I. Introduction

As the story of a living being created not by conventional reproductive means but by scientific endeavour, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* stands as one of the quintessential representations of the fears and hopes engendered by science and technology. Conceived, remarkably, when its author was only nineteen years old, the novella went through numerous editions between 1818 and 1831, was first adapted for the stage in London in 1823 and spawned numerous film versions, beginning with a silent version in 1910. *Frankenstein* circulates through our collective cultural imagination as a hybrid and composite creation of disparate and sometimes contradictory fragments and interpretations. Like the creature at its heart, the legacy of *Frankenstein* comes to us as a pastiche of many parts; but it is also more than the sum of these parts. Its transformation from Gothic novella into cultural icon via many subsequent adaptations and interpretations has guaranteed it a central place in global culture, and has led to many characterising the work as a ‘modern myth’.

The purpose of my lecture today is to look behind that enduring influence and to consider how ‘Frankensteinian’ imagery and associations have shaped our collective consciousness. What does it mean to re-member Frankenstein – both in terms of tracing its historical evolution, but also to dismantle and reassemble its constituent parts and themes? And in particular, what are
we committing ourselves to when we identify *Frankenstein* as a ‘modern myth’? What are we saying about its enduring power, not only to articulate fundamental human concerns, but also perhaps to shape and direct them? Does the ‘myth’ of Frankenstein now exert too strong a power over us, distorting our perceptions of complex issues?

My contention is that academic enquiries within anthropology, the study of religion, literary and Biblical studies of myth can assist in an exploration of the workings of mythology and mythical discourse for shaping cultural understandings of science and technology. There is much to be learned from such scholarly disciplines: about the power of story-telling and myth-making, even in a supposedly secular age. But we may also have to do some ‘myth-busting’ in the name of myth itself: and ‘read against the grain’ of simplistic notions to reveal many more layers of enduring meaning. While *Frankenstein* can, rightly, be conceived of as a modern myth – about human power in relation to nature and technologies, which over the past thirty years in the West that has come to mean research in the biological sciences, on areas of assisted reproduction, cloning and genetic modification, in other words enquiry at the very frontiers of life itself – we may also consider it to be modern in another sense: as a humanist myth, exploring truths about what it means to be human, perhaps in the absence of the gods. In engaging with issues of responsibility, identity and belonging, it still has much to teach and challenge us about what it means to be human.
II.  *Stop worrying, Dr. Frankenstein: and other stories*

The two hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Frankenstein* has given rise to many commentaries and reappraisals, including within scientific literature. In fact, an entire edition of the journal *Science* in January this year was devoted to its legacy. ‘Frankenstein lives on!’ proclaimed the editorial, and this seemed to be the consensus. ‘The scientific literature, like the popular press, is rife with references to Frankenfood, Frankencells, and Frankendrugs — most of them supposedly monstrous creations. The novel offers grist for psychologists and science historians, and ammunition for technophobes.’ (Cohen, 2018, p. 148)

One such example within writing on science and technology ethics and law is an article published in 2016 by an American jurisprudence scholar, Adam Gross (2016). It concerns something called the CRISPR-Cas 9 process: CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) is a sequence of DNA and Cas9, an enzyme which uses the CRISPR sequence to edit genes in human organisms. The question for Gross is whether this technique of genetic modification should be subject to international legal controls. His title? ‘Dr. Frankenstein, or: How I
Learned to Stop Worrying and Love CRISPR-Cas9.’ Interestingly, he begins by arguing, ‘The concern of a lab created creature's exposure to the natural world wreaking havoc is not new’, but his conclusion is this: ‘There is no interest in an internationally binding treaty or convention among all of the necessary Parties … We have little choice but to trust CRISPR-Cas9 users and to know that the catastrophic, doomsday scenarios that occur in the imaginations of science fiction authors are so unlikely that they are nearly impossible.’

So Gross raises the spectre of mad scientists and creation out of control only to lay it to rest again … but it shows how evocative this cultural referent is – and its title overlays Frankenstein with another cultural trope, that of Stanley Kubrick’s film Dr Strangelove: or, how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb. Which I seem to remember didn’t end quite so well.

What’s going on here? Popular newspapers may not find that CRISPR-Cas9 makes for very arresting headlines, but another particular epithet has been adopted with great frequency in relation to contemporary debates about genetic modification and manipulation: that of ‘Frankenstein Food’ (Graham, 2002, pp. 13-14, 25-26; Grice, 2013). Clearly, one of the attractions of this term ‘Frankenstein Food’ for the headline writers must rest in its alliterative qualities. But if that were the only reason, then surely, terms such as ‘terrifying take-aways’ or ‘doomsday dinners’ would produce the desired effect!

