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Michael Laplace-Sinatra

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# Science, Gender and Otherness in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Kenneth Branagh's Film Adaptation

Michael Laplace-Sinatra

Questions of gender and genre in *Frankenstein* remain complex issues for contemporary critics, in the novel itself as well as in its cinematographic adaptations, from John Whale's classic 1931 version to Kenneth Branagh's 1994 "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." Though science seems to be the unifying principle behind the main story of the novel and the films, I will argue that Shelley incorporates science and sexual orientation within her novel in a way that differs significantly from the films, and especially from Branagh's version. There is indeed an engaging dialogue between this post-*Frankenstein* production and the original novel, particularly in the construction of science as the over-important narrative and visual element in the former, and as the absent other in the latter. Science is reclaimed as an insider part of the story by Branagh and exemplifies a misreading of Shelley's attempt at displacing the scientific discourse, with all its gender politics, outside the novel. Similarly, Shelley's decision to leave open for interpretation the sexual politics of her novel is read authoritatively by Branagh with a strict heterosexual agenda, even though his intention is actually undermined by some of his directorial decisions.

Adapting *Frankenstein* to the cinema is, of course, not an easy task, and I should say from the outset that I consider Branagh's version to be one of the best adaptations so far, though maybe for reasons he would not put forward himself. Defining *Frankenstein* is probably the first difficulty one faces when attempting to transpose the story to the big screen since, as Brian Aldiss remarks, "*Frankenstein* is generically ambivalent, hovering between a novel, Gothic, and science fiction" (Aldiss 54). For Branagh, the

Gothic dimension of the story had the most appeal, as he recognised in an interview with Ray Greene:

This isn't a horror story. . . . I've always thought of it as being a sort of Gothic fairytale, with big monsters, and big shadows on the wall, and a cruel streak, like there are in fairytales. It's very full, very profound, at the same time as being just a corking yarn that you can scare people with. (Branagh 1994b)

Branagh also opens his film with the voice-over of 'Mary Shelley' reading the following extract from the 1831 preface:

I busied myself to think of a story which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror . . . one to make the reader afraid to look around, to curdle the blood and quicken the beating heart. (Branagh 1994a, 32)

The novel no doubt contains numerous Gothic elements, and understandably so since it is the result of a ghost story writing contest between Mary Shelley (then still Mary Godwin), Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and Byron's private doctor John William Polidori. The horror / Gothic dimension of the novel was clearly present in Shelley's mind, as this other extract from the 1831 preface shows:

O! if I could only contrive one [ghost story] which could frighten my reader as I myself had been frightened that night! Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me. 'I have found it! What terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow.' (Shelley 172)

Shelley was definitely successful in investing her novel with an extremely compelling sense of terror, and the association of the name Frankenstein with horror dates back from as early as a month after the premiere of Peake's *Presumption: or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, the first dramatisation of the novel, performed in London in 1823. From then onwards, Shelley's novel became a norm, a set standard by which similar writings as well as similar scientific events were to be judged.

Though I expect most readers to be familiar with Shelley's novel, I will briefly sketch out the textual construction of the book in order to point out some of the differences between the novel and Branagh's cinematographic adaptation. *Frankenstein* is an open-ended series of dialogues between present and absent characters, between active male and passive female characters, and between science fact and science fiction. The re-telling of Victor

Frankenstein's tale by Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Walton Saville in a series of letters places Victor's story within a narrative frame, which will then incorporate the (re)telling of the Creature's story as told by Victor still within Walton's epistolary writings. The very nature of a novel — writing— is made explicitly obvious by Shelley's use of the epistolary genre, though she also cleverly makes speech a key feature of the story by depicting it as an exchange of speech on an oral level with the reported discussions that take place between Victor and Walton, Victor and the Creature, and the Creature and Walton.

