

## RETHINKING ROMANTICISM: *FRANKENSTEIN*, *THE X-FILES*, AND THE POSTMODERN PROMETHEUS

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### **Abstract:**

*In a ground-breaking episode titled "The Postmodern Prometheus," the iconic television show The X-Files, which changed the landscape of television drama, reinvented the story of Victor Frankenstein in conjunction with contemporary beliefs, the nature of scientific truths in our time, and the (sub)cultures promoted by the genre known as 'daytime television'. If Shelley's protagonist is the modern Prometheus, ours is the postmodern: a figure representing not only the imperative to evolve while contending with the cultural and philosophical implications of technological progress but also the ethical implications of issues such as gender and disability inequity, both of which are examined in the episode. Further, the episode, shot entirely in black and white, deliberately references Shelley's text in a manner that encourages readings based on intertextual frameworks of understanding. A critical comparison of the two texts leads to the emergence of a series of insights that illuminate not only the continued relevance of Shelley's text but also the broader context in which Romanticism is now seen as the beginning of typically contemporary concerns such as ecocritical discourse. The paper outlines such concerns, attempting to locate its analysis of the two texts within the larger inclusive framework of Romanticism as well as the nature of Post-Romanticism.*

**Keywords:** *Frankenstein, Mary Shelley, The X-Files, Romanticism, Post-Romanticism, science fiction, English studies, cultural studies, popular culture.*

### **1. Introduction and review of literature**

In the two hundred years since its publication, *Frankenstein* has become perhaps one of the best known literary texts that has a life of its own in the realm of popular culture; in the two and a half decades since it first premiered, *The X-Files* has often been cited as the television show that heralded a major turning point in the history of the genre. Separately, each is often identified with brave new worlds in technological innovation and the idea that science can not only take us to undreamt-of places but also spiral out of control if allowed free rein. Together, Shelley's *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* and *The X-Files*' "The Postmodern Prometheus" present Romanticism and Post-Romanticism through the emblem of the mythological figure of Prometheus by problematising conventional notions of heroism as well as progress.

In his article "Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism" (1996), Daniel Riess locates Post-Romanticism as beginning in the era when texts first became commoditised objects for sales, necessitating the perception of their being for bourgeoisie readers and thus suggesting that there emerged a dimension of popular culture that was integrated in the production and reception of literary texts. This, as Riess notes, was a more "perplexed" (p. 808) era than the more idealistic time of 'high' Romanticism: the post-Napoleonic world struggled to engage with idealism in the aftermath of failed revolution and the emergence of a materialism-driven sense of realism. High Romanticism (1790-1815) was "an organic, expansionist human model of reality" followed by the disappointed pragmatism of a world that ultimately "deformed" its ideology (Riess, p. 809); it is not difficult to posit that Shelley's novel quite literally

represents this deformed vision, 'deformed' in the sense of both 'distorted' and 'de-formed', deconstructed and reinvented.

For Riess, Post-Romanticism is “a mode which attempts to preserve the Romantic style of writing while simultaneously rejecting the Romantic artist's claim that art transcends the ills of the social environment into which it is born” (p. 813). Interestingly, his observation that Landon's poetry has “the ability to play upon the fantasies of a (male) readership” (p. 813):

The fact that she is a woman poet places her in an awkward, even paradoxical, situation: though she wants to establish her authority and legitimacy as a poet, her simultaneous wish for continued popularity as a writer dictates that she avoid the label of “bluestocking.” (pp. 813-14)

This description may well apply to Shelley: however, it may also be perceived as somewhat limiting in its sense of the author's gender identity. While he does describe Landon's work as “subversive” (p. 815), he also maintains that certain subjects were “dangerous” (p. 816) for women authors to write about. He refers to her borrowings from established writers and her de-politicising her novel *Corinne* as facets of her work that “call attention to her circumstances as a woman poet, lacking the proper education and worldly knowledge of her male counterparts”: “The result is a poetry of pastiche, a second-order, synthesized Romanticism carefully shaped and blended by Landon to increase her popularity as a writer” (p. 818).

