

Kim Fischer as The Creature in Dallas Theater Center's
Frankenstein, by Nick Dear, from the novel by Mary
Shelley. Directed by Joel Ferrell. Kalita Humphreys
Theater, Dallas, Feb. 2 to Mar. 4, 2018.
Photo by Karen Almond.

Womb and Doom

Frankenstein as Mother and Maker

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which celebrates its two hundredth birthday this year, has itself become a monster, stitched together this way and that way from the raw materials of an ever-renewing (or ever-decaying) popular culture. Shelley would approve. In her introduction to the 1831 edition she wrote, "I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper." Here I look at two of *Frankenstein's* offspring, a stage adaptation by Nick Dear and a new version of the novel published by MIT Press and annotated for scientists and engineers.



Since its 2011 debut at London's Royal National Theatre, Dear's *Frankenstein* has traveled the world. This winter, it came to haunt the Kalita Humphreys Theater in Dallas, where the intimate setting thrust the audience uncomfortably, delightfully close to the grim drama. Dear's telling of the story deviates from the original in several ways, including who gets to know Victor's secret. In the novel, he never tells his fiancé Elizabeth about his creature. He promises to confide his "tale of misery and terror" the day after their marriage, but she is killed by the creature on their wedding night. On the stage, though, we get watch Elizabeth absorb the news of Victor's abomination.

She waits alone in her wedding gown on her bridal bed while a paranoid and armed Victor leads a posse of men on a security sweep of the mansion. They are finally wed, but he still hardly speaks to her, let alone touches her. Maybe tonight Victor, the 'genius,' will at long last seek a kind of carnal knowledge that cannot be had alone with a cadaver in a lab. But when he does arrive, he sits haggard at the end of the bed as if it were his desk. "I built a man!...I brought him to life!...I have lured him here," he says, looking over his shoulder.

Elizabeth is an amorous woman. Earlier, she had mounted Victor, insisting, "Show me how you'll give me children. Touch me. Feel my heat!" Unaroused, he refused, tossing her aside to finish packing his trunk to travel to Scotland to raise the dead. Elizabeth was left (in heat) for many months. Now he was back and rather than consummate he confesses! Her temperature rises to a mocking disdain: "You lured him to our wedding?! But, Victor, he wasn't on the guest list!" Jolly Abraham, playing Elizabeth, delivers just the right sneer. She laughs at the thought of his creature, "This is ridiculous...What is it, like a puppet?"

Victor mansplains to her (again) that he was conducting serious scientific work. She

wouldn't understand. He was trying to create life! Elizabeth retorts: "But if you wanted to create life, why not just give me a child?... That is how we create life, Victor – that is the usual way!" The conversation shows Victor in a new light. Not a master inventor. Not even a monster. Rather, a fool. The entire endeavor, all that suffering, was utter stupidity. He could have had life all along – life born of pleasure and ecstasy, of rose-tinged (not reeking) flesh. That idiot. Victor leaves to do one more security check. The creature then has his way with her on a stage that rotates just slowly enough to give you a glimpse of the vile act. "What is wrong with you men?" Those were some of Elizabeth's last words before the mortal scream.

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Frankenstein is often read as a tale about playing God, where God is understood in the Judeo-Christian sense as a creator and not, like Zeus, a procreator. The creator works alone to make something that was first an image in the mind: In the beginning was the *logos*. Procreation, by contrast, requires the coming together of male and female to give existence to another being not through conscious design but by simply being what we are. Like other animals, we are gendered and engendering beings. We make many things, but we don't 'make' humans. We have sex and, God willing, a being self-assembles in the dark through mute, exquisite mysteries and arrives as a gift. So, was Victor taking the place of God or of woman? Maybe it amounts to the same thing.

That bit about "gendered and engendering" comes from the philosopher-physician Leon Kass in his essay about human cloning titled "The Wisdom of Repugnance." Kass argues that we are justified to feel disgust at the prospect of cloning human beings, because it is an

affront to the natural order and a threat to the social institutions built atop that order. Clones, like the monster, are the product of asexual reproduction – which means they are without the usual kin. Born of isolation, rather than union, their origin compels an identity crisis: Who am I? You are a wretch, a manufactured product, not the fruit of the womb.