Victor's tale is constituted by a series of episodes, chronologically arranged, which describe his childhood, his training as a doctor, the creation of his Creature, and the events that follow this act, namely the death of his entire family, save one of his brothers.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the novel, Walton, though very sympathetic to Victor from the first moment they meet, questions the veracity of Victor's story. The questioning elements of the dialogues between both male and female characters, and indirectly between Mary Shelley and her readers, create a particular atmosphere throughout the novel. The letters from Elizabeth, Victor's fiancée, certainly contain numerous questions, as do Margaret Walton Seville's absent ones.<sup>2</sup>

As far as Elizabeth is concerned, I would argue that the use of questions is a way of asserting a character apparently very passive throughout the story: Elizabeth remains at home and obeys Victor until her death, directly caused by Victor. If, as Lacan argues, "What constitutes me as subject is my question" (Lacan 86), it becomes clear that Shelley cleverly stresses her importance in the narrative and invites the reader to reconsider Elizabeth's place within the story with regard to Victor and the patriarchal society in which she lives, and partly because of which she dies. Elizabeth is an important character in the novel because of what she represents, and indirectly criticises. Throughout Branagh's film, the character of Elizabeth is much stronger than it is in the novel. She is the one who refuses to marry Victor at the beginning of the film, telling him that he has to go and study to become a doctor (whereas he was ready to abandon his study and stay with her in Geneva). She has also several arguments with Victor, standing firm and eventually deciding to leave him. To turn Elizabeth into such an active, strong-willed character might at first seem to be Branagh's politically correct reading of the novel, but it is in fact a clever transposition of Shelley's own intention to depict Elizabeth as an important character in her story. To turn Elizabeth into such an active character implicitly assigns some stereotypical feminine attributes to Victor: he is shown several times to be submissive to Elizabeth's wishes, and cries abundantly when she is about to leave him for good. Once again, Elizabeth is the decision-maker,

asking Victor to marry her and telling him "Marry me today and tomorrow tell me everything" (Branagh 1994a, 121).

The other important female character of the novel is Margaret Walton Saville, primary recipient of the story of Victor Frankenstein as addressee of Walton's letters. She is another interesting case of an apparently silent speaker. As for Margaret, whose initials, incidentally, are identical to Mary Shelley's, we never hear her side of the story, or so it seems. The self-effacing opening word of the novel, i.e. "You", seems to enhance the (unconscious?) acceptance of female non-assertivity by leaving behind her identity in the "darkness and distance" (Shelley 156) with which the work ends. Yet, as William Veeder remarks,

[Margaret] fails to get into action—into the plot or into Robert's adult life—not because True Womanhood binds her to the home or even to vitiating concepts, but because Promethean men are incorrigible. Robert would not heed her before he left, and he will listen still less upon a return which proves her right all along. (Veeder 215)

Thus, the character of Margaret underscores Shelley's comment on the apparent submission of female characters in her novel. It is by putting their attitudes into perspective with the male characters' ones that Shelley shows how men are misled in their actions.

However, even though Branagh chooses to include the character of Walton to frame Victor's story in his film, he deletes any references to Margaret, thus removing Shelley's implied criticism of the male characters from the story. Furthermore, he depicts a Walton who is no longer very friendly towards, and in admiration of, Frankenstein. Only present at the beginning and the end of the film, Branagh's Walton does not believe Victor's story, describing it as the delirium of a madman at the end of the film: "He died raving about some phantom. . . . He told me a story that . . . couldn't be true. He was mad" (Branagh 1994a, 136). One of the consequences of Branagh's choice is that Walton's strong attachment to Victor in the novel does not appear in the film, therefore making more space for Victor's heterosexual relationship to Elizabeth. It also removes any possible hint of homosexuality between Walton and Victor that could be read into the story,<sup>3</sup> whereas the novel contains numerous implied references to its sexual / homoerotic dimension.

And it is important to point out this homoerotic dimension because, as Mark Simpson notes, "*when revealed*, it is the greatest challenge to virility and thus masculinity's claim to authenticity, to naturalness, to coherence -

to dominance" (Simpson 7). This is to a great extent what Branagh is trying to prevent, though ultimately unsuccessfully. Branagh's attempt at concealing such a reading partly comes from the very nature of mainstream cinema and its relationship to homosexuality. Steve Neale describes this very well when he remarks that

the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male: it is one of the fundamental reasons why the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed. Were this not the case, mainstream cinema would have openly to come to terms with the male homosexuality it so assiduously seeks either to denigrate or deny. As it is, male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed. (Neale 19)

Whereas readings of *Frankenstein* in terms of homosexuality, masturbation and narcissistic love are not hard to come by in scholarly works, a reading of Branagh's film and his relationship to the characters played by Helena Bonham Carter and Robert de Niro with the same criteria would certainly be more unusual, though there are many reasons for providing such a reading.

