

# READING *FRANKENSTEIN* IN 1818

## From Climate Change to Popular Sovereignty<sup>1</sup>

*James Grande*



QUESTIONS OF CHRONOLOGY, of time and of place, are always at stake in our readings of *Frankenstein*. Shelley's novel has come to occupy multiple chronotopes,<sup>2</sup> ranging from Lake Geneva, 1816, its legendary moment of creation, to Europe in the 1790s—the partially redacted (but decipherable) diegetic dates—to the English Opera House (now the Lyceum Theatre), just off the Strand, London, in 1823, when the novel was transformed into Richard Brinsley Peake's melodrama *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, the forerunner of countless screen and stage adaptations.<sup>3</sup> It was here that Shelley's supremely eloquent Creature who, as Marilyn Butler writes, 'speaks impressively, with the dignity, even authority, appropriate to a witness brought back from the remote past', was transformed into a mute monster, anticipating Boris Karloff's iconic performance of this role in the 1930s Hollywood films.<sup>4</sup> Tracking back from these films to the eighteenth-century sentimental mode, James Chandler has written of how 'Mary Shelley [...] poises her novel on a delicately balanced question: will no one sympathize with the creature because he is a monster, or is he a monster because no one will sympathize with him?'<sup>5</sup> Peake's melodrama (and the adaptations that follow it) insist on the former possibility, while the paradigmatic modern reading of the novel tips the balance towards the latter—at least, this is surely the accepted interpretation today, when *Frankenstein* holds the title of the most frequently taught novel on the Anglophone curriculum.<sup>6</sup> Its very ubiquity makes the novel appear uncannily proleptic, as the subject of seminal works of feminist literary criticism, theories of female authorship and the gothic, and—even more broadly—as a modern myth, concerned not just with the dangers of reckless scientific advance, but with questions of procreation, race, reproductive rights and the rights of the child.<sup>7</sup>

In view of these proliferating chronotopes, and the different modes of historicism (or present-ism) they engage, 1818, the year of the novel's first publication remains in many ways a neglected context for the novel, overshadowed as it is both by *Frankenstein's* varied afterlives and by the moment of its conception. Despite the global interest in the bicentenary of 1818, this date will always be overshadowed by a much more intensely imagined moment in literary history: 1816, the 'Year without a Summer', and the Shelley–Byron *ménage* at Villa Diodati. As Shelley's Preface informed readers of the 1831 third edition, it was here, confined indoors, reading ghost stories, and discussing 'the nature of the

principle of life, and whether there was any possibility of its ever being discovered and communicated', that *Frankenstein* was born (p. 195). For readers in 1818, however, this paratext, which has overdetermined readings ever since, was unavailable. Instead, Shelley's novel appeared on 1 January 1818, in an edition of just 500 copies, with only the names of the publishing firm Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor and Jones, on the title page. These conditions of *Frankenstein*'s first appearance shape our understanding of a novel that is profoundly occupied both with uncovering secrets—'with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding places'—and with questions of authorship: about what it means to create, discover, or author a new place, a new being, a new self (p. 36).

In what follows, however, I want to focus not on authorship but readership. I take my cue here from an essay by William St Clair on 'The Impact of *Frankenstein*', which poses the following question: 'How [...] can we trace the historical and cultural influence of *Frankenstein* without becoming presentist, determinist, circular, or anecdotal? How can we retrieve readerships?'<sup>8</sup> St Clair goes on to give a compelling, empirical account of the progress of *Frankenstein* over the nineteenth century, through stage adaptations and, once copyright restrictions expired in 1880, through cheap editions of the novel. I wish to return to this question in a similarly historicist, but also necessarily speculative, spirit, with one specific, often overlooked, readership in mind: the readers of 1818. Writing to Percy Shelley in August 1818, Thomas Love Peacock described how, on a visit to Egham racecourse (close to where the Shelleys had been living the previous year at Marlow), he had been pestered by 'a multitude of questions concerning "Frankenstein" and its author. It seems to be universally known and read'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more known than read, we might infer, with a reputation developed in part through the substantial excerpts given in reviews. As St Clair reminds us, the novel was not the instant bestseller it is often claimed to have been, existing as it did in a mere 500 copies.<sup>10</sup> Even if we factor in shared reading practices and circulating libraries, the audience for the novel in 1818 amounts to a vanishingly small group of readers—especially when set against the millions who have read the novel or seen adaptations on stage or screen in the two centuries since. Nonetheless, attempting to understand the experience of these readers might help us historicise the novel in new ways. What did *Frankenstein*, or perhaps more accurately, what *could Frankenstein* have meant to its first readers, before it had become a popular melodrama, a modern myth, or a recognised part of the Godwin–Wollstonecraft–Shelley oeuvre? How do we recover these meanings, and why might they matter?

