## ‘Hail, Mary, the Mother of Science Fiction’: popular fictionalisations of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in film and television, 1935-2018

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**Abstract**

This article uses fictional depictions of Mary Shelley as the ‘mother’ of sf to explore how gendered images of the Romantic genius continue to influence our perception of women in genre fiction. The first part of the article introduces the concept of the Romantic authorship, and reviews Shelley’s legacy as the mother of sf. The second part of the article analyses Shelley’s fictionalised appearances on-screen: in film, television, and new media, from 1935 to the present day. This analysis demonstrates that even in fictions depicting Shelley as an author in her own right, she is still marked by a gendered understanding of how women should function creatively. The way female authors are fictionalised (as opposed to how they are depicted in biographical or academic texts) reflects our expectations of women in the creative industries more broadly.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is widely regarded as the ‘mother of science fiction’ for her authorship of *Frankenstein*, first published anonymously in 1818.[[1]](#footnote-1) At first glance this is a formidable title. Brian Aldiss, one of those responsible for popularising it, described Shelley as a writer of ‘prophetic talent’, and *Frankenstein* as ‘a triumph of imagination: more than a new story, a new myth’ (*Billion* 35, 30). Like later science fiction, he argues, *Frankenstein* combined ‘social criticism with new scientific ideas, while conveying a picture of [the author’s] own day’ (23). In this account, *Frankenstein* becomes the origin story of the modern age, and Shelley its creator. Two hundred years after its publication, Shelley’s ‘hideous progeny’ (Shelley xiii) looms large in the genre, and numerous retellings of *Frankenstein* have graced screens large and small worldwide. However, Shelley’s role as the metaphorical ‘mother’ of this tradition is more complex than the above description implies. Specifically, while her feminist scholarship often portrays her symbolic motherhood as positive and powerful, popular culture offers a very different, often contradictory perspective.

As a historical figure, Shelley has received substantial attention from feminist scholars and critics since the 1970s, claiming her as a great author in her own right and as one of the ‘lost foremothers who could help [women] find their distinctive female power’ as writers and creators (Gilbert and Gubar 59). Jane Donawerth and Carol Kolmerten likewise argue that ‘a clear and traceable tradition of women’s writing often derives its permission for women’s writing from the example of Mary Shelley’ (9), and Debbie Shaw introduces feminist sf by outlining how, since ‘Mary Shelley’s time, many women have discovered the unique potential that sci-fi offers for social comment’ (263). More recently, following the conservative ‘Sad Puppies’ voting campaigns at the Hugo Awards,[[2]](#footnote-2) Shelley has been cited as proof that women’s contributions deserve more recognition in the genre: ‘Despite the fact that science fiction as a genre was literally invented by a woman – aka Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* – women have often been marginalised in the world of science fiction, both as fans and as creators’ (Cuteo n.p.).

Given this context, one might expect Mary Shelley’s increasingly frequent appearances in fictional film and television productions to reflect these empowering claims, with Shelley as a feminist role model and originary genius. After all, representation is an important tool in the negotiation of cultural equality. Christine Battersby suggests that ‘before we can fundamentally revalue old aesthetic values, the concept of genius has to be appropriated by feminists, and made to work for us’ (15). Here the image of the originary genius (the ‘mother’ figure) is championed as a key factor in the construction of a feminist aesthetic and a female artistic heritage. And as Carolyn Cocca argues, in mass media ‘the repetition of stereotypes exerts power’ (5). In the case of sex and gender roles, if

the constantly repeated story is that women and girls are not leaders, are not working in professional settings, are not agents of their own lives but merely adjuncts to others, and are sometimes not even present at all, it can reinforce or foster societal undervaluing of women and girls. It can naturalise inequalities. (5)

In other words, we need great women in our media if we are to value the great women we have in our society.

Shelley is an increasingly visible figure in fantastic film and television, with frequent appearances in the heritage cinema of the 1980s, children’s educational programming in the 1990s and 2000s, and new media texts of the 2010s. Each of these productions dramatises her role as the creator of *Frankenstein* and sf’s metaphorical mother. In practice, however, Shelley’s appearances in film and television are rarely flattering to the author herself, or empowering to female artists working in the genre today. This does not necessarily indicate that these texts are part of a postfeminist backlash; indeed, many claim explicitly feminist motives. However, while some feminists nominate Shelley as a ‘mother’ or great originary author in an attempt to create a space for female artists in the present, in popular practice ‘motherhood’ (or female authorship) is still not recognised as equal to ‘fatherhood’ (or male authorship).

Crucially, the myth of the original author has its roots in the deeply gendered systems and terminologies of Romanticism, a movement at its height when Shelley published *Frankenstein*. Romanticism is still deeply embedded in twentieth and twenty-first-century cultures of creativity. After all, to mother a text still implies something quite different than to father one. The very use of this reproductive metaphor often directly hinders the establishment and acknowledgement of women in artistic fields, rather than making them more visible in a powerful and positive way. In Western cultures, motherhood continues primarily to suggest nurturing, collaboration and self-sacrifice, and is inevitably positioned as somehow lesser than the foundational, authoritative model of fatherhood. This is reflected in artistic creation as well, in which the Romantic naturalisation of authorship as an inborn gift serves to create a socio-political distinction ‘between creative (“productive”) and pseudo-creative (“reproductive”) imagination’ (Battersby 100). For the Romantics,

a great man struggled to produce, driven even harder by unconscious forces within him. Creation involved suffering, pain and tears. Work (even sweat) was involved; but the outcome was not a soulless “mechanical” product. It was “natural” and “organic”, and was likened to the (previously despised) processes of being impregnated and giving birth. (73)

Despite this liberal use of pregnancy and birth imagery, Romantic writers conceptualising their ‘natural’ greatness often deliberately excluded female artists, whose work was considered lacking in the masculine effort and skill required for genius. Though they could be biologically productive, women’s art was considered inherently reproductive, and where ‘great’ female authors did appear, they were regarded as exceptional and unnatural (42). While parenthood may have become more privileged as an artistic metaphor, only men could produce great art.