The language used to describe the making of the Creature by Frankenstein in the novel does suggest masturbation, as Gordon D. Hirsch and David E. Musselwhite have pointed out (Hirsch 126, Musselwhite 62-64): Victor describes how he uses his "profane fingers" in a "solitary chamber" where he keeps his "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 32), and he complains that his "heart often sickened at the work of my hands" (Shelley 113). Furthermore, as Judith Halberstam points out,

The endeavor of Frankenstein to first create life on his own and then prevent his monster from mating suggests, if only by default, a homoerotic tension which underlies the incestuous bond. Frankenstein's voluntary exclusion from friends and family in pursuit of the secret of creating life also hints at the sexual nature of Victor's apparent withdrawal from all social intercourse. His creation of 'a being like myself' hints at both masturbatory and homosexual desires which the scientist attempts to sanctify with the reproduction of another being. (Halberstam 42)

A Freudian reading of *Frankenstein* would also confirm the homosexual dimension of the relationship existing between Frankenstein and the Creature. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, *Frankenstein* is a story about a male

who not only is persecuted by, but considers himself transparent to and often under the compulsion of, another male. If we follow Freud in hypothesizing that such a sense of persecution represents the fearful, phantasmic rejection by recasting of an original homosexual (or even merely homosocial) desire, then it would make sense to think of [*Frankenstein*] as embodying strongly homophobic mechanisms. (Sedgwick 91-92)

Because of the absence of the numerous references to Frankenstein's feeling of persecution that one finds in the text, Branagh's film seems to present an interesting alternative to such a reading, or at least it does so at first. In fact the film re-inscribes Victor's homosexuality by over-emphasising his heterosexuality. The film never seems to doubt Victor's sexuality whereas the novel is more open to interpretation. Victor is obsessed with the Creature, who repeatedly makes his pulse beat faster and his brow sweat. For instance, Victor declares: "I remembered also the nervous fever with which I had been seized just at the time that I dated my creation" (Shelley 49).<sup>4</sup> Victor also reacts nervously to his father's comment:

For some time I was lost in conjecture as to the cause of [your unhappiness]; but yesterday an idea struck me, and if it is well founded, I conjure you to avow it. Reserve on such a point would not only be useless, but draw down treble misery on us all. (Shelley 103)

To which Victor reacts by "trembl[ing] violently at this exordium" (Shelley 103). Victor's father goes on to say, with much more prescience than Victor gives him credit, that

you may have met with another whom you may love; and considering yourself as bound in honour to your cousin, this struggle may occasion the poignant misery which you appear to feel. (Shelley 104)

Victor reassures him that he loves his cousin, but he does so in terms that explicitly offer an alternate love to the suspected heterosexual relationship Victor's father fears: "I never saw any woman who excited, as Elizabeth does, my warmest admiration and affection" (Shelley 104). That Victor might have met another man is clearly not a possibility for his father, and to a certain extent neither is it for Victor himself, though he is certainly

much more excited physically by the thought of the Creature and its physical presence than he is by Elizabeth.

Later on in the novel, the possibility of Victor's love for another person is brought up again, this time by Elizabeth herself, when she asks: "Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—do you not love another?" (Shelley 130). Margaret Homans comments that

This is in fact the case, for the demon, the creation of Frankenstein's imagination, resembles in many ways the romantic object desire, the beloved invented to replace, in a less threatening form, the powerful mother who must be killed. (Homans 104)

But what if the Creature had really become Victor's 'romantic object desire' and not only the embodiment of his Oedipus complex? The manuscript version of the novel also offers a supplementary argument for the possibility of homosexual love. In the draft version of this passage, Mary Shelley wrote: "Answer me, I conjure you by our mutual happiness, with simple truth do you not love ~~as you would wish to love a wife~~ another?" (Robinson II, 541) By deleting a reference to a wife, Shelley leaves the gender of Victor's love unspecified. Once again, Branagh's film removes such a reading by having Elizabeth go to Geneva to ask Victor to come home with her: she fears that she might be denied her wedding night by losing Victor to somebody else, with the very implicit notion that this somebody is a woman of course. To a large extent, Branagh's film offers a reading of the novel that is both traditional, in that it refers to previous cinematographic adaptations, and male-oriented, in that it focuses on the male characters and their heterosexuality without including Shelley's critique of them, or her deliberate openness regarding questions of sexuality.