In the attempt by the 'Romantic Novels 1818' project to reconstruct the fictional landscape of 1818, *Frankenstein* features as the sole canonical novel, alongside *Florence Macarthy* by Sydney Owenson, Patrick Brontë's *The Maid of Killarney*, Susan Ferrier's *Marriage*, Anna Maria Porter's *The Fast of St Magdalen* and Charles Maturin's *Women*. For these texts, the issue is first of all one of recovery, but *Frankenstein*'s inclusion prompts a different set of questions: what does it mean for a novel that has transcended literary history and achieved

mythic status to be re-situated as one of the novels of 1818? What different meanings might this approach generate and what methodological problems does it pose? In this essay, my focus is not on these contemporary novels—compelling intertexts though they might be—but on some of the other contemporary frames of reference, which have received uneven levels of attention in the vast field of *Frankenstein* criticism, but may all have shaped the way that *Frankenstein*'s first audience read the novel.

The most well known of these connects the conception of *Frankenstein* with the moment of its initial reception. In recent ecocritical readings, the April 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora, in modern Indonesia, looms large. Tambora is now known to be among the most powerful and lethal volcanic eruptions of the past 80,000 years. Beyond the catastrophic effect on the surrounding area, the eruption sent vast volumes of sulphurous dust into the stratosphere, forming a veil over the whole planet. This dust veil took several years to disperse and produced a marked cooling effect at the earth's surface. By the summer of 1816, there was frost and snow—a lurid brown and orange—in central Europe. The harvest failed and, a year after Waterloo and the end of a generation of war, Europe was plunged into a subsistence crisis, with widespread famine and disease. Nobody at the time could link cause and effect, and it is these seemingly apocalyptic changes in the climate—evidence, to some contemporary witnesses, that the earth was freezing—that shape the environment of Shelley's novel. Gillen D'Arcy Wood has even claimed *Frankenstein* as the first climate change novel, reading the Creature as a figure for the homeless, starving poor of Europe in the fallout from Tambora.<sup>11</sup>

What Wood's study further emphasises is that these were not just the conditions of the novel's genesis in that famously cold, wet Genevan summer of 1816 but also of its publication; indeed, we need to treat the 'Tambora event not as the natural disaster of a single year, 1816, but as a three-year episode of drastic climate change'.<sup>12</sup> Storms and gale-force winds continued in January 1818, the month of *Frankenstein*'s publication, pummelling Edinburgh and flattening St John's Chapel in the city. At the beginning of March, a tempest swept through southern England, and newspapers reported the destruction of a 100-foot tree in Plymouth, 'shivered to pieces by the electrical fluid'—a real-life echo of the lightning strike that the 15-year-old Victor Frankenstein witnesses, an event which 'completed the overthrow' of the Renaissance alchemists and cabbalists 'who had so long reigned the lords of my imagination', and set him on the path to modern science (p. 25).<sup>13</sup> For *Frankenstein*'s first readers, these extreme weather conditions were perhaps not so shocking as they had first been in 1816, having by this point continued for more than two years. They had become, it seemed, the new normal.

That we know about the weather in Britain at this period in such detail is largely due to the records of Luke Howard, a Tottenham Quaker and the so-called father of meteorology, who published the first volume of his *Climate of London* in 1818. His records go on to show that the apocalyptic weather ended

as abruptly as it had begun. By June 1818, the dust cloud had lifted and Howard was recording dry, warm weather—the most clement for a decade—which eventually produced a good harvest.<sup>14</sup> Only readers in the first few months of *Frankenstein's* existence read the novel under the shadow of Tambora.