What does this mean for Shelley, and her depiction as sf’s mother, in a post-Romantic culture? Contrary to postmodernism’s claims about the death of the author, in mainstream and popular culture the Romantic elevation of ‘productive’ authorship above ‘reproductive’ authorship lives on. This has numerous implications for Shelley’s representation in popular culture, particularly since *Frankenstein* is frequently read as a metaphor for the male usurpation of traditionally female forms of reproduction, and Shelley’s level of involvement as its ‘author’ is still contested.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As Kristina Busse argues, ‘most aesthetic theories of modernity’ build ‘on a popularised version of Wordsworth and the Romantics’ and thus

have been vested in the myth of originality, and it is from this mindset that

we have inherited the popular belief that continues to value originality even as we

have long entered an age of mechanical reproduction where creativity often takes quite

different guises. (50)

Ironically, adaptations and derivations that attempt to establish Shelley as sf’s originating ‘mother’ often fall into the trap of ‘productive’ versus ‘reproductive’ authority as well. Fictionalisations of Shelley often attempt to re-write (or overwrite) her impact on the creation of *Frankenstein*. Crucially, this is almost always done through the lens of the Romantic authorship model, with all its implications for artistic ‘motherhood’ as reproductive, rather than productive and original.

While there are many studies of specific adaptations of Shelley, very few have focused on the overall impression her fictional persona creates across popular film and television, from her first appearance in *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale US 1935) to the present day. Therefore, this article examines Shelley’s legacy as an author across multiple decades and genres, and in relation to the gendered, Romantic authorship model. I have chosen to focus on popular depictions of Shelley in particular because, as Esther Peeren argues, popular culture represents ‘a realm of social struggle where cultural forms and traditions are creatively reformulated both in the service of the dominant culture and in the service of its subversion’ (26). Such fictionalisations are also vital in determining an author’s cultural longevity. In an article about the popular success of William Shakespeare and Jane Austen as author figures, Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield argue that ‘works of literature prosper not through simple reproductions but through re-interpretations, quotations and transformations … Megastardom for a writer comes only by being adapted to interest an audience far beyond the natural one’ (431, 438). More specifically, this process requires three forces: adaptation, travesty (parody or extreme transformations), and fictionalisation of the author (443).

Gaston Franssen and Rick Honings argue that depictions of authors in fiction and popular culture are effectively a means of ensuring ‘a prolonged afterlife for their idol, but at the same time they *re-author*, in a sense, the author’s image and oeuvre’ (3), and as Astrid Erll suggests, literary afterlives have much to teach us about ‘transcultural memory’ and ‘the incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms and practices of memory, their continual “travels” and ongoing transformations through time and space’ (11). Not only does Shelley’s cultural afterlife inform how we view her as an author, it also indicates continuities and developments in the construction and transmission of authorship since Shelley’s own time.

Shelley’s post-*Frankenstein* work has received minimal attention from adaptors, but her debut novel has been reinterpreted thousands of times. Many films, novels, and television shows revisit her experiences at Villa Diodati, and many of these stretch far beyond what we might traditionally call adaptation.[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘Frankenstein’ is even embedded in our language: Frankenfoods, Frankenstorms and Eddie Van Halen’s Frankenstrat guitar are just a few examples. *Frankenstein*’s most iconic adaptation, James Whale’s 1931 film, has inspired countless adaptations, references and re-imaginings of its own. As Paul O’Flinn argues, there ‘is no such thing as *Frankenstein*, there are only *Frankensteins*, as the text is ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced, refilmed and redesigned’ (22). One consequence of this casual popularisation is a conservative tendency to reduce the story to its most basic components, which in turn enables popular adaptations to change numerous aspects of Shelley’s novel while still claiming kinship with it. For instance, in a recent survey of its staff, the blog *Film School Rejects* lists such film as *Blade Runner* (Scott US/UK/HK 1982), *Re-Animator* (Gordon US 1985) and *Frankenweenie* (Burton USA 2012) and suggests that they are faithful ‘in spirit’ as ‘all have that basic fabric that Shelley created with her book’: a Gothic story about science, death, and artificial life, featuring a monster and a creator (Miller 1).

Although Shelley inserted herself into the *Frankenstein* narrative with her 1831 account of its conception, in which ‘the hideous phantasm of a man’ stirs before her much as it does before Victor Frankenstein (xi), relatively few *Frankenstein* adaptations depict a fictionalised Shelley-as-author. Of those retellings that do feature her, many trivialise her role in the novel’s creation. Such trivialisations of ‘original’ authorship are not unique to her, or to female authors. For example, in *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden US 1998), William Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) is depicted as a plagiarist whose best ideas are pilfered from Christopher Marlowe (Rupert Everett).[[5]](#footnote-5) However, Shelley’s gender, combined with the gendered implications and afterlives of authorship more generally, does have a unique effect on her authorial image in fiction. Specifically, in fiction Shelley is either depicted as a reproductive writer (effectively a sidekick whose true skill is in observation rather than imagination, or in bearing and nurturing the male ‘seed’ of productive genius), as an unreliable hysteric, or as the lone, ‘unnatural’ female genius in a male-dominated world – all traditionally Romantic conceptions of the female artist. In very few instances is she the star of her own story, and in even fewer can she be said to serve as a role model for contemporary artists as Battersby, Cocca and other feminists scholars envision.