Claudia Moscovici's *Romanticism and Postromanticism* (2007) defines Post-Romanticism in terms of three characteristics: verisimilitude, emotion, and beauty and sensuality (p. 74). While these three characteristics may also be present in any other kind of writing, Moscovici describes them as “all-pervasive” and as the “coordinates” through which Post-Romanticism may be located (p. 75). However, these identified characteristics seem, peculiarly enough, to contradict the notion that the book subscribes to that the reinvention of a particular ideology can never be carried out in exactly the same ways as the original philosophy was put into practice. Rather than examine Post-Romanticism as a phenomenon that readdresses or reimagines the original tenets of the philosophy, Moscovici seems to largely confine her thesis to the ways in which the original forms and directives of Romanticism survive in post-Romantic contexts.

Anne K. Mellor's “Making a 'monster': An Introduction to *Frankenstein*” (2003) discusses the homosociality of the novel, most notably Victor Frankenstein's relationship with his 'progeny' created without recourse to heterosexual intercourse as a repression of female sexuality. Mellor observes:

The male-authored masterpieces of the genre Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786 [English edn.]), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), all written by avowed homosexuals or bisexuals uncover the damage caused by compulsory heterosexuality. By contrast, the female-authored Gothic novel, most notably in the works of Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Dacre, Sophia Lee, and Emily Bronte, explores the cultural repression of all female sexual desire in the name of the chaste, modest, proper lady a lady confined within a patriarchal bourgeois domesticity and often menaced by a looming threat of incest. (p. 12)

Mellor goes on to posit that Shelley's novel differs from the female Gothic in that it does not feature a female protagonist and that the attribution of villainy in the novel is far from simple. Further, both homosociality and the notion of a male-authored Gothic narrative that eschews compulsory heterosexuality may be understood in the context of Chris Carter's “The Postmodern Prometheus,” both written and directed by him. Indeed, Mellor's essay pushes the homosocial bond between the scientist and his creator to homosexual undertones; she notes how Percy Shelley's edits of his wife's work sometimes obfuscate the ur-text's implication that “Frankenstein is more sexually attracted to his male creature than he is to his fiancée” (p. 15).

Mellor's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley* also includes a discussion of the ontological question of what constitutes 'being' particularly noteworthy in the context of Romanticism, with its interest in external nature as well as human nature and the epistemological question of how we know what we do. Linking these questions to cultural codes of signification through the ways in which the creature is perceived by others as well as himself, she observes that "All the characters in the novel assume that his outer appearance is a valid index to his inner nature" (p.20). These modes of discourse may well be applied to the postmodern text that concerns itself with ways of seeing as well as with body image or self-perception. However, Mellor also notes that "this semiotics of the face implicitly endorses late eighteenth-century theories that physiognomy and character are closely related" (p.20); the observation may suggest that this relation of physiognomy and character may no longer be seen as valid.

Nevertheless, she also points out that the ending of the novel could be seen as an invitation to continually renew the ways in which the creature is perceived:

Instead of moving from perplexity to judgment, however, Walton loses sight of him "in the darkness & distance," as Mary Shelley originally wrote, suggesting not only that the creature is still alive but also that his nature, his *meaning*, remains unfixed, ever available to new interpretations. (p.21, italics in original)

Further, Mellor attributes Shelley with "powerfully anticipating the insights of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault: human knowledge is the product of invented or linguistically constructed forms or grammars which societies have imposed over time on an unknowable (or, as Derrida would put it, absent) ontological being" (p.22). This observation may also be extended to the origins of Romanticism itself, especially in its emphasis on the nature of perception. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge says in a letter to John Thelwell, the universe sometimes has form and design and beauty when he can perceive it so, but more often, the same universe is nothing but "an immense heap of little things":

I can *at times* feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for themselves-but more frequently *all things* appear little-all the knowledge, that can be acquired, child's play-the universe itself-what but an immense heap of *little* things?-I can contemplate nothing but parts, & parts are all *little!*" (qtd in Perry, p.26, italics in original)

This perceived sense of the agency of the human mind and the imposition of meaning on 'absent' Derridean reality prioritises the notion of the human invention of meaning.

