

Unexpected Creatures:

Procreative Liberty and the Frankenstein Ballet

BY ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON

One of the most recent and original adaptations of Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is the ballet version choreographed by Liam Scarlett and performed by the Royal Ballet in 2016 and the San Francisco Ballet in 2017 and 2018.¹ What emerges from this translation is an economical, emotionally wrenching, and visually elegant drama of family tragedy from which we can draw a cautionary tale about contemporary bioethical dilemmas in family making that new and forthcoming biomedical technologies present. This performance of bodies interacting suggests the need for an ethics of acceptance and recognition as people navigate complex familial relationships involving procreative liberty, questions of moral personhood, and parental obligation. In the *Frankenstein* ballet, the narrative genre of dance—what I'll call “story in the flesh”—invites viewers to identify with the characters and enter into the complexity of interpersonal relations. The ballet becomes a compelling testimony about possible unintended outcomes set in motion by well-intended fallible humans like themselves.

Through its formal vocabulary of movement, embodied arrangements, costumes, expression, and staging, the ballet—to use the narrative axiom—shows rather than tells the agonizing interrelations that come from parental rejection of a child who differs from other family members in physique, behavior, temperament, cognition, or psyche. The performance invites us to consider how families should and should not navigate the entry of children who seem irreconcilably different from their progenitors. As Andrew Solomon's book *Far from the Tree* tells us, a child whose behaviors, physical characteristics, or sense of identity are very different from what the parents anticipated can provide a family the opportunity to adjust expectations and experience positive psycho-emotional and moral development. Solomon's book (recently

adapted into a documentary film) looks at relationships between and the individual flourishing of, for example, hearing parents and children who are deaf, parents of typical stature and children with dwarfism, and cisgender parents and transgender children.² In contrast to the families in Solomon's book, the Frankenstein family is a case study in the tragic consequences for every family member when the parent refuses to recognize his obligation to accept the seemingly alien child as he is, rather than how the parent prefers or expects the offspring to be. Like a child born with a significant disability to parents without such a disability, the creature Victor Frankenstein creates is like a changeling for the fully human being he intended to produce with his progressive scientific technologies. Although there have always been children who have fallen far from the tree, the *Frankenstein* ballet raises questions about how the procreative liberty that comes with emerging reproductive technologies can or perhaps will affect familial acceptance and inclusion. It warns viewers of human frailty and the existential reality that decisions and actions taken to be moral goods in the present can wreak moral and relational disaster in a future that we have endeavored to control with our most prudent deliberation.

The ballet tells the tale of Victor Frankenstein and his creation through a series of intense pas de deux, the danced duets characteristic of classical ballet. The pas de deux shift in membership, form, and meaning throughout the ballet, expressing the entangled relations of recognition, belonging, rejection, repudiation, tenderness, and violence that bind this cursed family. From the emotional power of these scenes, we can draw an analogy to the complex potential drama of the child who is unexpectedly very different from and thus refused acknowledgment and recognition by his creator.

The nub of the drama is Victor's refusal—perhaps inability—to recognize the Creature as he is and accept him as a family member. Without the resemblances and similarities that usually help build family solidarity and harmony, the Creature remains outside the family circle, first pleading for and then demanding the acceptance he never receives.

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In Victor and the Creature's danced duets, we witness simultaneously the similarities that might bond them as close kin and the differences that mark them as alien species. Through the movement vocabulary of ballet and modern dance in each pas de deux, the Creature advances toward Victor, entreating him to bestow the look of familial affirmation and the embrace of familial acceptance.

These embodied emotional entanglements begin with the creation scene in which Victor electrically animates his cadaver. As the Creature rises from his bier, he catches his maker in an at-once tender and threatening embrace. A terrified Victor escapes from the urgent grip, and the Creature frantically exits. In striking contrast to Shelley's text, in which Victor flees

without any physical contact between him and his newly made creature, the choreography thus enacts the essential relationship of similarity and difference between the two that movement and costume narrate in every subsequent pas de deux. Akin in creaturely shape, size, and comportment, they are equally opposed in costuming. Victor is the properly costumed and coiffed eighteenth-century aristocratic young scientist doctor and Frankenstein heir, by turns romantically despondent, sensitive, and arrogant. The Creature is naked, unprotected by hair or cloth, with the dancer costumed in a skin-tight deathly white bodysuit vividly sutured with red wounds. The Creature is raw, a ghostly and ghastly figure lurking and longing on the edges of the Frankenstein family circle. Twins in form and grace, each alternately dominant and submissive, the progenitor and progeny move toward and away from each other, touching and releasing, embracing and struggling through the pas de deux that tells their story of entangled estrangement. The originary embrace between them continues as the ballet's gestural thematic. In the image shown here, from their final pas de deux, the creator and his creation are parallel in body and form, but now the Creature attempts to hide his nakedness and wounds with Victor's coat that he has stolen in the creation scene, suggesting his poignant but futile attempts to be a member of the Frankenstein family.