Brian Easlea reads *Frankenstein* as an exposure of "the compulsive character of masculine science" (Easlea 35), a reading that Branagh would no doubt agree with. Yet, it is interesting that, where Branagh sees an occasion to make the creation one of the most important scenes of his film, Shelley is much more elusive. It is true that, as Aldiss mentions, "[Shelley] appeals to scientific evidence for the veracity of her tale" (Aldiss 1995, 78). Yet I would argue that the scientific discourse is, to borrow Derrida's words, "en retrait" in the novel. "En retrait" means both retracted, that is taken out of the narrative, and re-traced, that is say re-inscribed within the narrative. In other words, Shelley integrates the scientific dimension of her novel within the text by simultaneously eliminating traces of science and re-tracing these elements in the sub-text of the main narrative. This is the case, for instance, in Victor's early interest in science that appears in the manuscript but which was removed from the published novel.<sup>5</sup> This is also particularly

true of the scene describing the creation of the Creature. Whereas the reader would expect to be told how the experiment is conducted, Shelley is rather quick in dispatching the origin of Frankenstein's story. Shelley's unwillingness to elaborate on the life-giving apparatus may be a deliberate gesture in so far as the machine poses an immediate threat to the exclusivity of female generation. Writing science in *Frankenstein* thus becomes an act of denial, resulting in a meaningful silence. As opposed to the genesis of the universe as told in the *Bible*, where the Word was the beginning of all creation, Mary Shelley literally *unspeaks* the birth of the Creature. The absence of description frustrates all male attempts at emulating natural birth which cannot but end in destructive chaos and annihilation. Shelley's husband sympathises with his wife's views when he writes in the 1818 preface that the "physical fact [of artificial reproduction]" is "impossible" (Shelley 5), thereby stressing that giving birth is a female prerogative. It is obvious that Victor suffers from 'womb envy'.<sup>6</sup> In fact, his whole project shows the extent of his wish for supplementing women's reproductive power by a (male) scientific approach to the creation of life. The haunting quality of the Creature's final speech, containing the phrase "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion"<sup>7</sup> (Shelley 155), leaves little room for misinterpretation. It is equally important that Mary Shelley, in the 1831 preface, highlights the fact that she, and she alone, was capable of producing a complete story in the ghost writing contest, for this can be read as a reinforcement of the privilege of female productivity and reproduction.

As I have mentioned, Mary Shelley is very elusive concerning the actual experiment and its proceedings in her novel. Victor declares:

I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of life into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the pane, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the Creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (Shelley 34)

Victor then meditates for a moment on his achievement and, "unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep" (Shelley 34). That's it. No lightning bolt, no giant piece of machinery, and definitely no cry of "it's alive! Alive!" Not surprisingly, Branagh finds this aspect of the novel particularly useful:

Perhaps the most abiding and astonishing thing is the novel's very unspecific evocation of the creation process: Shelley almost completely ignores the details. It is a stroke of brilliance, really, because it allowed artists in other mediums to interpret that part of the story in many imaginative and exciting ways. (Branagh 1994a, 9)

The preface to the 1831 edition is in fact where one should turn to find a more detailed description of this scene. Here, Shelley describes her mental vision which triggered the writing of the novel:

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with uneasy, half-vital motion. (Shelley 172)

Whereas the novel lacks a detailed description of the creation of the Creature, any cinematographic adaptation requires a creation scene for two main reasons. First, because of the cultural weight of Whale's 1931 film and its famous creation scene, with its scientific apparatus or "engine" and lightning bolt. Then, the nature of cinema itself implies the necessity of visual elements referring to a previously known setting to work for the cinema-goers. Indeed, as Jean-François Lyotard notes, the appearance of reality is the basic requirement for a cinematic experience to take place:

The image must cast the object or set of objects as the double of a situation that from then on will be supposed real. The image is representational because recognizable, because it addresses itself to the eye's *memory*, to fixed references or identification, references known, but in the sense of 'well-known', that is, familiar and established. (Lyotard 174)

Because of this set of references, the viewer may relate to the events happening on the screen. Thus, the two elements I have ascribed for the inclusion of a creation scene in a cinematographic adaptation of *Frankenstein* are related. In other words, any viewer has come to expect a creation scene to resemble Whale's in some ways and therefore it is impossible for any director not to include such a scene. Whale's version has become the reference scene by which other films are judged either for their innovation or for their homage to what is now the archetypal cinematographic creation scene.