At the same time that many parts of the globe were experiencing unusually cool temperatures, reports began to arrive of the Arctic sea ice breaking up, another effect of the Tambora eruption. This phenomenon seemed to hold out the promise that polar seas might soon be navigable, leading to renewed optimism about the possibility of discovering the fabled Northwest Passage. In February 1818, John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, published an article in the *Quarterly Review* promoting the search for the Northwest Passage as a suitable project for naval officers in peacetime. In the final sentences of *Persuasion* (1817), Austen's novel of the Peace, posthumously published a few days before *Frankenstein*, it is the 'dread of a future war' which forces Anne Elliot to 'pay the tax of quick alarm' for being a sailor's wife, or 'belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance'.<sup>15</sup> Barrow had now, however, identified an alternative—if equally dangerous—occupation for out-of-work sailors like Captain Wentworth. The February 1818 issue of the *Quarterly* sold a record 12,071 copies on its first day of publication.<sup>16</sup> For readers who bought *Frankenstein* or borrowed the novel from a circulating library in the early months of 1818, Shelley's frame narrative took on a topicality that could not have been foreseen even a year earlier; indeed, Walton's quest must have seemed strangely prophetic of the arctic fever which gripped the British imagination with unprecedented intensity between 1818 and 1822.

Adriana Craciun has identified 1818 as a 'watershed year' in Britain's Arctic history, inaugurating a new era of state-sponsored scientific exploration in place of the commercial speculation that characterised British arctic endeavour in the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> *Frankenstein*, she argues, was 'strategically timed' in an effort to reach a new audience for arctic adventures (although there is no evidence that either Shelley or Lackington conceived of it as such).<sup>18</sup> For Craciun, the publishing house of John Murray represents the centre of 'polar print culture'.<sup>19</sup> Murray famously turned down the chance to publish Shelley's novel and John Wilson Croker, Barrow's superior as First Secretary to the Admiralty, wrote a scathing review of the novel in Murray's *Quarterly Review*, describing it as 'a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity' and identifying it as a work of Jacobin fiction:

It is piously dedicated to Mr. Godwin, and is written in the spirit of his school [...] Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family, whose chief skill is in delineating the wanderings of the intellect, and which strangely delights in the most afflicting and humiliating of human miseries.<sup>20</sup>

Croker included in the course of his plot summary a satirical connection to Barrow's theory of an open polar sea, as set out in the preceding issue of the *Quarterly*:

the monster, finding himself hard pressed, resolves to fly to the most inaccessible point of the earth; and, as our Review had not yet enlightened mankind upon the real state of the North Pole, he directs his course thither as a sure place of solitude and security.<sup>21</sup>

Over the next few years, the failure of expeditions led by Captains Ross and Buchan, Edward Parry and, most famously, John Franklin must have strengthened the cautionary reading of the novel, and Frankenstein's speech to strengthen the resolve of Walton's crew assumed a grim irony. Instead, it is Frankenstein's final words to Walton that seem to be vindicated by the real-life arctic voyagers: 'Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries' (p. 186).

Extreme weather and polar exploration constitute two of the most pressing contexts for Shelley's novel in 1818, but there was another, even more pertinent context, operating at the level of allusion and allegory, which has not attracted the same level of attention in recent criticism. Political readings of *Frankenstein* have tended to treat the novel as a French Revolution allegory, with Victor Frankenstein a figure for the liberal leader—perhaps one of the Girondin friends of Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft—who unwittingly creates a violent, uncontrollable mob. For instance, Anne Mellor's influential study claims that, 'Mary Shelley conceived of Victor Frankenstein's creature as an embodiment of the revolutionary French nation, a gigantic body politic originating in a desire to benefit all mankind but abandoned by its rightful guardians'.<sup>22</sup> The sheer fact of historical distance, of viewing the history of the 1790s through the prism of the post-war moment, seems to lead inexorably to a reading of the novel as firmly anti-revolutionary: 'By representing in her creature both the originating ideals and the brutal consequences of the French Revolution, Mary Shelley offered a powerful critique of the ideology of revolution'.<sup>23</sup>

This version of the novel can be traced back to a pioneering essay by Lee Sterrenburg in the volume that inaugurated modern criticism of Shelley's novel, *The Endurance of Frankenstein* (1979). For Sterrenburg, writing before the advent of the new historicism, 'Mary Shelley translates politics into psychology. She uses revolutionary symbolism, but she is writing in a post-revolutionary era when collective political movements no longer appear viable'.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the conflicts of the 1790s are interiorised and reduced to the scale of the individual, in a way that turns against the political dualisms of the earlier period:

Viewed in its wider cultural context, Mary Shelley's shift from politics to psyche in *Frankenstein* should be seen, not merely as a reaction against the utopianism of Godwin, nor against the conservatism of Burke, but rather a reaction against this entire world-view of the revolutionary age'.<sup>25</sup>

This makes *Frankenstein* an apolitical novel, set against the competing claims of ideology—which, of course, is also to classify it as a conservative novel, albeit one of greater sophistication than the identikit anti-Jacobin fictions of the 1790s. Ronald Paulson similarly reads the novel as a summation of recent European history:

a retrospect on the whole process of maturation through Waterloo, with the Enlightenment-created monster leaving behind its wake of terror and destruction across France and Europe, partly because it had been disowned and misunderstood and partly because it was created unnaturally by reason rather than love within the instinctive relationships of the Burkean family.<sup>26</sup>

Here, the account of *bildung* in the novel is cast in the terms of the revolution controversy, with the Creature the product of (Wollstonecraftian, Godwinian) reason, cultivated at the expense of the ‘domestic affections’ that Edmund Burke identified as the germ of social feeling and that Victor warns Walton not to neglect.

