

Our Material Selves: Imago and Social Exchange in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Renee Harris, University of Kansas

Denying the unsavory facts of the processes of production, commodity form strives to veil the history of the product's manufacture under a façade of completeness that makes the commodity appear as though it came into being perfectly whole. The commodity form proves a bourgeois means of "healing" what Marx believed a bifurcated society of property owners and propertyless workers. Citing Marx on this societal split, Franco Moretti writes, "the literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society, and out of the desire to heal it" (83). In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the split society reveals itself in the fragmented body of the monster, where his otherness and the impossibility of his assimilation into human society spring directly from his obvious materiality. The monster's constructedness, the veins visible through his patchwork skin, the thin, straight black lips are at once wonderful and terrifying to those who look upon him. These features call attention to the very constructedness of the onlooker.

The bourgeois gaze wishes to behold the human body, as it does the societal body, as whole, contained and controllable, and thus humans have repressed the fact of their own fragmented, machine-like, assembled bodies. Just as the sight of the disabled body calls attention to the fragmented nature of human bodies held together underneath a façade of wholeness (skin), the sight of the monster is uncanny in so far as it externalizes the internal—he reveals the truth of the material self. In an often-cited essay on the novel, Elsie Michie concludes, "Shelley's novel thus suggests that the ultimate

HR

The Humanities Review
Volume 11, Issue 1
Spring 2013 pp. 104-113.
St. John's University

Renee Harris
is a doctoral candidate
in nineteenth-century
British literature at the
University of Kansas. She
is specifically interested
in interdisciplinary
approaches to Romantic
poetry, particularly in
examining literature
through the lenses of
economics and gender
studies. She also has an
interest in the treatment
of the grotesque body
and the metaphorical
connections between
these bodies and
the uncontainable
abstract marketplace of
capitalism.

nineteenth-century self-alienation arises not from production itself but from the denial of the materiality of that process" (93). Drawing on Marxism and disability theory, I will show how *Frankenstein* presents a cultural model for the failure of the bourgeois impulse in its attempts to veil the monstrous and unsavory bifurcation of society. Indeed, a product's making (the factory in which it is made and the propertyless workers who assemble the commodity piece-by-piece) creeps to the surface of culture, peeks through the skin of our monsters and through the very curtains of our bedchambers.

Written in the wake of the French Revolution (three years after Napoleon's surrender in 1815) and in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, *Frankenstein* bears the mark of its social, political, and historical contexts. Yet the text challenges the very nature of the human body, and so occasions the novel's widespread and lasting appeal. Both the French and Industrial Revolutions were movements engendered by notions of eighteenth-century progress and advances in reason, and the novel plays with the implications of improving upon the human being. Issues with technology, science, romantic aspiration, and social justice all find homes in the composite body of Frankenstein's monster. Over the course of the novel, the ways Shelley problematizes such advances in human thought call into question the definition of humanity and the human. Tied up in all these challenges, we find the issue of embodiment. And ultimately in a post-Enlightenment Europe, the monster finds that intellectual capacity is not an unconditional signifier of membership in the human species. No matter the historical and individual progress of human thought, the body proves an inescapable reality that determines social participation.

Mass production ensures that copies of individual products look the same. Indeed, the abled human body is like a manufactured good: its function in an industrial capitalist society, its ability to work the assembly line, marks it human. But what of the disabled body—a disruption in the visual field, as Lennard Davis notes in his book *Enforcing Normalcy* (129)? What happens when there is a disruption of that parade of mass-produced human commodities? David Collings joins Davis in comparing the encounter of human beings and the monster in *Frankenstein* to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. Collings writes:

In the novel's normative relations, one bestows a human status on another by recognizing that other as human and receives a like status in return. This fundamental relation...takes place on the visual or imaginary level, in a prelinguistic mode of symbolic exchange, the substitution of a visual image for a literal corporeality and the exchange of this fiction between mutually constituting individuals. (209-210)

This exchange of fictitious symbolic images, in fact, *mirrors* the economic processes described above, where a symbolic commodity form—a fiction of wholeness and origin-less existence—presupposes successful exchange. Thus finding parallels in social and economic exchanges, we can better understand why

the vision of a monstrous body engenders such visceral reactions that ultimately deny the creature's humanity, which could easily be accepted as truth if one were to simply close one's eyes.

