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United we stitch: Reading *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*

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Review: *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, ed. Andrew Smith, CUP, Cambridge 2016, 292 pp.

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Considering the popularity of two important works published in 2002 and 2003: *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, supervised by Jerrold E. Hogle, and *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, edited by Esther Schor, respectively, the publishing of such a companion to *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* seemed to be just a matter of time. Indeed, CUP bestowed both the critics and fans of the novel with one just a year ago (2016). *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, edited by Andrew Smith, seems a wonderful and immensely insightful introduction for even more advanced, or enthusiastic readers of the novel. Indeed, the idea which I should endeavour to convey is the following: *The Companion* offers a fascinating variety of essays which help to contextualise, understand and simply enjoy the novel. What is more, unlike suggested on the paperback cover, it should interest not only “students and academics”; it is a must-read for all fans of Mary Shelley’s most famous artwork. It is, however, in terms of form and matter, a piece of writing as complex and verging on all kind of dual extremes in both its form and its content as the original novel itself. Like the Creature, “stitched” of parts, prisms and voices, the companion can hardly remain unnoticed.

To begin with, the author offers a fine selection of authors. Not only does Andrew Smith invite some of the most removed scholars in the field of Gothic criticism such as Jerrold E. Hogle, Angela Wright or David Punter, but he also allows for some not-as-prominent-yet persons who often prove their findings of immense value. All of this in a book which aims at a most concise yet highly exhausting reading of *Frankenstein*.

In total, it is comprised of sixteen essays, sub-grouped into: (1) *Historical and Literary Contexts*, (2) *Theories and Forms* and (3) *Adaptations*. This triadic structure echoes the threefold pattern of narration in the novel also because it draws a parable, here, however, in terms of its quality which reaches its peaks at the beginning and end of the companion, meanwhile awakening mixed feelings

just as does the evolving narrative pattern employed by Mary Shelley. Before forming any more solid conclusions, let us then briefly touch upon each essay of the first part.

Charles Robinson's notes on *Frankenstein's Composition and Publication* helps to trace the changes in the published incarnations of the novel from the times of its private revisions and re-readings by Mary Shelley and her friends in the years 1816–1817, to its first public appearance on the book market in 1818 onward. Robinson helps to notice two important things: first, that Mary proved very determined and strong despite numerous obstacles on the way to publication (the financial aspects or those concerning the political or gender-prejudice) and, second, that the *Frankenstein* as we know it would never be what it is if not for the help of her relatives, particularly of her husband Percy, but also of Mary's father, William Godwin, who not only directly aided the aspiring author with finding the publisher but also marked the text with various corrections. Indeed, some of them had been explicitly discussed by other authors, most notably by Anne K. Mellor in her *Hideous Progeny*.¹ Although not noted by the author, the often evoked connection Percy = Victor Frankenstein seems even more credible considering how many of Victor's lines were revised by Mary's husband.

Lisa Vargo offers another insightful study in her *Contextualising Sources*, where she points to various works which significantly influenced young Mary in her writing. All of this points to two facts: a great novel does not appear in vacuum — *Frankenstein* is, so to say, intensely intertextual; and that the quality and variety of the writings vastly influences the quality and richness of the writing itself. However engaging, at times the style of Vargo remains confusing, especially when the author includes no citation where a more curious reader would expect one, after the information conveyed in excerpts such as “The allusion” and “Mary Shelley's Contemporaries”.² At other times, however, Vargo's writing exhibits much credibility, for she precisely quotes (and not merely mentions) from the particular works she analyses as contextual to *Frankenstein*.

The *Romantic Contexts* offered by Jerrold E. Hogle initially prove rather inconsistent, for instance, where the reference to racism seems ungrounded in the novel and more of a quiet smuggling of a popular ideology of the “cultural unconscious” or offering a dead-obvious explanation of the three-fold narrative structure employed by Mary Shelley, which might seem rather condescending.³ However, despite these minute drawbacks, the essay proves fascinating. Hogle perfectly tackles a challenging issue of feminist under-

¹ A.K. Mellor, “My hideous progeny”, [in:] M. Shelley, *Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, New York 1988, pp. 52–69.

² L. Vargo, “Contextualising sources”, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, ed. A. Smith, Cambridge 2016, pp. 29–30.