In these and many other readings, the central fact of *Frankenstein* is its belatedness, its re-visiting of the events and debates of the 1790s from a post-revolutionary perspective. There are, of course, good reasons for reading *Frankenstein* in dialogue with the 1790s, from the blatant—the dedication to Godwin, a paratext that flaunts the novel’s Jacobin affiliations—to the hidden: the submerged chronology of the 1790s that can be pieced together from the dates in the narrative. This takes us from the beginning of Frankenstein’s studies at Ingolstadt and Walton’s training for his voyage in 1789, through the animation of the Creature in 1792—the year of the September Massacres in Paris, the publication of the second part of Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, as well as the birth of Percy Shelley—to Victor’s voyage to Scotland, and Wollstonecraft’s expedition to Scandinavia in 1795, and finally the telling of the story in August and September 1797, the months of Shelley’s birth and Wollstonecraft’s death.<sup>27</sup>

While the 1790s offers a compelling context for the novel, one consequence of reading *Frankenstein* through the 1790s is that it gives us, almost *de facto*, a Burkean, anti-Jacobin novel: it is hard to read the novel with this degree of belatedness and hindsight and not produce, as in the accounts cited above, an interpretation of *Frankenstein* as a critique of revolutionary ideas. This political reading is one that would be crystallised and reified through the nineteenth century in visual satire: from James Parry’s 1833 lithograph, *REFORM BILL’S FIRST STEP AMONG HIS POLITICAL FRANKENSTEINS*, to the Punch cartoons of ‘The Brummagem Frankenstein’ (1866) and ‘The Irish Frankenstein’ (1882), images which show Frankenstein as the political leader who creates an uncontrollable mob. In doing so, they are indebted less to Shelley’s original novel than its adaptations for the stage, which invest it with the Manichean moral structure of melodrama.



For the readers of 1818, however, it is the unfolding events of post-Waterloo Britain, not the French Revolution, that constitute the overriding political context. Moreover, this frame of reference produces a more ambivalent novel—one that reflects what Percy Shelley claimed to be ‘the direct moral of the book’:

Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Require affection with scorn;—let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments, are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse.<sup>28</sup>

We do not have a single-year history of 1818, in the manner of James Chandler’s *England in 1819* or Malcolm Chase’s *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom*. However, what Chandler suggests of the writing of 1819 might also hold true for *Frankenstein* in 1818. For Chandler,

[L]ike the literature of the larger period we call Romanticism, but with a particular intensity, English writing from 1819 is aware of its place in and as history. Much literary work of England in 1819, in other words, seems concerned with its place in England in 1819—concerned, that is, with a national operation of self-dating, or -redating, that is meant to count as a national self-making, or -remaking.<sup>29</sup>

As a novel of 1818, *Frankenstein* reflects on multiple levels the widespread distress of the post-war years, the crisis in political representation, the sense that Britain might be on the brink of revolution and the project of ‘national self-making’ with which literature in these years is engaged.

If we surmise that the most pertinent political context for the novel in 1818 was not the French Revolution (tempting as this allegorical framework is) but the events of England in 1818, this more immediate, pressing context produces a more open-ended political novel, one that speaks to a nation in a radically unsettled state. While we lack the kind of single-year study of 1818 along the lines of the (otherwise very different) works by Chandler and Chase for the following two years, we might identify the immediate political context for the novel in a period beginning with the Pentrich rising in June 1817, continuing through the imprisonment and trials of radical reformers in subsequent months, under the terms of the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act and often using evidence collected by spies and informers, and continuing on to the widespread cotton workers and coal miners’ strikes in the summer of 1818.<sup>30</sup> We might consider how these events were mediated in radical and conservative print culture and explore the resonance of individual events, protests and trials, keeping in mind Justine’s trial in the novel, a Godwinian scene of injustice that depends on a forced confession: ‘Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was’ (p. 66).

