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Anne Rouhette. 'A disciple of Albertus Magnus [...] in the eighteenth century': Anachronism and Anachrony in Frankenstein. *Romanticism and Time: Literary Temporalities*, dir. Céline Sabiron et Sophie Laniel-Musitelli, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, p. 163-179., 2021. hal-03408530

**HAL Id: hal-03408530**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03408530>**

Submitted on 29 Oct 2021

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## **‘A disciple of Albertus Magnus [...] in the eighteenth century’: Anachronism and Anachrony in *Frankenstein***

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*Le Monstre et le magicien* [The Monster and The Magician], a melodrama by Jean-Toussaint Merle and Antony Béraud, opened at Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin in 1826. A great success, set in sixteenth-century Venice, it tells the story of an alchemist, Zametti, ‘*livré depuis sa jeunesse aux funestes travaux des Paracelse, des Albert le Grand et des Faustus*’ [who from an early age had pursued the dreadful works of the likes of Paracelsus, Albertus Magnus and Faustus].<sup>1</sup> Zametti fashions a hideous monster who proceeds to kill his creator’s blind surrogate father and son, and finally Zametti himself on board a ship. The monster is then struck down by lightning in godly wrath. These elements, despite time and space differentials, or perhaps precisely because of them, were sufficient for critics and spectators to recognize the play as an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), whose plot unfolds in the late eighteenth century. The author herself remarked on the similarities between the two works,<sup>2</sup> reinforced by the presence of T.P. Cooke in the role of the Parisian Monster—the English actor and mime artist had already appeared as Frankenstein’s Creature in *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein*, Richard Brinsley Peake’s 1823 stage adaptation of Shelley’s novel.

This choice of a Renaissance setting and of a magician as the main protagonist may have been inspired by the first French translation of *Frankenstein* by Jules Saladin, which appeared in 1821 and discreetly but recurrently stresses the supernatural components of Shelley’s plot. The translator thus consistently rendered Shelley’s ‘chemistry’ by ‘*l’alchimie*’, the French term for ‘alchemy’: ‘the more rational theory of chemistry which has resulted from modern discoveries’ becomes ‘*la théorie d’alchimie, la plus raisonnable qui soit résultée des*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Nodier, *Œuvres dramatiques II. Bertram; Le Monstre et le magicien* [by Jean-Toussaint Merle and Antony Béraud]; *Le Songe d’or: fragments*, ed. by Ginette Picat-Guinoiseau (Genève: Droz, 1991), p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> On 11 June 1826, Shelley wrote to John Howard Payne, who was then in Paris: ‘How goes Frankenstein of Porte St. Martin?’, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, vol. I, ed. by Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), p. 52.

*découvertes modernes*’ [the theory of alchemy, the most sensible that has resulted from the modern discoveries] while M. Waldman teaches an oxymoronic ‘*alchimie moderne*’ instead of ‘modern chemistry’.<sup>3</sup> Saladin’s use of ‘*alchimie*’ or Zametti’s quality as Magician may be considered as adaptations or misinterpretations of *Frankenstein*, but they also arguably identify one very strong element of the novel and relocate Victor in the era, or in one of the eras, to which he belongs in mind, though not in body as he admits: ‘it may appear very strange, that a disciple of Albertus Magnus should arise in the eighteenth century’.<sup>4</sup> He is thus a living anachronism, a man at odds with his age. Echoing Victor *verbatim* almost immediately afterwards, M. Krempe also insists on the chronological disorder his young student represents: ‘I little expected in this enlightened and scientific age to find a disciple of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus’.<sup>5</sup> But what both Saladin’s translation and *Le Monstre et le magicien* put forward is that the plot itself should rightfully unfold in the late Middle Ages or in the Renaissance, since its premise, bringing to life the inanimate, or in Victor’s words, ‘bestow[ing] animation upon lifeless matter’,<sup>6</sup> is one of the pursuits of alchemists. The novel’s writing, and the effect it produces, depend on the superimposition of two or more temporal lines. Similarly, James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein* also attests to the power of the medieval paradigm in Shelley’s novel, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues, by ‘mingl[ing] effortlessly medieval archaism and scientific modernity’ with its gleaming laboratory setting in a medieval tower.<sup>7</sup> Lecercle focuses on the constant interplay in the novel between

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, The 1818 Text, ed. by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 23 and 30 (‘Shelley, *Frankenstein*’ in the rest of these notes); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, ou le Prométhée Moderne*, trans. by Jules Saladin (Paris: Corréard, 1821), pp. 77-78 and 104.