Lacan's mirror stage marks a human's very first introduction to a pre-linguistic symbolic order. The infant sees her reflection for the first time and dons the image of the self as whole and contained. Lacan reads this moment as a misrecognition because her bodily experience to this point has been one of fragmentation, that of the *corps morcelé*. She sees herself as whole and subsequently substitutes the *imago* (the translated image of wholeness) for her *corps morcelé*. Therefore, I argue, the *imago* serves as commodity form for the infant as it will for others she encounters in future social exchange. This façade of wholeness covers over the repressed truth of a fragmented body. The abled body symbolized in the mirror image provides a specular unity, an image of wholeness that the infant learns will effectively cover over any disjunction she feels. Lacan writes that the end of the mirror-phase inaugurates the social dialectic. The mirror is replaced with another human being, and we find we are perhaps overinvested in visual recognition. The social exchange presupposes that the body in front of us is substitutable with our own—another *imago* like all other human bodies. Indeed our social identity depends upon our identification with our fellow's *imago*, a recognition of our similarity, and when that recognition is inexact—or perhaps too exact—we have a physical response of abjection. We reassert our bodily boundaries in the act of rejecting the Other.

Davis complicates Lacan's mirror stage of a complete and implicitly abled body with a mirror stage involving the disabled body. If indeed the mirror stage is misrecognition, then "the disabled Body is a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body. The disabled body causes a kind of hallucination of the mirror phase gone wrong. The subject looks at the disabled body and has a moment of cognitive dissonance, or should we say a moment of cognitive resonance with the earlier state of fragmentation" (Davis 139). Extending Davis's logic, a mirror stage for a disabled body generates no symbolism. There is little space between a signifier (the *imago*) and its signified (the human bodily experience). The body's outward image translates the internal experience of the body's disjunction.

Frankenstein's monster is all biology and all materiality.¹ Like the disabled body, there can be no distance between what his outward form conveys and what he is—fragmented. Yes, the monster is horrifyingly composite, and, yes, he evokes the fragmented body that is repressed by all humans who assume the commodity form *imago* of wholeness. But what is more terrifying even than a forced acknowledgement of human fragmentation is the implication of constructedness. The monster is horrifying because his composite body makes his inner-workings all too visible. His interior is exterior enough to be recognizable as inner-workings. His production—not only his product form—is on the surface, and so his commodity

form is faulty—revealing the history of his manufacture.²

Frankenstein's monster is a disruption in the visual field: he is clearly differently embodied than most of the human species. And in my own reading, the monster is the failed commodity that vexes the enlightened bourgeois gaze. Ultimately, the monster's body cannot signify human because he collapses the differentiation between outward image and inner, natural, material workings. He exposes what Enlightenment rationality is not prepared to see and that which the human *imago* serves to cover over, that which commodity form is intended to disguise. He is obviously not without origin. Victor describes the uncanny desire and horror contained in that specular moment of beholding the monster:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 60)

Indeed, what is particularly revealing in the passage above is the fact that, as Victor looks upon his product, he is reminded of its production process. Victor designed the monster to be a beautiful product, with lustrous hair, beautiful features, and pearly white teeth.³ Victor remembers how he carefully selected the pieces to assemble, so how is it that the monster appears a hodge-podge of mismatched parts?

The monster's eyes seem the feature most horrific to Victor, and these shift Victor from claiming the product of his toil as beautiful into understanding the product of his toil as a catastrophe. The eyes suggest the monster's animation—they are the organs through which he looks back at Victor. Apparently, the eyes match too well with the skin. They are almost the same dun white color as the sockets in which they have been placed. Yet, there must be more to these eyes than a simple design flaw. In her dream, recorded in the "Introduction" to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley envisions the "yellow, watery, but speculative eyes" of a monster, peering through his creator's bed curtains (24). The eyes are speculative: they indicate human reason, inquiry, and enlightenment. They present the problem of the monster's membership into the human race, and from an economic reading of the term "speculative," the eyes indicate the monster's rightful participation in exchange. The speculative eyes suggest he has the capability to participate socially and economically in human community like a "normally" embodied person. But he's a product. The normally embodied can see the fact through his skin, and so consumers reject him.