## Mary Shelley and heritage gothic

In *Bride of Frankenstein*, Shelley introduces the film in an opening frame narrative as though she, and not Whale, were its auteur. Biofictional author insertion can be traced to the earliest days of cinema (Vidal 4), but as Ann Marie Adams argues, Whale’s film can actually ‘be said to prefigure second-wave feminist arguments that attempt to secure Shelley’s authorship over her own tale by “embodying” the author within her text’ (40). Presaging critical discussions of the monstrous feminine, Elsa Lanchester not only plays Shelley in the film’s frame narrative but also the titular ‘Bride’, or female creature, though she remains uncredited for this additional role. Shelley does not make another author cameo in film or television until the late 1980s, where despite her reclamation by feminists in the preceding decades her return is part of the decidedly conservative heritage craze.

As adaptations of the novel’s origin story, 1980s ‘heritage gothic’ fictionalisations of Shelley-as-author combine history, horror and sf. They are part neither of the realist ‘cycle of quality costume dramas’ (Lloyd-Smith 126) defined by Andrew Higson as ‘heritage films’ (91) that were ‘*centrally* engaged in the construction of a *national* identity’ under Thatcherism (Monk 179), nor of the biographical drama or biopic, which was more broadly engaged in the creation of ‘public history’ through the commercialisation of national icons (Polaschek 42). Similarly, however, in both kinds of fictionalisation ‘the construction of the woman writer on the screen feeds on often contradictory cultural readings of female autonomy, as her quest for self-definition is predominantly set against the background of romance and the love interest tends to overshadow all other concerns’ (Haiduc 52). In many of these adaptations, the Romantic model of reproductive creation becomes literal through Shelley’s depiction as a sexual (and sexualised) being.

Ironically, most heritage gothic adaptations of Shelley-as-author are North American, though several have British directors who were formerly involved in major British heritage productions. The most famous of these adaptations is undoubtedly Kenneth Branagh’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (US/Japan/UK 1994), although Shelley does not actually appear in it.[[6]](#footnote-6) Discussions of authorship are central to *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, as are the parallels between authorship, creation and (sexual) reproduction. The metaphor of artistic or scientific creation as birth is made most explicit in the scene in which the creature (Robert De Niro) is given life: we see ‘a shower of electric eels – spermatozoa – descend from enormous bags resembling testicles to a container of amniotic fluid – a surrogate womb – where the creature is lying and from which he breaks out – the birth waters flood the ground – naked and helpless like a newborn infant’ (García 228–9). This reproductive metaphor is present on a more subtle level as well, as Professor Waldman (John Cleese), not Victor Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh), is the ‘original’ genius in this story. Frankenstein simply works from Waldman’s notes, and even uses his brain, to create the resurrected creature.

Despite Shelley’s prominence in the film’s title, her only direct appearance is in the opening voice-over, abridged from Shelley’s 1831 prologue to *Frankenstein*: ‘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 dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart’ (x). In Branagh’s retelling – which appropriates Shelley’s name, exploiting her creativity and reputation – the focus is overwhelmingly on male creativity, particularly that of Branagh, its director and star. The women who do appear in the film are treated as little more than disposable bodies, or at best foils for the male characters (see Elliott 225, Gill 95). Shelley seems to function similarly for Branagh; his interviews abound with personal projections about Shelley’s authorial intentions in *Frankenstein*. On one occasion he even ventures that she was ‘titillated’ by the thought of sex with the creature – an idea which he links to his decision to reanimate Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), thus creating ‘sexual jealousy’ between Victor and his monster (Fuller n.p.).

Shelley has a more visible position in fictionalised adaptations from the preceding decade, but she still appears primarily as a lover, a pupil or a devotee, as someone whose authorship is derived from intercourse (sexual or otherwise) with a greater male figure. Such accounts imply that anyone in the company of these great men would have produced a similarly great tale, reducing *Frankenstein*’s creation to a process of implantation and gestation. Consequently, these retellings seem primarily interested in Shelley’s relationship with the Romantic poets, rather than her own identity as a writer. In feminist terms, this perspective also contributes to Shelley’s framing as a ‘reproductive’ writer, rather than a ‘productive’ one. Often, Shelley’s motherhood of *Frankenstein* is only possible through her metaphorical (or literal) impregnation by some greater seed of genius, inevitably from a male source.

