



2012

‘Even if they were to leave Europe’: Frankenstein in Tasmania

Leigh Dale

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Dale, Leigh, ‘Even if they were to leave Europe’: Frankenstein in Tasmania, *Kunapipi*, 34(2), 2012.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/11>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

'Even if they were to leave Europe': Frankenstein in Tasmania

Abstract

Since the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein has served as a narrative model for those writing of science and ambition. For example, a contemporary journalist trying to explain the modus operandi of biologist and science entrepreneur J. Craig Venter, who was involved in the first sequencing of the human genome and was leader of the first team to create a cell with a synthetic genome, turned to the protagonist of Shelley's 1818 novel as a point of reference for a description of his subject:

LEIGH DALE

‘Even if they were to leave Europe’: Frankenstein in Tasmania

Since the early nineteenth century, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has served as a narrative model for those writing of science and ambition. For example, a contemporary journalist trying to explain the *modus operandi* of biologist and science entrepreneur J. Craig Venter, who was involved in the first sequencing of the human genome and was leader of the first team to create a cell with a synthetic genome, turned to the protagonist of Shelley’s 1818 novel as a point of reference for a description of his subject:

If only Victor Frankenstein had some media savvy, he might have been J. Craig Venter. Rather than living in dread of his appalling creature, he could have assembled a panel of bioethicists and theologians to bless it, applied for a Swiss government grant to research it, and hired an investment bank to explore an initial public offering — FrankenCell Inc. — to exploit the results of his research. (Mooney online)

Amidst modern interest in scientific debates around the creation of life, the constant citation of Shelley’s novel is not difficult to explain. Less explicable is why two modern Australian fictions about the themes central to *Frankenstein* — science, ambition and the creation of life — Rose Michael’s *The Asking Game* (2006/2007), and Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter* (1999), should turn to the story of an Australian animal generally believed to be extinct: the thylacine. The thylacine, which looks a little like a stocky greyhound with a large head and jaws, and a striped back, is colloquially and erroneously known as the ‘Tasmanian tiger’ (being neither exclusive to Tasmania nor a tiger).

Frankenstein provides the frame for my reading of ‘The Origins of the Monster Dogs’, one of two short stories embedded in Michael’s novel *The Asking Game*¹, and of Julia Leigh’s much better known novel *The Hunter*, which has subsequently been made into a feature film. *The Hunter* focuses on the search by a man known as ‘M’ (but in the last line of the book as Martin David), who has a contract from an unnamed biotech company to obtain the genetic material of a thylacine. M seems to have made a lot of money for the company, probably by obtaining genetic materials without scruple.² At the end of the novel, M shoots what the reader must presume to be the last living thylacine (although the novel is set in the present). What is noticeable is the protagonist’s lack of reflection on the ethics of executing the tiger for science and profit (something changed in the film, which has a less pessimistic ending). Contrastingly, *The Asking Game*, which is set in a not-to-distant future, is focused on ethical reflection about cloning. A young

woman detective from Sydney is given an assignment in central Australia, which becomes a mission to explore her own (genetic) past. ‘The Origin of the Monster Dogs’ has similar themes to the novel within which it appears, but describes a scientist, called only ‘the professor’, who dreams of cloning the thylacine. Both Michael’s short story and Leigh’s novel, then, although they are concerned with the ambition to create life, work against the backdrop of the well-known story, at least in Australia, of the extinction of the thylacine.

Although the remains of thylacines have been found on the Australian mainland, the destruction of the animal as a species is associated with the island state of Tasmania. To speak of extinction and Tasmania is to evoke two colonialist narratives: the extermination of the thylacine, and the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines. As Elizabeth Leane implies, these defunctive narratives reference each other in a way that is more than analogical: Tasmania as a place becomes signature of and shorthand for massacre within modern Australian history. This occurs also in relation to stories about science — not only *Frankenstein*, but Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde’. In both of these cases, the name of the scientist gripped by hubris — Victor Frankenstein and Henry Jekyll — has come to stand in for the quasi-human creation which embodies their evil: Frankenstein’s monster, and Mr Hyde. This cross-referencing and displacement, by which a name becomes shorthand for a violent history, is part of the splintering and recreation of these fictions within popular and professional cultures. As Nicola Marks contends, the literary narratives operate in complex ways as templates for describing scientific research (as the example of the description of J. Craig Venter signals) — and, I might add, historical events.

Shelley is astute in portraying scholarly ambition, which she attributes not only to Frankenstein but to the listener to whom he tells his story, the polar explorer Walton. The moral is shown when Walton boasts naively to Victor,

how gladly I would sacrifice my fortune, my existence, my every hope to the furtherance of my enterprize. One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race. As I spoke, a dark gloom spread over my listener’s countenance. (77)

Although Victor recoils from Walton’s declaration, the novel works to demonstrate that he himself has been entrapped by this feeling. Indeed, Victor does not stop his ‘research’ until he decides to renege on a commitment to make a companion for the monster he has manufactured from materials found in abattoirs and mortuaries. In a story in which characters seem constantly to rush into danger, Victor finally pauses to reflect. It is the creation of the female at which he balks, because:

she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was

to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation... (210)

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror... I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace, at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race. (210–11)