<sup>4</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 34. Among the three alchemists mentioned by Victor, Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus, the first two were sixteenth-century natural philosophers, and Albertus was a thirteenth-century thinker, chronologically the most remote from the late eighteenth century; this choice underlines Victor’s temporal distance from his own time, but it is also particularly relevant since, more so than Agrippa and Paracelsus, Albertus Magnus was interested in bringing to life the inanimate.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Frankenstein, Mythe et Philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), pp. 7 and 16 (my translation).

seemingly mutually exclusive discourses (religious, scientific, historical and mythical), to whose contradictions *Frankenstein* offers a possible dénouement.

I will here examine this blurring and even co-existence of distinct timelines and their discursive modes with reference to the concept of anachrony. The latter may be understood in its narratological sense of a chronological disorder between diegesis and narrative, defined by Gérard Genette as ‘the various forms of discrepancy between the order of the story and the order of the narrative’.<sup>8</sup> This allows a consideration of the complex handling of time in the novel which engages with the poetical, creative sense of the term in line with Jacques Rancière’s definition of anachrony, which he prefers over anachronism because it is putatively free of pejorative connotations. By anachronies, Rancière designates ‘events, notions, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with “itself”’. They have the capacity ‘to define completely original points of orientation’, from which we might see the world, and our temporal experience of it, in unexpected and revealing ways.<sup>9</sup> Even though Rancière here deals with the writing of history, his concept is useful in literary analysis, particularly in a work like *Frankenstein* which builds on a complex and even contradictory temporal experience, if only because its entire plot depends on Victor’s anachronistic ambition. In the last part of this essay, I will attempt to broaden this conceptual framework with examples taken from Shelley’s fiction in general, with a view to showing how *Frankenstein* and its chronologically displaced protagonist inform the rest of her work.

*Frankenstein* is set firmly in the eighteenth century, as we know from the dates on Walton’s letters which frame the narrative, ‘17—’.<sup>10</sup> Other details help narrow down the period to the last decade of the century: the Creature thus learns to read from Volney’s *Ruins of Empire*, published in French in 1791. Efforts to conclusively establish a clear timeframe, for example Anne K. Mellor’s suggestion that Walton’s letters encompass nearly a year, from December

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<sup>8</sup> Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 79 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian’s Truth’ [1996], trans. by Noel Fitzpatrick and Tim Stott, *InPrint*, 3.1 (2015), 21-48 (p. 47).

<sup>10</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 5 and 178.

1796 to September 1797, have however failed.<sup>11</sup> Thus Leslie S. Klinger identifies Walton's encounter with Victor as taking place in 1799, to account for their quotes from Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', first published in 1798.<sup>12</sup> This though does not explain why both Victor and the Creature quote from Percy Shelley's 'Mutability', published in 1816, or why Victor should refer to the third canto of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816) and Leigh Hunt's 'Rimini' (1816), or why he quotes from the revised 'Ancient Mariner' of 1800.<sup>13</sup> These literary anachronisms properly constitute forms of *paralepsis* as defined by Genette, where the reader receives more information than authorized by the narrative code operating within the novel, here a first-person narrator telling a story set in the late eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> These leaps forward in writing-time disrupt the initially recognised temporal framework of the narrative, substituting the author's timeline for that of the diegesis, and possibly imposing the author's voice in place of that of her characters'. The same disruptive effect is apparent when Victor attends an incomprehensible lecture on 'potassium and boron' since as Stuart Peterfreund notes '[b]oron and potassium were first isolated and named by the Shelleys' favorite chemist, Humphrey [*sic*] Davy, in 1807'.<sup>15</sup> This blurring of temporal markers is exacerbated by the fact that the dates on Walton's letters are incomplete: 'Dec. 11<sup>th</sup>, 17-' for the first one. If the day and month are specified, the exact year is left blank, or rather, it is erased, replaced by a dash which both 'veils and unveils chronology', as Lecercle remarks.<sup>16</sup> This dash materializes a double movement, a form of affirmation and elision, emphasised by the contrast it creates with the details provided concerning the month and the day.