For example, in the late 1980s a trio of films imagined the inception of *Frankenstein* in dramatically different but similarly sexualised terms. Where Branagh’s film is best linked to Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (US 1992), and the revival of the sympathetic monster in 1990s cinema (Weinstock 278), these three films respond more clearly to the wave of heritage films coming out of the UK, adapting the literature and literary idols of the nineteenth century to comment on the relationship between past and present. They even cast familiar faces from the heritage industry, including Hugh Grant, Alice Krige and Julian Sands. In Ken Russell’s camp horror film *Gothic* (UK 1986), Shelley and the others at Villa Diodati combine ghost stories with experimental drugs, causing their worst fears to come to life as gory hallucinations. The film plays on the glamorous depiction of Romantic poets as the equivalent of twentieth-century rock stars, immersed in an almost metaphysical world of sex, drugs and art. *Haunted Summer* (Passer US 1988), based on Anne Edwards’s 1972 novel of the same name, indulges in a similarly glorified sex-and-drugs lifestyle, but characterises the Shelleys and their companions as gentle hippies rather than boisterous rock stars. *Rowing with the Wind* (Suárez Spain 1988) begins as a costume drama but slowly morphs into an erotic, psychological horror. Shelley (Lizzy McInnerny) is literally haunted by her past, and imagines her fictional creature has somehow come to life to murder her friends and family.

In all three films Shelley’s character follows a similar arc, and Byron is the central figure. His relationship with Percy Shelley, an equally passionate but more naïve character, is the initial focus. Mary typically begins as a rather silent and reserved figure – particularly in contrast with Claire Claremont[[7]](#footnote-7) – clothed in bonnet, gloves and several layers of dress and coat. In each film, her cool exterior is gradually worn down by her proximity to Lord Byron and (to a lesser degree) Percy. Her relationship to Byron, whether directly sexual or a sexualised power struggle for Percy’s affections, plays a key role in each film’s climax. As the films proceeds, Mary’s sensuality and sexual receptiveness is revealed, visually symbolised by her undressing from braids and gowns into a thin, white cotton nightgown and a loose halo of blonde hair. This sexual awakening also coincides with her establishment as a more vital and outspoken part of the narrative. It is her physical relationship with Byron and Percy and immersion in their world of drugs and poetry that enables her vision of *Frankenstein*. Her creativity is thus directly linked to her sexuality, and her ability to be receptive to the sexual and creative prowess of these Romantic poets.

In these three films, Shelley’s inspiration for *Frankenstein* and the Frankenstein narrative itself become symbolic of sexual and spiritual revelation. This psychoanalytical reading is one many *Frankenstein* scholars have explored in a feminist context, and it is certainly no coincidence that Shelley’s rising popularity as a fictionalised author closely follows her reclamation by feminist theory.[[8]](#footnote-8) As Adams suggests, although

some critics still contend that Shelley’s impressionistic and dream-laden account of the summer of 1816 does much to diminish her own role in the genesis of Frankenstein, most scholars endorse feminist readings of the introduction that see it and the tale that follows as a peculiarly ‘feminine’ creation. (408)

These feminist critics are also responsible for many of the resulting psychoanalytic readings popularised by later adaptations. As Brian Stableford notes, however, when determining whether there are biographical origins for the diverse themes found in *Frankenstein*, popular fiction tends to oversimplify psychoanalytical theory, and popular ‘champions of these various meanings are usually content to interpret them as the result of a coincidence of inspirational forces in which the author’s role was that of semi-conscious instrument’ (47). This effectively allows authors to frame the text as a blank slate on which to inscribe their own, authoritative reading.

## The time traveller’s wife

While the heritage industry primarily produced films in the realist mode, with occasional forays into Gothic romance, 1980s sf also began to delve regularly into the past for its narratives. In addition to psychoanalytical or superficial adaptations of Shelley and the *Frankenstein* inspiration story, several retellings are themselves sf or fantasy, bringing in characters from entirely different, often futuristic, storyworlds. In some, the *Frankenstein* origin story offers an attractive opportunity for the main character – often a time traveller – to insert himself into Shelley’s legend. This has the added effect of transforming the inserted character into a kind of viewer surrogate – someone who already knows the larger story and can predict its progression. Again, such adaptations tend to depict Shelley as an object of idolisation and sexual attraction for a more modern, male character, who is inevitably a fan of *Frankenstein*. This constructs Shelley as a celebrity author within the text as well as paratextually.

*Frankenstein Unbound* (Corman US 1990), based on Brian Aldiss’s 1973 sf novel of the same name, marks Shelley’s last appearance on the big screen for nearly three decades.[[9]](#footnote-9) Scientist Joe Buchanan (John Hurt) travels from 2030 to 1817 through a tear in time and space created by his own failed experiments. Emerging in Geneva, he meets Victor Frankenstein (Raul Julia) and his creature (Nick Brimble), who has helped his creator to continue his monstrous experiments. Joe, suffering the consequences of his own brush with hubris, determines to stop them. He attends the trial of Justine Moritz (Catherine Corman), another character from Shelley’s novel, and there meets Mary Godwin (Bridget Fonda). The villagers identify her as ‘Byron’s mistress’, but Joe is a great admirer of *Frankenstein* and realises that she is the future Mary Shelley. In this adaptation, then, Shelley’s inspiration comes not from a series of ghost stories, but from real-life events unfolding in Geneva. This ‘based on a true story’ revelation is a common trope in time-travel adaptations, allowing original characters (often men) from other storyworlds to assume ownership or authority over past texts and events.

Despite Mary Godwin’s early appearance in the film, she plays a relatively minor role in the narrative. She serves two key purposes, enabling the film to make *Frankenstein*’s themes and context explicit to uninitiated viewers, and becoming Joe’s love interest. Taking her on a drive in his futuristic car, he reveals that he is a scientist from the future and an avid fan of the book she will someday write. Fearful of learning too much about her own work and future, Mary chooses not to accompany him on his mission to stop Frankenstein – but she does sleep with him, citing her belief in ‘free love’. Again, Mary serves as an inspiration or muse in a way that directly objectifies her, rather than elevating her as a great author in her own right. She is sf’s ‘mother’ only in that she brings the seed of a male character’s genius to fruition.