Elizabeth said that sex is the ‘usual’ way children are created, but she could just as well have said ‘natural.’ Indeed, the Greek word *physis*, often translated as ‘nature,’ refers precisely to the way living things have *in themselves* the source of their reproduction, growth, and development. Plant an acorn, Aristotle says, and an oak tree will sprout. Plant a seed, though, and a seed does not sprout. To know the biology of a thing—how it ‘usually’ unfolds—is to know its essence. When the essence is perverted, we should feel repugnance just as we do at any kind of pollution. Nature sets the proper boundaries.

This moral power of nature was waning in Shelley’s time. It diminished in proportion to the increase of the studies of physical power – lightning, Leyden jars, Voltaic piles, and most poignantly, electric eggs. Maybe the spark of life is something material, not divine. Darwin would soon deal a decisive blow to the connection between nature and morality. Evolution is the unfolding of blind forces...forces that we could harness for our own ends. There is no human nature. We are a process, a becoming. We are not a being with a particular form that we must obey. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the first to sniff out the consequences: this means anything goes. But “is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?” It is for Victor, who is left howling on the ice chasing his unnatural spawn, rather than lounging in the arms of his lover watching his natural children play.

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Repugnance. That is the world of the creature. At the opening of Dear’s play, we feel it too. But only for a moment. Then, we smile, because the creature is just a man-baby, taking delight in the simplest sounds – its own voice echoing in a metal bucket, the chirrup of the birds. Our heart aches when time and again it is greeted with shrieks of terror and revulsion, with violence and hatred. If only they got to know him like we do! They would see that he is good. But is he good “by nature” even though he is an artifice? Are we forced still to speak of some essence that predates the influences (nearly all corrupt and despicable) of society? His was not a blank slate that passively absorbed the evils of prejudice; it was already carved in the shape of beneficence and his conversion into a vengeful monster took a great deal of force to overcome the original pattern.

For all its strengths, Dear’s adaptation, which tells the story from the creature’s point of view, is also flawed. As Jill Lepore notes, the genius of Shelley’s book lies in the way she patiently “nudges readers’ sympathy...from Frankenstein to the creature.” There is a pilgrimage of moral imagination where we first inhabit the ‘usual’ mindset of the ‘normal’ person only to be wrenched into a realization that we were the bullies all along, that our ‘wisdom’ of repugnance was no more than chauvinism. In Dear’s version, though, we are thrust too quickly into our sympathies; they come too easily and as a result they do not transform us.

When Victor first meets his creature in the play, he replies in astonishment: “It speaks!” Kim Fischer plays the creature and has, by then, willed his character to life through the sheer force of facial expressions, grunts, and gesticulations. By degrees, we watch him transform as an

education in the humanities turns him into the animal who speaks. The creature, like Elizabeth, mocks, not the arrogance, but the stupidity of Victor: “Yes, Frankenstein. *It* speaks.” Duh. The emphasis is on the ‘it,’ because if ‘it’ speaks then ‘it’ can’t really be an ‘it’ now, can it? Dear’s De Lacey, the creature’s only true father figure, says that “no man is a monster.” An ‘it’ is a monster, but not a ‘he.’ To be without gender is, arguably, to be more radically ‘other’ than to be without name.

fictitious. And it is here that the creature founders. So, ‘it’ is a ‘he’ and he can speak, but is he really human if he has no mate?

His most ardent desire is to “excite the sympathy of some existing thing.” The creature’s request is for a companion “of the same species” where this is understood to be something other than ‘man.’ It must be “one as deformed and horrible as myself.” In sexual selection, animals often make vivid displays like the peacock’s feathers. The outward appearance signals the inward

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Even in our day, growing lists of gender inclusive pronouns do not include ‘it.’ “Zie speaks.” That would work too. Gender queering is just one sign of our times where authenticity has become the new natural law to fill the vacuum left by Darwin. Maybe there is no species essence, but each individual has an essence, their “true colors.” The more different you are, the better – it just means, in Natalie Merchant’s words, that you are “one of the wonders of God’s own creation” and the fates smiled at your cradle. But what if God didn’t create you and there was no cradle? No matter how different you appear, you are the same and, thus, deserving of equal dignity...as long as you came via cradle. Maybe nature still trumps nurture and still guides ethics.

This brings us to the question of engendering, as in begetting. Here is that ultimate source of belonging for which the creature pines. A species is often defined as a group of interbreeding individuals. It is a fuzzy boundary, as we know even from the history of our own species’ dalliances with Neanderthals. But fuzzy is not the same as

nature and the kind of complementarity it seeks. In the novel, the monster wears its hideousness like a peacock’s exhibition, looking in vain for a peahen. But Dear’s monster doesn’t look monstrous enough. Once again our sympathies come too easily, this time by virtue of the creature’s normal (natural?) proportions. Indeed, Fischer (the actor playing the creature) is shorter than Alex Organ, who plays Victor. Yet Shelley is at pains to stress the superhuman stature and physical abilities of the creature. Maybe that’s because he really is a different species and, even if people were nicer, he never would belong because he never could begat.