Mellor ends by recalling Blake's words that we become what we perceive: "When we write the unfamiliar as monstrous, we literally create the evil, the injustice, the racism, sexism, and class prejudice, that we arbitrarily imagine": a thought that is "strikingly modern, even postmodern" (p.23). Her suggestion that this process constitutes a "categorical moral imperative" (p.23) in Shelley's work, however, does not quite suggest a postmodern attitude; for if we truly do become what we perceive, then, surely, the constitution of 'evil' and 'moral' perceptions is also the result of subjective ways of seeing rather than of objective reality-which is 'absent' in the Derridean sense.

Robin Silbergeld's "The Truth We Both Know': Readerly Desire and Heteronarrative in *The X-Files*" (2003) examines the narrative trajectory of the show in the light of transformative works created in a gendered space. While the article focuses on Dana Scully's pregnancy and her romantic relationship with Fox Mulder, its emphasis on "anxieties surrounding gender, heterosexuality, and reproductive technologies" (p.50) may well be applied to "The Postmodern Prometheus," in which two women find themselves pregnant against their consent, in much the same way that Dana Scully does. Speaking of fans' "attempt to negotiate cultural anxieties about gender and reproductive technologies that *The X-Files* canon systematically foregrounds and problematizes" (p.50), the author points out that if television may be seen as a cultural artefact, then one way to understand it is through fan-made works that respond to it in transformative spaces created by fans. Scully's own pregnancy indicates "unlawful reproduction, gender roles, and medical rape" (p.53); the premiere of Season 11 in January 2018 reveals that the father of

Scully's 'miraculous' baby may not be Mulder but rather his insidious father, who claims to have had Scully 'scientifically' impregnated against her will in the episode "En Ami," which was part of the series' original run.

This exploration of "unlawful reproduction" in opposition to conventional gender roles may well be discussed in the context of Victor Frankenstein's "unlawful" creation and the repercussions it has for the debate on reproduction and gender roles; it may also be explored in the context of the forced pregnancies-on women who, like Scully, welcome the results of the non-consensual scientific/sexual acts performed on them-in "The Postmodern Prometheus." The author quotes Mulder in the Season 7 finale, in which Scully's son is born, and which ends with the lead pair kissing with the baby held between them, the picture of heteronarrative completion: "How did this child come to be? What set its heart beating? Is it the product of a union? Or the work of a divine hand? An answered prayer? A true miracle? Or is it a wonder of technology-the intervention of other hands?" (p.59)

For Kowalski and Krieder (2009), "The Postmodern Prometheus" "takes a swipe at the idea that truth is something pristinely "out there" to be discovered. However, it does so in an incredibly subtle (but still fanciful) way by blurring the lines between comic book, comic-book author, and reality" (p.229). The significance of the comic-book will be examined in the analysis below. Similarly, McRae's "The Postmodern Prometheus: Collective Experience and the Carnavalesque" (2002) offers the notion that popular culture, with its fictionalisation and retelling of history, offers an unstable and disruptive space in which marginalised communities can empower themselves.

