

Frankenstein: Volume III, Chapter VIII

Hester Reeve



Self-Portrait on Mary Shelley's Grave, 2006

Preface: There has been much discussion around the ‘recognised’ monster, both that of historical prejudice towards the ‘not normal’ and that of literary device. To a lesser degree discussion has arisen around the philosophical implications of the category of the monstrous but less still is ventured towards a willing identification with ‘being monster.’ How positively valued are the ideas and experiences of our monsters themselves and might these be as important as the ideas that ‘others’ spin around them? What if to be truly virtuous in agency (where the content seeps off the book’s pages and uncontrollably infects everyday procedure) is to become ‘monstrous’ in the eyes of others? The latter considerations have direct implications for me as a woman, a thinker and a live artist.

‘Volume III, Chapter VIII’ proposes itself as a post-scripted final chapter to Mary Shelley’s 1818 *Frankenstein* which, keeping the letter format of the novel, is a letter from myself to Mary Shelley and addressing her book itself. By mimicking the flowery style of Frankenstein’s eloquent creature, the letter I write in 2006 at first seems to suggest that it is from the monster himself. Not only are the ice caps melting, metaphorically releasing Victor Frankenstein’s living-dead monster from a two hundred year deep freeze, but all our notions of time, being, biology, society and value have been revolutionised. This continued narration of the novel does not aim at fiction but, acknowledging Shelley’s monster as both a textual reality and strategy, writes from my own embodied experience of monstrous reality as a female authoress. The conflation between a ‘(true) reader’ and ‘(true) monster’ are intended.

*St. Peter's Church Cemetery,
Bournemouth*



Mary,

I am floating, all is in motion and I indeed rejoice to announce that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which some have regarded with such evil foreboding: Total origination. Not that there were not times when I did think I was disaster's lost love, and yet I, myself fleeing from who I am, was always the real disaster. Such is where I have come from, dearest thing, Mary. My Mary thing, my matter of you and I.

It has taken many rounds of the orb to find you here. Mistakenly for most of my life I was seeking my blood father (like many others), instead I now realize it is you, my ink mother, to whom I must turn in these dangerous times. Yet these are also the times when I find the crisis of my identity no longer needs assuaging but instead issues gratitude.

So I am arriving in humility, for I come in the knowledge that your physical frame has long been no more but that you were ever smiling over the future progeny of your book. All now know of "Frankenstein," including I (everyone's matter of Mary).



'I' am *here*, Mary, here where you are and yet where you are not. One more of life's parodies: You too have become monstrous it seems, caught in the never-ending unknowability, that which cannot be confronted by humankind: disintegration, death. And me? I am floating, floating on a self-made raft. Mary, the polar ice caps are melting, the entire human world floats ever on in its blind destining. You cannot imagine the things I am seeing, so much has passed since your very own passing. Truly, at times I have been overcome. I have trembled as I looked upon the changes taking place, like myriad forms of fishes darting up to greet me from the huge expanse of sea. And me here, caught up in all its depth (nay, finally realizing: I am part of its depth and bring to man his drink of health).

The continual flux that has fashioned my days and character alike have indeed proved a virtuous instrument of good. I am clearer now, thanks to all you have set to sail for me in the blackness of ink. Your pen has been like something writing itself out into the depths of my soul. Fate was after all in my own hands, with the writer's always entwined in my destiny; so much of me borne out on your pages.



But Mary, the cold. The coldness of being sent adrift. Such cold you could not imagine. Cold to the depths of my heart, even such an 'inhuman' brute as I (for thus am I called, single lonesome pioneer that I am).



Set apart, one becomes crowded in by clear sightedness of what is going on around. I have seen such murder and sacrifice of life that many is the time that I thanked the heavens for not being totally accepted by humankind after all. For what is human companionship through allegiance or family bond through blood if within the world at large peoples are reduced to data? What is democracy when all sign up to it and intend justice yet still the most atrocious events befall man by his own hand? I saw fights for justice too, many times, but always it is as if the social sphere fighting for 'good' only lands itself in the irony or creating new forms of evil.



Whilst I was still fledgling in years, I set to travel the world. There could be no home for such as I or rather, in my case, home was not where the heart was. I could not stay encased in the ice of my origin. The reflection of my physical appearance in the eyes of others meant nothing to me anymore, for I could tangibly feel how I was changing

and becoming, as the plants and animals around me are want to do. As I grew in confidence, I found it easier to pass within the crowded streets where most things come to pass. In these times, people are much preoccupied with who they are and how the image of their life does or does not measure up to large-scale images they see around them. This diminishes their everyday energy for noticing me. This is not to say that I have not been scoffed at and harassed for my 'larger than life' deportment. I have suffered somewhat, but, as I grew in years, my ability to shun such rebukes came all the more easy. I came to realize that it was not indeed on account of what I am that evinced such malicious and ignorant treatment but on account of who the instigator was (or was unable to be).



It has grown me well to realize that, for all my or another's singularity, I am not some separate Being from all else; that visual surfaces are no such boundaries to interconnectedness. I am in existence and all hail to those aware of such a state (and all kindness and empathy to all in Being).

As time passed, I learned a lot more about human nature. Though I was scorned as monstrous, I witnessed others (not like me yet similarly not conforming to some ill-fated model of regularity) also being rebuked and sometimes cast away from the centre of society. This first appalled and unsettled me but I must say that it also assuaged me in my own sense of isolation and alienation. So, it was not just I who felt as if I was the despised curse of humanity? - A being whose origin none could bear thinking of or caring after.