In his own mirror stage, the monster catches a glimpse of his reflection in a pool of water. Seeing his own fragmented embodiment, and comparing his own image to that of the De Lacey family he has been observing, the monster fully recognizes his “deformity.” He explains, “but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror” and he eventually, “became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am” (104). Desperately craving community with fellow creatures, the monster seeks to humanize himself by acquiring language. Gayatri Spivak focuses on the monster’s attempts to learn to be human via “histories.” Reading *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and Volney’s *Ruins of Empire* properly acculturates the monster⁴ (257). Thus he learns European culture and history, and, in so doing, he gains a devastating self-awareness. These texts continue unraveling his self-concept as potentially human, and as a result of this education, he experiences an epiphany about his role in human economy and relations. The monster explains:

The words induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possession most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these advantages; but, without either, he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few! And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man...When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (Shelley 109)

The monster’s grief is palpable. He is alienated from human society because of an imperfect embodiment. When he looks for other persons in whom he could identify a familiar form, he sees none like himself. The grief evident in this passage is entirely relational, seeming to spring from his isolation. Significantly, the monster describes his isolated existence in socio-economic terms. As imperfect, he has been “disowned” from social and economic exchange. No one wants to take possession of him. Moreover, he cannot pinpoint his identity because he has no possessions: no connections, no money, no property. He has no human origin and no societal origin with which to identify, for he has been artificially manufactured in a workshop, and thus he asks not “who was I?” but instead asks, “what was I?”

While the monster cannot be humanized through a liberal education, the novel’s female Others can be made into perfect female commodities to be traded to their respective male buyers (Felix and Victor) on the marriage market because

they are embodied in a desirable form. Safie, an Eastern Other, undergoes a similar acculturation to the monster, being familiarized with European literacy in order to be properly civilized, and arguably humanized. The Turkish woman is “Arabian” and, thereby, according to the hegemonic culture, less human than her soon-to-be husband, Felix (Shelley 107). The monster describes her: “a countenance of angelic beauty and expression. Her hair of a shining raven black, and curiously braided; her eyes were dark, but gentle, although animated; her features of a regular proportion, and her complexion wondrously fair, each cheek tinged with a lovely pink” (106). Significantly, she receives attention to the same body parts that we get from Victor’s description of the monster. She, too, is perfectly proportioned, and she has lustrous black hair. However, her skin is fair, not yellowed. Her dark eyes are not watery, but rather, they are gentle and animated. Her embodiment seems perfectly normal and, even more importantly, perfectly beautiful. Spivak writes that in the monster’s French language education alongside Safie, “Shelley differentiates the Other, works at the Caliban/Ariel distinction, and cannot make the monster identical with the proper recipient of these lessons” (257-258). Indeed, the comparison to Caliban and Ariel of *The Tempest* makes readily apparent the discrepancy in these two students: monstrous versus beautiful embodiment. Safie is a racial other, but she can be transformed into the ideal human representative via the proper education and male desire (or rather, market demand). The monster cannot. Ultimately, Safie has sexual exchange value that bodes well for her receipt of human status. And though an Arab accent might tinge Safie’s French and initially betray her as a manufactured European, accents can be wrung out through appropriate dictation lessons, and Safie can enter into exchange both social and economic.

Like Safie, Elizabeth displays beautiful embodiment that presupposes her successful participation in social exchange. Recalling his first vision of her striking form, Victor dotes upon her angelic disposition, “her hair was the brightest living gold, and, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head. Her brow was clear and ample, her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness.” Again, we are to focus on her bright gold hair, her clear eyes, and her sweet lips. Again, we are to observe the harmony of her features and the completeness of her beauty. In fact, here Victor misrecognizes her as a “distinct species,” a comment that seems to heighten her desirability rather than inspire abjection. Her desirability, her market value, remains in place, however, because her image still reflects a commodity form. She is “a being heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features”—she is a perfect product, sealed in divine approval and sent to earth for circulation (Shelley 43). And if Elizabeth is not perfect already, like Safie, she receives a cultural education to further enhance her desirability, to produce her as a seamlessly perfect potential wife, “a pretty present” for the first son of a former syndic (43-44). Of noble Milanese and German heritage, Elizabeth is not entirely strange. Her

nobility predicts her easy ascension from an impoverished Italian foster home into a former German syndic's family. She is traded to the Frankenstein family: her care is exchanged for her use value as the daughter/daughter-in-law for whom Victor's mother had longed. "Taught" to call her new benefactors "uncle and cousins," Elizabeth's life is spent as the family's "shrine-dedicated lamp," and "her smile, her soft voice, the sweet glance of her celestial eyes, were there to bless and animate" the Frankenstein household (50, 45). Arguably she is little more than learned ideal femininity packaged in a beautiful body.