## **2. *Frankenstein* and "The Postmodern Prometheus"**

While there has been much discussion on the Post-Romantic as a term denoting the period that is 'post,' or after, the Romantic era, the majority of such discussion focuses on Romanticism as a marker of an era rather than an ideology that may still be used to reference the Post-Romantic era. What is radical in one era is seen as classical in later times, leading to the evolution of what may be termed "Post-Romanticism." Just as "post-theory" is currently used in the sense of subsuming theory into the frameworks of thinking (rather than going 'beyond' theory, as it were), Post-Romanticism may be used to indicate the notion that, as the school of thought that spearheaded modernity in literary thought, Romanticism may now be perceived as intrinsic to the ways in which literary thought is framed. In his retelling of Shelley's novel, Chris Carter, the creator of *The X-Files* as well as the writer and director of "The Postmodern Prometheus," may be seen to present-or re-present-Romanticism in the contemporary era. This vision of Post-Romanticism is often problematic in its portrayal of characters and themes, as is discussed below.

Other than the 'creature' himself, called the Great Mutato in the episode (a name that, interestingly, suggests 'mutation' or change rather than monstrosity), perhaps the most historically significant figure in the narrative is the counterpart to Victor Frankenstein, Dr Pollidori. Scholars of Romanticism will immediately recognise the name as that of Byron's doctor (albeit spelt a little differently, perhaps a signifier of reinvention), who was among those present at the famous night of storytelling in which Mary Shelley conceived the idea for *Frankenstein*. In his first scene, Pollidori cuts short his meeting with the FBI in order to visit the University of Ingolstadt, where, in Shelley's novel, Frankenstein makes his creation. While Dr Pollidori may consequently be seen as the most obvious choice to represent Victor Frankenstein in this retelling of Shelley's tale, there is also another contender for that role: his father, Pollidori Senior, who is in fact responsible for bringing up the 'creature' and arranging for the multiple rapes that he commits in a bid to create a mate for himself.

There are at least three occasions of sexual assault that 'Mutato' is guilty of: twice on Shaineh Berkowitz and once on Elizabeth Pollidori, who is clearly meant to represent Elizabeth Lavenza Frankenstein, Victor's wife. On each of these occasions, the woman who is assaulted hears Cher singing before she succumbs to the fumes that render her unconscious: Mutato is a fan of the popular singer, somewhat ironically finding solace in her music even as he is committing assault. The three songs by Cher

that are part of the episode's soundtrack—"The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore," "Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves," and "Walking in Memphis"—are perhaps ostensibly meant to represent the idea that popular culture has a way of normalising rebelliousness, of appealing to those who don't fit into spaces that can, in Mulder's words, be "programmed, categorised, or easily referenced." Just as Shelley's creature is the product of Frankenstein's efforts, the 'monster' in *The X-Files* appears to be the product of his cultural environment: he believes himself to be monstrous since he is seen as such by those around him. However, the notion of popular culture as a refuge for those cast aside by society is quickly undermined by the (most likely) unwitting demonstration in the episode of the norms that Mutato flouts in order to make himself a 'mate'. In this, Mutato is not very different from Shelley's creature, who kills or causes the death of several characters in his bid to force Frankenstein to create a mate for him.

In this representation of popular culture, the portrayal of the grotesque book ends the episode, which begins and ends with the popular icon Jerry Springer. Interestingly, the culture of daytime talk shows often disparaged as being intended for 'bored housewives' and the unemployed as portrayed through *Jerry Springer*, while it does begin with showing a woman who has apparently given birth to a 'wolf baby,' is later undermined by Mulder when he explains that the baby in question is not a supernatural being, but rather a human child suffering from a skin condition. In this dismissal of the sensationalised story presented on the show, "The Postmodern Prometheus" appears to start subverting its own status as a piece of popular culture: *The X-Files* is often seen to feed conspiracy theories and validate ludicrous notions of supernaturalism. Nevertheless, the show appears to succeed in using "*Jerry Springer* to locate the carnival moment in contemporary lives," offering a "spectacle of obscene otherness" (McRae, p. 7) that serves to reinforce the normalcy of societal regulations and perceptions. Romanticism itself, of course, would most likely locate itself in the otherness rather than within regulation norms of behaviour and thought.