Indeed, I realized that there seemed to be an inability at large to cope with all deep and true thoughts upon our origins as living, mortal matter whether through a woman's body or through her pen. My own erudite, self-made education had wholesomely forced me to confront such issues in the early stage of my mind's development so that thoughts of it, though uncanny and unsettling, served to refresh my joy at being here. My sense of isolation and inner torment slowly started to diminish and a new sense of what I potentially could be took hold.

It was indeed strange to realize I had been taking the torture instrument thrust upon me by society and willingly pushing it into my soul all the more deeply. Who truly was my oppressor if not I myself? It was then that I read your very own mother's book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. I read that femininity was 'taught' and could be thus untaught; our characteristics are not writ in stone. Your Mary even questioned after the value and use of physical perfection, "So sensitive am I of the beauty of moral loveliness," she states. Surely, this must be worth more than visual loveliness? How could I have forgotten one of my earliest hopes? Such hopes are so easily shot down by others. This very mother of yours was condemned as a 'philosophising serpent,' a 'hyena in petticoats' and all because she brought the promise of truth back to the present. This opening up of the limits of the limits was unbearable to its witnesses, and still is unbearable to most. Your mother had showed the door to freedom but instead had had her name brandished as monstrous and all gates closed to the power of the possible.

So surely the charge of monstrousness was a good thing, the opportunity to progress and become more human? And, even more surely, 'fear' was merely a learned instruction from society, not *mine* so to speak? I did not possess its cause. Why should the monstrous in me be negatively defined as a lack by those without the perspicacity to follow their own monstrosity?

It was an era of accepting whom I was, an awakening to the view, shared by others of great learning, that the human being is a myriad potential form of no finalised proportion or depiction. Indeed, I am human and it is fitting as I write to you at your

grave, one hundred and fifty years after your death that I proclaim that to be human is as much to be a creature of fiction as it is to be a creature of biological fact.



I soon resolved to bear my being and sense of apartness with more self-possession. Why did I expect another to make me happy through loving me, why did I depend upon such a permission? Is love a property of one human that can be passed to another like an object? For such it was assumed. Surely love is more like a medium within and without us all, and as surely I am indeed ever floating in it, caught up in a constant flow of changing states.



And what of my potential progeny? Surely my thoughts, my ideas, my ‘tuning-in’ perspective were as fertile and generative as any mixture of male and female seed? For the first time in my existence I felt the future and its freedom. I resolved not just to read, but also to start writing myself, to originate. What was done could not be

undone and I myself must commit to the extension of all that is; to bond with matter my thought, and spread new matter thoughtfully throughout the world. In short, I resolved to be an artist.

But this new era of my being was to carry with it more painful lessons. Realising that I was in need of more learning, I duly entered university. I had hoped for like-minded and passionate minds, but strangely found little of either quality. Unlike others, my learning was also an unlearning. I quite consciously realized that for art to take place I had to resist making from the structures of knowledge and form established through the current culture - which was really history in the present tense - and to admit that the origin of art laid in wait outside of culture, inaccessible but calling to become nonetheless.



I am not ungrateful for these years but they left me feeling placeless. I had become a promising and adventurous artist but my enquiring mind was excavating any sense of solid ground from beneath my feet. When I looked around me, I saw that I was making in a different realm and that my creations were also taken as monstrous.

Why was this? I knew it could not just be my impressive stature alone, that the monstrousness was somehow now transferred into the artworks I was producing. Not that they were ugly, more that they themselves somehow refuted culture as the centre of legitimisation. This was particularly the case when I used my body as part of the artwork in performances. The fact that I was prepared to put my body in the place of my beliefs and push the limits of my agency seemed to be abhorrent to those who witnessed it.



My desire to communicate significance but without being specific about what exactly was significant caused alarm, the audience could no longer rationally order or fit what I was offering into their preconceived body of knowledge. This was to push the limits of the limits, to respond to the call of art in the outside region, a brave, good thing.

But I soon instinctively became aware that my offerings invited unconscious loathing and that this was contributed to all the more through the nature of my sex: female.



But I had come too far to not continue further; I took responsibility for my apparent weakness, my inability to fit in or find a way of fitting in and resolved to make a place, a fixture out of mobility, a floating monster. For that is what I am, Mary, a human monster. I proclaim it loud and may the song of my becoming echo all around the land. A floating monster in an ocean of potential hungry writings, one of which is your novel, the place where you found me and now the place where I come to find you.

For indeed it was your book itself that was the biggest monster all along, persisting still and never truly finished. The 'digestible other' of your book may have been pick pocketed and polished (borne but not bred) through culture at large but simultaneously your written words have continued to contain the pregnant belly of the ultimate monster that we are all floating within: the future.

I eat the promise of your ideas, they fuel the bright light of the saving power that grows within and without me. I am striking safety deep down within my own heart whilst rampaging through the pages of this current era, writing myself out loudly from the black ink of its night.

Mary,

I am,

Your reader.

Text & art action © Hester Reeve, photographs courtesy of Simon Webb. Many thanks to Cannon Richardson at St Peters' Cathedral Bournemouth for permission to make work on Mary Shelley's grave & to the Unitarian Church within the cathedral grounds for supplying electricity and amicable conversation.