

‘Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time’:  
Monstrosity in *Richard III* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

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Shakespeare is undoubtedly one of the main sources of inspiration to be found in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s works, the great Bard’s influence being constant and decisive in any English-speaking literary context. However, a global and accurate evaluation of Shakespeare’s presence in the writings of the Romantic authoress has never been successfully traced, despite the proliferation of criticism -conceived from many different approaches- centred upon the female writer. It is not our concern here to undertake such a task for obvious reasons and limitations. Our purpose is more modest in its scope: to carry out a brief study of monstrosity in *Richard III* and suggest some intertextual and comparative guidelines of the topic as it appears in Shakespeare’s “history play” and Shelley’s most well-known narrative, *Frankenstein*. This research will hopefully show how the latter borrowed -whether consciously or unconsciously- significant features in the referential framework of monstrosity from Shakespeare’s play, manipulating them through the patterns of thought concerning the topic in the 18th and early 19th centuries, finally providing the subject with new mythical connotations.

Emily Sunstein (1989), the best biographer of Mary Shelley to date, has conveniently emphasized the fact that, while composing *Frankenstein* in the interval between 1816 and 1818 (the year of publication of the first edition of the novel), Mary Shelley was currently reading and studying Shakespeare’s plays. Even in her early childhood, Mary was familiar with them: “*Godwin, however, continually impressed her with the need for long apprenticeship, and her standards were very high. Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare and Milton were her favorite older English poets*” (Sunstein, 59). Her father’s rigorous education was later on completed by Percy Shelley’s influence upon her writings and readings. The young couple carried with them in their elopement to France, in 1815, the works of Mary’s mother -the great pioneer of the British feminist movement, Mary Wollstonecraft-, together with those of Shakespeare and Byron (Sunstein, 84). Percy and her used to study the major English poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton... in the months preceding the composition of *Frankenstein*. Moreover, Shakespeare was included in the “reading list” that Percy Shelley used to perform aloud while Mary was finishing the first volume of her *magnum opus*.

Mary’s favourite play was *Othello*, where monstrosity constitutes one of the most successful rhetorical fields. As Sunstein says,

She [Mary] placed herself in the grand tradition of lawbreaking passion with Francesca and Paolo, Juliet and Romeo, and identified in particular with Desdemona, who fell in love with her father’s friend, eloped and was discovered; she was always to see *Othello* played whenever she could. (104)

However, as we pointed out above, neither Sunstein nor any other biographer or critic has fully determined the importance of Shakespearean imagery in the configuration of monstrosity, so essential a matter in *Frankenstein*, although there are some partial contributions in this respect. In an original and intriguing book, Chris Baldick (1987) studies the significance of monstrosity in the context of nineteenth-century writing, focusing on the categorization of *Frankenstein* as a myth. Baldick makes us aware that “*In modern usage ‘monster’ means something frighteningly*

*unnatural or of huge dimensions*" (10). However, in earlier usages still persisting in the nineteenth century, the term carried connotations which were not only physical, but also explicitly moral. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault underlines, a 'monster' is something or someone to be *shown* (1967: 68-70). The etymology of the word comes from Latin *monstrare*, from which Spanish *mostrar*, French *montrer* and English *demonstrate*, derive. In a world created by a beneficent God, what can be the explanation for the existence of the freak, the deformed and the lunatic? As Baldick puts it, the answer is: "*to reveal visibly the results of vice, folly, and unreason, as a warning... to erring humanity*" (10). Great thinkers of Ancient times ranging from St Augustine to Martin Luther attempted interpretations of monstrosity from this perspective. And this is mainly the meaning of physical and moral deformity in Shakespeare's plays: in *Othello* Emilia speaks about jealousy as a monster (III. iv. 161), and ingratitude is prototypically seen as such in *Timon of Athens* (V. i. 65) and *King Lear* (I. i. 219-20), together with the more explicit usage of the category in *The Tempest*, where a 'real' and literal monster, Caliban, can be found. In general terms, "*The monster is one who has so far transgressed the bounds of nature as to become a moral advertisement*" (Baldick, 12)<sup>1</sup>.