One of the winning traits of Dear’s creature is his aversion to contradictions. Twice he screams in exasperation: “I do not like inconsistent!” Sorry, but things just are so: you are both human and non-human, product and child.

Transhumanists talk about the next civil rights wave as one centered on “morphological freedom,” the ability to modify our bodies as we choose. Lizard scales, bird feathers, digital selves, you name

it. For this to be a right, the assumption is that looks and biological origins don't matter when it comes to carving out communities of belonging—that bird-man and lizard-man could both operate under the same constitution as, well, man-man. If this seems unlikely, then maybe we shouldn't embrace this 'right.' Do we have a right to undo the community of man? Maybe we should reject certain experiments in the way things are 'usually' done.

These, anyway are Victor's thoughts as he, this man-mother, agonizes through an unholy late-term abortion. The sun has set and it is too dark to continue work. Time to ponder (finally) about the meaning of it all. Eventually he is resolved and he dismembers the female mate for his creature even though she was nearly completely formed in his lab, that artificial womb. He did it, lest "a race of devils would be propagated on the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror." It is a decision that seals his miserable fate, but perhaps saves humankind.

Then again. Maybe that was a moment of cowardice and he should have pushed on. Shelley had three children die and she nearly bled out from a miscarriage. The precariousness of life—especially the life of little things ferried into being on the frail raft of sex—was abundantly clear to her. Earlier, we concluded that Victor was stupid. But no, he wasn't. He was after the ultimate prize: immortality. What if he could "renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption?" Shelley had a vision of reviving one of her dead babies by caressing her near the fire. What could be nobler than to make that kind of earthly resurrection possible? Wouldn't that be worth any price?

William Godwin, Shelley's father, was a critic of the way lords treated peasants like so

much fodder. He denounced feudalism as a "ferocious monster." But death is the ultimate tyrant. If rebellion against kings is legitimate, why not rebellion against mortality? The best part of Dear's play is hearing this question posed as it should be: as a mad, and maddening, scream in the dark.

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Victor gets a bad rap for being selfish. We are told with a moralist's wagging finger that he was driven by arrogance and hubris. But what's wrong with scientists acting selfishly? Knowledge is good. Curiosity is a virtue. Our reigning myth about science, that "endless frontier," is the same as Vannevar Bush put it in the document that launched the National Science Foundation: "Scientific progress on a broad front results from the free play of free intellects, working on subjects of their own choice, in the manner dictated by their curiosity for exploration of the unknown." Note well: *Their own choice*. And if science progresses, society progresses. It is the same logic of capitalism: the sum of individually selfish acts equals the greater good.

This, at any rate, is the default mentality of most aspiring young scientists and engineers. That would mean that they are accountable only to their peers – if fellow scientists say their work is good science, then *ipso facto* it is good for society. But is that equation sound? Might the scope of scientists' responsibility be wider than that, and could *Frankenstein* be a lever for elevating their ethical consciousness? That's the question animating another adaptation of the novel, this one in the form of a new edition published by MIT Press and annotated for scientists and engineers. The volume, edited by David Guston, Ed Finn, and Jason Scott Robert, is just one offspring from the Arizona State University *Frankenstein* Bicentennial Project. It features hundreds of annotations, seven

short original essays, as well as dozens of references and discussion questions.

The introduction, written by the late Shelley scholar Charles Robinson, cuts to the quick: this is a novel about the dangers inherent in seeking knowledge. But not just the dangers. Early in the novel, the creature finds a fire and learns the hard way that it can produce both the pleasure of warmth and the pain of a burn: “How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!” Nowadays this is called creative destruction. The good and the bad are all tangled up in moral monstrosities.

That means that the moralist’s simple conclusion (don’t make monsters!) can’t be the whole story. Look, Victor was trying to conquer death. That’s a tough thing to do. Failure in the short term is unavoidable. There is no way to know, *in advance*, how different approaches to that challenge will pan out. If we knew in advance, then we wouldn’t have to do the research! Unintended consequences are inevitable, because we cannot possibly foresee the myriad impacts and behaviors of our creations.