In the blasphemous nature of Frankenstein's discovery, Shelley's novel revolves around a bitterly contested term, making its entrance in the world a few weeks after William Hone's celebrated acquittal in three trials on charges of blasphemous libel, on 27, 28 and 29 December 1817.<sup>31</sup> Hone conducted his own defence, based on the audacious argument that the targets of his satire in *John Wilkes' Catechism*, *A Political Litany* and *The Sinecurists' Creed* were not texts of holy scripture but corrupt politicians. As such, he capitalised on the fact that he had been charged with blasphemy, not sedition, making the brazen claim that his satirical catechism, creed and litany were not ridiculing religious forms but instead mocking the government. The trial demonstrated the complex relationship between religious and political dissent, but also the authority that literary history could have within the courtroom. Hone cited an impressive list of precedents for using the Bible as part of political satire, including Milton, 'who himself was a parodist on the Scripture' in writing *Paradise Lost*.<sup>32</sup> This became, then, part of the currency of Milton in 1818, and in the aftermath of Hone's trials, Shelley's dialogue with Milton throughout *Frankenstein* may have taken on a more radical set of meanings to its earliest readers.<sup>33</sup>

Alternatively, we might consider the novel in the light of debates over population, political economy and the Poor Laws, a newly urgent topic in the post-war context of demobilisation, unemployment, failed harvests and high food prices. In what Isobel Armstrong has described as the 'Malthusian curbing of reproduction', through Frankenstein's refusal to allow the Creature a female partner, Shelley engages with the debate over Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, a controversy that had re-ignited in 1817 with the publication of the fifth edition of Malthus's essay, the first in a decade.<sup>34</sup> As Armstrong argues in relation to Victor Frankenstein's confrontations with the Creature:

It is impossible to rinse out the monster's personhood. Every encounter with him becomes an inquiry into the borders of the human, and correspondingly the borders of the non-subject. Every encounter alters the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the category of the human [...] Despite Frankenstein's glimmering of understanding that he might share species being with the monster, and that his own freedom is predicated on the freedom of the monster to reproduce, he is unable to bring himself to this recognition of equality.<sup>35</sup>

In the post-war moment, Malthusian questions about the category of the human and the right to reproduce were highly topical. In the remainder of this essay, however, I want to explore one specific intertext in more detail, William Hazlitt's essay 'What is the People?', the first version of which appeared in three parts in the radical newspaper *The Champion*, under the editorship of Joseph Clayton Jennyns, in October 1817, before being revised and republished in John Hunt's *Yellow Dwarf* in March 1818 and then in Hazlitt's *Political Essays* (1819).<sup>36</sup>

Hazlitt's essay begins with a brilliant riposte to the question in his title, creating a vivid sense that the reader has just walked in on an impassioned tavern or



coffee-house debate over popular rights, or joined a crowd listening to a speaker such as Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt on the radical platform:

—AND who are you that ask the question? One of the people. And yet you would be something! Then you would not have the People nothing. For what is the People? Millions of men, like you, with hearts beating in their bosoms, with thoughts stirring in their minds, with the blood circulating in their veins, with wants and appetites, with passions and anxious cares, with busy purposes and affections for others and a respect for themselves, and a desire of happiness, and a right to freedom and a will to be free. And yet you would tear out this mighty heart of a nation to lay it bare and bleeding at the foot of despotism: you would slay the mind of a country to fill up the dreary aching void with the old, obscene, drivelling prejudices of superstition and tyranny: you would tread out the eye of Liberty (the light of nations) like ‘a vile jelly’, that mankind may be led about darkling to its endless drudgery, like the Hebrew Samson (shorn of his strength and blind) by his insulting taskmasters: you would make the throne every thing, and the people nothing, to be yourself less than nothing, a very slave, a reptile, a creeping cringing sycophant, a court favourite, a pander to Legitimacy—that detestable fiction, which would make you and me and all mankind its slaves or victims.<sup>37</sup>

The emotional rhetoric, use of the master–slave dialectic, sublime imagery of popular sovereignty and contrasting language of abjection all chime with Frankenstein’s debate with the Creature on the glacier near Mont Blanc, when the Creature demands a mate ‘with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being’ and refuses ‘the submission of abject slavery’ (pp. 118–19).

