MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN (1994)

by

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Lost in the Arctic wastes, the over-ambitious scientist Victor Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh) tells his story to an equally ambitious explorer (Aidan Quinn) who searches for a route to the North Pole (heaven knows why). Victor recounts his youth in Geneva and the loss of his mother (Cheri Lunghi) through childbirth. He leaves his adopted sister, Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), to study medicine in Ingolstadt with the sinister Professor Waldman (John Cleese), who has experimented with re-animation, and his cheery friend Henry Clerval (Tom Hulce). After Waldman's death, Victor steals his notes and with the information therein creates the Monster (Robert DeNiro). The creature escapes, lives in isolation, but eventually confronts Victor with his evil deed. The creature requests a mate - the due of any sentient being. Victor refuses and the creature kills Elizabeth on their wedding night. Victor re-animates Elizabeth, not for the Monster, but for himself. She kills herself. Victor destroys both the creature and himself. (Rated R)

The story of Frankenstein, both the person and the text, is a fascinating one. Even the dictionary defines a Frankenstein as, "a work or agency that ruins its originator." It is the nature and dynamics of that ruin that seem to fascinate us endlessly. Since 1818, when Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Shelley) wrote *Frankenstein; or the Modern*

Prometheus, the book has never been out of print. I believe this qualifies it as a major text of the English language. Yet today, while everyone is familiar with the myth, few have read the book – most find it overlong, dreary, and far too moralizing for contemporary tastes. Today, our major text is an amalgam of the films that embrace and embroider the myth. Over one hundred films partake of this seemingly bottomless wellspring of myth. It is a story so deep, so strong, so archetypal that it demands constant updating for the viewing audience (and it is no coincidence that the appearance of a Frankenstein film is very often paralleled with the release of a Vampire film).

As the specifics of our cultural needs change, so do the specific manifestations of our myths, yet the archetypal, psychological core remains unchanged. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is an updating for modern audiences – it is literate, well played, and affecting. However, I am sure that in a decade or two it will seem as quaint as the other Frankensteins that line video rental shelves. This is the sign of a really subterranean myth: it demands constant refreshing, yet the older versions still fascinate.

Central to the Frankenstein myth is, quite simply, the sexual confusion of men trying to give birth without women. In our world, life has been created or restored by primarily three figures: God creating Adam and Eve; Jesus' resurrecting of Lazarus; and every woman who gives birth (note that this elevates women considerably in the mythological life-giving pantheon). The consequences of man's hubris in attempting to replicate this august accomplishment are invariable: monsters are created, and death ensues. What varies from telling to telling of this story are the details of what drives a man to the attempt the unachievable.

The most familiar version of the myth, at least in terms of the images the word "Frankenstein" almost reflexively brings to mind, is the 1933 film with Boris Karloff as the mute, murderous, but curiously sympathetic monster and Colin Clive as the energetic explorer of the medical unknown. The 1933 telling departs considerably from the book:

the mute monster, the survival of the young couple, and so on. Yet these are easily accepted by audiences.

Later films have vocal, even literate, monsters more in keeping with Shelley's idea of the "New Prometheus," yet none catch the public imagination as the 1933 version does. Perhaps the two that come closest in popularity to the "original" are *The Bride of Frankenstein* [1935], and Mel Brooks' satire, *Young Frankenstein* [1974]. The latter may seem curious, until we realize that Brooks changed very few of the basic mythical elements of the story. In *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, the tragic ending for Victor and Elizabeth is restored. Perhaps today's audience is ready to face the full consequences of tinkering with nature, given our current fascination with ecology and the fear of genetic engineering.

Why do we relate so strongly to this particular story? Why do we confuse the monster and the maker so easily as to call them both by the same name – Frankenstein? Why has this same story survived repetition in forms as different as *Weird Science* [1985], *Edward Scissorhands* [1990], *RoboCop* [1987], or *Making Mr. Right* [1987]?