However witty and relevant Baldick's analysis actually is, it is certainly striking that he never refers to *Richard III* when dealing with monstrosity in Shakespeare. It is our contention that the play sustains significant relationships with the critic's ideas, *Richard III* providing a link in the main chain of the treatment of monstrosity leading to the conceptual framework of reference which appears in *Frankenstein*, an intertextual chain whose most remarkable peaks in this respect are those of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, some of Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. Of course, this taxonomy would be completed by several classical and medieval illustrations which maintain intertextual bonds with Mary Shelley's novel. A clear example is that of the Vice of medieval drama, a Machiavellian role assumed by Richard himself throughout the play: "*Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word*" (III. i. 82-3).

The figure of King Richard coincides with the most important features that Baldick describes for the monster in the past. First, as was pointed out above, monstrosity was habitually used as an illustration of a particular vice or transgression. When the monster is a king, the embodiment of royal power whose prerogatives came directly from a divine source, the moral lesson presents more interesting implications, for a monster-king can only be seen as a sign of God's trial for the sins and mistakes of a nation or country. As Baldick establishes:

The representation of fearful transgressions in the figure of physical deformity arises as a variant of that venerable cliché of political discourse, the 'body politic'. When political discord and rebellion appear, this 'body' is said to be not just diseased, but misshapen, abortive, monstrous. Once the state is threatened to the point where it can no longer be safely identified (according to the medieval theory) with 'the King's body' -that is, with an integral and sacred whole- then the humanly recognizable form of the body politic is lost, dispersed into a chaos of dismembered and contending organs. (14)

This view is related with the conception of Richard as a representative of the *flagellum dei* or "scourge of God", a wicked and blasphemous being in this case who serves God's exemplary purpose of punishment and final redemption: the tragical fall of Richard conveys the accession to the throne of Richmond, Henry VII, an able ruler who, according to Shakespeare, would restore order and control in a country devastated by the blood-thirsty War of the Roses. The mistakes of the past have to be purified through the very epitome of horror: a tyrant king whose murderous contrivances are suffered both by the Court and the people of England, her territory becoming -like her ruler- monstrous. The "mob" -sometimes monstrous too in Shakespearian plays- can do

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<sup>1</sup> Baldick collects some more significant examples of monstrosity taken out from Shakespeare's plays (pp. 11-15).

nothing to stop the hypocritical tyrant, as is seen in the citizens's scene in III. 7, despite their rejection of Richard.

However, by means of God's final restorative mechanisms of control and order, it could be stated that England's sin turns itself into a *felix culpa* which will develop the inexorable and ultimately fair designs of God.

Richard becomes thus a moral advertisement of malignant behaviour, one -we repeat with Baldick- "*who has so far transgressed the bounds of nature*" (12). Although monsters are "natural", they are often perceived as "unnatural" and even "uncanny". It is curious that, in Shelley's narrative, this definition would be more appropriately applied to Victor Frankenstein, the scientific overreacher, than to his creature. This is undoubtedly a reminder of each other's indissoluble entity, a link reflected in popular culture by calling the monster after its creator's name.

Secondly, ingratitude as a monster in Shakespearean terms has to do with another feature of monstrosity, as, again, Chris Baldick emphasizes: "*It is the vices of ingratitude, rebellion, and disobedience, particularly towards parents, that most commonly attract the appellation 'monstrous': to be a monster is to break the natural bonds of obligation towards friends and especially towards blood-relations*" (13). One of the most noticeable characteristics of the relationship between creator and creature in *Frankenstein* is rebellion -however much justified it can be- or a turning against one's parent or "benefactor". Richard III, the same as the monster, will show his unnaturalness by means of practically extinguishing his whole family and -due to his sexually devious and puritan behaviour- aborting any possibility of multiplying his own offspring. The climax of the play is reached in the pivotal action of killing the young princes, his own nephews (IV. ii), infanticide being a most atrocious and "monstrous" deed. Frankenstein's monster also wipes out his own family (except one member, Ernest), in murdering his progenitor's relatives, for Victor is his "father". The paroxysm of violence contributes to the reader's perception of the monster's actions as unbearably unfair, his arguments of *bon sauvage* in Rousseauian terms being utterly deconstructed throughout the systematic butcheries against the innocent members of his "kith and kin".