Given that the film speaks very little about the actual work of authorship, or the details of Shelley’s novel, Joe’s infatuation with Mary is more clearly attributable to her physical attractiveness. Aldiss’s source novel also paints Shelley in this light, focusing not on her artistic genius but her solemn beauty:

Seen in the soft green light of the window, speaking with her serious calm air, Mary Shelley was beautiful to behold. There might be a melancholy here, but there was none of Shelley’s madness, none of Byron’s moodiness. She seemed like a being apart, a very sane but extraordinary young woman, and a slumbering thing in my breast woke and opened to her. (93)

This description mirrors Aldiss’s own response to Edward John Trelawney’s description of Shelley, in which he associates the validity of her authorship with her physical beauty.[[10]](#footnote-10) In *Frankenstein Unbound*, then, Shelley’s value as sf’s ‘mother’ is once again sexual and reproductive. Her function is to inspire great men, and be inspired by them.

Shelley’s television appearances follow a similar pattern, falling almost exclusively into the genre of time travel narratives. In many ways this signals her entrance into the annals of authorial ‘megastardom’ (Troost and Greenfield 438): she has become a household name. In other ways she remains a marginalised figure. *Highlander* (Canada/France 1992–8), a series based on the 1986 film, features yet another example of Shelley as a ‘reproductive’ genius. Duncan MacLeod (Adrian Paul), a warrior born in the sixteenth-century Scottish Highlands, is one of a group of immortals (most of them men, born at different times and places across the millennia) competing to obtain a coveted Prize – the ‘ultimate power and knowledge’ that only the last living immortal can possess. MacLeod, a reluctant participant in this centuries-long game, kills rogue immortals, each time absorbing their power and coming one step closer to the Prize. In ‘The Modern Prometheus’ (12 May 1997), Duncan’s friend Methos (Peter Wingfield) reveals that he was at Villa Diodati during the summer of 1816. There, he met Lord Byron (Jonathan Firth), another immortal, along with Percy (Christopher Staines) and Mary Shelley (Tracy Keating). In flashback sequences, Mary is portrayed as a sensitive and impressionable girl, intimidated by the great men around her. One night, she witnesses Methos and Byron kill another immortal, his death unleashing a burst of electricity that inspires her to write *Frankenstein*. Her inspiration is thus framed once again as a case of proximity to great and powerful men, and of observation rather than imagination.

‘The Modern Prometheus’ repeatedly places Mary in situations where she is sexually objectified, and where she must be rescued, protected or cared for. In one scene, designed to establish Byron as unable to control his own desires and urges, Methos must stop him from molesting an unconscious Mary. Despite repeated, predatory behaviour, back in the present day Methos tries to convince Duncan to spare Byron’s life, explaining that ‘he’s a genius … how can you think like that, write like that – without being larger than life?’. Mary’s authorship is, in contrast, markedly more mundane. When Methos, in 1816, asks her why she has not finished her ghost story, she responds: ‘Lord Byron’s words are things that will live forever. What have I to offer in such company?’ Methos replies: ‘Your heart. Your dreams. Your nightmares’. Where Byron is a mad genius whose inspiration is ‘larger than life’, Mary’s creativity comes from everyday tragedy and experience; like many female artists portrayed on screen, she is inevitably ‘weighed down by myths of suffering, victimization, and failure’ (Bingham 10).

Though most time-travel narratives treat Mary Shelley as a tragic accessory to *Frankenstein*, observant rather than inspired, not all portray her as a love interest. Some productions from the 2000s and 2010s can actually be seen to react against popular postfeminist backlash. In these retellings, Shelley assists the main character in practical or intellectual ways. Although many fictionalised versions of famous writers, including Charles Dickens (Simon Callow), William Shakespeare (Dean Lennox Kelly) and Agatha Christie (Fenella Woolgar), have made cameo appearances in *Doctor Who* (UK 1963– 89, 2005– ), Shelly has not, but she does appear in numerous transmedia supplements to the series, including Stephen Marley’s novel *Managra* (1995), the 2008 comic story ‘The Creative Spark’ (first published in the trading card magazine *Doctor Who: Battles in Time*), and a series of audio adventures from *Big Finish Productions*: ‘Mary’s Story’ (part three of *The Company of Friends* (2009)), ‘Silver Turk’ (2011), ‘Army of Death’ (2011) and ‘The Witch from the Well’ (2011). These plays reveal that Shelley was one of the Doctor’s companions, and ‘Mary’s Story’ offers a fictionalised version of the inspiration for *Frankenstein*.

In this retelling, the gathering at Villa Diodati is interrupted by the arrival of a badly burned Eighth Doctor (Paul McGann) who only manages to announce himself as ‘Doctor Frankenstein’ before collapsing, seemingly dead. At Percy’s (Anthony Glennon) suggestion, the group decides to test Galvani’s theories of electrical current on his body before they bury it. Their experiment is interrupted when the electricity jump-starts the Doctor’s regeneration process, sending him running off into the stormy night. Mary (Julie Cox) bravely chases after him, and following a convoluted series of events she agrees to join the Doctor as his ‘entirely platonic’ companion – a disavowal clearly made necessary by Shelley’s past appearances in the genre. Mary’s first meeting with the Doctor, as well as their subsequent time-travel adventures, prompt her to write *Frankenstein*. Here the show’s depiction of Shelley comes close to the ingenious ‘mother’ figure envisioned by feminist critics, with an important caveat. Though the Doctor is lavish in his praise of Mary’s intellect and writing ability, he is of course the star of the series. His is thus the genius the story privileges, and it is his life that ultimately inspires *Frankenstein*.