No, there’s something deliberate going on here, which is attached to the power of that very name, ‘Frankenstein’, to evoke a set of desired reactions. To describe produce derived from
crops or as in a news story recently, bees that have been genetically altered to resist disease or enhance growth, clearly deploys a different representational strategy to the more neutral language of ‘genetically-modified’ or even ‘genetically-engineered’; for it intentionally stirs up associations with mad scientists, murderous creations and dangerous knowledge.

This illustrates perfectly the part played by narratives and metaphors in shaping popular feeling and public policy, and also testifies to *Frankenstein*’s extended after-life in continuing to mould the Western cultural imagination even after nearly two centuries. It is used to forge an elaborate set of associations between scientific experimentation and danger, doom, manipulation of the secrets of life and the abuse of power:

Stories of mad scientists, whether textual or cinematic, constitute an extremely effective anti-rationalist critique of science. They thrill their audiences by brewing together suspense, horror, violence, and heroism and by uniting those features under the premise that most scientists are dangerous (Toumey, 1992, p. 434).

Indeed, we may well consider Adam Gross’ article to be the latest in a long history of the strange union of the anti-hero of an English gothic novel and the mobilization of public opinion over scientific innovation. The historian of science Jon Turney has suggested that Mary Shelley’s novel and its later acolytes has persistently functioned as an enduring resource for popular understandings of scientific innovation in genetics and biomedical science, calling it ‘one of the most important myths of modernity ... the governing myth of modern biology.’(Turney, 1998, p. 3).

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Arguably, ever since antiquity, myth and narrative have considered questions of human knowledge and how learning could be used for good or evil. Tales of the Garden of Eden, Prometheus, Dr. Faustus, Pandora and the Jewish legend of the Golem all focus on the ambivalence of knowledge and the moral power, indeed, the power over life and death, that it brings. So *Frankenstein* is not alone in articulating some of those questions, but it is taken as representative, definitive, even, of public anxieties, as occupying a central place as the defining framework through which scientific innovation is considered.

In affording *Frankenstein* the status of myth, therefore, commentators converge around two key characteristics of Frankenstein as cultural phenomenon. Firstly, it is understood as a narrative that has evolved and changed, having been told and retold in many forms through many media. One does not need to be a literary purist to argue that the ‘Frankenstein’ invoked in contemporary news media is far removed from Mary Shelley’s original, which has become altered almost out of recognition by later renditions. It is impossible to answer the question, ‘What (or who, or where) is the real *Frankenstein*?’ For millions who have never read Shelley’s novel, it is likely that the most striking association they would have in response to the mention of ‘Frankenstein’ would be the following visual image:

*Boris Karloff as the ‘Monster’ 1931.*
Indeed, for many, this is the only version they do know, so compelling and iconic is Karloff’s portrayal, here taken from James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), that it has eclipsed all others. This image has also given rise to the common mistake of identifying the ‘monster’, and not its creator, as bearing the name of Frankenstein. ¹ So, arguably, it is Hollywood, supremely, that has been responsible for the infusion of *Frankenstein* into the Western bloodstream and to its status as a ‘modern myth’. It is cinema that has thoroughly popularized *Frankenstein* and in whose likeness its impact on the cultural imagination is experienced – as melodrama, horror or comic parody:


¹ The Manchester novelist Mrs Gaskell was possibly the first commentator to adopt the mistaken habit of referring to the creature and not Victor ‘Frankenstein’. Writing against the backdrop of social unrest and political agitation, Gaskell asks whether the actions of radicals such as the Chartist should be condemned when the extremities of poverty drive them to desperation. Some sections of the working classes may resort to opium, rather than communism; but they are not driven to such measures by innate vice, but by the severity of their deprivation. ‘The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil. The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with a mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?’ (Gaskell, 1970, pp. 219-220).
The original is left far behind as it evolves and mutates, and as successive accretions of meaning and association are added (Cutchins and Perry, 2018, pp. 1-16). We may need to disaggregate ‘Frankenstein’ the composite myth and talk about ‘Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, James Whale’s Frankenstein – even, as another Hollywood adaptation has done, ‘Kenneth Branagh’s Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”’ (1994).

