the remains of his prize-money to purchase stock, and then himself solicited the young woman's father to consent to her marriage with her lover. But the old man decidedly refused, thinking himself bound in honour to my friend; who, when he found the father inexorable, quitted his country, nor returned until he heard that his former mistress was married according to her inclinations. "What a noble fellow!" you will exclaim. He is so; but then he is wholly uneducated: he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command.

Yet do not suppose, because I complain a little, or because I can conceive a consolation for my toils which I may never know, that I am wavering in my resolutions. Those are as fixed as fate, and my voyage is only now delayed until the weather shall permit my embarkation. The winter has been dreadfully severe, but the spring promises well, and it is considered as a remarkably early season; so that perhaps I may sail sooner than I expected. I shall do nothing rashly: you know me sufficiently to confide in my prudence and consideration whenever the safety of others is committed to my care.

I cannot describe to you my sensations on the near prospect of my undertaking. It is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation, half pleasurable and half fearful, with which I am preparing to depart. I am going to unexplored regions to "the land of mist and snow";

but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety, or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the “Ancient Mariner”. You will smile at my allusion; but I will disclose a secret. I have often attributed my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of ocean, to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets. There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand. I am practically industrious – painstaking; a workman to execute with perseverance and labour: – but besides this, there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore.

But to return to dearer considerations. Shall I meet you again, after having traversed immense seas, and returned by the most southern cape of Africa or America? I dare not expect such success, yet I cannot bear to look on the reverse of the picture. Continue for the present to write to me by every opportunity: I may receive your letters on some occasions when I need them most to support my spirits. I love you very tenderly. Remember me with affection, should you never hear from me again.

Your affectionate brother,
Robert Walton

Letter III

To Mrs. Saville, England

July 7th, 17–

My dear sister,

I write a few lines in haste to say that I am safe – and well advanced on my voyage. This letter will reach England by a merchantman now on its homeward voyage from Archangel; more fortunate than I, who may not see my native land, perhaps, for many years. I am, however, in good spirits: my men are bold, and apparently firm of purpose, nor do the floating sheets of ice that continually pass us, indicating the dangers of the region towards which we are advancing, appear to dismay them. We have already reached a very high latitude; but it is the height of summer, and although not so warm as in England, the southern gales, which blow us speedily towards those shores which I so ardently desire to attain, breathe a degree of renovating warmth which I had not expected.

No incidents have hitherto befallen us that would make a figure in a letter. One or two stiff gales, and the springing of a leak, are accidents which experienced navigators scarcely remember to record; and I shall be well content if nothing worse happen to us during our voyage.

Adieu, my dear Margaret. Be assured that for my own sake, as well as yours, I will not rashly encounter danger. I will be cool, persevering and prudent.

But success *shall* crown my endeavours. Wherefore not? Thus far I have gone, tracing a secure way over the pathless seas: the very stars themselves being witnesses and testimonies of my triumph. Why not still proceed over the untamed

yet obedient element? What can stop the determined heart
and resolved will of man?

My swelling heart involuntarily pours itself out thus. But I
must finish. Heaven bless my beloved sister!

R.W.