Branagh's version of the creation scene is very stimulating in the sense that it provides a fascinating reading of this particular event of the novel, as

well as fulfilling the viewer's expectations. Branagh's own comment on this scene is quite revealing here:

we wanted to make it as plausible as possible. We have about five [life-giving devices]. You know, acupuncture needles in key energy points as have been described by the Chinese for thousands and thousands of years, and amniotic fluid as a kind of biogenic agent. We threw electric eels into the mix 'cause then you've got a very sexual image. We have them in a huge kind of scrotum and they come down a huge tube into a great sort of womb and fertilize this embryonic Creature. (Branagh 1994b, n. pag)

Branagh rightly interprets the creation scene from the novel as a crucial part of the story, though it is not in fact for the reasons he would advance. Whereas Shelley undermines the male attempt at replacing women, and displaces the scientific dimension of this scene into a meaningful non-description, Branagh does more than just re-inscribe science as the major element of *Frankenstein*: he makes it the major part of this scene, and the climax of his film. Brian Aldiss provides an interesting gloss on this scene:

In Branagh's film, amino acids are injected into the Creature's feet and it is born in—or tipped out of—a copper bath full of amniotic fluid, in a striking approximation of real birth. Child and father (Robert de Niro and Kenneth Branagh) splash together nakedly in the gushing waters. This may not have happened in the book, but it certainly does in the sub-text. (Aldiss 1995, 78)

The creation scene is indeed a birth scene in its own right, but I would argue that the sub-text present in this scene is the homoerotic dimension that Aldiss does not mention; neither, for that matter, does Shelley, though, as I have suggested, such a reading is undoubtedly present in the novel.

Whereas Shelley had rendered women absent from her novel, and emphasised the taking on of maternal quality by her principal character, Branagh's film adds an explicit sexual dimension to the creation / birth scene. Zakhariyeva describes the moment Branagh attempts to help his Creature stand amidst the sliding amniotic fluid: "Creator and creation embrace in an ambivalent scene of struggle and affection; their hug is an expression of a desire to separate from each other and at the same time to help each other stand erect" (Zakhariyeva 745). Zakhariyeva accurately anticipates the rejection of the Creature and she also invites, though unwillingly perhaps, a reading of this scene in sexual terms: "stand erect". Branagh does physically support his Creature, provides it (him?) with a cardiac massage and

ultimately engages in what looks like an enticing parody of sexual intercourse which reflects the homosexual side of his character in the film as well as in the novel. I refer to the Creature as 'him' because it is assumed to be male by Victor, who, more than anyone else, should know. Actually, the manuscript version contains a more precise description of the Creature: "it was on a dreary night of November that I beheld my man completed" (Robinson I: 97). For a modern reader, 'my man' has obviously an interesting *double-entendre*. However, Shelley chose to replace 'my man' by 'the accomplishment of my toils', and thus she offered the reader an ungendered Creature, a being only defined sexually by Victor and his relationship to it.

In Branagh's film, the 'birth' of the Creature is already highly erotic as the spectator is able to see his body naked, as well as Branagh's character engaged in his creation / sexual act topless, sweating and visibly very excited by the whole affair. That Branagh's body is so exposed is in itself unusual in Hollywood films. Indeed, as Paul Burston remarks,

Historically, popular cinema has shied away from presenting sexually explicit images of its male stars. Of course this is no accident. Socially and cinematically, male authority is bound up with the act of looking. Any representation of masculinity denoting 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is therefore perceived as a threat to dominant notions of what it means to be a 'real' (i.e. rigidly heterosexual) man. (Burston 111)

Thus, even though Branagh attempts to prevent any potential misreading of the story which would imply homosexuality, his choice to expose himself is one of the elements that undercuts this. Similarly, when Branagh uses the famous lines from Whale's classic version of the novel, "it's alive, it's alive" (Anobile 95) though pronounced more slowly, as if realising for the first time what he has just achieved, following the tapping of the Creature's hand against its artificial womb, the camera angle re-emphasises Branagh's physical presence by encompassing only his hairy, sweaty torso and thus offering another detailed shot of his (masculine) anatomy.