So myth assumes a kind of state of itinerancy, cut loose from the moorings of one original, authentic version to circulate freely within the collective consciousness:

The truth of a myth ... is not to be established by authorising its earliest versions, but by considering all its versions. The vitality of myths lies precisely in their capacity for change, their adaptability and openness to new combinations of meaning. That series of adaptations, allusions, accretions, analogues, parodies and plain misreadings which follows up on Mary Shelley’s novel is not just a supplementary component of the myth: it is the myth. (Baldick, 1990, p.4)

In its power to evoke strong associations, then, even to shape and determine the direction of subsequent understandings of science, at least at a popular level, Frankenstein does seem to have taken on a life and potency that far surpasses its original qualities. And this takes us to its second quality. Myth is regarded as articulating powerful and enduring truths; its cultural significance lies in its capacity to function as guiding metaphor or cultural meme. As we have already begun to see, Frankenstein as myth furnishes Western culture with what Christoph Rehmann-Sutter terms ‘interpretative patterns’ (1996, p. 271) through which it makes sense

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2 A ‘meme’ is a virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea.
of scientific innovation. Those who participate in public or popular debate on scientific matters will use the narratives and archetypes of Frankenstein as ‘landscapes of fear’ which map out ‘expressions of a longstanding cultural ambivalence about science in which a general recognition of the power of science is accompanied by a persistent fear of the terrible consequences that follow when scientists’ obsessive, amoral curiosity leads them to trespass in forbidden areas of inquiry’ (Mulkay, 1996, p. 157-8).

So Frankenstein as modern myth gives voice to perennial cultural fears, adds new ingredients and nuances to adapt to changing circumstances, and circulates freely within the cultural imagination, borrowing from and contributing to seminal images and stories. This, I think, that’s behind its being characterized as ‘myth’: not only its continuing currency in popular culture, its many adaptations and imitators, but the sense in which it has become in some way foundational, that it has a definitive status, in relation to our understanding of science and the human condition.

It is notable, however, that even the most detailed discussion affords little space to a wider exploration into the nature of myth within human cultures and belief-systems such as may be found amongst historians of religion, theologians, anthropologists, literary theorists or Biblical scholars. I therefore want to move now to a consideration of this more specialist area in an attempt to gauge how this claim for Frankenstein to be a modern myth might actually withstand the scrutiny of such scholarship.
II. In the Beginning … was the Future

For scholars of religion, anthropology and literary theory, myth as a genre is endemic to culture, albeit of a different register to that of scientific rationalism. But far from being a fanciful tale arising from excesses of credulity – as its commonplace usage frequently suggests - myth is understood as a primal story that invites us to reach beyond its superficial appearance to deeper and enduring truths.

Plato was probably the first philosopher to differentiate between ‘mythos’ and ‘logos’: the former being fantastic or implausible fable, and the latter being propositional, rational statement. It sets up an unfortunate binary between ‘primitive’ and ‘advanced’, superstition and science, falsehood and truth (Armstrong, 2005).

Mistakenly, then, people associate myths with ‘widely shared beliefs that are simply false’ (McCutcheon, 2000, p. 190); or myths are considered to be pre-scientific fictional narratives constructed to explain natural phenomena. Both are essentially about myth as falsehood or substitute for ‘true’ knowledge. But both fallacies are ‘modern’ insofar as they assume that ‘truth’ equates with what is empirically verifiable, and everything else is mere illusion. The
story of the victory of logos over mythos is part and parcel to the birth of Western modernity and the rise of scientific method (Armstrong, 2005).

However, it would be misleading to think of myths merely as quaint tales about fantastic beings or some kind of pre-technological Game of Thrones, ‘the realm of imagination, the domain of centaurs, unicorns, and miracles.’ (Paden, 1994, p. 70) Myth is more than a pre-scientific account of the cosmos or fanciful stories about heroes or the outworking of psychological archetypes. It may be preferable to think of myth is heuristic rather than simply descriptive: it is a thing to think with, an invitation to consider the stories we live by. It serves to explain the world but also helps to structure, explain and govern it. Whereas the fairy story or folk tale begins, ‘Once upon a time’, the myth starts with ‘In the beginning’ (p. 72). It narrates prototypical events and characters and by so doing ‘names the ultimate powers that create, maintain, and re-create one’s life.’ (p. 73)

Myth, a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all the parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth expresses and confirms society’s religious values and norms, it provides patterns of behaviour to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult … In this way, too, the world order, which was created in primeval era and which is reflected in myths, preserves its value as an exemplar and model for people today.’ (Honko, 1984, p. 49)