The story of Frankenstein resonates at the deepest levels of our psyche. It reveals our deepest fears and confusions. While it has many interpretations, one will suffice here. Consider a simple physical description of the original Boris Karloff Monster: He is put together from mismatched pieces, too big for his clothes, clumsy, lacks communication skills, keeps knocking things and people over. Everybody is against him, and no one understands him. In the end, all he really wants is a girlfriend, but he is terribly confused as to how to go about it. And he has terrible skin. Here is the perfect picture of a male teenager passing through the rigors of puberty! I wonder how many adolescent minds unconsciously echo (in the same context) Dracula's famous statement, "To die, to be really dead. That must be glorious. . . . There are far worse things awaiting man than death." No wonder young male audiences so readily identify with such sympathetic monsters.

Thus, central to the Frankenstein myth is the male hubris of creating life. This may be a manifestation of adolescent confusion about the true nature of sexuality. In *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Victor uses amniotic fluid as part of his experiments. In previous films, it was usually electricity that did the trick. Electricity, not directly one of the four natural elements – earth, water, air, and fire – has been mythologically associated with the male provinces of the Old Testament God and the Greek Zeus sending lightening bolts to punish perceived evildoers. Victor, here, recognizes that maleness alone cannot create life. Yet he refuses to abandon his male worldview, even while recognizing the feminine: he uses stolen or bought amniotic fluid, a substance incorrectly under male control. While the fact of its use reduces Victor's hubris in terms of recognition of the importance of the feminine in the creation of life, the specific way in which he uses and attempts to control it shows little psychological progress over his filmic Frankenstein predecessors.

As is the privilege of any storyteller, each version of the film stresses certain aspects of the myth. Rather than the puberty/sexual-confusion aspect, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* investigates the angst and pain of the love/hate friction inherent in the Oedipal conflict: the Monster resents and despises his creator for having brought him into a world of pain, ill equipped to deal with physical, philosophical, and psychological realities. Yet, at the same time, he experiences any son's love for his father. Much of our identification with the monster – and the creator – stems from this conflict. The Monster also represents the incestuous taboos inherent in the Oedipal story.

The film eases us into the full force of this conflict with several introductory incidents. The most striking is the Monster's relation with the poor tenant farming family. The Monster helps them, and they assume that he, unseen of course, is the good fairy of the forest. Throughout the myth, it is especially the children who seem to trust the monster. Not yet old enough to experience Oedipal confusions about a father figure, they accept

him for who he is – a very ugly human being who does nice things for them – rather than the psycho/sexual challenge he will signify to them in a few short years.

The old blind man of the family also accepts the Monster. The son is only the male in his middle years who instantly and instinctively rejects the Monster. He reacts without even a pause; it is an instinctual, archetypal reaction – one that comes from the deepest recesses of the psyche. While the elder and the Monster are getting along fine, the son projects his own unresolved Oedipal fears without hesitation. Children have not yet entered the Oedipal stage; elders have either survived it or resolved it. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* addresses all who are still caught in the middle.

In addition to extensions of the Oedipal conflict, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* throws other taboos into the brew. For instance, Victor is obviously trying to give birth to his own mother (she died giving birth to his brother and left Victor devastated). Furthermore, Victor and Elizabeth consider themselves not only brother and sister but also lovers, reminiscent of Siegmund and Sieglinde of Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold*. In Wagner's version of the Germanic myth, their union leads to Siegfried, the innocent hero who will free the world of the dominion of the gods. Did director Branagh intend this parallel, seeing the Monster as a liberating figure? If so, liberating from what? The egotism of science?