## Mother Mary, monster Mary

Though Shelley often appears in adult programming, following the revitalisation of North American children’s television in the 1990s she has also been a frequent guest on educational cartoons.[[11]](#footnote-11) In one notable example, Shelley is explicitly *not* inspired by her time travel encounter. *Time Warp Trio* (Canada/US 2005–6), based on Jon Scieszka’s 1991–2005 children’s book series of the same name, is a semi-educational cartoon about a group of young time travellers. In ‘Nightmare on Joe’s Street’ (15 Jul 2006), Joe (Mark Rendall) and Sam (Darren Frost) must use Joe’s magic book to return Frankenstein’s monster (Ray Landry) to 1816. There they run into Jodie (Tajja Isen), another time traveller who is visiting the period to meet one of the ‘greatest women writers’, Mary Shelley (Vickie Papavs). The three heroes introduce the monster to its creator, and accidentally enable him to come to life in the first place. Unable to locate her own journal after a nightmare, Mary jots down her famous vision in Jodie’s magic time-travelling book, bringing the monster into the real world.

Together, Mary and the Trio are able to stop the monster, but after seeing her creature come to life, Mary decides not to write *Frankenstein* – or anything else. Upset at the thought of a world without *Frankenstein* or Shelley – ‘Do you know how many women writers she was going to inspire?’ – the trio must travel back one more time, ensuring that Mary writes her dream in the correct book and the events of the episode never occur. This is one of the few adaptations to suggest that Mary Shelley alone is responsible for inventing *Frankenstein*, though again, her key importance as an author is as an inspiration to others (and exclusively to *women* writers). In this case, as an adult in a story about child adventurers, Shelley acts as a more literal mother, even if it is one the heroes define themselves against rather than through. This is also one of the rare adaptations where Shelley and her ‘creature’ (the novel or the monster) appear together.

When adaptations link Shelley to the female creature, it is usually through Whale’s iconic Bride, rather than the incomplete and disassembled creature from Shelley’s novel. For example, *Histeria!* (US 1998–2000) is an educational cartoon in which the main characters meet and learn about various historical figures through satirical plots. Mary Shelley’s brief appearance comes in ‘Super Writers’ (21 Nov 1998), in which a literary agent tries to convince his clients to write ‘happy stories’ that will sell. The agent’s first client is Edgar Allan Poe (Frank Welker), who fails to be convinced that ‘The Raven’ should changed to be ‘The Bunny’. Undaunted, the agent is sure Mary Shelley (Tress MacNeille) will be a ‘total dynamo. Her story will put a smile on everyone’s face!’. His hopes are dashed when his door opens to reveal a grey-faced Shelley, her body wrapped in bandages and hair styled like the Bride of Frankenstein. ‘My latest book is a monstrous tale I call … *Frankenstein*!’ she exclaims, clutching a copy of her manuscript and bursting into maniacal laughter, accompanied by a musical crescendo.

In such instances, parallels between Shelley and the Bride serve to link Shelley explicitly to Goth fashion and culture, which has been stereotypically associated with gothic and horror fiction.[[12]](#footnote-12) Little more than visual gags, such parallels do play on popular preconceptions of women artists as hysterical, depressed and deranged (Codell 165). The Romantics praised and romanticised the ‘feminine’ traits of emotion, imagination, and even the excess of feeling leading to madness, but only as long as they were to be found in a biologically male body; women displaying such qualities were derided as hysterics (Battersby 7).

In the 2010s, the rise of YouTube television spawned many adaptations of classic literature and characters for various audiences. Yet another ‘monstrous’ depiction of Shelley can be found in William J. Stribling’s *Edgar Allan Poe’s Murder Mystery Dinner Party* (US 2016), a YouTube miniseries with 11 episodes, each between 10 and 20 minutes long. The show draws in viewers with the promise of putting a new twist on familiar characters, bringing great literary figures from different places and times together in a murder mystery mashup. In this respect it echoes British heritage cinema, using public domain texts and existing fanbases as part of a low-budget marketing strategy. But like *Histeria!* the show’s satirical portrayal of literary characters is based on loose stereotyping rather than any historical fact. Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Clayton Snyder) drinks vodka and spouts morose truisms, and George Eliot (Lauren Lopez) tries to convince the other authors she is a man by wearing a fake moustache and speaking in a deep voice. Mary Shelley (Whitney Avalon) arrives to the party wearing black lace, and with a white streak in her dark hair, visually echoing Whale’s Bride. Her speech is melodramatic and full of hyperbole, again framing her as a Goth girl, depressed and over-reactive. Like the series’ other literary characters, she is murdered partway through by an unknown villain. The cause of death is electrocution – more likely a reference to Whale’s films than Shelley’s novel, in which electricity is only subtly referenced.

In most popular adaptations that feature Shelley as an author character, then, she is either a model of artistic appropriation, drawing inspiration from the genius of great men or real-life events, or an enabler of appropriation whose life and work exists to inspire others to greatness, or an hysteric.

