Angela Wright, *Mary Shelley*, Gothic Authors: Critical Revisions (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 192pp. ISBN 978-1-7868-3173-6; £24.99 (pb).

The radical purpose of Angela Wright's bold new book, *Mary Shelley*, is 'to significantly revise our understanding of [Shelley's] engagement with the Gothic' through examining 'a broader range of her works than have to date been included in the Gothic canon' (p. 1). Wright suggests that themes emerging from *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) recur throughout Shelley's subsequent writings (p. 2), which Wright urges readers not to overlook. Her compelling examination of these neglected texts makes a persuasive case for considering how the gothic permeates the writing of Mary Shelley beyond the work with which she has become synonymous.

Building on her useful chronology of Shelley's life, Wright investigates how her 'unique and exceptional literary heritage' was shaped by her parents Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley and architects of the gothic like Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, who all became components of her 'literary imagination' (p. 12). Wright juxtaposes the 'striking originality' of Shelley's childhood compositions with her self-confessed skill as a 'close imitator', and this fusion of emulation and innovation in her work is one which Wright carefully, and rewardingly, threads throughout the text.

Although the argument here is that Shelley's fascination with the gothic was not limited to *Frankenstein*, her foundational work is an apt starting point. In chapter 1, Wright conducts a sophisticated reading of the novel and the ways in which it 'seeks to expose the limitations of story-telling and of language itself' (p. 20). She teases out the dichotomies underlying the text—external and internal, scientific and supernatural, horror and terror—and the 'liminal spaces' which separate them (p. 21). The creature is mired in liminality: he is nameless because he is 'ultimately indefinable' (p. 26), and so embodies the gothic's quest to investigate the 'inexpressible and contradictory impulses of human nature' (p. 32). Exploring as it does the 'uncharted elements of human character, the space where a soul might reside' (p. 35), the novel may be considered a search for the source—of life, of inheritance, of self.

All three are persistently denied, however, to the women of *Frankenstein*. 'Who writes this, and why does it matter?', is a question which Wright stresses must be asked of any text (p. 44). This is where her book is at its most powerful, spotlighting Shelley's metatextual focus on women's invisible endeavours: writing, editing and curating manuscripts. This was a labour which Shelley knew well, as Anna Mercer has since detailed in her monograph, *The Collaborative Literary Relationship of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (2019). Margaret Walton Saville, who notably bears Shelley's initials, 'collate[s] and curate[s]' the documents that tell the story (p. 45). Wright persuasively asserts that Shelley's 'most transformative' advancement is in framing women as the 'source of rational judgment and authorship', and calls

on us to participate in what she terms 'the Gothic quest of *Frankenstein*' by following Margaret's editorial lead (pp. 48–49).

Incest was not uncommon in gothic fiction of the time (see: the collected works of Horace Walpole), but the 'reciprocity' of the proto-Freudian desire in *Matilda* made it scandalous. In Chapters 2 and 3, Wright explores how the novel's titular heroine, as both an investigator and unveiler of secrets, exerts 'a strong sense of agency' in a way which '[r]evers[es] *Frankenstein*'s particularly masculine narrative' (pp. 63–64). She contends that women writers like Shelley, Jane Austen and Ann Radcliffe, 'renegotiated the porous boundaries of romance, historical novel and "Gothic Story" in order to explore the hidden, often Gothic histories of women' (p. 68). What might be termed Shelley's 'radical gothic' foregrounds the lived experiences of women that might otherwise have been lost, giving women chroniclers like herself the space to express their traumas, their passions and their ambitions. This is apparent in *Matilda,* and also in *Valperga* through its dual heroines, Euthanasia and Beatrice, the latter of whom is not easily categorised as either 'tragic heroine' or 'female devil' (p. 82). Wright brilliantly conveys how Shelley reframes female friendship as a mutually healing bond: Euthanasia ensures that through her testimony the 'tale of two uncelebrated women' survives, and thus 'challenges [the] Gothic narrative' that only material possessions are worthy inheritances (p. 87).

Chapter 4 scrutinises Shelley's cathartic process of writing through grief, exemplified by her essay 'On Ghosts' (1824) and her dystopian novel *The Last Man* (1826), written after the deaths of Percy, Lord Byron and three of her children. The latter manifests grief as an apocalyptic landscape: a barren and unending desert that must be traversed and ultimately moved beyond (pp. 93–95). Through the writing of this novel, Shelley is arguably engaging in what we might assume the creature is doing after *Frankenstein* ends: evolving and transforming through grief. 'On Ghosts' is her articulation of this 'dynamic' process.

Wright identifies Shelley's subtle, subtextual refusal to pit women against each other (p. 99), instead portraying women as uncompetitive, independent and mutually supportive in contrast to the antagonistic, and ultimately destructive, fruits of ruthless male ambition. For Wright, '[t]he governing act of editorship provides a strong thematic link between *Frankenstein, Valperga* and *The Last Man*', wherein 'the final authoritative manuscript comes from the pen of a female' (p. 107). Chapter 5 traces this throughout later works, such as *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), which embody her 'repositioning' of the oft-forgotten heroine (pp. 109–10). The revised 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* transforms Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor's cousin in the 1818 original, into an orphan 'gifted' to Victor by his mother. This change vividly underscores 'the terrors of the disposability of the female' (pp. 113–14). The doubles in these texts, antagonistic to the male characters therein, also work to 'relegat[e] the females to the margins' (p. 118). Shelley powerfully redresses this 'through the transformative experiences of female friendship' (p. 125).

Mary Shelley once modestly said, 'I cannot *teach*—I can only *paint'* (qtd on p. 121). In essence, she—like Wright—does both. Wright's book succeeds in painting a 'truer picture' of Shelley that offers both an excellent introduction and a bold and sagacious contribution to scholarship on one of gothic fiction's finest innovators.

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