

## MARY SHELLEY’S FRANKENSTEIN TRANSLATED: MONSTROSITY AND DEMONISATION

*Vitana Kostadinova*  
*Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv*

This paper discusses Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (the 1831 edition) in view of its interpretations along the lines of monstrosity and demonisation, and how these relate to the language of the first Bulgarian translation of the novel in 1981. It touches upon the act of creation, science and the scientist, and deviation as monstrosity before it focuses on the intertextualities with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. It also elaborates on the untranslatability of cultural layers when it comes to connotations or to the ambivalent usage of words such as *daemon*.

**Key words:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, translation, monster, monstrosity, daemon, demonisation

When, in the summer of 1816, Mary Godwin came up with the idea of “the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and ... show[ing] signs of life” (Shelley, M. 1831: Introduction 11), she had no idea this was to become one of the greatest myths of modern time, “open to all kinds of adaptation and elaboration” (Baldick 1987: 2). As all works of genius *Frankenstein* lends itself to various interpretations, and tapping into the major ones demonstrates the centrality of the problem of “monstrosity and demonisation”. The present discussion traces these interpretations and uses them as the contextualizing canvas in order to then compare and contrast the demons of the original to the monsters in the first Bulgarian translation of the novel (1981). It also comments on the untranslatability of the layers of Miltonic tradition and Romantic moral relativism.

The inscribed reading, according to the author’s introduction for the 1831 edition, has to do with “the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world” (Shelley, M. 1831: Introduction 11). The circumstances of the Creature’s existence are termed “monstrous” by Percy Shelley in his anonymous review written back in 1817 or 1818 and published in the *Athenaeum* in 1832 (Shelley, P. 1995: 82). On

these grounds critics branded the text “sacrilegious”. An alternative line of analysis takes up scientific progress and the price humanity are prepared to pay for inventions and discoveries. Here the monstrous is associated with the scientist: “in creating the monster Frankenstein has created – or freed – part of himself” (Wilkie and Hurt 1996: 670). Baldick’s term, “the technological reduction” cautions against interpretive simplifications of the novel as a warning against the monster science because the text is ambiguous enough (Baldick 1987: 7), as encapsulated in Frankenstein’s final words:

Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.

(Shelley, M. 1831: Walton, §30)

There is no final judgment on the adequacy of pursuing one’s dreams, even if Walton himself gives up the quest to the North Pole.

The Gothic heritage is another obvious domain in the novel, even though *Frankenstein* lacks the traditional trio of hero, villain and damsel-in-distress. One direction, in which this takes us, is the psychological reading of the Gothic as the break-through of the suppressed feelings and emotions in a culture that prioritises rationality, a pre-Freudian “return of the repressed” type of narrative. Such formulas have been applied to Mary Shelley’s masterpiece, claiming that it is about human nature or, in the phrase of Fiona Sampson, about “an all too human monster” (Sampson 2018). More extravagantly, an undergraduate of biological sciences renders the Creature-Creator binary along the lines of “paranoid schizophrenia” (Urizar 2016: 21), which re-groups monstrosity with madness.

A long-standing interpretation of the text insists on its political implications, from the radical vs. conservative implications to the role of the French Revolution in portraying the monster. An ideological off-shoot is, obviously, related to feminism and succinctly expressed by Anne Mellor: *Frankenstein* is “a book about what happens when a man tries to procreate without a woman.” (Mellor 2003: 10). In other words, misogynistic monstrosity lurks in interpretations that focus on Frankenstein’s fear of female sexuality.

Many would agree that the novel showcases otherness and demonstrates society’s intolerance towards the Other. Under the circumstances racial and ethnic otherness (or, potentially, any form of it) appears monstrous and demonic:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an

incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.

(Cohen 2007: 202)

In the spring and summer of 1817, Percy Shelley wrote the poem “Laon and Cythna”, in which the protagonists are a brother and a sister who have an incestuous relationship – it was his aim to present readers with a practice radically different from their own and thus test their open-mindedness (Holmes 1987: 380). It is no revelation that husband and wife may share an agenda of provoking audiences and trying out their tolerance.