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 54-55. On the impossibility of precisely dating the events in *Frankenstein*, see Leonard Wolf, *The Essential Frankenstein* (New York: Plume, 1993), pp. 333-34.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Shelley, *The New Annotated Frankenstein*, ed. by Leslie S. Klinger (New York: Liveright, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 66, 89, 48, 111 and 59.

<sup>14</sup> Genette, *Figures III*, p. 211.

<sup>15</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 25; Stuart Peterfreund, 'Composing What May Not Be "Sad Trash": A Reconsideration of Mary Shelley's Use of Paracelsus in *Frankenstein*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 43.1 (2004), n. 6, p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> Lecercle, *Frankenstein*, p. 50.

Both specific and uncertain, accurate and undetermined, this partial date signals a conflict between two conceptions of time. In Mircea Eliade's terms a distinction may be drawn between the linearity of historical time, or 'profane' time, and the suspension or repetition of mythical or 'sacred' time.<sup>17</sup> Thus historical time, an impression of linearity and ineluctable movement forward through time, is conveyed by the succession of Walton's dated letters and by the other letters in the narrative, Elizabeth's 18 March and 18 May missives, and Alphonse's, dated 12 May, in all of which dashes replace the exact years.<sup>18</sup> This linearity is also apparent in the inherent nature of Victor's and the Creature's autobiographical narratives as they both look back on their lives, Victor beginning with an allusion to his 'ancestors' and the Creature referring to 'the original æra of [his] being'.<sup>19</sup> But Walton's framing narrative functions according to an alternative temporal mode, distinct from these retrospective accounts, recounted in the preterit. He relates for the most part what happens in his very recent past or his present, even writing 'to the moment' in the present tense or in the present perfect: 'I am interrupted [...]. It is midnight [...]. I must arise and examine [...]. Great God! What a scene has just taken place!', for instance.<sup>20</sup> The structure of the novel, which combines the epistolary format and chapters, thus rests on two temporal narrative modes at variance with each other, complicating the experience of chronology. Nevertheless, all three narrators remark on the passing of time and comment in particular on the change from one season to the next, as the following quotations illustrate:

[Walton] The winter has been dreadfully severe; but the spring promises well, and it is considered as a remarkably early season [...].

[...] it is the height of summer [...].

[Victor] Winter, spring, and summer, passed away during my labours [...].

Summer passed away in these occupations, and my return to Geneva was fixed for the latter end of autumn; but being delayed by several accidents, winter and snow arrived [...]. The winter, however, was spent cheerfully; and although the spring was uncommonly late, when it came, its beauty compensated for its dilatoriness.

[The Creature] As the sun became warmer, and the light of day longer, the snow vanished [...].

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<sup>17</sup> *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 48, 159, and 53.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 18 and 79.

<sup>20</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 186.

The pleasant showers and genial warmth of spring greatly altered the aspect of the earth.

Autumn passed thus. I saw, with surprise and grief, the leaves decay and fall, and nature again assume the barren and bleak appearance it had worn when I first beheld the woods and the lovely moon.

The winter advanced, and an entire revolution of the seasons had taken place since I awoke into life.<sup>21</sup>

The natural cycle of the seasons quietly evokes the passing of time, which advances at a relatively regular pace in the novel. Other examples of these types of chronological markers include numerous dates and times of day in addition to those given in letters: the Creature famously opens his eyes ‘at one in the morning’ ‘on a dreary night of November’, although the exact day is unspecified; he is seen by Victor at Plainpalais ‘at midnight’; William disappears ‘[I]ast Thursday (May 7<sup>th</sup>)’ and his body is discovered at ‘about five in the morning’ on the following day. It is also ‘about five in the morning’ when Victor enters his father’s house on his return home; Justine’s trial begins at ‘eleven o’clock’; ‘it was nearly noon when [Victor] arrived at the top of the ascent’ and the Creature’s ‘tale had occupied the whole day’ before he returns; Victor leaves London ‘on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March’, ‘arrive[s] at Havre on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May’, and lands at Evian at ‘eight o’clock’.<sup>22</sup>

However, partly because the year on the letters and the day on which the Creature is brought to life are missing, these dates and times are given to some extent in a temporal void, so that the floating character of an unsettled, even suspended or circular timeline conflicts with the linearity of historical time. Instead of progressing in time, the novel doubles back upon itself when the Creature’s tale covers the same time span as that of Victor’s story and returns to some events already related, namely the murder of William and the framing of Justine. This long analepsis represents an anachrony in Genette’s terms, a chronological disorder in the way the elements of the diegesis are presented, whose effect here is to open up fresh perspectives on events previously related. This contributes significantly to the impact of the novel as the Creature’s voice is superimposed onto Victor’s.