Kevin Gilmartin has observed that Hazlitt’s essay ‘skirts any endorsement of specific democratic institutions of government’, instead operating on a level of symbolism and abstraction:

[W]here Hazlitt’s *negative* treatments of popular mobilization were often grounded in specific events (Birmingham in 1793, London in 1820), it is striking that the *positive* urban Leviathan was advanced as a supposition or figural ‘type and image,’ without direct reference to celebrated radical episodes in the era of Peterloo—events that were available to him, and that suffused the periodicals in which his essays appeared.<sup>38</sup>

The primary context for Hazlitt’s essay may be the campaign for parliamentary reform but the power of his essay is based not on prosaic debates about representation but on a visceral imagining of the popular Leviathan, which arises out of Hazlitt’s essay like Frankenstein’s patchwork Creature:

If we could suppose society to be transformed into one great animal (like Hobbes’s Leviathan) each member of which had an intimate

connection with the head or government, so that every want or intention of every individual in it could be made known and have its due weight, the state would have the same consciousness of its own wants and feelings, and the same interest in providing for them, as an individual has with respect to his own welfare. Can any one doubt that such a state of society in which the greatest knowledge of its interests was thus combined with the greatest sympathy with its wants, would realise the idea of a perfect commonwealth? But such a government would be the precise idea of a truly popular or representative government. (p. 329)

Hazlitt's principal antagonist in the essay is Robert Southey and his 'rhapsody against the old maxim, *vox populi vox Dei*' in the *Quarterly Review* of October 1816 (in fact published February 1817), in an article eliding the war against Napoleon abroad with the repression of the parliamentary reform movement at home (p. 320). In reading Hazlitt's representations of metropolitan liberty in relation to Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and Hazlitt's own writing about the Alps, Gilmartin argues that 'Southey's phrase reinforces the relevance of Alpine sublimity to Hazlitt's expansive urban populace', turning as it does on an interpretation of divine voice. Such a connection is particularly suggestive for a reading of Hazlitt's essay alongside Mary Shelley's novel, given the Alpine setting.<sup>39</sup>

Hazlitt's utopian projection of the 'perfect Commonwealth' gives us a much more sympathetic image of Shelley's Creature as a figure for the people than any reading of *Frankenstein* and the French Revolution allows, and the Creature's demands resonate with the claims for the people in Hazlitt's essay:

The people are not subject to fanciful wants, speculative longings, or hypochondriacal complaints. Their disorders are real, their complaints substantial and well-founded [...] They do not cry out till they are hurt [...] For any thing we could ever find, the people have as much common sense and sound judgment as any other class of the community. Their folly is second-hand, derived from their being the dupes of the passions, interests, and prejudices of their superiors. [...] The people do not rise up till they are trod down. They do not turn upon their tormentors till they are goaded to madness. (p. 337)

Hazlitt's defence of popular discontent is paralleled in Shelley's novel by the Creature's Miltonic defiance, which revolves around the mutual obligations between sovereign and subject:

'I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owe'st me. Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where 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.' (*Frankenstein*, 77–78)

Just as the Creature vows to 'revenge my injuries' (p. 119) if Frankenstein fails to fulfil his duty towards him, Hazlitt's defence of popular rights extends to a justification of the use of violence, which can only be averted by parliamentary reform:


They are violent in their revenge, no doubt; but it is because justice has been long denied them, and they have to pay off a very long score at a very short notice [...] The errors of the people are the crimes of governments. They apply sharp remedies to lingering diseases, and when they get sudden power in their hands, frighten their enemies, and wound themselves with it. They rely on brute force and the fury of despair, in proportion to the treachery which surrounds them, and to the degradation, the want of general information and mutual co-operation, in which they have been kept [...] Timely reforms are the best preventatives of violent revolutions. ('What Is the People?', 337–38)

Mary Shelley had known Hazlitt all her life as her father's friend, a socially awkward though friendly visitor to the Godwin household at Skinner Street.<sup>40</sup> By the time she wrote the novel, Hazlitt was a member of the Shelley circle and part of their conversations about reform in England—a less famous, but perhaps just as formative, sequel to those conversations with Byron in Geneva. On 9 February 1817, while staying with Leigh and Marianne Hunt in the Vale of Health, Hampstead, Shelley records in her journal: 'Several of Hunt's acquaintances come in the evening—Music—after supper a discussion untill 3 in the morning with Hazlitt concerning monarchy & republicanism'.<sup>41</sup> No doubt they would have talked in the terms later elaborated in 'What Is the People?'. Just two days later, the issue of the *Quarterly Review* containing Southey's article was published and Hazlitt worked on his response over the next few months.<sup>42</sup> On 18 March 1817, the Shelleys moved in to Albion House in Marlow and Shelley records 'Write every day' in her journal, drafting the final section of her novel, from Victor's destruction of the female Creature on Orkney to the end. By early April, the draft was complete.<sup>43</sup>