The fact that explications of the novel proliferate with none of them cancelling out the rest indicates the centrality of its narrative to our experience of life. Along with other Romantic publications, *Frankenstein* introduces moral relativism. The all-important precursor is Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In relating the story of a sailor shooting an albatross, the ballad zooms into the responses of the crew, who first rebuke him for having killed the bird “That made the breeze to blow”, then change their minds and approve of his act: “’Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, / That bring the fog and mist”, and finally single him out as the cause of their misfortunes (Coleridge 1957: ll. 96, 101-102, 139-142). Good and evil are not fixed notions; they are rather a matter of utility: what suits the crew is naturally right, what inconveniences them is certainly wrong. Coleridge’s poem is referenced in the novel more than once: Walton mentions it in his second letter to his sister, drawing a parallel between himself and the protagonist, whereas Frankenstein quotes from it to illustrate how he felt after bringing his Creature to life (Shelley, M. 1831: Letter II, 6; Chapter 5, §7). Mary was undeniably spellbound by the ballad when she first heard the poet recite it to her father, aged eight and hiding behind the couch with her step-sister. The event was made even more memorable by her step-mother who, upon discovering the girls were not in bed, “flounced into Godwin’s study, pulled the culprits from behind the couch, and marched them up to the nursery” (Gordon 2016: 31). Charlotte Gordon argues that the encounter with the Mariner, who has no choice but to tell his story again and again, taught the future novelist about the struggle to get rid of one’s own creation (Gordon 2016: 30). Some ten years later, while Mary was busying herself with her first literary project, Byron wrote his dramatic poem *Manfred*, which she read soon after its publication on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1817 (Mellor 1989: 71). Very much like

*Frankenstein, Manfred* draws upon the Gothic and collapses the hero—villain binary opposition by posing the central character as both. What this does in terms of morality is question the principles of good and evil. To add more detail to the binary opposition, the Byronic hero uses the phrase “Now to my task” (Byron 2015: Act I, Scene I), echoing the Attendant Spirit in Milton’s *Comus*, and yet, he is also the one who says “for I have ceased/ To justify my deeds unto myself/ The last infirmity of evil” (Byron 2015: Act I, Scene II); he is the moral winner at the end of the poem when he dies on his own terms but he does not distinguish between angels and demons when he addresses the spirit of hell as “Thou false fiend” and his companions as “thy surrounding angels”, while the narrative guidelines put them in the same category, “the demons disappear” (Byron 2015: Act III, Scene IV). In 1821, in his preface to “A Vision of Judgement”, Southey positioned Byron along with Percy Shelley in the Satanic School of poetry (Southey 1821: xx-xxi). Readers of such Romantic texts as Byron’s remain uncertain who is to blame, but this is equally true of *Frankenstein*.

An essential aspect of the *Frankenstein* novel is the representation of the Creature as monstrous and d(a)emonic. The narrative structure gives the reader access to Walton’s, Frankenstein’s and the Creature’s evaluations, but does not allow for Mary Shelley’s labels, so we need to extrapolate her opinions from her narrative decisions. In terms of direct characterisation or self-characterisation of the Creature, the narrators predominantly use the words “fiend” (39 times), “monster” (35 times), “wretch” (20 times out of 64 examples of usage overall), “daemon” (18 times), “devil” (11 times), and “demoniacal” (3 times) – the count includes major derivatives such as “fiendish”, “monstrous” or “wretched”. Out of these, the word “wretch” seems the least hateful as it accommodates the Creature’s feelings of unhappiness and misery that hint at his perspective on events. It is also the word that Frankenstein often uses self-referentially and can, therefore, be associated with some degree of sympathy. As a label it bridges the gap between Creator and Creature early on as both are wretched, i.e. unhappy. Other references are directly reminiscent of *Paradise Lost*: in Milton’s poem “Fiend” is used to signify Satan, often “Arch-Fiend” (26 times overall); “Devil” has the same objective correlative when capitalised (15 times), whereas the lower case noun and the adjective “devilish” are applied more generally; “monster” and “monstrous” (14 times) combine biblical threats with the horror of incompatible body parts: “Dagon his name, sea-monster, upward man/ And downward fish” (Milton 1821: Book I). Having read *Paradise Lost*, Frankenstein’s Creature acquires a double self-identification with Adam,

the first of his kind, and with Satan, the destroyer. Even the latter's jealousy of the companionship of Adam and Eve is mapped onto the Creature's envy of Frankenstein's marriage to Elizabeth:

Aside the Devil turned  
For envy; yet with jealous leer malign  
Eyed them askance, and to himself thus plained.  
Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two,  
Imparadised in one another's arms,  
The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill  
Of bliss on bliss; while I to Hell am thrust,  
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,  
Among our other torments not the least,  
Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines.

(Milton 1821: Book IV)

The Creature can see Frankenstein and Elizabeth "Imparadised in one another's arms" in his mind's eye when he threatens, "I go; but remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night." (Shelley, M. 1831: Chapter 20, §15) This degree of interiorisation of Milton's paradigm explains why the Creature has appropriated the use of "monster" and "fiend" with regard to himself. And yet, it is worth noting the etymology of "monster", Lat. "*monstrare*", Eng. "demonstrate", that Chris Baldick links to "display" and "illustrate [...] vice or transgression" among other things, providing illustrations from *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* (Baldick 1987: 10-11). In Johnson's *Dictionary*, nuances of meaning are registered with the adjective "monstrous": "deviating from the stated order of nature" in Locke's usage; synonymous with "strange" and "wonderful" for Shakespeare; "irregular" or "enormous" according to Pope; "shocking" and "hateful" with Bacon. Johnson's definitions are important as they reveal the implications of the word for late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century readers.