One of the major symbol systems in this film is architecture. The basic psychological premise of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is revealed as soon as we see Victor's house. Outside, it is neat, cleanly decorated, and symmetrical, a mansion appropriate to an upper-class medical family. Inside, in an interior far too big to fit into that modest exterior, are vast empty spaces occasionally dotted with furniture, small places of comfort within a general emptiness. Clearly, this is a metaphor for Victor's own mind. The house, in parallel to what the young scientist believes about his own mind, has no unexplored places, there is no dark or dank or gloom. Yet we can see that these vast expanses of emptiness are just that, places which cannot give comfort or promote life. There is

another notable aspect to the interior of Victor's house/mind: a sweeping, stories-tall, banister-less (and thus dangerous) staircase that has been borrowed directly from the original *Dracula* [1931] – the other great cinematic psychosexual myth. Thus, the connection between the upper areas of the mind – science and male hubris – and the ordinary level of life is a very dangerous path to tread.

The architectural metaphors continue in Ingolstadt, where Victor studies medicine. He moves into a barren attic space; that is, he wants to explore what he perceives to be the upper aspects of the psyche. With the highest possible goals, he wants to do good for humankind. We are warned that this will not work out when he inspects the space and pronounces it to be, despite the barrenness, "Perfect." At that very moment, a single dove (a common symbol of spirit) takes flight and leaves the attic. Spirit leaves him. At that very moment, he is doomed.

The lecture hall at the medical school is another good example of symbolic architecture. Its circular balconies, where the students stand and observe, rise above a central lecture pit from which there seems to be no exit, remind us not only of the Tower of Babel turned inside out, but also of Dante's description of The Inferno. Here the inescapable Hell and impossibility of communication is the closed mindedness and sterility of unfeeling "pure" medical science, a Hell that ignores philosophy, and the lack of human attention to the human being. Victor rebels against "inhuman" science. Of course, in the hands of Victor's psychosexual problems, all this pro-humanist sentiment backfires. In his goals, Victor is Politically Correct. Interestingly, this film claims that one can be Politically Correct only if one is psycho-sexually mature; otherwise you're asking for trouble.

Other details are used to visually amplify the story. Once in Waldman's laboratory, for instance, our first view of the place where a monster has already been created is through a pair of large magnifying glasses. But from the camera's point of view, they don't magnify – they distort. Thus, we are told, if we look closely, presumably at the inflated,

and thus artificially magnified, psychology of Victor and his associates, we will find distortions.

Each of the characters is also worked out along the psychosexual theme. For instance, an important father figure in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, Professor Waldman, is far more complicated than the mother image. Waldman (not Victor's biological father, but the stronger father figure nonetheless) has already done the experiments that Victor wants to do, but has given them up (that is, faced and rejected, not resolved, the Oedipal conflict). When he dies, Victor simply steals his notes, which become the key to his success. Thus, without the benefit of his father's experiences, Victor is bound to simply amplify the psychosexual problems of his father figure. However, a clever complication enters with Waldman's death. While attempting to vaccinate the population against cholera, Waldman is stabbed to death by a beggar who will be hanged and taken by Victor to become the body of the monster. Since the Monster considers Victor his father, what, then, is the relation between the three men? The grandson kills the grandfather in order to be born the son of the father?

The connection between Mother, Father and Monster are very strong. For example, the first word the Monster speaks is "friend," but the second is, "father." The very first words the Monster reads are Victor's mother's handwriting, "This is the Journal of Victor Frankenstein." While the notebook is now full, it was blank when Victor first received it as a posthumous graduation gift from his mother. This connection between Victor and his mother is the only thing the Monster took with him when he fled Victor's laboratory.

The inanimate monster being sent upward into the air for his immanent resurrection takes on the arms-splayed posture of Christ crucified. The religious commentary continues when the Monster ironically escapes the city by jumping onto a cart carrying corpses and playing dead (which, of course, technically he is). A few moments later we see him wading a stream so shallow that he appears to be walking on the water. The multivalency of the Monster is further shown when he helps a poor farming family survive the winter

by having the physical strength to pull nourishment from the frozen ground (he also stays in their pig sty, not quite a manger, but close enough). His first murder is of an abusive landlord that attack's the farmer's daughter and his blind father. And yet, because of his own desire for the feminine (a bride/companion) and Victor's refusal and perhaps inability to furnish it to him, he becomes a killer of children and women.