While the topics discussed in February 1817 made it into Hazlitt's essay of later that year, my aim here is not to argue for influence in either direction. Instead, I want to suggest that the rival claims of monarchical authority and popular sovereignty, which Hazlitt engages in his essay, were part of the public debate in 1818 and operate throughout Shelley's novel, giving it a particular topicality in its first moment of publication. 'What Is the People?' may be one of the most compelling intertexts from the moment of *Frankenstein's* first publication, evidence of the radical discourse that is coeval with Shelley's novel of ideas. This context produces a more radical text, in which the Creature appears as a figure for the people, demanding justice, not a French revolutionary

mob: a menacing presence, perhaps, but one insistently demanding answers to its questions, in the present tense. The *Edinburgh Magazine* famously reviewed the novel in the following terms:

Here is one of the productions of the modern school in its highest style of caricature and exaggeration. It is formed on the Godwinian manner, and has all the faults, but many likewise of the beauties of that model [...] it possesses a similar power of fascination, something of the same mastery in harsh and savage delineations of passion, relieved in like manner by the gentler features of domestic and simple feelings. There never was a wilder story imagined, yet, like most of the fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times.<sup>44</sup>

While 'the favourite projects and passions of the times' has often been read as a reference to scientific discovery and polar exploration, it might also take in the political debates that convulsed England in 1818. This national debate was the context into which *Frankenstein* was first received, and situating it within the politics of 1818 turns Shelley's novel into a radical, highly topical text. 

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to the editors of this special issue, members of the 'Romantic Novels 1817 and 1818' seminar series at the University of Greenwich who responded to an early version of this essay, the two anonymous readers for *Romantic Textualities*, who offered many useful and insightful comments and to my students at King's College London on the 'Family, Authorship and Romanticism' module.
2. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics' [1937–38], in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258. For Bakhtin, '[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the moments of time, plot and history' (p. 84).
3. Sarah Hibberd has explored the use of music and mime to communicate the vitalism debate, in 'Good Vibrations: *Frankenstein* on the London Stage', in *Sound Knowledge: Music and Science in London, 1789–1851*, ed. by James Q. Davies and Ellen Lockhart (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 175–202 <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226402109.003.0008>>.
4. Marilyn Butler, 'Introduction', to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xxxvi. All subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition, with page numbers in parentheses.
5. James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 247 <<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226035000.001.0001>>.

6. *Frankenstein* appears as the most frequently assigned novel on the corpus of six million syllabi analysed by the *Open Syllabus Project* <<https://opensyllabus.org/>> [accessed 10 October 2019].
7. Influential accounts of these topics include (though are by no means limited to) Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. by George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 77–87 <<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520341562-007>>; Barbara Johnson, 'My Monster/My Self', *Diacritics*, 12.2 (1982), 2–10 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/464674>>; Mary Jacobus, 'Is There a Woman in this Text?', *New Literary History*, 14.1 (1982), 117–41 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/468961>>; H. L. Malchow, 'Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Past & Present*, 139 (1993), 90–130 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/past/139.1.90>>; Anne K. Mellor, 'Frankenstein, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 23 (2001), 1–28 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08905490108583531>>; and Eileen Hunt Botting, *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
8. William St Clair, 'The Impact of *Frankenstein*', in *Mary Shelley in her Times*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 38–63 (p. 39).
9. Cited in Radu Florescu, *In Search of Frankenstein* (London: New English Library, 1977), p. 155.
10. St Clair, p. 42.
11. Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that Changed the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). See also David Higgins, *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), ch. 3 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67894-8>>.
12. D'Arcy Wood, p. 10.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
15. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 203.
16. William Gifford to George Canning, 27 March 1818; cited in Jonathan Cutmore, 'Quarterly Review Archive: Volume 18, Number 35 (October 1817)' [in fact published 21 February 1818], *Romantic Circles* (University of Maryland, 2005) <<https://romantic-circles.org/reference/qr/index/35.html>> [accessed 25 July 2019].
17. Adriana Craciun, *Writing Arctic Disaster: Authorship and Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 5 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316410790>>. See also Jessica Richard, "'A Paradise of my Own Creation": *Frankenstein* and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 25.3 (2003), 295–314 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0890549032000167826>>; Siobhan Carroll, 'Crusades against Frost: *Frankenstein*, Polar Ice, and Climate Change in 1818', *European Romantic Review*, 24.2 (2013), 211–30 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2013.766402>>; and Katherine Bowers, 'Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space', *Gothic Studies*, 19.2 (November 2017), 71–84 <<https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.0030>>.
18. Craciun, p. 83.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