Biographically, the daughter of Godwin and Wollstonecraft was steeped in her parents' texts, particularly her mother's whose absence she felt acutely while growing up. In Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, we have the story of Jemima, a character who grew up motherless and fatherless and who interiorised social perceptions of what is monstrous to such an extent as to condemn her own dreams of a better life: "I thought of my own state, and wondered how I could be such a monster!" (Wollstonecraft 2012: 202) The same alienation from the self is noticeable in Frankenstein's Creature when he sees his reflection in water for the first time:

...how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was

reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification.

(Shelley, M. 1831: Chapter 12, §13)

Such intertextualities, along with the immersion into the first-person narrative of the Creature, prompt readers to develop an ambivalent attitude towards what “monster” really signifies.

The most interesting of the appellations attached to the Creature is “daemon” [or “dæmon”]. On the one hand, it can be the alternative spelling of “demon”, and the mention of “Pandæmonium” and “the dæmons of hell” in the Creature’s tale (Shelley, M. 1831: Chapter 11, §9) clearly demonstrates that. But another meaning of the word, which goes back to classical mythology, is alive and well in the early nineteenth century and certainly familiar to the Shelleys. In Plato’s dialogue *Timæus*, the “daemon” features as an embodiment of the “soul”: “we declare that God has given to each of us, as his daemon, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us—seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant up from earth towards our kindred in the heaven” (Plato 2018: 90a), whereas in his *Apology* it is a voice that keeps Socrates from making mistakes:

You have often heard me speak [31d] of something related to the gods and to the *daimones*, a voice, which comes to me, [...] a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything, and this is what stands in the way of being engaged in matters of the state.

(Plato 2019: 31c-d)

Thus, the use of “daemon” in *Frankenstein* complicates the doppelgänger effect because, as Harold Bloom reminds us, “the monster and his creator are the antithetical halves of a single being” (Bloom 2007: 2). On the one hand, to accept the Creature as a warning against Frankenstein’s predisposition to celebrate knowledge is quite uncomplicated. Frankenstein is himself alarmed by the potential dangers of his braving into uncharted territories and he communicates his anxieties to Walton. On the other hand, however, there are the unresolved ambiguities in the text that do not allow interpreters to read straightforward didacticism in it. If we follow the tradition that Bloom traces back to Richard Church and Muriel Spark (Bloom 2007: 2) and read *Frankenstein* and the Creature as two projections of the same entity, “daemon” becomes consonant with the “inner voice” of Socrates. The phrase also characterises Kierkegaard’s nineteenth-century

take on the Socratic-Platonic concept. We are told by an interpreter of Kierkegaard's that:

Kierkegaard depicts this *daimon* as a sort of instinctive-intuitive, verbally inexpressible inner voice that is, however, incomplete: not an action-motivating and orientating form of divination but instead a negative one, an inspiration that is merely warning, prohibitive, halt demanding.

(Mújdricza 2016: 5)

Twentieth-century philosophy further reinforces the "intuition" aspect of the classical notion:

In exploring the "mystery of intuition," Inglis (1987) keys on the concept of *daemon* referred to as early as Socrates as a force or a presence, a voice, a passion, an urge of certitude that impels one to action. [...] Inglis reminds us that the very notion of *daemon*, chronicled throughout history by both modern civilizations and indigenous cultures, fell out of favour in the West around the nineteenth century as educated people began to embrace the advent of scientific "knowing".

(Boucouvalas 1997: 7)

For Plato a *daimon* was god-related in a polytheistic world. Christianity with its monotheism relegated the word (metamorphosed into *demon*) to Satan's fallen state. What Christian interpreters of Plato have been doing is internalise and psychologize the voice Socrates hears. In Mary Shelley's Christianity-informed post-Christian tale, if the "daemon" is Frankenstein's intuition warning him against this or that, it makes perfect sense that the Creature never refers to himself as a "daemon" even if he has appropriated the "monster" talk. There is only one example of the third narrator, Walton, labelling the Creature "dæmon" (in the immediate context of discussing Frankenstein's death with him) but this is not as a form of address, it is rather for the benefit of the reader and the example is easy to perceive as implying "Frankenstein's daemon" (Shelley, M. 1831: Walton, §39).

