



CHAPTER 2

SHELLEY, THE ALCHEMIST

I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be ...

— Victor Frankenstein,
Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus, 1818 1st Edition
Anonymous ¹

Nearly every great ghost story begins on a dark night, wind whistling through the trees, rain pelting the windows, lightning streaking across the sky, and an image appearing as a shadow in the darkness peering through a window. So it is with *Frankenstein* as Mary Shelley beckons the reader to imagine how the creature came to her in a waking dream.²

When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie...I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow. On the morrow I announced that I had thought of a story. I began that day with the words, It was on a dreary night of November, making only a transcript of the grim terrors of my waking dream.

The history behind *Frankenstein*, as written by Mary Shelley in her 1831 Preface, as we have previously noted, is almost as legendary as the novel itself. Few books have so memorable a history, and perhaps this is the primary reason why so few scholars have been willing to consider an alternative origin for *Frankenstein*. Reconsider the cinematic quality of the backstory: a stormy summer in Switzerland; a small band of poets—including Lord Byron—and a couple of young girls in a candlelit room; a blazing fire of orange and yellow reflected in the eyes of literary rebels reading German ghost stories; talk of the living dead; eccentric scientists with electrical devices; and a young girl's waking dream of a spectre. This is pure Hollywood gold in terms of setting up the occasion for a ghost story to end all ghost stories! One might almost imagine that the backstory is as fictional as the creature sewn together from dead tissue and brought to life as a murderous demon.

Mary Shelley's dramatic 1831 Preface gives the reader precisely what any reader would desire and in so doing she has written a clever cover story and pulled off a skilled act of misdirection, but *to what end?* While the reader is focused on the creature stirring in the shadows of Mary Shelley's waking dream, Percy Bysshe Shelley magically disappears from the stormy summer in Switzerland. A literary sleight of hand has effectively removed even the least possibility of linking the name of Percy Bysshe Shelley to the authorship of *Frankenstein*:

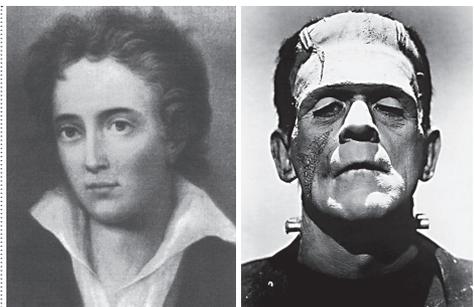
I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband.³

Mary Shelley's disclaimer concerning her husband's participation with *Frankenstein* is explicit, all-encompassing, and oddly reminiscent of the disclaimer found at the end of motion pictures:

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Not surprisingly, the motion picture disclaimer originated under circumstances in which the characters appearing in the work do *in*

fact bear an uncanny resemblance to real persons.⁴ Mary Shelley’s attempt to remain true to her husband’s hoax and to shield him from notice as the author could not overcome one major obstacle, namely that of Shelley himself, who bore an undeniable resemblance to characters in *Frankenstein*. Such an insincere disclaimer in the 1831 Preface should be seen as the most sure indication that those who seek for Percy Bysshe Shelley shall indeed find him.



PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY, AUTHOR OF *FRANKENSTEIN* (LEFT)
FRANKENSTEIN’S “MONSTER” AS PORTRAYED BY BORIS KARLOFFS

In Richard Holmes’ biography *Shelley: The Pursuit*, the author writes, “implicitly, Shelley accepted his own identification as Frankenstein’s monster.”⁶ Holmes’ astute observation that Shelley is virtually one and the same with the creature, and that Shelley himself was aware of this fact, nearly defies reason at the point that the author then is incapable or unwilling to accept the reason why a main character is so perfect a literary sketch of Mary’s husband. One wonders why any scholar would be fooled by Mary’s disclaimer after actually reading *Frankenstein*, the story of an intelligent, isolated, Illuminati-influenced, incestuous young man and student of alchemy whose tutoring in scientific method leads him to envision a world of men without the need of God. Indeed, Holmes was very near the truth when he wrote, “Shelley was well aware of the many autobiographical influences which shaped Mary’s book.”⁷

THE YOUNG ALCHEMIST

Frankenstein is *not* a horror story. This observation is so self-evident that, as we have previously written, the entire 1831 Preface

has been called into question. Although Mary Shelley hoped to misdirect the readers of her 1831 Preface to think of *Frankenstein* as a waking dream of horrific spectres and a contest-winning ghost story, there was one person who understood and explained the real underlying purpose of *Frankenstein*: the man who anonymously wrote it, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

In this the direct moral of the book consists; and it is perhaps the most important, and of the most universal application, of any moral that can be enforced by example. Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn; —let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness. It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments, are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse.⁸

So wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1817 in what would remain an unpublished review of *Frankenstein* until 1832 when Shelley's cousin Thomas Medwin presented it for publication in *The Athenaeum*. The novel, according to Shelley himself, is an indictment against the authoritarian structures in society which use threat, abuse, punishment, and separation or isolation to force obedience and conformity. It is an indictment against the supposed God who created man "in His image" and then terrorized and punished man for his unique nature as a rational independent person. It is an indictment against the God who established boundaries for human society, first in marriage and the family, and then extended into communities, and from those communities arose tyrannous governments and abusive religious institutions. While much more will be said regarding Shelley's religious views and how they are embedded in *Frankenstein*, what is critical to observe at this point is that *Frankenstein* is not a ghost story written to frighten readers with images of fantastic monsters. It is a treatise with a purpose; a story of man's aspirations and society's

disapproval; *Frankenstein* is an autobiographical novel inspired by the thoughts and experiences of its author, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Frankenstein is a series of life stories, narratives weaved together for a common theme. One such narrative is that of an alchemist turned scientist who seeks to offer an alternative to an upside-down and unenlightened world, whose expertise in science unlocks the alchemical goal of transforming the base material of undignified human flesh into a new man, a higher man, a second Adam. Paradise revisited in the garden of Ingolstadt. Frankenstein's creature is abandoned into a world without love, without compassion, a world of people made in the image of its god. The creature, a stranger and foreigner to this world, must learn how to survive alone in a world without another being who is comparable to it or compatible with it. A new man for a new society, and a new world order created by the hands of an enlightened man—this is the story of *Frankenstein*! The question then arises: if the story does not originate in the waking dream of Mary Shelley, where does the story of the alchemist turned scientist and creator originate? To answer that question is to return to the childhood of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Newman Ivey White, Shelley's biographer, accurately wrote, "Of few writers more than Shelley can it be said that his works are the man himself."⁹

FRANKENSTEIN AND SHELLEY THE ALCHEMIST

In 1792, Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at Field Place, an isolated country house set on a working farm in Sussex. As a child, Shelley's imagination took him to places that few children would venture. James Bieri, in his thoroughly documented biography *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography*, wrote:

One imaginary occupant of Field Place who found an important place in Bysshe's psyche was 'an Alchemist, old and grey, with a long beard.' The young explorer found a spacious garret under the roof where a lifted floorboard gave access to a deserted room where the alchemist lived.¹⁰