Furthermore, the dates and times given do not seem to operate simply as chronological markers. Some play significant roles as they can have symbolical values: this appears clearly when the first hour of the day, ‘one in the morning’, signals the beginning of the Creature’s life. Their role may remain more elusive, as when Victor arrives home ‘at about five in the morning’. The same phrase is used in reference to the discovery of William’s body, perhaps hinting that Victor is to blame for the child’s murder, perhaps for an altogether different

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<sup>21</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 10, 11, 38, 50, 90, 92, 105-06, and 106.

<sup>22</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 38, 57, 52, 58, 61, 76, 122, 132, 157, and 164.

purpose or for no purpose at all; the reader's attention is thus drawn to a coincidence which seems to require interpretation. Other elements further contribute to blur the linearity of the narrative. Events similar in nature take place several times, strikingly so in a relatively short novel (186 pages long in the Oxford World's Classics edition): two characters are wrongfully accused of murder, Victor speaks to an elderly magistrate twice, and he falls very ill three times. Time can even appear to go backwards, a temporal movement which mirrors as it were a geographical one since Walton abandons his voyage of exploration at the end of the novel and returns home. In the space of three pages, Victor gives two different dates for his and Clerval's arrival in Britain: 'It was on a clear morning, in the latter days of December, that I first saw the white cliffs of Britain' thus becomes 'We had arrived in England at the beginning of October' only two pages later.<sup>23</sup> As David Ketterer observes, this mistake 'originated at the Fair Copy, typesetting, or proofing stages' since Shelley's draft indicates 'in the latter days of September', not December.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless it went uncorrected in the 1823 and 1831 editions, which emend other slips, including chronological mistakes,<sup>25</sup> and creates for the reader a sense either of reversibility (time going backwards, December turning to October as Victor continues his scientific pursuits of earlier years) or of irrelevance, of arbitrariness. *Frankenstein* is thus caught between two contrary and yet co-existing conceptions of time, one evolutionary, the linearity of history, and the other circular, the a-temporality of myth, to which the paralepses contribute. A telling illustration of this occurs when Shelley has her Creature read Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, referred to as *Plutarch's Lives* in *Frankenstein*, and classify them both as 'histories', a point made even clearer on the following page when he explains having considered *Paradise Lost* 'as a true history'.<sup>26</sup> This seemingly impossible fusion between the mythical and historical, emphasised by the shared initials, PL, is emblematic of Shelley's juxtaposition of

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<sup>23</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 130-31 and 132.

<sup>24</sup> David Ketterer, 'The Corrected *Frankenstein*: Twelve Preferred Readings in the Last Draft', *English Language Notes*, 33.1 (Sept. 1995), 23-35 (p. 32). Shelley's draft of this passage, MS. Abinger c. 57, 46r, is available online on <http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/sc/oxford/frankenstein/volume/ii/#/p96>.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, Victor's departure for England is moved from August to September. A more obvious mistake regarding the date of one of Walton's last letters (September 9<sup>th</sup> instead of September 19<sup>th</sup>) was also corrected.

<sup>26</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 103 and 104.



contradictory discourses as previously noted. It is fitting that the Creature should operate such a fusion because his creation results precisely from Victor's attempt at aligning myth and history.

Victor describes his scientific career in historical and developmental terms, claiming to discard the alchemy of the 'early philosophers' to move on to 'modern chemistry' (my emphasis) but it is obvious that he never really gives up the initial nature of his interest in science.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the 1831 version goes as far as to present this movement as regressive, inverting the whole history of science, when Victor explains that in his youth, '[he] had retrod the steps of knowledge along the paths of time and exchanged the discoveries of recent inquirers for the dreams of forgotten alchemists'.<sup>28</sup> Although, as will be seen, the shift from 'early' to 'modern' is described in slightly different terms in the 1818 version I am concerned with, this movement backwards in time is evocative of what Victor finds so fascinating about alchemy and underlies the project so dear to his heart, since his creation is described as a by-product of his early interest in the *elixir vitae*, i.e. the search for immortality:

I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. But the latter obtained my most undivided attention: wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!<sup>29</sup>

Although Victor claims to have rejected the visions of the 'early philosophers' by the time he reaches Ingolstadt, he takes up the same subject some pages on, after he has made his discovery, thanks to which

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<sup>27</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 24 and 30.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1831), ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1988) p. 91. The variations between the 1818 and the 1831 versions regarding Victor's attitude towards alchemy and modern science are examined in particular by David Ketterer in 'Frankenstein's "Conversion" from Natural Magic to Modern Science—and a *Shifted* (and *Converted*) Last Draft Insert', *Science-Fiction Studies*, 24.1 (March 1997), 57-78.