These nuances of discourse are certainly lost in the Bulgarian translation of the novel. The first transgression, as it were, comes with planting the Bulgarian word for a monster into Mary Shelley's Introduction of 1831: whereas in English, with reference to the nightmare that inspired her to come up with the story, she called the Creature "a horrid thing" (Shelley, M. 1831: Introduction, §11), Zhechka Georgieva's Bulgarian translation of 1981 renders the phrase as "чудовището" (Шели 1981: Авторката за своя роман). This creates an overarching frame for monstrosity, objectified by the author. The word "monster" appears for the first time in Chapter 5 of the original, in Frankenstein's account of his

dream. It is a calculated provocation for the readers – unaware of what happens later in the narrative, they can only associate monstrosity with the Creature's appearance provided by the story-teller. In the Bulgarian translation, at the very beginning of Chapter 5, this association is firmly linked to Frankenstein's disappointment as a creator: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?" (Shelley, M. 1831: Chapter 5, §2) The Bulgarian text transforms the "catastrophe" and "wretch" of the sentence into "horror" and "monster": "Как да ви опиша вълнението си при вида на този ужас и чудовището, което бях сполучил да създам след такъв неимоверен труд?" (Шели 1981: Глава V) Thus, monstrosity appears less justified in Bulgarian as appearances seem to predetermine attitudes to a much greater extent. Monstrosity is amplified in the concluding pages as well: in the original there are five occurrences of "monster" in Chapter 24 and the continuation of Walton's journal versus nine instances of the corresponding Bulgarian word "чудовище" in the translation. The boost is at the expense of "daemon", "creature", "he", and "abortion" (Shelley, M. 1831, Chapter 24).

To this we need to add the uniform spelling of "daemon" and "demon" in Bulgarian ("демон") and the general lack of etymological awareness of the Greek or Latin meanings amongst the reading public of a twentieth-century communist culture exorcising the demons of Christianity. The word "демон" is used 43 times in the 1981 translation, sometimes in lieu of "fiend" and sometimes as a correspondence to "daemon". Furthermore, there is no cultural layer of *Paradise Lost* to fall back on: the first translation of Milton's poem is contemporaneous with that of *Frankenstein*, published in 1981. Understandably, there is no consistent replacement for "fiend" in the Bulgarian version of *Paradise Lost* either, the translator being concerned with rhythm and the count of syllables as well as with meaning. As a result, the intertextuality of Mary Shelley's text is weakened in the Bulgarian context. This is even more the case with Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which was not translated until 2010. The excerpt from Part VI of the ballad draws a parallel between the loneliness and wretchedness of Coleridge's protagonist and Frankenstein but for the Bulgarian reader it simply reinforces the image of the "frightful fiend" translated as "демона проклет" (Shelley, M. 1981: Chapter V).

The language used to depict the Creature in the Bulgarian translation intensifies the processes of demonising and ascribing monstrosity: „гнусен“ (used 13 times), „проклет“ (13), „дявол“ (9 times), „изверг“ (8), „изрод“ (3 times), or „изчадие“ (3 times) weave the threads of "loathsome", "damned",



“devil”, “reprobate”, “degenerate”, and “miscreant”. Detailed textual analysis is needed to take the emotional temperature of the texts on either side of the language divide and establish correspondences, as words like “loathsome”, “repulsive” and “appalling” are used in the original as well. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that the Bulgarian translation of 1981 functions on the presumption of the Creature’s monstrosity and further demonises him linguistically.

The Frankenstein myth certainly preceded serious critical attention to the novel. The Bulgarian translation took place at a moment when Mary Shelley was not securely attached to the literary establishment and had not even had her scholarly biography yet. The story thrived in popular culture featuring political monsters as well as monsters of human frailty. Screen adaptations were preoccupied with the genetics of monstrosity, in the form of a criminal brain (1931) or an abnormal brain (1974), and ignored its making by social interaction, even though Percy Shelley had already warned readers: “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” (Shelley, P. 1995: 82). Existing creative and critical interpretations are “acts of translation” and they open up new discourses that inevitably influence a new act of translation. When Zhechka Georgieva took up *Frankenstein* to render it into Bulgarian, the world had persuasively labelled the Creature a monster. This umbilical cord between translation and context fed the attitudes of the preceding one hundred and sixty years or so into the Bulgarian text but it could not intercept the shadows of futurity as Mary Shelley’s text was re-interpreted in the next three or four decades. Anne Mellor’s suggestion that “if we concur with [Mary Shelley’s] characters in reading the creature as a monster, then we write the creature as a monster and become ourselves the authors of evil” became the new leitmotif (Mellor 2003: 23). This opened the door for “the ethic of care” to supplant monstrosity and demonisation, or so we would like to hope.

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