Both Richard's and the monster's justifications for their bloody behaviour coincide in their deterministic despair brought about by their deformity and monstrosity. Of course, if peculiar in the end, the creature's arguments are the product of his being rejected because of his uncanny ugliness by the rest of mankind, his creator and would-be friends included. Richard's alibi is even more elusive, as can be deduced from his self-portrait in I. i. His deformity can justify neither his hatred for his own family, priorly focused on his being a cold-fish in sexual matters, nor his hypocritical aversion towards his own brothers. He obviously fits better in a war-like context, for that calamity is also portrayed as a monster ("*Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,*" I. 9). Unlike his brother Edward, he is "*not shaped for sportive tricks/ Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass*" (14-5). Richard's rejection of sexuality -or his sado-masochistic approach to it, as illustrated by his devious feelings towards Lady Anne (I. ii.)- is curiously akin to that of Victor Frankenstein himself, a feature which is subconsciously manifested in the episodes of the creation and posterior destruction of the female monster (Chapter XX), and his obscure fears as his wedding-night approaches (Chapter XXII). Together with this moral resemblance with Victor, Richard parallels the creature's monstrosity:

I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,  
 Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,  
 And that so lamely and unfashionable  
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them -  
 Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
 Have no delight to pass away the time,  
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun

And descant on mine own deformity (16-27).

“Dissembling Nature”, the same as Frankenstein, seems to have selected the parts of Richard in a distorted way, modelling him out of *disjecta membra*, monsters prototypically being “composed of ill-assorted parts, sometimes combined from different creatures..., sometimes merely multiplied to excess” (Baldick 13). Both Victor’s creature and Richard conceive of their bodies as “other”: their physical appearance becomes an archetype of “otherness”. Animal imagery in their self-portraits and in other characters’ perception has something to do with this feeling of unnaturalness and alienation. Only in *Richard III* the King is called or compared to a “hedgehog”, a “[bloody] dog”, a “[foul bunch-backed] toad”, a “bottled spider”, a “creeping venomous thing”, a “tiger”, an “ape”, a “[deadly] boar”, a “cockatrice”, a “hellhound”, a “foul swine”, and a “wolf”, one of the symbolic investitures of the devil.

However, the most recursive images in both works are those connected with the moral ugliness of the monsters and their connexion with hell and the devil. Indeed, they are considered as “devils” in many occasions. The most common denigrating epithets applied to Frankenstein’s creature are those of “monster” (27 appearances), “fiend” (25), “daemon” (18), “creature” (16), “wretch” (15), “devil” (8), “being” (4) and “ogre” (1). Many of them are related to the moral wickedness of the character, coherent with the physical repulsion which he provokes in those who -unlike the benevolent reader, who never “sees” the monster, or bears in mind the lovable image of Boris Karloff- contemplate his horrid appearance.

Richard is also identified by the other characters in the play as a product of hell, and he is called “black magician” and “hell’s black intelligencer”, the contriver of “devilish plots, damnèd witchcraft and hellish charms”, “devil” (at least 12 appearances), “devilish slave”, “devil’s friend” (“*Not to relent is beastly, savage, devilish*, Clarence will say shortly before he dies at the hands of Richard’s mercenaries in I. iv), “cacodemon”, “dreadful minister of hell”, “slave of nature and the son of hell”, “Hell-governed arm”, “death and hell have set their marks on him” (there are some other references to hell in connexion with Richard; he is also the embodiment of “sin”), “foul defacer of God’s handiwork”, “God’s enemy” (precisely the etymology of the word “Satan”), and “cursed self”.