Further, McRae claims that the popular "is championed as the terrain of difference and otherness—of radical destabilisation of the status quo. It becomes attached "to some pure, unsullied, primitive and originally peasant or peasant-like community" (McRae, p. 5, qtd. from McGuigan's *Cultural Populism*, 1992) may also be considered in the figure of Pollidori Sr, who is Mutato's accomplice and care-giver. Epitomising the figure of the "simple man," as Mutato calls him, he is a farmer who provides Mutato with the drug meant for tranquilising farm animals that Mutato uses to disable the women he assaults. In this, the Wordsworthian figure of the idyllic peasant is greatly problematised, perhaps inviting the question of whether this figure was ever meant to be seen as the epitome of innocence and goodness. Pollidori Sr's compliance in the crimes committed by Mutato, as a reinvention or revision of Rousseau's Natural Man, presents a bleak Post-Romantic vision of corruption.

Curiously, McRae brings in the Bakhtinian notion that popular culture is "offered as ruptures in the social fabric that can alter the rules of social life momentarily to disrupt and redirect the flow of power" (p.5), thereby indicating that the carnivalesque is actually essential to the sense of "legitimate, state sanctioned space for otherness" (p.5), but then goes on to state that this very space is used disruptively by marginalised communities. If the notion of the carnivalesque is essential to reinforce the "flow of power," how then do we identify the same space as subversive and disruptive? Regardless of the possible answers to this question, the carnivalesque nature of popular culture has allowed it, particularly in the digital era, to create transformative spaces (such as fanfiction and other fanworks) in which non-traditional ideas of identity can be expressed and discussed.

If the representation of popular culture in this manner is distinctly representative of contemporary notions of public spaces, the nature of the narrative itself, like Shelley's original, is meta-fictional in the sense that it begins and ends with the respective opening and closing of a comic book, most likely the one created by Izzy Berkowitz—the product of Shaineh's first assault-based on sightings of the creature he christens the Great Mutato. Additionally, the episode is filmed entirely in black and white in an attempt to pay homage to earlier retellings of *Frankenstein*, most notably the film starring Boris Karloff. Shelley's

novel, “built in the established epistolary tradition of multiple frames” (Spivak, p. 257), invites its readers to identify with the recipient of the letters detailing the story of Victor Frankenstein, Margaret Saville, who is “the irreducible recipient function of the letters” (Spivak, p. 259). The existence of multiple narrative frames also serves to reinforce the idea that multiple narrators allow for a greater ambiguity in storytelling, for perceptions are subjective.

In its representation of its tale as a comic book, “The Postmodern Prometheus” also suggests the breakdown of boundaries between television and comic books, but also dialectically synthesizes both in the sense that both are forms of popular culture, which in itself is textual in the sense that it is made for and requires an audience. Both comic books and television series are situated in the space of popular culture, and both are unstable and disruptive in that sense. Moreover, this textual definition recalls the ending of Shelley's novel:

At the end of the text, the monster, having confessed his guilt toward his maker and ostensibly intending to immolate himself, is borne away on an ice raft. We do not see the conflagration of his funeral pile—the self-immolation is not consummated in the text: he too cannot be contained by the text. (Spivak, p.258)

Thus, both texts may be seen to reinforce the idea that the text cannot contain the 'monstrous'; it is transitory by nature, representing a continual threshold state or liminal space that is attributed meaning by the act of reading/viewing.

Curiously enough, “The Postmodern Prometheus” takes its place in production order between the two-part stories of “Christmas Carol” and “Emily,” in which Scully's first child (that we know of), Emily, is discovered and dies tragically. Like William, Scully's son born at the end of Season 7, and the children conceived in “The Postmodern Prometheus,” Emily is a product of science rather than traditional reproduction. Perhaps even more curious is the fact that both Shelley and Carter represent their scientists in terms of retelling the myth of Prometheus, who is not only hailed as a hero for stealing fire from the gods but is also known for making human figures out of clay. Both tales are often seen as cautionary narratives of science 'gone mad,' but perhaps more interesting to debate are the intellectual by-products they create in terms of gendered identities, societal norms, and the binary between nature and culture.