Honko’s working definition contains a number of constituent elements:
• Gods
• Beginnings
• Creation of a universe
• Expressive of religious values and norms
• Related to cults and rites
• Order out of chaos
• Re-enacts a putative historical event in order to effect binding power now
• Primeval world order becomes exemplary

For Bronislaw Malinowski, myth is ‘not merely a story told, but a reality lived’, a sacred story that lives on in our imaginations to shape our conduct. (2014, p. 150) ‘Myth deals with the stuff of worlds. It grounds and elaborates in transhistorical images what is central to a world.’ (Paden, p. 83) Myth ‘gives an account of that on which the world is based. It names the powers and principles that create and govern the world.’ It ‘names the ultimate powers that create, maintain, and recreate one’s life’ (Paden, 1994, p. 73).

These definitions are concerned with the generative, organic nature of myth and its role in meaning-making and world-building. Myth invests the past with meaning for present and future.
Like nature, myth unfolds and realizes itself in various environments. It is seminal, alive, resourceful … It branches, recombines, subdivides … *Myths have careers …*

Myth represents a storehouse of images and archetypes that can be drawn on according to a community’s needs and according to diverse “readings” …

There is a certain paradox here. Myth – the eternal, fixed archetype [timeless] – turns out to be creative. It reveals an internal elasticity, a capacity to unfold new contents, a play of applicability. (Paden, 1994, pp. 90-91, my emphasis)

How do these ideas correspond with the rules-of-thumb developed by the *Frankenstein* scholars? Firstly, there is a match in terms of myth as multi-layered, porous and flexible. Purity, exclusive ownership and immutability are not its hallmarks. Myth is necessarily hybrid, vernacular and dynamic in quality.

Secondly, we can see that many scholars of myth concur with the binding and authoritative quality to myth. For the scholar of religion, myth is more than agreeable diversion or entertainment; it is the narrative embodiment of recurrent and generic preoccupations. Myth is thus a narrative by which a culture constitutes reality itself, a view advanced by William Paden when he argues that myths are integral to the process of what he terms ‘world-building, world-shaping’ (Paden, 1994, p. 69).³ Myths build worlds – not the physical worlds of villages, tools and skyscrapers, but worlds no less binding, of values, belief-systems and moral obligations, what Paden terms the ‘sacred words and models by which one lives’ (Paden, 1994, p. 69). Myth

³ Paden draws a distinction between myth and science: ‘Scientific discourse aspires to objectivity, about religious symbols are by nature participatory, enactive, involving’ (1994, p. 69). It should become clear that I regard scientific representations of the world as being as much narratives about origins, means and ends as religious myths. Both science and myth build representations of the world that are, albeit in different ways, binding and real. In its metaphors of naked ape, code of codes, survival of the fittest, or humans as machines, contemporary technoscience builds metaphysical or symbolic worlds of discursive meaning as well as those of tools and artefacts.
necessarily forges a link between the metaphysical and the material, for what is told as holding sway in the sacred become the stuff of which the social is made.

Scholars of religion would therefore seem to agree upon the binding nature of myth, of how it serves an exemplary function and embodies deeper moral obligations, occasioned by its power to constitute and order a world.

But it may be worth noting at this stage, that for some commentators, *Frankenstein* does not qualify as a myth, for myths are things that occur in oral, pre-literate cultures, and therefore lost to supposedly technological, text-based, ‘sophisticated’ cultures such as ours. The degree of mutability and elaboration that takes place in the telling and retelling of a myth in oral cultures cannot happen, it is argued, in the context of more tangible ‘texts’. Yet given the many permutations of Mary Shelley’s original that are in existence, we might well refute this – further questioning the model of myth as merely the superstitious, pre-scientific speculations of a so-called ‘primitive’ culture.

Similarly, *Frankenstein* may appear to depart from traditional myths in that it tells the tale of human endeavours, not those of the gods or even epic heroes. *Frankenstein* is every bit a product of its modern context, blending Romantic and Gothic genres in a reflection on the consequences of human technological power at the very moment in Western history when the industrial and scientific revolutions were gaining momentum. This sets it firmly as a secular, rationalist narrative without the comforts or sanctions of religion. Victor Frankenstein does not enter a Faustian pact with the Devil or battle with supernatural powers. His is rather the story of the fragility of the boundary between life and death and the dilemma of balancing ends over means in the satisfaction of human curiosity and creative brilliance. In this respect,
Victor is much closer to Everyman than to the gods, and is given entirely human motives and methods.