The traumatizing event that sets into motion Victor's desire to create life is the death of his mother during childbirth. While this makes sense at the surface level – an attempt to resurrect his mother and to assuage the guilt of his own birth, which must have threatened her life in the same way as the fatal birth of his brother – there are deeper implications. He undertakes these tasks without the presence of the guiding and humbling feminine – he is a man lost in the excesses of masculine, egotistic power. What little feminine power there is clearly demonstrated in Elizabeth's "feeling" that something bad is happening to Victor many hundreds of miles away.

Elizabeth (who bares a striking resemblance to Elsa Lancaster playing both Mary Shelley and the Monster's intended in *The Bride of Frankenstein*) represents the positive feminizing influences: she wants to make a home for Victor, have his children, and be a good wife. Yet she is unaware of Victor's projections on her, that she will become a substitute for his dead mother in the attempted resurrection. The unnatural nature of their relation is revealed at the end of his marriage proposal to her: they shake hands but left hands! (This kind of symbolization can be seen throughout the film. Victor's first successful experiment is the re-animation of a toad – a common symbol of ill omen and death. To further emphasize the negative portents, the toad is upside down. This "successful" experiment is immediately followed by the announcement that cholera has become an epidemic. That is, all the efforts of "modern science" have come to naught and its timing implies the same for Victor's sciences.)

Even in death, Elizabeth becomes the single ray of hope for the power of the feminine. She is killed on her wedding night by the Monster. Here the Monster clearly represents

the incest taboo, for by killing her he prevents the consummation of the incestuous relation between Elizabeth and Victor – incestuous in emotion and feeling if not in blood. Victor then re-animates her. Realizing that male births are unnatural, that this is the province of the feminine, she immolates herself rather than continue a psychologically perverted life. Even as a resurrected monster, she understands.

In addition to the psycho/sexual aspects of the Frankenstein story, Branagh has added an interesting element to the existing Frankenstein lore – Eastern philosophy. Waldman tells Victor of the theory of *chi* and the Chinese acupuncture system. The film clearly demonstrates what happens when Western science gets a hold of almost anything Eastern that it doesn't understand – it becomes brutalized. Where the Chinese, as Waldman shows Victor, use elegant, slender needles delicately inserted into very specific points, Victor turns these into small spikes brutally and blindly driven into the cadavers he is attempting to re-animate.

What is satisfying about this film is that it is an intelligent and controlled contribution by a talented director rather than the product of the hacks that have been previously attracted to this material. Director Kenneth Branagh, with his background in theater, sinks his teeth into every cinematic device like a terrier that simply will not let go. Camera work, typical of Branagh, varies from peripatetic to frantic. His obvious enthusiasm for the cinematic apparatus reminds me of young Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* [1941]. Like Welles, Branagh uses sound edits throughout the film. For instance, when Waldman says that his previous experiments resulted in abominations, we hear a cacophony of screams and, a few moments later, we are in a public clinic where the rebellious, misunderstanding, and distrustful population is being vaccinated against cholera.

As I have pointed out, the Frankenstein myth is basic to our modern culture. It keys not only into our psycho-sexual preoccupations, but also into many contemporary issues like genetic engineering, test-tube babies, multiple organ transplants, geriatric and surrogate pregnancies, designer babies and the development of artificial intelligence. *Mary*

Shelley's Frankenstein is just the latest incarnation in a series of filmic investigations of these issues, ancient and modern. Quite simply, audiences invariably respond to the appearance of these deep myths no matter how good or how bad the film. This film proves that, when mythology is involved, only a very small portion of the audience either reads reviews or takes them seriously, for no one gave this film a good review. Despite almost universal pans, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* did well – $11 million – on its opening weekend. Mythology triumphs over criticism yet again.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Written by Steph Lady and Frank Darabont. From the novel *Frankenstein; or the New Prometheus* by Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (later Shelley). Photography by Roger Pratt. Design by Tim Harvey. Costumes by James Acheson. Make-up by Daniel Parker. Distributed by TriStar Pictures, 1994.