20. [John Wilson Croker,] 'Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus', *Quarterly Review* (January 1818), 379–85 (p. 381). This number was published on 9 June 1818: see Cutmore, 'Quarterly Review Archive: Volume 18, Number 36 (January 1818)', *Romantic Circles* (University of Maryland, 2005) <<https://romantic-circles.org/reference/qr/index/36.html>> [accessed 25 July 2019].
21. [Croker], p. 382.
22. Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, her Fiction, her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 82.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
24. Lee Sterrenburg, 'Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*', in *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, ed. by George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 143–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520341562-010>> (pp. 145 and 159).
25. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
26. Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 239.
27. See Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *The Annotated Frankenstein*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson and Ronald L. Levao (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 'Introduction', p. 37.
28. Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On "Frankenstein"', *The Athenaeum*, 10 November 1832, p. 730.
29. James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 5.
30. The best recent account of this period is given by Robert Poole as part of the sequence of events leading to Peterloo. See *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ch. 7: 'Conspirators' and ch. 8: 'Strikers'. See also Robert G. Hall, 'Tyranny, Work and Politics: The 1818 Strike Wave in the English Cotton District', *International Review of Social History*, 34.3 (1989), 433–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S002085900009469>>.
31. For the fullest account of this episode, see Ben Wilson, *The Laughter of Triumph: William Hone and the Fight for the Free Press* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).
32. *The Three Trials of William Hone* (London: Hone, 1818), p. 35.
33. On Shelley's dialogue with Milton, see John B. Lamb, 'Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Milton's Monstrous Myth', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 47.3 (1992), 303–19 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2933709>>; and Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
34. Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 44 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198793724.001.0001>>. On *Frankenstein* and Malthusian population theory, see also Clara Tuite, 'Frankenstein's Monster and Malthus' "Jaundiced Eye": Population, Body Politics, and the Monstrous Sublime', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 22.1 (1998), 141–55; and Maureen McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ch. 3.
35. Armstrong, pp. 43–44.
36. 'What Is the People?' was first published in *The Champion* for 12, 19 and 26 October 1817, reprinted in two parts in the *Yellow Dwarf* for 7 and 14 March 1818, and included in *Political Essays* (August 1819). There are some variants between these different versions; the text cited here is the original *Champion* essay, which



- appeared under the Miltonic motto, 'Let not England forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live.'
37. W[illiam]. H[azlitt]., 'What is the People?', *The Champion*, 12 October 1817, p. 321. All subsequent references to the novel will be to this version of the essay, with page numbers in parentheses.
  38. Kevin Gilmartin, *William Hazlitt: Political Essayist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 265 and 273 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198709312.001.0001>>.
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
  40. See Duncan Wu, *William Hazlitt: The First Modern Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 75.
  41. Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (eds), *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–44*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1, 163. Godwin's diary records a similar gathering a week later, on 16 February 1817: 'Dine at L Hunt's, w. Shelleys, Hazlitts & B Montagu'; see Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy and Mark Philp (eds), *The Diary of William Godwin* (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010) <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/diary/1817-02-16.html>> [accessed 16 October 2019].
  42. This number was published on 11 February 1817 and sold out (a total of 7587 copies) on the first day of sale: see Cutmore, 'Quarterly Review Archive: Volume 16, Number 31 (October 1816)' *Romantic Circles* (University of Maryland, 2005) <<https://romantic-circles.org/reference/qr/index/31.html>> [accessed 7 October 2019].
  43. These dates follow the account given in Charles E. Robinson, 'Frankenstein Chronology', *The Shelley–Godwin Archive* <<http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/contents/frankenstein/frankenstein-chronology/>> [accessed 7 October 2019]. As Shelley's recent biographer comments, 'the months from February to June 1817 are more intellectually communal and creative than any hitherto'; see Fiona Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein* (London: Profile Books, 2018), p. 155.
  44. *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany; a New Series of The Scots Magazine*, 2 (March 1818), 249–53.

### REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

J. GRANDE. 'Reading *Frankenstein* in 1818: From Climate Change to Popular Sovereignty', *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840*, 24 (Winter 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.18573/romtext.103>>.

### COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is © 2022 The Author and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar credited with authorship. For full copyright information, see page 2.

Date of acceptance: 9 December 2019.