Then, the actual birth process involving electric eels cannot but call forth an anticipatory climax for the Creature as it twitches under the electricity and the biting, evoking an orgasmic pleasure of great intensity. Branagh himself admits the highly sexual dimension of this scene when he comments:

the entire conception / creation process is full of explicitly sexual imagery. . . . There is a tremendously thrilling, sexual, musical sequence leading up to a moment that is without music—you hear just

the slurping of the fluid and this Thing, grunting and groaning.  
(Branagh 1994a, 20)

Making good use of the cinematographic medium, Branagh combines music and rapid movements of the camera to emphasise the growing excitation of his own character. Yet Branagh does not fully realise what his character is really getting excited about. A possible answer is found in the novel, with Victor's grandiloquent declaration: "a new species would bless me as its creator and source" (Shelley 37). That he might have created a new species to satisfy him sexually can result from Victor's (mis)reading of the Bible: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy *pleasure* they are and were created" (Revelation 4:11 - emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> Then again, if Victor is to be considered as a god, he does not play his role properly for he does not grant the Creature's request. Whereas the Bible says "For every Creature of God *is* good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving" (Timothy 4:4), Victor considers the Creature to be evil and denies him a companion.

Without going into detail about Victor's difficult relationships with women, whether with his mother, Elizabeth, Justine or the female Creature he attempts to create and then destroy,<sup>9</sup> it will suffice to say that Frankenstein's project is typical of what Anne Mellor calls "a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality" (Mellor 220). Ellen Moers comments that

*Frankenstein* seems to be distinctly a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of after-birth. (Moers 218)

Branagh's film comes close to rendering this aspect of the novel in the scene described above, as well as in the (bloody) death of Victor's mother when giving birth to William. Though this is not in the novel—the mother actually dies when taking care of Elizabeth—it reinforces the traumatic dimension of after-birth for Victor. It is also the origin of Victor's scientific experiments. As Zakharijeva notes, "Birth is seen as murder and Frankenstein's denial to accept his mother's death is in fact a denial to accept natural birth. This denial is the basis of his obsession with his future scientific discovery." (Zakharijeva 744) In the end, Frankenstein's rejection of his own offspring illustrates the masculine inability to deal with the trauma of after-birth. I would suggest that it is not surprising that Victor's rejection takes place as soon as he contemplates the finished product of his

experimentation: the body of his Creature. Deleuze's discussion of the body in *Cinema 2: The Time Image* is particularly relevant here:

Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life.  
(Deleuze 189)

By contemplating the body of the Creature, Victor is reminded of the principle of life and the ultimate failure of his artificial construct. But there is also the possibility that Victor is reacting to his own sexuality when he is confronting the naked body of his Creature. When the Creature finds himself hanging in the air, unconscious and completely exposed to Branagh's eyes which face him (though of course the Creature's anatomy is not shown, being shrouded in a protective shade, maybe in fear of exposing another monstrous part?), Branagh declares "what have I done?" (Branagh 1994a, 81). Is this only a moral reaction to his experiment, or is he reacting to the undepictable sexual apparatus of his creation that he is now viewing fully,<sup>10</sup> with all that it connotes for his own sexuality?

In Shelley's novel, Victor's sexuality cannot be said to be qualified by his relationship to Elizabeth. As Maurice Hindle notes, when Victor writes to Elizabeth "all that I may one day enjoy is centered on you" (Shelley 131), it becomes clear that "Victor only ever really perceived her as a possible possession, and never as an erotic and sexually attractive being" (Hindle 101).<sup>11</sup> In Branagh's film, Victor's sexuality is entirely based on Elizabeth. In fact, Elizabeth comes to embody Victor's heterosexuality in the film. Elizabeth's name was Myrtella in the early parts of the manuscript, a name which, if kept, would have reinforced her symbolic position in the novel since myrtle, held sacred by Venus, was an emblem of love (Robinson I: lviii). Elizabeth is also the first one to mention their wedding-night, and consequently introduces an explicit sexual dimension to her relationship with Victor from the very beginning of the film. This famous wedding-night, and the implied sense of forthcoming heterosexual pleasures, becomes the emblem of Victor's heterosexuality, being mentioned again and again in the film, as if to convince the audience of Victor's sexuality. For instance, when Victor begins his series of experiments, he writes to his family to describe his study and adds a postscript for Elizabeth evoking the pleasure he intends to give her, and to receive from her, on their wedding-night. The wedding night itself is an assertion of Victor's heterosexuality in Branagh's version in so far as, where the novel shows him unable to proceed with his (sexual) relationship with Elizabeth, the film version explicitly shows Victor and Elizabeth kissing, fondling each other, and taking off their clothes (though the audience is only allowed a view of Branagh's

naked chest - again). Branagh stresses this passionate embrace with sweeping movements of the camera and the sound of romantic violins. But at the same time, this scene also illustrates the director's nervousness in leaving a potential homosexual reading of the relationship between Victor and the Creature open for interpretation. However, this reassertion of the character's sexuality is again undermined since Victor still cannot complete the sexual act.