In his 1995 book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Dr Carl Sagan made what was perhaps his only observation on *The X-Files* (then in the third year of its original run)—that the show might perhaps have been more realistic if some of the cases Mulder and Scully investigated had turned out to be hoaxes. Indeed, the third season episode “Home,” often lauded as among the most disturbing in the series, contains no element of the supernatural, but is instead about the monstrous human. Like “The Postmodern Prometheus,” it depicts the 'monstrous' in the form of physical disfigurement; unlike the later episode, it offers no redemption for its monstrous characters. Indeed, it is debatable whether the declaration of “Hey, he's no monster!” at the end of “The Postmodern Prometheus” is actually valid: Mutato may not be a monster because of his appearance, but he is certainly guilty of rape. In this, the episode fails significantly: its insistence that beauty is not skin deep erases the gendered acts of violence performed by Mutato. Consequently, the monstrous erasure of sexual violence and non-consensual pregnancies reveal unwitting prejudices in the mind of the writer himself, presenting both the perceived horror of societal judgement based on physical appearance and the subtextual horror of a narrative that does not recognise rape as such, or, at the very least, does not consider it a crime worth punishing: Mutato is taken by Mulder and Scully to a concert by Cher, in which he is portrayed as disturbingly innocent in his childlike joy in meeting his idol, who invites him on stage to dance with her. The fact that there is nothing supernatural in the episode reinforces the nature of the well-meaning human, the writer, who consistently manipulates the audience to present a tale that questions its own moral imperatives by the end.

### 3. Conclusion

At the two-hundredth anniversary of its publication, it is safe to say that Mary Shelley's

*Frankenstein* will continue to remain an integral part of both literary scholarship and popular culture; the publication of Fiona Sampson's *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who Wrote Frankenstein* in January 2018 will no doubt create more opportunities for debate and deliberation on the text. January 2018 has also seen the beginning of what is almost certainly the final season of *The X-Files*, at least as far as its original protagonists are concerned, which has already generated passionate debate among critics and fans. The legacy of the legendary show will most likely continue through its successors such as *Supernatural* and *Black Mirror*, both of which carry on the arguments first presented in *The X-Files: Supernatural's* "The Benders," much like "Home" and "The Postmodern Prometheus," contains no supernatural element other than the monstrous human, and the show continually debates the definitions of 'good' and 'evil'.

Paradoxically, *The X-Files* writer Glen Morgan, after the broadcast of his Season 11 episode "This," which features the replication of human consciousness through technology, stated that one of his goals was to bring the show into the realm of *Black Mirror* (Nelson, 2018), which itself may be seen as part of the legacy of *The X-Files*. Like Scully's ouroboros tattoo—a symbol of a snake devouring its own tail—from the episode "Never Again," the *Frankenstein* story has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to generate meta-narratives that circle around ontological and epistemological questions that remain pertinent in the face of our understanding of who we are and of constantly evolving forms of technological advancement. A further investigation into contemporary science fiction and horror shows that investigate the nature of the 'monstrous' and the supernatural may well benefit from examining both *Supernatural* and *Black Mirror* as iconic artefacts of popular culture.

Finally, while "The Postmodern Prometheus" almost certainly fails to convincingly reinvent Romanticism for its contemporary age, it does allow for debate on the nature of Post-Romanticism in its subjective and problematic vision of what is 'normal' and what is not, as well as of its exploration of the nature of texts and the ways in which they create spaces for discussion and reinvention. Perhaps what is most encouraging about its textuality is that discussions by fans rarely overlook its problematic representation of technology and gender, and perhaps this very awareness is a defining characteristic of the Post-Romantic: to seek out questions rather than answers and to acknowledge disparities and contradictions, reinforcing the notion that the construction of realities cannot, in fact, be programmed, categorised, or easily referenced.

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