³ J.E. Hogle, “Romantic contexts”, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 45.

tones in the novel⁴ — unlike many authors (some, as I should try to show, even in this companion), he aims at actually retelling the facts about the 19th century society as faithfully as possible for a 21st century scholar without merely perpetuating an ideology. In conclusions, the scholar praises the novel by highlighting its strength when facing the oppressive critique it received during Romanticism.⁵

Catherine Lanone's *Context of the Novel* offers certain intriguing theses, not all of them, however, grounded firmly in other texts, the novel's in particular. Surely, following a clearly formulated aim of her research, the author smartly defines the reason for the Creature's humanity and the lack of Victor's moral superiority.⁶ She also proposes to look at less popular works, one of them, in fact, being an astonishing example of resemblance between itself and Mary's novel: Wilkie Collins's *Basil*.⁷ Still, however, these findings are not devoid of small imperfections, most of them resulting from missing direct, explicit references proving the proposed ideas. A reader might not conclude why could be the way of introducing Heathcliff (from *Wuthering Heights*) into the family a "parody of female delivery"⁸; might dispute upon naming the accidental death of William, Victor's little brother, a "killing"⁹; or else dispute whether the relationship between possibly unmarried Walton and his sister was indeed "incestuous" (sic!).¹⁰

Next is the editor's, Andrew Smith's reading — *Scientific Contexts*. Despite a minor yet rather imposing remark, when the author labels the "ghost story competition at the Villa Diodati" infamous without any justification to it (indeed, I believe this to be rather brilliant, for two well-known Gothic works were its offspring), the rest of this chapter makes it probably my favourite of all.¹¹ As if creating yet another argument against Victor's fears of the Creature's monstrous race, Smith notes that knowledge of mechanisms of inheritance had been known long before the novels publication.¹² Smith smartly highlights the scientific aspects of the (arguably, the first sci-fi) novel by firmly grounding them in the then-contemporary scientific moods: the early 19th century scholars believed in a strong dependence of life upon death — a motive or, perhaps, a mech-

⁴ Ibid., pp. 47–48.

⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶ C. Lanone, "The context of the novel", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 58.

⁷ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹ C. Jeray, *Friendship and Monstrosity in Selected Gothic Novels: Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" and Richard Matheson's "I Am Legend"*, diss. University of Wrocław, Wrocław 2016, p. 61; C. Lanone, op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁰ C. Lanone, op. cit., p. 66.

¹¹ A. Smith, "Scientific", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 71.

¹² M. Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, London 1999, p. 127; A. Smith, op. cit., p. 72.

anism also vivid throughout the novel.¹³ Overall, Smith discusses numerous peculiarities within the realm of science which were not so unusual to Shelley's contemporaries, and which all resonate in the novel, defining the strong roots of the novel in the science as known to her. Though not inter-fictional, these examples of literary intertextuality all point to that Mary Shelley indeed devoted much time to read and prepare, trying to articulate her imaginations in a most intelligible manner.

In her *Frankenstein's Politics*, Adriana Craciun offers a considerable insight in the socio-politic contexts of the book. Here, we can find solid references to yet another source of Mary's inspiration — her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. Craciun finds a firm connection between some of Wollstonecraft's values and those uttered by the Creature.¹⁴ What is more, the author pays sufficient attention to the thus far (by no mean within this companion, only within *Frankenstein* criticism generally) neglected narrative by Walton connecting it to the then-present controversies over the Arctic travels.¹⁵ My only complaint would be that to assume the Creature's narrative to be, like Victor's and Walton's, male is still too risky.¹⁶ Indeed, the "he" pronoun is assumed throughout the novel, but as has been argued in numerous writings, if the Creature ought to be a catalyst for all voices of oppression, it should be a gender-neutral "it" and as such should be viewed the Creature's narrative.¹⁷ Still, along with all the other essays within this part, Craciun's well describes the social and political, scientific and literary, domestic and foreign, male and female moods and tendencies contemporary to Mary Shelley.

Admittedly, the second subgroup of essays proves a challenging read, and not always in a wholly positive way. The main problem is that not all ideologies and theories serving here as a matrix actually relevant to the novel. This is not to say that there is some external rule prohibiting such use, but many of them proved useless on the course of the study or were simply ill-employed. What is more, such a limited selection of theories allows one to sharply mark the time in which these readings were conducted — the 2010's. After all, it is arguable whether feminism, queer theory, race studies, ecocriticism or posthumanism will be still relevant to thinkers in the scope of next hundred years or so. How then, are they relevant for a novel written exactly 200 years ago? While some of these authors managed to justify their use of the given theoretical matrixes, others failed miserably.

¹³ A. Smith, op. cit., p. 75.

¹⁴ A. Craciun, "Frankenstein's politics", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 86.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 90–93.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁷ C. Jeray, op. cit., p. 57; S. Styker, "My words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix. Performing trans rage", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 1, 1994, no. 3, pp. 237–254.