## Shelley and STEMinism

With the 200th anniversary of *Frankenstein*’s publication, Shelley is enjoying a resurgence in popular culture. Interestingly, recent productions frame her as the story’s ‘mad scientist’. While a number films and television productions have explored the possibilities of a female Frankenstein, only rarely (and recently) have they placed Shelley in this role. More often, such adaptations serve as allegories for women in traditionally male-dominated fields. Many also offer explicitly feminist – or STEMinist, as the recent buzzword among feminist scientists would have it (see Kantor) – readings of *Frankenstein* that vilify the value contemporary culture places, to the detriment of women, on certain kinds of originality, individuality and success.

In *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (UK 2015– ), Shelley (Anna Maxwell Martin) has a brief story arc. Following a series of bizarre child murders that seem inspired by her novel, she is consulted by Inspector John Marlott (Sean Bean). She hints that they may have been perpetrated by a former colleague, Sir William Chester (Samuel West), with whom she once committed a terrible act. During amateur experiments in electricity (in a lab very much modelled on Whale’s *Frankenstein*), she, Chester and Percy Shelley (Richard Clements) accidentally killed their friend, James Hogg (Hugh O’Connor), who had volunteered as the test subject. Her role in these events that prompted her to write *Frankenstein*, but although she is depicted as a shrewd and independent author, she plays only a small supporting role in the story of Marlott’s investigation.

The genderswapped YouTube series *Frankenstein, MD* (US 2014) features Victoria Frankenstein (Anna Lore), a final-year medical student determined to become a world-renowned doctor and scientist, and to succeed in a male-dominated industry where her mother did not, rewrites the female ‘author’ or genius into the Frankenstein story. It is framed as her informational video blog, where she catalogues her research for the public. On it, she recruits her friends – including other genderswapped characters from the novel, such as Eli Lavenza (Brendan Bradley) and Rory Clerval (Sara Fletcher) – to help demonstrate certain practical aspects of her work. Some characters retain their traditional genders, including Frankenstein’s teacher Dr Abraham Waldman (Kevin Rock), Iggy DeLacey (Steve Zaragoza) – based on the Igor character from various film adaptations – and the creature (Evan Strand), a reanimated version of Robert the cameraman, who serves as an analogue to Robert Walton, the frame narrator in Shelley’s novel.

*Frankenstein, MD* clearly drew from numerous texts and authors during the process of its creation, including Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) and Mel Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein* (US 1974), with which it arguably has more in common. However, the show’s creators persist in acknowledging Shelley as their inspiration, and Victoria is explicitly linked to her through efforts to succeed in a male-dominated field. Head writer Lon Harris explains that what drew him to the idea of ‘Frankenstein as a gender-bending character is that Mary Shelley wrote it on a dare to a bunch of dudes that she could write a better horror novel than they could’ (McNutt n.p.). Harris not only reframes the character of Frankenstein to better align it with its author (and with what he perceived to be Shelley’s own cultural situation), but he also reframes the novel’s origin story as an overtly feminist endeavour.

Harris frequently engages with critical fans in the comments section of *Frankenstein, MD* videos, occasionally referencing Shelley’s novel and defending his own creative decisions with claims of fidelity to it. In the final episode, ‘Alone Together’ (31 Oct 2014), Victoria decides to abandon her career in the natural sciences and run away with Eli, but before they can make their escape, the creature appears at Victoria’s hideout, demanding that she make him a friend. As she has done in previous episodes, Victoria rejects his request. Furious at her refusal, he strangles Eli, ensuring that Victoria will be as alone as her creation. The episode ends with a shot of a weeping Victoria holding Eli’s broken body. In the comments below the video, one viewer asks: ‘What the hell kind of way to end is this﻿’? Harris replies: ‘The Mary Shelley way! It’s not really a happy ending kind of story’ (see https://youtu.be/bm4vURGaQ30). Of course, this dramatic final scene is very different from the novel’s drawn-out ending, in which Victor eventually dies of exhaustion, and the creature vanishes into the Arctic wasteland, presumably to end his life. This takes place months, possibly even years, after the creature murdered Elizabeth. It also results in the (somewhat) happy ending of Robert Walton returning home to his country and his family. Though there is no reason to assume that Harris or Pemberley Digital are disingenuous in their desire to promote female authors and creators, positioning Shelley as the ‘author’ of their narrative is nevertheless misleading.

At the same time as *Frankenstein, MD* works to mythologise Shelley as both the ‘original’ author of their adaptation and an inspiration to women, many elements of the show’s production undercut its promotion of female authorship. First, while Victoria is capable and intelligent, she is also depicted as a lone female hero in male-dominated STEM work, indirectly reinforcing the Romantic stereotype of the ‘great woman’ as being the exception rather than the rule (Battersby 42). Second, perhaps because *Frankenstein, MD* represented Pemberley Digital’s first foray into horror, or perhaps because of its broadcast on PBS Digital (a science-heavy network), the scripts and sets for the show are noticeably masculinised in comparison to Pemberley Digital’s earlier productions. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (US 2012–3), *Emma Approved* (US 2013–4) and *The March Family Letters* (Canada 2014–5), most scenes take place in a domestic space (bedroom, living room or home office). The backgrounds are painted in bright or pastel colours, and filled with images and trinkets that reflect the personal nature of the space. Likewise, most episodes centre around inner conflict or relationship dynamics, and the dialogue is accordingly colloquial. *Frankenstein, MD*, in contrast, is set at Engle State University (a play on *Frankenstein*’s Ingolstadt), against relatively stark, sparse backgrounds decorated in blues, whites and greys. Because it is framed as a research and teaching vlog, the dialogue includes many technical explanations of scientific concepts, and numerous jokes about blood and other bodily fluids, as well as gruesome or macabre medical experiments. Finally, although Pemberley Digital is a network that employs a high number of female creators and directors, *Frankenstein, MD*’s head writer, director, executive producers, cinematographer and editor are all men. While the narrative advertised a feminist message, the steps the network took to adapt the story to this new platform ironically suggest that they fell prey to familiar stereotypes about women’s interests and genre preferences. While this adaptation claims Shelley as a great, originary author, it does not imply a role for other female creators in the genre.