<sup>29</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 23.

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds [...] I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.<sup>30</sup>

What Victor desires is not so much to still or abolish time but simply and plainly to bring back the dead, more precisely, to erase his mother's death, as his famous dream after the awakening of the Creature reveals. Jerrold E. Hogle sums up the position of Freudian critics thus: 'Victor's finished product is revealed by his dream at the moment of "birth" to be a cover for his drive to return to his mother'.<sup>31</sup> His ultimate wish is thus to reverse time, escape from the consciousness of man's finitude, from the 'bounds' of 'life and death' and the linearity of human chronological existence, in what can then be defined as a backwards movement.

Although Victor claims that 'the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus' was effected when he discovered the power of electricity at the age of fifteen,<sup>32</sup> his move from alchemy to chemistry can best be described in Lecercle's terms as 'repression' more than progress or development:

Victor's history sums up that of chemistry. He first reads Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa, but the sight of a tree destroyed by lightning inspires a passion for electricity and he turns away from those ancient authors. In Ingolstadt, he studies chemistry, and he spends time in charnel-houses not to summon the souls of the dead but to observe the decomposition of tissues. This is however a dubious activity, redolent of magic—for Victor, chemistry springs from alchemy as it represses it. And alchemy returns when Victor discovers the archetypal alchemical secret, that of life. In a strange and contradictory blend, the most archaic dreams and the most modern form of science coexist in Victor's scientific mind.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, 'An Introduction', *Frankenstein's Dream, A Romantic Circles Praxis* Volume, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (June 2003) <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/frankenstein/hogle/hogle.html> [accessed 30 July 2019] (para. 4 of 18).

<sup>32</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> Lecercle, *Frankenstein*, p. 42. That Victor's interest in alchemy is not simply to be dismissed as he moves on to more modern and presumably better science is a point also made by several critics, among whom is Stuart Peterfreund, 'Composing', pp. 79-81. Science in *Frankenstein* has been the subject of many stimulating analyses in recent years, summed up

When Victor describes his reaction after meeting with M. Krempe, a champion of modern science and denigrator of alchemists, his language is fraught with this ‘strange and contradictory blend’:

I returned home, not disappointed, for I had long considered those authors useless whom the professor had so strongly reprobated; but I did not feel much inclined to study the books which I procured at his recommendation. M. Krempe was a little squat man, with a gruff voice and repulsive countenance; the teacher, therefore, did not prepossess me in favour of his doctrine. Besides, I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different, when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth.<sup>34</sup>

The reasons which Victor gives for disregarding Krempe’s recommendations reveal how little he has progressed since his readings of the now supposedly ‘useless’ alchemists, if only because Victor’s axiology finds itself reversed at the end of this passage where modern realities and not alchemical dreams are deemed to be ‘of little worth’. He still clings to the notions expounded by the ‘masters of the science’ and has not yet given up on ‘chimeras of boundless grandeur’. Interestingly, he bases his rejection of Krempe on physiognomy (the teacher is physically repulsive, hence his doctrine is as well), an epistemological system which Albertus Magnus held in high esteem. ‘The scene was changed’, that is, the time-period has changed, perhaps, but not the visions and ambitions on which Victor’s interest in science is based.

Jules Saladin’s mistranslation of ‘modern chemistry’ into ‘*l’alchimie moderne*’ thus turns out to be both oxymoronic and fitting: instead of moving, progressing from ‘early science’ to ‘modern science’, Victor operates a fusion, ‘attempt[ing] to wed the visions of alchemy to the methodology of science’, as Irving H. Buchen argues.<sup>35</sup> Victor’s refusal to take historicity into account was already evident when he was as fascinated by the search for the *elixir vitae* as by

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by Andrew Smith in ‘Scientific Contexts’, *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016), pp. 69-83.