So *Frankenstein* is not explicitly about the gods. Might we also disqualify *Frankenstein* on the grounds that it gives no account of origins of the universe *per se*, an element central to much understanding of mythology? Well, we might identify compensating features; for whilst not a narrative of sacred origins, *Frankenstein* does address a perennial theme of human creativity through the device of the seeker-after-knowledge who wishes to unlock the secrets of life itself. In that respect, it touches, albeit at one remove, upon themes as foundational as the creation of the world by divine or supernatural powers.

Indeed, one of the freshest aspects of the origins of Mary Shelley’s original novel was this very synthesis of old and new. It emerged from a world in transition between enchantment and disenchantment. In identifying *Frankenstein* as the first great work of science fiction, critics grant the work a degree of novelty and originality, by virtue of its humanist, secular and scientific register. And it is this that marks it out as a modern myth; for no longer is this a fantastic narrative peopled by gods, devils and spirits; nor is it entirely a tale of magical powers and supernatural forces; nor is it set in antiquity or in the mists of time. It is a narrative born of that period of Western history that begins with the Scientific Revolution of C17th and matures with the Industrial and Democratic revolutions of the C19th. And unequivocally, it is also a myth *about* modernity – about the challenges to human identity, moral reasoning and the limits of scientific and social change in a world where humanity and not God is perceived as master and architect.
Even without an explicitly theological referent, then, this is still arguably a myth with enduring qualities that enable us today to explore fundamental and contentious issues. But is it a healthy myth; or is it being told in such a way as to attenuate our powers of reasoning and reflecting on the human condition? Does a myth ever become redundant, its power to make sense of the world for us clouded by changing circumstances; or even, perhaps, ossifying in meaning as to inhibit creative or critical engagement with the world?

The cultural critic and semiotician Roland Barthes argued that we can understand mythologies as investing a cultural phenomenon with sacred or divine authority in order to serve the values of an elite or sectional group within society (Coupe, 1997). This suggests, then that our approach to myth needs to consider the risks of myth as ideology – its use as a narrative that serves to enshrine and sanction powerful, vested interests. Myth becomes a way of stopping people asking too many questions. So perhaps every so often we need to read or tell a famous myth ‘against the grain’ as it were; and ask in particular what elements of an ancient narrative are being remembered and what is being forgotten, and whose interests are being privileged in the process.

Indeed, continued allusions to Frankenstein as a metaphor for ‘dangerous knowledge’ by those opposed to such scientific and technological advances has generated resentment within the scientific community, which has protested that this communicates an exaggerated and fictitious image of the actual research in question (Touney, 1992; Mulkay, 1996). This has led some commentators, Jon Turney especially, to argue that, however
evocative, the myth of *Frankenstein* has ceased to function creatively and now only serves to reify and distort public opinion:

We are never going to be rid of *Frankenstein*, even if we want to be. The story is too deeply embedded in our culture now not to leave its traces or raise echoes whenever we discuss our attitude to science and scientists. And as the products of biological manipulation become ubiquitous, there is every reason for the grip of the story to strengthen ... But if we have to accept that the old stories will stay alive, it is also surely time to recognise that their use is becoming more limited. If, in the past, they have most often functioned to symbolise or express ultimate consequences, there is now some truth in the suggestion that they hinder rather than help debate when we are confronted with the details of real, novel technologies ... *Frankenstein*, simply, tends to polarise a debate which we urgently need to take forward to a point where other answers, more complex than yes or no, are possible. (Turney, 1998, p. 220)

If the ubiquity of the Frankenstein myth is misleading, what are the prospects for shifting its cultural significance in a more critical direction? Perhaps the clue lies in the very heterogeneous and multiple qualities of myths themselves. I have already been arguing that myths are open to many levels of reinterpretation. Part of the power of ‘myth’, arguably, is this multiplicity of thematic and interpretative pathways; that it is not simply ‘about’ one thing
only. This won’t undo the subsequent interpretations, but does perhaps alert us to the fact that the original novel contained a richness of texture that is still not exhausted by its imitators. I’m not suggesting we ‘go back to the original’; we cannot unmake any of the elements that go to make up the Frankenstein myth. Nevertheless, I want to argue that subsequent elaborations, and the later construction of the tale as ‘myth’, may have actually robbed us of some of the richness and ambiguity with which it started. In its telling and retelling, certain elements have been privileged and preserved, whilst others have been silenced. But what happens when, asking questions about the effacement of some voices, we start a process of telling and retelling that chooses to restore those submerged narratives?