**Conclusion**

Although Shelley’s establishment as a ‘great author’ may be part of a feminist process, her primary use in film and television has overwhelmingly been to promote the products that fictionalise her, not initiate fundamental change in the industry more broadly. She is more often used as a vehicle for a male character or author’s vision than to advocate for women in sf. Even as Aldiss, in 1974, linked Shelley to the genre, this was more to the genre’s benefit. Aldiss indirectly used *Frankenstein* to establish his own status (he is, after all, a sf writer), piggybacking on feminist scholarship’s efforts to claim Shelley as a ‘lost foremother’ (Gilbert and Gubar 59). He notes that just as ‘the standing of Mary's reputation is still in the balance, so is science fiction’s’ (*Billion* 36), but reinforces many of the value judgements that originally stopped work by Shelley and other women from being recognised.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Whatever the goals of the production adapting Shelley – national heritage, profit, education, women’s equality, or otherwise – all betray similar assumptions about the nature and capabilities of authorship, falling back on Romantic stereotypes that ultimately reflect negatively on Shelley’s image as the founder of sf. ‘Motherhood’, it seems, is still a concept that does female artists more harm than good. It remains to be seen how our image of Shelley will evolve in the future, as both *Frankenstein* and feminism continue to be adapted in new ways, but popular fictionalisations will certainly continue to play an important role. As Munford and Waters argue, in popular culture the ‘death’ of feminism is now often taken as a given: ‘the “post-ness” or “past-ness” of feminist politics is routinely asserted as if it were fact’ (21). More optimistically, they also assert that ‘feminism’s consignment to history makes it usefully available to the possibility of ghostly return’ (21). This promises interesting futures for Shelley’s fictional legacy, and for the future of other great (women) creators in popular culture.

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1. See, for example, Blumberg 3. Some credit Brian Aldiss with the popularisation of the epithet (Shaw 263, Freedman n.p.). My title refers to the 1979 *Reader’s Guide to Science Fiction*, which proclaims: ‘Hail, Mary, the Mother of Science Fiction’ (Searles et al. 131). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Sad Puppies first aimed to influence Hugo nominations in 2013, campaigning ‘for slates of nominees made up mostly of white men’, and claiming ‘that the Hugos had become dominated by what Internet conservatives call Social Justice Warriors … who value politics over plot’ (Wallace n.p.). They have returned every year since to promote this agenda, and in 2015 their campaign was largely successful. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 1972 Robert Kiely suggested that ‘like almost everything else about her life’, Mary Shelley’s authorship of *Frankenstein* ‘is an instance of genius observed and admired but not shared’ (161), and scholars, novelists and conspiracy theorists continue to question whether it was not really Percy Shelley who wrote the novel (see Lauritsen and Shepherd). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this article I use the term ‘adaptation’ loosely; in Linda Hutcheon’s words, adaptations are those works which (rather tautologically) are ‘seen *as an adaptation* … haunted at all times by their adapted texts’ (6). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In one memorable scene, Marlowe feeds Shakespeare the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*, which Shakespeare has been conceptualising as *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As with the related *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Coppola US 1992), the author’s name is included in the title of *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* for copyright reasons – not because of any complications with the Shelley estate, but because Universal Studios (with its monster movies of the 1930s and 40s) still owned the title rights to *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* (Kaye 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This accords with a larger biographical mythology that depicts Shelley as ‘cold’ and reserved (Mellor 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This period also sees the more general advent of biopics about historical women artists (Codell 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Two Shelley biopics, both to be directed by women, were announced for 2018 release: *Mary Shelley* (Al-Mansour US/UK/Luxembourg) and *Mary Shelley’s Monster* (Coky Giedroyc US), although as of this publication the latter appears to be stuck in development. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In *Billion Year Spree*, Aldiss (quoting Trelawney) writes:‘“The most striking feature in her face was her calm grey eyes; she was rather under the English standard of woman’s height, very fair and light-haired, witty, social, and animated in the society of friends, though mournful in solitude.” It is hard to resist the idea that this is a portrait of the first writer of science fiction’ (21). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. After 1990, all full-service television stations were required to offer a certain amount of educational programming for children. Many of these cartoons thus draw on historical events and figures to teach, but also to fulfil their educational quota (see Engstrom, and Hofferth and Sandberg). Examples include *Animaniacs* (US/Japan 1993–8), *The Magic School Bus* (Canada/US 1994–7) and the first revival of *Schoolhouse Rock!* (US 1993–6). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Some of *Frankenstein*’s most famous adaptors, such as Tim Burton, are also key figures in Goth subculture, making a connection between their work and Shelley’s seem natural. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. He suggests that Shelley’s success with *Frankenstein* was accidental. Describing her 1826 novel *The Last Man* as failed sf, Aldiss laments: ‘If only Mary had been a great writer instead of merely a good one! What a sombre masterpiece she could have given us!’ (*Billion* 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)