<sup>34</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Irving H. Buchen, ‘*Frankenstein* and the Alchemy of Creation and Evolution’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 8 (Spring 1977), p. 104.

experiments on an air pump, or when he considered Pliny and Buffon as ‘authors [...] of nearly equal interest and utility’, showing no awareness of a progression from the former to the latter, or even of a difference between the two.<sup>36</sup> His creation of the monster results from a deep yearning for the co-existence of several temporal planes, aspirations that may be termed a-chronistic rather than anachronistic since they work towards annihilating historical time and replacing it with the timelessness of mythical time. These aspirations lead to the anachrony that is the creation of the Monster, an event outside of its time and even outside time, thus questioning the finitude of human beings, of their beginning and of their end. Of course such transgressive ambition is proved to be destructive in the diegesis of the novel, as instead of restoring the dead to life Victor and his Creature condemn the living to death. But from a literary point of view, the impulse responsible for Victor’s creation, this attempt at going backwards, or probably more precisely, at merging history and myth, constitutes the creative drive behind some of Mary Shelley’s work. In the last part of this essay, and from this particular perspective, I would like to review the variations her fiction offers on the Frankensteinian motif of the chronologically displaced character.

Victor Frankenstein can be said to be a prototype in Shelley’s fiction which frequently resorts to the device of introducing a character in a time period to which he—for that character is always male—does not belong, usually with dire consequences. This motif occurs in varying guises in terms of content and of form, which reveals its creative potential for Shelley. These chronological displacements or decalages can be conceptual or metaphorical. Such is the case in *Frankenstein*, where Victor’s alchemical interests are presented as anachronistic in the eighteenth century in which he lives. Another example would be Richard of York, the doomed hero of *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, an 1830 historical novel set in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, who clings to the medieval values of chivalry in the proto-capitalist world of the Renaissance. Richard is portrayed as a quixotic figure, a remnant of a past era who cannot survive the end of the novel.<sup>37</sup> Or again, in the last chapters of *The Last Man* (1826), the narrator, sole relict of the human race annihilated by the plague,

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<sup>36</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 24 and 25. See also Peterfreund, ‘Composing’, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> On this novel and its anachronistic character, see for instance William D. Brewer, ‘William Godwin, Chivalry, and Mary Shelley’s *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 35.2 (Spring 1999), 187-205.

wanders in a world to which he very strongly feels that he no longer belongs.<sup>38</sup> These three novels invite contemplation of man's place in time, which is addressed from other perspectives in several of Shelley's short stories.

These depict literal temporal anomalies thanks to the use of supernatural devices and raise more explicitly the metaphysical question of man's existence as a chronological being thanks to the characters' reaction to immortality or resuscitation. What interests me here is the variety of forms this basic premise gives rise to. Like *Frankenstein*, 'The Mortal Immortal', first published in 1833 and frequently anthologized, is a first-person narration. An actual pupil of Cornelius Agrippa, Winzy, the narrator, drinks his master's elixir of life by mistake and watches his wife Bertha grow old and die; aged 323 as he writes his tale, he yearns for death and yet still fears it. The short story draws on several genres: humorous when it describes the disappointment of the elderly alchemist and his difficulty in finding a servant, it becomes sentimental when Winzy relates his courtship of Bertha, and then psychological when he recounts his long years spent in solitude and his ambivalent attitude towards death. Two other short stories offer variations upon the same theme but this time the characters are brought back to life—unlike Winzy's long life, theirs have been discontinued. 'Valerius, Or, The Re-Animated Roman', an unfinished tale probably written in 1819 and first published in Charles E. Robinson's 1976 collection of Mary Shelley's tales and stories, makes use of a rather complex narrative technique, beginning with the intervention of an unidentified first-person narrator followed by two retrospective accounts, the second one covering partly the same grounds as the first, as in *Frankenstein*. As in *Frankenstein* again, the timeline of the story is blurred: 'Valerius' begins with a precise time but imprecise date since the year and the day are missing – it is '[a]bout eleven o'clock in the month of September'.<sup>39</sup> The decalage between the main character, a Roman who lived and died in the first century BC, and the time period, is remarked upon several times, as in the following passage:

I can compare him to nothing that now exists—his appearance resembled that of the statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Square of the Capitol at Rome. Placid and commanding, his features were Roman; except

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<sup>38</sup> The question of the handling of time in *The Last Man* is addressed in fine detail by Timothy Ruppert in 'Time and the Sybil in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*', *Studies in the Novel*, 41.2 (Summer 2009), 141-156.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Shelley, *Collected Tales and Stories*, ed. by Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1990 [1976]), p. 332.

for his dress you would have imagined him to be a statue of one of the Romans animated with life. He wore the dress now common all over Europe, but it appeared unsuited to him and even as if he were unused to it.<sup>40</sup>

The tale also integrates the point of view of Valerius' friend Isabell Harley, who describes him as 'a being cut off from our world' and feels 'that [her] companion was not a being of the earth'.<sup>41</sup> The tone is tragic as the character feels nothing but despair in his second life.