The creature was a pilot study, a phase one clinical trial. Yes, things went horribly wrong. Oh, but think of all that we learned as a result! That means next time we are more likely to succeed. Here is just one of many spots where the annotations in the MIT volume invite us into a deeper understanding. In one of his own notes, Guston flags a quote from Victor: “The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind.” The key word is *ultimately*. Scientific progress is a contact sport: no pain, no gain. But if you take the long view, the gain always outweighs the pain. Or as Guston puts it, there is a “presumed certainty” that the outcome will be a net positive.

Taking the long view, though, means extended responsibility. As several contributors to the MIT volume suggest, Victor’s fault wasn’t in creating the monster, but abandoning it. Reckless abandonment: that’s the real problem with science and technology. Bruno Latour, a leading intellectual in the field of science studies like those behind the MIT volume, put it this way: “Which God and which Creation should we be for, knowing that, contrary to Dr. Frankenstein, we cannot suddenly stop being involved and ‘go home?’” Scientists and engineers are not mistaken in the quest to play God. They just have a flawed notion of what this means. It doesn’t mean distance, independence, and aloof detachment. Rather, it means being involved, entangled, fixing, fretting, and caring. Especially caring. “Love your monsters!” Latour commands.

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How do you love your monsters? Let’s say your monster is a machine learning program that some troll used to make it look like President Trump just declared a war that he, in fact, did not declare. Welcome to our future of “deep fakes” brought to you by...Science! If it is not entirely the troll’s fault (i.e., the user’s fault) but morally implicates the creator, then how far back does culpability go? After all, you only made that one program and to do so, you relied on work done by others, who in turn relied on previous work, and so on back through Faraday and Newton.

This leads to what the philosopher Stanley Rosen called “the ultimate absurdity of the attack against the Enlightenment.” All aspects of science, he writes, “may lead to the destruction of the human race.” No one will quibble with the wisdom of trying to prevent, say, nuclear holocaust, but “not many are prepared to admit that the only secure way in which to protect ourselves

against science is to abolish it entirely.” I think of Victor on that fevered, futile quest to safeguard his home on his wedding night. Burn the house down! That’s the only way to be sure. Rosen draws the same conclusion: to really be safe from knowledge and its consequences, we must kill all the children, because we cannot predict who might produce an idea that spells our ultimate doom. Now there’s your sequel to *Frankenstein*!

This, as noted, is absurd. But arguably our culture’s wholesale embrace of research and development (to the tune of \$500 billion annually in the U.S.) is equally absurd. As if someone isn’t going to, say, unleash a novel virus, tip the climate into chaos, or juice up a malevolent AI. Ah, but we have faith in progress. I guess we won’t really know if this is an absurdity until things go boom. At which point, of course, it will be too late.

In one of the essays at the end of the MIT volume, science fiction author Cory Doctorow notes that we don’t have complete freedom of choice in using technologies. We don’t *choose* e-mail in any robust sense of that term. Yet when it comes to making new technologies, he says to the aspiring scientist or engineer, “That’s up to you.” I disagree. The creator, like the user, is constrained by the imperatives of the system. Funding comes from agencies or corporations with their own agendas. Promotions come from publications. The age of Victor—of the natural philosopher toiling alone—is over. Creations arise from the complex interworking of vast assemblages of “knowledge workers.” Even the makers of the machine are cogs in the machine.

The term for this is Big Science and it muddies the ethical waters. In *Frankenstein*, the chain of responsibility is linear and points back from the dead Elizabeth to Victor’s lab. But now knowledge is hivelike.

It’s specialized and distributed across networks. No one is really in control and there is no pinch point (like Victor’s lab) where we could just turn off a potentially dangerous development. No one really knows how to make any modern artifact. It takes thousands of specialists each doing a tiny part. When causal chains of responsibility get complex so do the moral chains. When the technological apocalypse comes and some future historian asks “Who did this?” the answer won’t be “Victor” or anyone else. It will be no one. The Great No One.

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So, is this nineteenth-century tale too antiquated to teach us about the twenty-first century? Victor’s creature was an outsider living on the edges of the social world. It was never enrolled, recruited, or folded into things. Our technological monsters, by contrast, are woven into the fabric of life. Victor’s creature was never commercialized or used. Rather, it was shunned and detested. Our technologies, by contrast, are embraced even to the point where they become (gasp!) *needs*. We depend on them. Oh, foul e-mail...demon! Then again, the end result is the same in the novel and in our lives: the creature conceived as slave turns out to be master. Doesn’t the internet also drag us across an endless frozen expanse in some futile hunt?