IV. Reading *Frankenstein* ‘against the grain’

a. Is Victor ‘mad scientist’, ‘hero’ or villain?

*Peter Cushing in “The Curse of Frankenstein”, 1957.*

As we have seen, it is easy to read *Frankenstein* as reinforcing antipathy to science, as an expression of romanticism, resistance to emergence of modern empirical methods, a moral
tale to expose the dangers of ‘playing God’, a tract on behalf of romanticism’s fear that rationalist science would endanger the human soul.

Some critics would have us believe that it is so immersed in the antiquarian chills and thrills of gothic as to have nothing remotely ‘modern’ about it at all (Sutherland, 1996). Perhaps they found it unthinkable that a young woman of such as Mary could have possessed the scientific knowledge to have enabled her to write anything but a highly impressionistic and emotive account of science. However, Mary took an active interest in new experimental and philosophical developments in the natural sciences. Mary had even witnessed public demonstrations of science, and knew about controversies amongst an emergent generation of scientists about the relative merits of experimental methods and the older, dying forces of natural philosophy and alchemy. Far from enshrining pre-modern methods, therefore, Mary was supporting what she saw as progressive, contemporary models of scientific knowing, such as those propounded by Erasmus Darwin and William Lawrence (Butler, 1998), as befitted the daughter of such famously radical freethinkers as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and the partner of such a notorious atheist as Percy Shelley.⁴

So to characterize Frankenstein quintessentially as a modern myth, is therefore not simply to think of it in the sense of ‘contemporary’ or ‘current’ but to realise the significance of its reliance on the birth of science, of emergent human power over nature, of the secular Prometheus rebelling against the gods for one final, irrevocable time. And clearly, this preoccupation with scientific activity, its limits and consequences, is central to the enduring

⁴ William Godwin was a political radical and freethinker who took his daughter to many public demonstrations of scientific techniques such as Galvanism. Mary’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, wrote A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792), now regarded as a founding text of modern feminism.
power of the myth even to this day – but the commonplace myth of the mad scientist may well obscure alternative interpretations.

For example, a classic text in the study of myth is Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first published in 1949). At the core of mythology for Campbell is the archetype of the hero, which he calls a ‘monomyth’: ‘the one, shape-shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find … in all times and under every circumstance’ (1988, p. 3). While Campbell’s resort to cultural universals does not go down so well in cultural or religious studies nowadays, his influence is still manifest. He argues that there is a structural continuity to the myth of the hero, as one who ventures forth from the commonplace world into a fantastic or supernatural realm, does battle with cosmic forces, is victorious and returns as the bearer of remarkable powers.

Is Victor an archetypal ‘hero’ in the Joseph Campbell mode for Mary Shelley? The sub-title, *The Modern Prometheus*, certainly classes him alongside mythical figures who audaciously steal fire from the gods and harness elemental powers in their quest for knowledge. But here we maybe see how Mary casts doubts on these kind of aspirations. Victor’s fate is more hubristic than heroic; not necessarily for aspiring to Promethean power and forbidden knowledge, but possible for his failure to consider the consequences of his actions. He may not defy the gods but he fails to live up to basic humane values.
Victor’s obsessive quest for a scientific method that can cheat death is ostensibly motivated by an ambition to defy mortality. Yet he demonstrates a profound ambivalence towards anything associated with birth, nurture or parental bonds. As it stirs to life, Victor denies his creation and runs away, not only from the creature, his progeny, but from all other ties of familial, marital and civic obligation. His lack of compassion towards his own creation is compounded by his abandonment of his family and a careless disregard for the nature he so wilfully manipulates. In his fantasy of life without limit Victor summons the creature out of death but has no means of conferring genuine life.

b. ... is Victor the true monster?

Indeed, there is a strong suggestion that we should actually displace the primary monstrosity within the text away from the hapless creature and relocate it in Victor Frankenstein’s actions. At the heart of Mary Shelley’s analysis of the nature of ‘Frankensteinian knowledge’ is therefore a suggestion that monstrosity is not a result of an inherent transgression against divine decree, but Victor’s abuses of the bonds of responsibility and mutuality that follow from his actions.