Unlike language and cultural knowledge, embodiment in the nineteenth-century cannot be so easily changed to reflect a human in the mirror. Though Safie and Elizabeth are imperfect humans (non-European or uncultured), they can yet be saved and humanized because of their beautiful embodiment and sexual appeal. The monster remains an outcast from membership into the human community. As Maureen McLane observes, "acquisition of 'literary refinement' fails to humanize the problematic body" (84). No matter his eloquence and intelligence, his body will always remind its viewer of his construction. But the female Others are beautiful and exotic. They can be desired, and while the monster might engender curiosity and intrigue, no one wants him. As Davis explains, "rather than seeing the object of desire, as controlled by the [gaze], the subject sees the true self of the fragmented body" (139). Safie and Elizabeth are reflections of the controlled *imago*—the object of desire, but no one is buying the monster as a desirable human companion or even acquaintance.

One monstrous body remains to be addressed. The constructedness of the text itself peeks through its presumably stable commodity form of "novel." Of course, the text is inherently unstable as it bears multiple frames and multiple narrators. In the 1831 "Introduction," Shelley toys with the idea that galvanism suggests "a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth" (23). Perhaps this too is the history of her text's monstrous body. This amalgamation of materials comes together in the commodity form of a novel. Shelley writes that her publishers wished access into the "origin of the story" (19). Using rhetoric of the disabled body and of economic production, she expresses concern that the introduction would be little more than an "appendage" to the earlier "production" (19). Nevertheless, she traces a history of her literary career that led up to the production of her ghost story in the Swiss Alps in 1816. Writing of her childhood literary ventures, she says "it was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered" (21). She writes of the "machinery of a story," and her husband's penchant "to embody ideas and sentiments" in literary products (22). Likewise, *Frankenstein's* process of production bears the rhetoric of childbirth and reproduction—very material and embodied production. She writes that the novel is an amalgamation of materials emerging from chaos:

"invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it" (23). Finally, she says she wished to construct a story "which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature," and the frightful human endeavor "to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world" (23, 24). Her goal seems thus to uncover the truth of fragmented, constructed human self.

The innermost narrator of this monstrous text is the monster himself, and at the very center of his narrative (and all the narrative frames by extension) stands the disabled body of the blind De Lacey patriarch. The De Lacey family is recognizably suffering from economic hardship, "in the midst of poverty and want" (Shelley 104). The monster observes the "distressing degree" of poverty under which they suffer, often enduring the "pangs of hunger very poignantly" (102). Moreover, as the patriarch of the clan is a disabled, non-standard body, we see that echo of the split society in his deformed body, inscribed by a turn in his family's socio-economic situation. The De Lacey's prove an inspirational case study of the endurance of the suffering classes, however. The monster notes their amiableness and the joy with which Felix presents a humble flower to his sister as a token of his love (he picks the flower while walking from work at a neighboring farm) (104). Likewise, the De Lacey's spirits are greatly improved with the arrival of the beloved Safie. Therefore, despite socio-economic circumstances that seem to damn the working classes, Shelley presents a seemingly optimistic tableau of domestic virtue and loving kinship, at least for intraspecies exchange.⁵

The world's imperfect commodities point to the fact of their manufacture. They point to the propertyless workers, who do not own land and, what's more, are not granted rights as human beings. And as we prefer to hide under the bourgeois image of economic success, the *imago* of the abled human body serves to cover over the true bodily experience of fragmentation just as the *imago* of a commodity form erases any history of the product's assemblage and the societal bifurcation the history indicates. Shelley believes the ultimate horror to be the recognition that human beings are fashioned by the hand of God and are ultimately little more than mechanisms hidden under a façade of skin. Indeed, the ultimate horror appears to be identification of the external veneer that covers over the truth of internal fragmentation and manufacture. Moretti writes: "the monster makes us realize how hard it was for the dominant classes to resign themselves to the idea that all human beings are—or ought to be—equal" (87). Indeed, recognizable at the heart of Shelley's constructed text are the realized facts of this societal split, and the truth of a split society is that some are refused admission into the human species because the abled gaze inscribes them, reproducing them as monstrous. Throughout the text, the creature continues to be constructed as monstrous Other by the abled gaze. The act of rejecting the monstrous body, the visceral response to beholding the non-normative body reifies the boundary between human and