All right, maybe Shelley’s monster still resonates, but what about her morality? Victor was no hero, to be sure. But he’s not necessarily a villain either. He didn’t intend harm, and once he realized what he had done he felt remorse and, in true romantic form, he devoted his life to the dogged pursuit of his monster. Of course, once the genie was out of the bottle it proved to be too late. But at least Victor tried—indeed, he literally went to the ends of the earth to carry out his obligatory chase. In this way, the novel is soaked in the ethos of

romanticism with all its passion, earnestness, and, yes, care.

Is that our ethos, though? Don't we slouch about in sweat pants, supping listlessly from the teat of mass culture, giving a 'meh' to the universe? *Frankenstein* is a cautionary tale about thoughtlessness. That's obviously still a relevant message. But our bigger problem might just be carelessness. Remember that our act of theomimesis—becoming God—hinges on our capacity for care. I worry that when Stephen K. Bannon chose the honey badger as the symbol of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, he didn't just label his candidate, he pegged our zeitgeist. The honey badger is that cobra-comping, chaos-generating animal that, as a 2011 YouTube video put it, "just doesn't give a shit." Honey badger don't care.

firewood chopped and bundled just in time for the coming winter. It is a gift from the creature, but they don't know that. "Who did this?" Agatha asks. Felix guesses it was the handiwork of "Faerie folk...elves and sprites!" He tries praying to them. Agatha, though, will have none of it: "There's no on there, you fool. It's just us." Presto! They forget the miracle, chalking it up to their own agency. Yeah, we did that. It's the pathology of the libertarian mindset in a technological culture. Though we are obviously dependent on invisible, inscrutable forces to provide our way of life, we keep telling ourselves we are free, autonomous, and independent. It's just me. It's all about me!

Try this out for the next adaptation of the novel. Imagine if Victor never gave another thought to his monster once it was

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Being *Frankenstein* is about making something without thinking about the consequences. Being a honey badger (like being a spoiled brat) is about taking whatever you want, consequences be damned. It's grabbing crotches and bragging about it. Our techno-bubbles shield us from the consequences of our actions. We are anonymized and in turn disinhibited. We fill up the car but don't see the refinery, we buy the cellophane-wrapped meat but don't see the slaughterhouse. The violent spawn of our activities are far off and hidden behind layers of mediation. As a result, we act like they don't exist at all.

There is a scene in the play where the cottagers Felix and Agatha discover a pile of

created. After the murder of his brother, he just shrugs rather than hikes into the mountains to find and bargain with his creature. Or imagine if Victor visited the murder scenes left behind by his monster only to point out the circumstantial nature of the case. Is there actual video footage of the killings? Even if there was, who can trust video nowadays in the age of, you guessed it, deep fakes? Seeing is disbelieving. Then imagine him smugly dismissing the whole thing as a hoax or as fake news.

That's not how the novel went, but that's our reality. The biologist Stephen Jay Gould said that the moral of *Frankenstein* is that the makers of monsters must educate

others to accept them. Sure, that's precisely what the tobacco and fossil fuel industries do. And now that Scott Pruitt is in charge of the EPA we are learning how to accept all sorts of misunderstood chemicals, especially the unfairly maligned CO₂, which is just trying to green the planet! For all the dark magic of her novel, Shelley still assumed a reality principle that we can no longer take for granted. Victor's monster was out of control, to be sure, yet at least that was plain to see. Now, though? Who knows and, really, who cares?

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich recently said that government needs "to move at the pace of technology, not the pace of bureaucracy." As if technology, that hyperactive child, was setting a sane pace. And as if bureaucracy was not the wicked progeny of technology—there to manage the complexities introduced by our modern 'conveniences.' If bureaucracies, like Victor,

also treat us as nameless, it is only because the machine told them to do it. I'll take a government that moves at the speed of care and contemplation. And may our scientists and engineers also find this rhythm in their work. The annotations in the MIT Press edition of *Frankenstein* have the effect of slowing things down. I applaud this pouring of sand in the tank. May it succeed, whether that is the intended consequence or not. **A**

Frankenstein, by Nick Dear, from the novel by Mary Shelley. Directed by Joel Ferrell. Kalita Humphreys Theater, Dallas, Feb. 2 to Mar. 4, 2018.

Frankenstein Annotated for Scientists, Engineers and Creators of All Kinds. By Mary Shelley, edited by David H. Guston, Ed Finn and Jason Scott Robert. Introduction by Charles E. Robinson. MIT Press, 320pp., \$20 paper.