This theme is played out in later film versions such as Steven Spielberg’s adaptation of Jurassic Park, in which dinosaurs revived from extinction via experiments with their DNA run amok. Here it is a scientist, Dr Ian Malcolm, played by Jeff Goldblum, who
criticizes the naked profiteering of the dinosaur emporium’s corporate investors for failing to anticipate the dangers:

You didn’t earn the knowledge for yourselves, so you don’t take any responsibility for it. You stood on the shoulders of geniuses to accomplish something as fast as you could … [but] your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could that they didn’t stop to think if they should. (cited in Frayling, 2017, p. 111)

Who are the monsters here? Not the dinosaurs, who are doing what comes naturally … which is to run amok and eat anything in their path. No, it is the reckless and avaricious misuse of genetic research that is responsible (or irresponsible as the case may be). And in Victor’s case it is his refusal to be accountable for the consequences of his own actions and for the fruits of his experimentation in his cowardly abandonment of the hapless creature.

*Frontispiece to 1831 edition*
c. Is the creature more human than Victor?

‘Mary Shelley saw the creature as potentially monstrous, but she never suggested that he was other than fully human.’ (Mellor, 1988, p. 63).

So elements of Victor’s behaviour have already begun to turn the tide of our assumptions about monstrosity. What if, similarly, there is another reading of the creature’s malevolence and fearsome persona; that its monstrosity ‘shows forth’ not evil and terror – but true humanity and a nobility of demeanour?

While ‘monster’ carries associations of horror and revulsion, traditionally, monstrosity has served a far more edifying purpose. We can trace the word ‘monster’ back to two Latin words, one of which means ‘show’ and the other ‘to warn’. As Marina Warner in her book Managing Monsters argues (1994), monsters exist in the cultural imagination with the purpose of teaching us something.

Monsters have excited popular speculation and scientific interest throughout human history. Very often they were the products of birth deformities occurring in the natural world; but others were imaginary hybrids of human and non-human animals, such as centaurs, sirens, or
satyrs; or of different animals, such as the griffin. Monsters were often interpreted as political or religious omens, as portents of divine judgement. Their breach of the laws of nature was held to be a prefiguration of some more cosmic rupture – their ‘unnatural’ essence seen as an offence to the divine order. Their ambivalent or dual status disturbed taken-for-granted categories of the ‘natural’ distinction between species, and destabilized the boundaries between what counted as normal and what was aberrant or abhorrent.

From classical times onwards, too, monsters inhabited the extremes of the known world, as travellers’ tales furnished society with visions of strange beasts whose existence signaled the dangers of new conquests and territories. To hear of encounters with fantastic beasts was to learn that the boundaries of the civilized world were gradually being extended – but they gave rise to outbreaks of anxiety – monsters were essentially uncanny ‘spectacles’, embodying and indicating multiple varieties of states of being. But they also stood ‘at the gates of difference’: at the threshold of order and disorder, culture and nature insofar as their ambivalent or dual status disturbed taken-for-granted categories of the ‘natural’ distinction between species. Where did the demarcation between strange and familiar, human and non-human, actually lie? It seemed it was not fixed but fluid. And it is easy to see that this may function as a cloaking device for wider fears: of the foreigner, the other, the differently-abled. That which is different becomes demonized as ‘monstrous’ and thus inhuman, deviant and dangerous (Graham, 2002, pp. 11-13, 38-55).
Insofar as Victor Frankenstein’s creature at the heart of the tale is both – and neither – alive nor dead, born nor made, natural nor artificial, man nor beast, he transgresses the categories by which we gauge our taken-for-granted understandings of normality.

This creature who is fabricated out of corpses is condemned forever to be an outsider; not a human but a monstrous parody. And yet its own role as one of the narrators of the story and his civilized sensibilities begin to sow seeds of doubt. In the abject yet noble figure of the creature, we can begin to trace a strongly humanist, egalitarian impulse – inspired in part, perhaps, by Mary Shelley’s own upbringing. Her depiction of the creature as the outcast, abandoned by his creator, are designed to excite the reader’s sympathies and challenge the conventions which demarcate the ‘human’ from the non- or in-human, or the ‘natural’ from the ‘unnatural’.