On the other hand, “monster”, “deformed”, “misshapen thus”, “elvish-marked”, “wretch” (his own mother, the Duchess of York, remembers him as “The wretched’st thing when he was young” in II. iv. 18, and considers her womb as “accursèd” in IV. i.), “bloody”, “murderous villain”, “villain-slave”, “guilty homicide” also occur in the play. As can be inferred, there is a striking coincidence between some of the adjectives and syntagms applied to both monsters. This resemblance is sharpened in their most remarkable characteristic: they possess a fearful command of rhetoric and eloquence. Victor Frankenstein is haunted by the monster’s narrative, despite his intolerable ugliness and his priorly having murdered William, the scientist’s younger brother:

Thus I relieve thee, my creator’, he said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me with violence; ‘thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion. By the virtues that I once possessed, I demand this from you. Hear my tale ... (101).

For the creature has had a good teacher of eloquence: no more no less than Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, one of the books contributing to his “education”. Although he cannot persuade Victor to create finally a female monster for him, his command of rhetoric is impressively moving. It is not strange that, at the end of the novel, Frankenstein advises Walton not to pay attention to the wretch’s mellifluous words, and kill him as soon as he turns up:

Yet, when I am dead, if he should appear; if the ministers of vengeance should conduct him to you, swear that he shall not live -swear that he shall not triumph over my accumulated woes, and survive to add to the list of his dark crimes. He is eloquent and persuasive; and once his words had even power over my heart: but trust him not. His soul is as hellish as his form, full of treachery and fiendlike malice. Hear him not, call on the manes of William, Justine, Clerval, Elizabeth, my

father, and of the wretched Victor, and thrust your sword into his heart. I will hover near, and direct the steel aright. (209)

Like father, like son: another hint of the creator-creature's unavoidable duality is Victor's oratorical powers as described by Walton (210): "*His eloquence is forcible and touching; nor can I hear him, when he relates a pathetic incident, or endeavours to move the passions of pity or love, without tears*".

With respect to Richard, his eloquence is proverbial, and the main reason for his surprising and rapid success. Apart from the general use of precise language throughout the first part of the play, the best examples of his never being at a loss with words are the parallel scenes of courtship in I. ii and IV. iv, where the perfect hypocrite (*hypokrités* was the usual term for "actor" in Ancient Greek) respectively woos Lady Anne and Queen Elizabeth, whom he wants to turn into a go-between that would convince her daughter Elizabeth into marrying him. Shakespeare's exploitation of irony here is bold if we take into account that Anne, to her fatal grief, will marry him in the end, in spite of the murder priorly committed by the grotesque character against her own husband. The case of Queen Elizabeth is even more painful, for Richard has killed her husband -the legitimate king- and her sons. His eloquence is so brilliant and his arguments so tempting that she will consent to arrange her daughter's marriage with the bloody monarch. Despite his ugliness and monstrosity, Richard's linguistic and rhetorical appeal is unquestionable.

In short, it seems to be clear that Shakespeare's purpose in depicting the *dramatis persona* of Richard III is that pinpointed above and dealt with in Samuel Johnson's sentence, "*Vice, for vice is necessary to be shown, should always disgust*" (quoted in Botting 1995, 6). The reader had to "*know how to discriminate between virtue and vice*" (Botting 1995, 7), and this contrast is more emphatic if the reader or the spectator pays attention to the opposed figures of Richard and Richmond, the false king's antithesis and the archetype of the able Christian ruler. Monstrosity fulfils a moral intention that is semiotically extended and widened at the time when Mary Shelley begins to write *Frankenstein*, a lapse when new aesthetic, political and social connotations, which had already appeared throughout the eighteenth century, occur. As a consequence, *Frankenstein* as a book, as a "romance", will become "monstrous", made of *disjecta membra* or "ill-assorted parts" (Botting 1991, 1995).

As a corollary, it can be established that the fate of monsters is ultimately the fate of otherness, an alienation ultimately perceived in the monster's assumed or forced and resigned isolation. Foucault reminds us of the fact that "*monsters signal the variety and diversity of nature's continuity*", and, at the same time, "*the monster ensures the emergence of difference*" (quoted in Botting 1995, 7). These assertions are well exemplified by both epitomes of otherness, Richard III and *Frankenstein's* creature, intertextual points of departure of literary myths.

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