Everything that has happened since his first death has been degradation: 'the wretched Italians, who usurp the soil once tread by heroes, fill [him] with bitter disdain' since 'all that is great and good ha[s] departed'.<sup>42</sup> More than Victor's, it is his Creature's voice that Valerius takes up here as he repeatedly stresses his uniqueness and the solitude that it entails.

Inversely, the re-animated character in 'Roger Dodsworth, the Re-Animated Englishman' is described on the whole as full of curiosity and admiration for the nineteenth century in which he awakes. The comic mode predominates in a work written in 1826 but published for the first time in 1863. The tale builds on what Charles E. Robinson calls 'a cryogenic hoax', a story published in *Le Journal du Commerce de Lyon* in June 1826.<sup>43</sup> It is told from the point of view of an author-like persona, an avatar of Shelley herself, and deals with a character 'whose animation had been suspended by the action of the frost [...] as he was returning from Italy, in 1654'.<sup>44</sup> The date becomes '1647' page 48 and the reader learns that the discovery occurred 'a score or two of years' before 1826, suggesting that, as in *Frankenstein*, the timeline is erratic or even superfluous, although here, instead of destabilizing the reader, the chronological uncertainties highlight the playfulness and fictionality of the tale.<sup>45</sup> Roger Dodsworth is 'dug out from under an avalanche' and 'resuscitated' '[u]pon the application of the usual remedies'.<sup>46</sup> These are unspecified, but they are presumably the same as those used on Victor when found half-frozen by Walton in the Arctic:

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, pp. 340 and 343.

<sup>42</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, pp. 333-34.

<sup>43</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, p. 377.

<sup>44</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

We accordingly brought him back to the deck, and restored him to animation by rubbing him with brandy, and forcing him to swallow a small quantity. As soon as he shewed signs of life, we wrapped him up in blankets, and placed him near the chimney of the kitchen-stove.<sup>47</sup>

The story alludes to *Frankenstein* elsewhere; Shelley thus imagines her ‘youthful antique’ dreaming of ‘his favourite play-mate, the friend of his later years, his destined and lovely bride’, or describes him with ‘a *Genevese* watch, which he often consults, as if he were not yet assured that time had made progress in its accustomed manner’ (my emphasis).<sup>48</sup> The story also most probably refers to ‘Valerius’ when the narrator of ‘Roger Dodsworth’ mentions having ‘often made conjectures how such and such heroes of antiquity would act, if they were reborn in these times’.<sup>49</sup> In this most metafictional of Shelley’s short stories, the anachronism is explicitly presented as a source of inspiration, as food for imaginative thought; since obviously Roger Dodsworth never returned to England, ‘let us be permitted to indulge in conjecture’, the narrator writes, which is what Shelley does during the greater part of her story.<sup>50</sup> She makes up dialogues between Dodsworth and his discoverer filled with humorous misunderstandings, and she deals with the character’s chronological unfitness here in a comic mode. Comic or tragic, literal or metaphorical, seen from various perspectives and different degrees of narrative complexity, these brief examples draw on one another and on the original text, *Frankenstein*, Shelley’s first published work of fiction, which they can be said to resuscitate and adapt to different time-periods. In this respect, it is not altogether unreasonable to suggest that the 1831 version represents an attempt at introducing the novel into yet another decade, an attempt perhaps mirrored by the publication of ‘Valerius’ and ‘Roger Dodsworth’ long after their author’s death, as if the tales themselves had been re-animated. A study of Shelley’s fiction from this perspective of anachrony and anachronism thus reveals the power of these concepts as fundamental tropes in *Frankenstein* and beyond.

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<sup>47</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, pp. 44 and 47. Victor refers to Elizabeth as ‘my future wife; [...] my playfellow, and, as we grew older, my friend’ (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 20).

<sup>49</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> Shelley, *Collected Tales*, p. 44.

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