non-human commodity form. What is socially accepted as human signifies closely enough with that ideal form presented in the infant's mirror. What does not signify, that which betrays its manufactured status, must be expelled from the clean, bourgeois conception of human. In describing his plight to the De Lacey patriarch, the monster mourns, "a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster" (120). If human beings could look upon his constructed materiality and accept their own statuses as fragmented bodies, if we could see that we all are already fragmented bodies, the monster would not experience any difficulty entering into social and economic exchange. However, human eyes are clouded, presumably by the hallucination of a human *imago*—the whole and contained human body reflected in the mirror.

Notes

1. Paul Outka very appropriately terms this phenomenon the "organic sublime," the moment when "subjectivity and materiality are fused" (37). This moment leads to a recognition that we have always been upon the edge of this collapse into nature. To bring back Davis, the encounter with the "organic sublime" of the monster (as a disabled body—Outka also makes this Davis connection) serves as "the reminder of the whole body about to come apart at the seams" (Davis 132).
2. Remarkably, Lacan uses this same language of production to describe the imago's functional capacity. He writes: "the mirror-phase is a drama whose internal impulse rushes from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, captive to the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality which we shall call orthopedic—and to the assumptions, finally, of the armour of an alienating identity, which will stamp with the rigidity of its structure the whole of the subject's mental development."
3. Speaking to the uncanny nature of the monster's appearance, Michie writes, "the creature is ugly or horrifying because it does not represent a smooth surface but is clearly fissured, showing the sutures that join it together as an assemblage of heterogeneous parts. The creature is also monstrous because the machinery that makes it run is too close to the surface and therefore too easily seen" (96).
4. Interestingly, Spivak notes that Volney's Ruins of Empire are written "from below" and were said to have prefigured the French Revolution. Spivak explains that Ruins was understood to be an "attempt at an enlightened universal secular" (257). Likewise, Elsie Michie famously argues that Shelley's novel replaces stories of creation with

stories of production. Finally, Helena Feder concludes that the monster's belief of his monstrosity arises not from learning that he was manufactured in a laboratory, but his self-conception becomes solidified "when he discovers from what and into what he has been made: the past and present of Western culture" (Feder 59).

5. Of course, the central trauma of the novel is the De Lacey family's rejection of the monster when he seeks their protection. Admittedly, Shelley does not provide a perfectly optimistic picture by any means.

Works Cited

- Collings, David. "Monstrous 'Man': Impasses of Social Mastery in *Frankenstein*." *Monstrous Society: Reciprocity, Discipline, and the Political Uncanny*, c. 1780-1848. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2009. Print. 193-221.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995. Print.
- Feder, Helena. "A blot upon the earth': Nature's 'Negative' and the Production of Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*." *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 2:1. (2010). Web. 15 March 2012. 55-66.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I." *Mapping Ideology*. ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 1994. Print. 93-99.
- McLane, Maureen N. "Literate Species: Population, 'Humanities,' and the Specific Failure of Literature in *Frankenstein*." *Romanticism & the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population & the Discourse of the Species*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000. 84-108. ebrary. Web. 27 April 2012.
- Michie, Elsie B. "Frankenstein and Marx's Theories of Alienated Labor." *Approaches to Teaching Shelley's Frankenstein*. Stephen C. Behrendt, ed. New York: MLA, 1990. Print. 93-98.
- Morretti, Franco. "Dialectic of Fear." *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. London: Verso, 1983. Print. 83-108.
- Outka, Paul. "Posthuman/Postnatural: Ecocriticism and the Sublime in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century: Science, History, Scale*. Stephanie Lemenager, Ken Hiltner, and Teresa Shewry, eds. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print. 31-48.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, 1831 edition. Boston: Bedford, 2000. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, 12:1 (Autumn, 1985). JSTOR. Web. 28 April 2012. 243-261.