At the turning point when the Creature compels Victor to look at him full on and acknowledge his being, Victor turns his face away in horror. This rejection hardens the Creature's heretofore ambivalent affection into resolute vengeance against his creator. The Creature's unreciprocated embraces and Victor's visual refusals parody the encirclement of love and acceptance that any child brought into the world merits by virtue of its shared humanity with the family to whom it belongs. By the final fatal pas de deux, the creature has killed everyone Victor loves, including Victor's brother, father, and now his new bride, Elizabeth; a now impassioned Victor, with nothing more to lose, returns the Creature's desperate embraces in tenderly violent mirrored postures of mutual holding and rough stroking. The Creature takes Victor's hands in forced caresses of his skull and face, but now Victor returns this mutual touching. This belated, urgent visual acknowledgment in effect choreographs the philosopher Immanuel Levinas's mandate to behold the face of the other to accord him full humanity.



The Creature and Victor Frankenstein perform their final pas de deux in parallel and complementary movements, suggesting their familial alignment and entangled opposition.

Photo credit: Bill Cooper / Royal Opera House / ArenaPAL

The Frankenstein family drama illuminates the contemporary ethical challenge in which families exercise procreative liberty in the often-bewildering environment of rapidly emerging reproductive technologies. Family making today requires autonomous decision-making based on information-gathering technologies and procedures from preconception genetic testing and counseling, to preimplantation embryo selection, to prenatal fetal screening through imaging and genetic testing, and through neonatal care. Parents must make selections based on information and dispositions available in the present intended to shape future outcomes. These information technologies generate a profile of a predicted future person who will or will not be admitted to the family. This abundance of often uninterpretable information can be an unfulfilled promise of an expected future person that the information technologies indicate. The informational profile of the future family member puts the reproductive woman in the difficult position of needing to accept the outcome of her decision to select for or against a particular embryo or fetus at any stage of her pregnancy if the result is not what she and her family expect.

Such procreative liberty emphasizes intentionality over acceptance. While this ethical mandate is proper in modern liberal societies, it has the potential to create unintended burdens or even harms that come when intentionality is not realized. An obstetrical environment with few testing and selection procedures compelled parents toward an attitude of acceptance for an outcome that exceeded their intentional control. Now, the obligation to exercise procreative liberty puts parents at risk of an unexpected outcome for which they and often others consider themselves responsible. This existential burden, this curse of acting in the present with the intention to control the future, can be more harm than benefit.³

Ultimately, the problem is the dominance of what Jeffrey Bishop calls the “utilitarian calculus of measurable goods in medicine,”⁴ which seems to generate for parents an obligation to select for offspring who have the best chance of the best life, a liberal eugenic position that the philosopher Julian Savulescu calls “procreative beneficence.”⁵ The *Frankenstein* ballet, as I have interpreted it here, can serve as an existential scenario—a cautionary tale—for why reproductive women need a more robust set of narratives for an ethics of recognition and acceptance of future persons unpredicted through the information technologies of today’s procreative clinical experience and thus unexpected in the modern project of family making.

1. See *Frankenstein*, Royal Ballet, directed by Ross MacGibbon, choreographed by Liam Scarlett, London, Opus Arte, 2017, DVD.

2. A. Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2012).

3. See, for example, K. Stoll, “The Routinization of Prenatal Testing and the Erosion of Patient Autonomy,” *The DNA Exchange*, November 16, 2017, <https://thednaexchange.com/2017/11/16/the-routinization-of-prenatal-testing-and-the-erosion-of-patient-autonomy/>; B. A. Bernhardt et al., “Women’s Experiences Receiving Abnormal Prenatal Chromosomal Microarray Testing Results,” *Genetic Medicine* 15, no. 2 (2013): 139-45; S. Samerski, “Genetic Counseling and the Fiction of Choice: Taught Self-Determination As a New Technique of Social Engineering,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 4 (2009): 735-61; E. Garcia, D. R. M. Timmermans, and E. Leeuwen, “Reconsidering Prenatal Screening: An Empirical Ethical Approach to Understand Moral Dilemmas as a Question of Personal Preferences,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 35 (2009): 410-14; and Looking for the Psychosocial Impacts of Genomic Information conference, New York, NY, February 26-27, 2018 (see <https://www.thehastingscenter.org/news/looking-psychosocial-effects-genomic-knowledge/>).

4. J. P. Bishop, “Charlie Gard and the Finitude of Medicine,” *ABC Religion and Ethics* (blog), July 26, 2017.

5. J. Savulescu, “Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children,” *Bioethics* 15, no. 5/6 (2001): 413-26.