Like many other nineteenth-century novels recently adapted for the cinema, *Frankenstein* provides a number of directorial challenges. The intricate issue of gender and genre and the resulting extraordinary non-discourse inscribed in Shelley's novel make this work unique, and, by their very nature, these features will always get lost in any cinematographic adaptation. Branagh's version is no exception to this rule. Yet, though sometimes unwillingly, Branagh succeeds in recreating some of the novel's ambiguities about gender and sexuality. Ultimately, a film cannot be and should not be a mere transposition of a story into another medium. And this is where Branagh's adaptation is particularly successful: he manages to present a visually striking film, which is closely based on the story and yet fully takes into account the nature of its medium. Image and music are now added to the narrative, and the imaginative creation scene satisfies the viewers' cultural expectations.

*St. Catherine's College, Oxford*

## Notes

I would like to thank Charles Robinson for his generous comments on an earlier version of this article, as well as for his invaluable edition of the *Frankenstein Notebooks*.

1. Incidentally, the only surviving member of the Frankenstein family is the one apparently not destined to be a scientist. Branagh includes only one brother in the film, thus emphasising the non-existence of Victor's family when he goes after the Creature.
2. At least, the potential existence of Margaret's questions is implied in Walton's letters, where he seems to respond to, and anticipate, them. For instance, he repeatedly discusses his health and his likely return in his letters, thus answering in advance those questions that Margaret would certainly ask him.

3. *Frankenstein* can indeed be read as having a homosexual dimension as early as the beginning of the novel, with Walton's numerous references to male companionship. As Paul Hammond remarks, "we approach the story of Frankenstein's act of all-male creativity via a preliminary narrative of unavailing male creativity and disappointed male desire." (Hammond 124) Furthermore, Walton's description of Victor as "the brother of my heart" (Shelley 15) illustrates how his relationship to Victor in the novel can be read as another instance of repressed homosexuality or, more precisely, a case of homosexual narcissistic love that Freud describes in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality'.
4. Incidentally, this sentence does not figure in the manuscript of the novel (see Robinson I: 175). It is rather fortuitous that Shelley felt like adding an extra pun on Victor's relationship with the Creature.
5. Shelley wrote in the draft manuscript of her first chapter "~~In this account of my early youth I wish particularly to mention those circumstances which led to and nourished my taste for that science which was the principal amusement of my boyish day and in the end decided my destiny~~" (Robinson I: 15). She also included, and deleted again, the same passage in her second chapter (see Robinson I: 27).
6. I borrow this term from Helen W. Robbins' discussion of David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, in which she defines 'womb envy' as "a feeling of impotence clearly stemming from [the protagonists of the films'] jealousy of female reproductive power." (Robbins 135)
7. It is worth noting that the word 'abortion' in the fair-copy was written by Percy Bysshe Shelley (see Robinson II: 767), thus reinforcing his statement in the 1818 preface.
8. Following the "birth" of the creature in John Whale's film, Frankenstein exclaims "In the name of God. Now I know what it feels like to be God" (Anobile 96), thus making explicit his taking-over of Divine attributes.
9. One may note that the "resurrected" Elizabeth chooses to kill herself in the film and thus indirectly denies Victor's control over her life, and also her death.
10. Incidentally, the only instance of the Creature's sexual potential being explicitly referred to is in Mel Brook's 1974 film *Young Frankenstein*,

in which the Creature is shown as an amazing, indefatigable lover in a heterosexual relationship.

11. My reading differs from Hindle's in that he reads the Creature's relationship to Victor as a competitive threat for the sexual enjoyment of Elizabeth on the wedding night, the Creature desiring to rape and murder Elizabeth in order to deprive Victor of sexual fulfilment, whereas I see Elizabeth's death as the physical manifestation of the Creature's loving feeling for Victor. As Jane Moore remarks, "a lover's discourse and the discourse of desire always, at least at a figural level, involve death." (Moore 142)

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