To say that feminism is not an issue on the pages of *Frankenstein* is would be more than a misunderstanding; it would seem plain ignorant. However, due to the vast amount of feminist reading of the novel, Angela Wright proposes to view the novel in the centre of an ever-intriguing argument over where it belongs to: the male or female Gothic. Still, some of the supporting claims are not as supportive as it might seem. While, indeed, an occasional absence of a female voice may bespeak its oppression, here, the argument involving the lack of Mrs Saville (Walton's sister) seems ill-grounded.¹⁸ Mary Shelley voiced her concerns through a sufficient female or not-necessarily-male characters to balance the male voices. To my understanding, as complex as some of the Gothic Chinese-box stories can be, adding another narrative layer would make the plot indigestible. However, continuing this wonky argument, the author goes as far so as to construct a peculiar epistemological stitch when she connects the name of Mrs. Saville and Safie.¹⁹ Indeed, connecting Safie's name to yet another character — Mary Wollstonecraft's Sophie — seems fully credited when discussed earlier.²⁰ Here, this connection is definitely too outstretched to be plausible. Apart from that, ascribing the framing of Justine to the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression remains equally unjustified.²¹ Justine, her name stressing her innocence, is framed because she was "at hand". Were it a male caretaker watching over William whom the Creature framed, no one would voice a concern of any oppression, would they? Finally, Mary's change of Elizabeth's origin from a cousin to a foreign orphan was not a result of her becoming "more confident and comfortable in her own experience"²² but simply because the later editions of the novel were published in a society increasingly more hostile towards romantic relations among cousins.

The second essay from this subgroup begins with a question begging for a sarcastic answer. Indeed, to ask the 21st century readers of any novel, "what is not queer" about this book is to expect a crowded "Nothing!". Again, this is not to say that one cannot find homosexual undertones in works written by heterosexuals and direct them exclusively towards Gothic works by Byron, Stoker or Wilde, for even Le Fanu proves a straight individual can well portray a character of extremely vague sexuality. Still, the essay by George E. Haggerty misses the point when trying to decipher any elements challenging the heteronormativity. An aforementioned, crucial to any queer theoretician, dubious gender of the Creature remains harshly bypassed. Instead, the author invites us to a pity-party over the fate of a gay man (why not a woman? why not a gender-fluid individ-

¹⁸ A. Wright, "The female gothic", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁰ J.E. Hogle, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²¹ A. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

ual?) relating him to the Creature only on the basis of the latter's self-abjection.²³ A rather puzzling, meta-discursive smuggling of ideology appears later, when instead of employing pronouns for their helpful determining, the author uses them to make a spectacle of his open-mindedness, with his open-mindedness, diverting entirely the reader's attention by "her or his or their" when referring to every queer reader, which itself limits the non-queer readers, who might feel unwelcome in this argumentative sphere.²⁴ A relevant prism, ill-employed: Haggarty's use of queer theory works against itself. It is male-centred and oppressive. Includes e.g. no possible lesbian undertones nor does it discuss the obvious gender ambiguity of the Creature.

Race and Frankenstein by Patrick Brantlinger also avoids making use of the wonderful potential of race studies in reading the novel. This essay equals the "oppressed" with "raced-differently-than-Caucasian". What is more, instead of drawing on legitimate arguments, such as those connecting e.g. black slaves with the Creature on the basis of his famous exclamation that he possessed "no money, no friends, no kind of property", the author draws on the Creature's skin being yellow and thus perhaps implying his Asian origin (I do grant at least that Brantlinger himself sees this argument shaky). My only question concerning the yellowness of a formerly-deceased-now-animated corpse is: would a red or blue colour likewise denote the deceased's alcoholism or extraterrestriality? It is a dead body's skin's right to look different. I believe in the genius of Mary Shelley. And just as she pictured other dualities — e.g. of males and females, of conservative aristocrats and radical revolutionaries — so would she depict the complexity of racial issues. While disregarding the violent treatment of slaves and non-Caucasian races (shown in the Creature's melancholy over the conquered Native Americans), she also voiced a healthy dose of white pride and a concern over the foreigners in her critique of Muslims as oppressive as Safie's father. There are few black and white issues within the novel, and race is certainly not one of them; however, the challenge it offers was not quite responded to in this chapter.

A most puzzling within the group is the work by Timothy Morton on *Frankenstein and Ecocriticism*. The only clearly formulated argument seems the one on the Creature's apparent vegetarianism, a claim supported by one instance of him deciding to eat only plant-based food instead of meat.²⁵ In my opinion, however, this claim (appearing also in other writings such as by Carol J. Adams's)²⁶ is

²³ G.E. Haggarty, "What is queer about Frankenstein?", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁵ T. Morton, "Frankenstein and ecocriticism", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 144.