As the *Frankenstein* narrative became layered over with later elaborations, this crucial element has indeed been lost: that of the unique voice of the creature himself. Unlike many of its later cinematic renditions, which deny the creature a voice or point of view, then, we should remember that the innovative narrational structure of Shelley’s novel gave equal weight to the creature’s story as to those of Victor and Captain Walton, the explorer. In the novel, it is his telling of his own story that encourages the reader to consider that whilst he is physically hideous, he is more sinned against than sinning. If the creature is hideous and violent, the suggestion is that it is the trauma of his abandonment at Victor’s hands that is to blame. When the creature speaks we are invited to empathise with his loneliness and, I think, challenged to consider the justice of his exclusion.
“Once my fancy was soothed with dreams of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal ... I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness.” (1998, p. 189).

Certainly, subsequent treatments, not only of the *Frankenstein* story, but of other ambivalent and marginal creatures, offer this alternative reading. So, for example, many of these characteristics of Victor’s creature endure into contemporary representations of *posthuman* figures, or beings who are amalgams of biological humanity and advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and robotics, often referred to as cyborgs -- hybrids of biology and cybernetics (Graham, 2002, 2015). They too are excluded and misunderstood – feared, perhaps, precisely because they embody the threat of technology out of control. Nevertheless, they nurse strong desires to be recognized as fully human. David, the android boy, abandoned by his parents in Spielberg’s *AI*; Lt. Commander Data and Seven of Nine in *Star Trek: Next Generation* and *ST: Voyager*; and Roy Batty in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, who proves ultimately to be a redemptive figure (and who, like Victor’s creature who reads Plutarch, is an auto-didact who quotes *Paradise Lost*). They too are monsters in the sense of being uncanny or threatening, but their purpose is often moral and didactic, asking questions about where and
how we distinguish between the human and the non-human. Very often, it is these creatures who in their attempts to ‘pass’ as human shine a light on what we take for granted as the marks of exemplary and normative humanity. And often, it is they, rather than their flawed creators, who are more successful in demonstrating those human and humane qualities (Graham, 2015; McAvan, 2012).

And yet, Mary Shelley invites her readers to contemplate whether humanity – as a moral rather than an ontological or biological property – is assumed at birth or acquired through socialization and experience. We are presented with another strikingly modern theme, therefore: that of ‘nature’ versus ‘nurture’.

In revisiting the central motifs of ‘mad scientist’ ‘hero’ and ‘monster’, therefore, we begin to make fresh discoveries. The debates about science may be a legitimate part of the myth, but Shelley’s novel is also an extended examination of what qualifies any of us to be considered fully a person, fully part of the human community. *Frankenstein* challenges us to think about what today we might term social exclusion: the acceptance or rejection of those who are different. We can regard *Frankenstein* as a modern myth about science or dangerous knowledge, then, but it is also far more: an exploration of human identity, responsibility and belonging.
V. *Frankenstein* as modern myth: identity, responsibility and belonging

In some respects, Shelley’s novel is like the unfortunate creation at its heart: a pastiche of borrowed parts and long-dead fragments. But that does not detract from its potency nor mean that we dismiss it as merely derivative. For if we really invest in the enduring efficacy and significance of myth-making then what matters is precisely how those constituent parts and fragments constantly shift and interweave, like shards of colour in a kaleidoscope. It is the constant invention and imaginative creativity at the heart of myth that makes it so rich and rewarding.

There are many representations of what it means to be human in *Frankenstein*, refracted through the attributions of monstrosity that ultimately implicate Victor as well as his creation. Yet it is impossible to spend time in the creature’s company not to feel some compassion for him, and the text invites the reader to question the fears and prejudices that might forbid him even an adoptive humanity.

We probably won’t be able to prevent the headline writers from reverting to the simplicities of ‘Frankenstein Food’ or ‘Frankenbees’ when confronted by scientific controversy, but we can perhaps still appreciate the enduring significance of story-telling and myth-making within contemporary popular culture. Indeed, this enduring property of myth may actually offer highly suggestive clues towards our very understanding of what it means to be human. As creative beings, we are inclined to ask questions about the
implications of a desire to place ourselves alongside the gods in our abilities to create and
manipulate material worlds of cathedrals, canals and computers; yet the parallel human
propensities for building symbolic and metaphysical systems (including language, myth and
religion, of course) also reflect our capacity to inhabit worlds of the imagination and the spirit
as well. Perhaps that is a testimony to the enduring power of myth, even in a secular,
disenchanted age such as ours. *Frankenstein* may not be a myth in the conventional sense of
what van Baaren calls ‘the why and how of the here and now’ (van Baaren, 1984, p. 223) but
I would defend its power to invite its hearers and tellers into a fabulous world where primal
and fundamental tales about what it means to be human continue to be told.

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