²⁶ C.J. Adams, "Frankenstein's vegetarian monster", [in:] *idem, The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, New York 1990.

unwarranted: the Creature changed his diet because he wished to restrain himself from stealing from De Lacey's. He cared little for the nature and environment, however, once he found out Victor's ruining the unfinished female and maddened, the Creature began to devastate all nature around him, which farther proves his vegan diet was out of practical not ideological reasons.²⁷ The remaining excerpts of the essay seem incoherent, with little direct analysis of the text, too much excuse for employing the ecocritical prism taking as much as half of the essay, at times violent and imposing as in the grotesquely prophetic note that "[i]n the future, all texts will be read with regard to environmentality".²⁸ What is more, the reading is filled with vague references (a sudden issue of "anti-Semitism"²⁹) and (too) personal remarks, such as the trip into why we do not and yet why we should read more Heidegger.³⁰ The overall imposing language — ever present "you's" and italicised words every few sentences — all cause me to suspect the essays slipped into the book already after all the other essays were thoroughly revised and accepted, both on basis of merit and language. The weakest in the chain, this essays constitutes the peak of the parabolic structure which I mentioned at the beginning of my review.

Andy Mousley's *Posthuman* draws our attention firstly by a concise yet handy revision of posthuman "scenarios" in art.³¹ He then puts them against the novel's context, forming three separable claims. His reading accords with the findings of other scholars: "Monsters are made not born. Likewise, the benevolent humanity of humans is a matter of cultivation, and not some inalienable fact of human nature".³² This passage summarises the failure of the Creature's upbringing and, self-consciously or not, originates in theories such as Rousseau's noble savage. Optimistically coherent, this essays closes the second part of the companion.

The first in the series of *Adaptations*, Diane Long Hoeveler's *Nineteenth-Century Dramatic Adaptations of Frankenstein* point to numerous important problems. Analysing the inconsistencies of the plays versus the novel, the author manages to show that these changes occurred so as to intensify the dramatisation, entertain and, at other times, to be culturally suitable. Thus, even such a seeming absurdity as incorporation a vampiric character into an adaptation proves justifiable considering the role vampires played several decades after 1818.

Similarly, Mark Jancovich tries to explain the fact that most cinematographic adaptations of the novel vastly differ from the original. He formulates a thesis

²⁷ M. Shelley, op. cit., pp. 104–105.

²⁸ T. Morton, op. cit., p. 152.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 154.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

³¹ A. Mousley, "The Posthuman", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 158.

³² A. Mousley, op. cit., p. 163.

conveying that films stripped the Creature of its intelligence and emotions, because such were the super/antiheroes of the time. The author does not say it, yet his insightful research prompts one to suspect that such cold heroism was an effect of the atmosphere following both world wars? As intriguing and innovative look at the films as it is, still it fails to mention a not-so-recent-anymore adaptation by Hallmark, starring Luke Goss (2004). This adaptation is popular among fans of the novel, simply because it is thus far the most faithful one.

Also stressing the importance of the visual is Christopher Murray's *Frankenstein in Comics and Graphic Novels*. Two particularly note-worthy elements of this work are the reprints of various, intriguing illustrations and an informative claim that humour in parodies was a result of censorship.³³ Indeed, along with some drawings basing solely on the film, some (hope-bringing) on the novel, there are still some which make a comedy out of the Gothic horrors, such as Dick Briefer's.³⁴

The last in the third group, just as welcoming to search through the enumerated artworks, is the work of two scholars: Karen Coats and Farran Norris Sands, who familiarise us with the *Adaptations for Young Readers*. The authors show how reflectively certain themes in the novel (e.g. bullying or abandonment) speak to the minds of the youngest. Some are to entertain, others to educate. The most unusual (yet to some point even expected) are the stories involving the Creature along with various other Gothic monsters, including the well-known series such as Hanna-Barbera's *Scooby-Doo* (1969–2001) and Gendy Tartakovsky's *Hotel Transylvania* (2011 & 2015). This essay is the last among all pointing to the timelessness of the modern-promethean myth coined by Mary Shelley — its uniqueness and yet universality allowing for creation of such artworks.

To conclude, *The Companion* is Creature-like on many levels. Stitched out of many voices, perspectives and prisms, it is not perfect. Still, however, it cannot remain unnoticed and ignored. It conveys various messages — it is up to the readers which one they choose. Yet to omit one and focus too much on the other would be a mistake. All these essays are of substantial value. The more, perhaps, if we find them controversial or against our own claims, for then they inspire us to reflect.

Despite some drawbacks in its form (inconsistent punctuation, use of pronouns and repetitions) and content, *The Companion* remains a vital read not only for scholars (but particularly for them) yet also for the fans of the novel. The book should find a place on the shelf of everyone who wishes to understand where did young Mary Shelley find all her fascinating ideas, how she employed them to serve certain personal or social dilemmas, and why, exactly 200 years later, she still manages to inspire so many artists.

³³ C. Murray, "Frankenstein in comics and graphic novels", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, p. 217.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.