I want to note three points about these comments: first, Victor's suggestion that the female might be 'ten thousand times more malignant than her mate'; second, his anxiety that the two creatures will procreate; and third, that his decision not to make the female is attributed to the possibility that should he obey the monster's request, he might destroy the human race. Taken together, these signal that whilst the story seems to hinge on a kind of exposé of the horrors of creation, the greater horror that outstrips even Frankenstein's ambition (but not his imagination) lies in procreation and extinction: the usurping of the achievements of science by the female monster, and the annihilation of the human race. What comes to be at stake in 'making life' is the 'fate of the race': this is the counter-narrative to stories of the destruction of indigenous races which organise colonial cultures. The narrative of ambition references loss and failure; the narrative of male conquest of the 'secret of life' references, whilst erasing the capacity (usually female) for reproduction. It is these counterweights within the *Frankenstein* story that seem to connect with, even to inspire, the modern Australian texts.

'The Origin of the Monster Dogs' opens with the female scientist, announcing to the press that it will be possible to clone the thylacine. A journalist asks:

'Some people say bringing back the Tassie Tiger is tantamount to playing God. What do you say to that, Professor? What would you say to them?'

'We played God', comes the careful reply, words slipping between thin lips so the journo's have to lean in to catch them, 'when we wiped out the species'.

Ah, they sigh in satisfaction at the soundbite and smile, at their interviewee and each other, as their flashes light up the professor's face like the first flush of excitement.

(45)

By foregrounding her gender, the identity of 'scientist' seems to be put into the background, and indeed this is the intention of her fellow researchers in asking her to face the press. 'You do it, her colleagues had insisted, you tell them; it's so much less monstrous coming from a woman' (45). The assertion itself is 'monstrous' precisely because it implies, self-servingly, that these colleagues see a 'natural' connection between the reproductive capacities of the woman and her professional achievements — a congruity normally denied in narratives about women in science (see Keller 1985; 1995; 2010). Another delusion of congruity appears when the professor's colleagues marvel at the similarity between the thylacine's DNA and that of humans. The professor, by contrast, knows her

creatures are different, as she also understands the ways in which the stories of the thylacine become the devices through which she is able to represent her own work to herself (see Marks).

In the brilliantly reconstructed double helix she'd seen a creature not of this world; an ancient alien. She doesn't come here often, but when she does that's what she thinks: they are just as I imagined them.³ *You* are just as I imagined. *It's almost as though she's invented them*, through her dreaming as much as through the lab work and the never-ending trials. (Michael 47; second emphasis added)

Like Victor Frankenstein's, the professor's efforts to create life have been successful; nine years later, the time in which the story is set, she is about to set her 'monster dogs' free. But her efforts at creation have failed in two ways. First, they do not gain public support⁴, and second, although the professor has managed to create 'not one ... not two, but many ... A litter. A batch. A pack' (48), the joeys are all female. They cannot reproduce and so life that is the product of scientific ambition comes again to signify death:

If only you could breed, she asks — pleads — again, thinking of all the species they've tried and the messy evidence of their more successful failures. Better not to think of that. 'Why can't — why won't you breed?' ... Doomed to die, they are all doomed to die. The experiment is over before it's even begun. Do they hunt alone? In packs? Do they ambush their prey or run them down? No no-one will ever know. The politicians might be haggling over maps, discussing sanctuaries and release schedules, but she knows what they'll decide in the end. The world doesn't want her wolves. The world's never wanted these wolves. (48)

We can contrast this glumness not only with the frisson of the fictive press conference to announce the potential of cloning, but with the mood of Mike Archer, a scientist who directed an actual Australian Museum project to clone the thylacine. Archer claimed that 'a population of thylacines could be resurrected and reintroduced into the wild', and dreamed of the consequence: 'To actually reverse extinction, even if it is just this one special instance, would be the biological equivalent of the first walk on the moon' (Owen-Brown online). In contrast to this ecstatic vision, Michael's grim account ties the story of cloning back to loathing of the tiger, manifested in the orgy of shooting and trapping that caused extinction.

Gender difference is also central to Leigh's *The Hunter*. M, who disguises his hunt as academic research, becomes increasingly obsessed in his search for the 'tiger', who early on is identified as female. He imagines his prey as part lover, part emissary: 'Is her eternal wandering a form of punishment? Perhaps she has come to make amends' (118). This mix of the religious, the reproductive and the scientific is made explicit as M explores a cave being used by the tiger. He finds a 'first treasure', some hairs, and then 'hidden in a far corner and illuminated by torchlight — his second treasure is so alarmingly beautiful that he touches it as he would the Holy Grail or his own first child' (159). The second treasure is the skeleton of a joey:

M trails a finger over the curved lumpy spine, then he lies down on the ground in a mirror position, eye to eye with the skull, and imagines for a second that he, too, will rot in this cave. In years to come, decades later, an intrepid explorer will find the skeletons and ponder the relationship between the two. (160)

After this intimate somatic mimicry of the tiger corpse, M resumes his hunt for the living thylacine. Both alone, hungry, nervous, human and thylacine seem at once double and couple, leading M to eroticise the stalking: 'Yes', he thinks, 'he is romancing his prey', 'But no, enough, he stops himself. This nostalgia for seduction is seductive itself. And it's delusory. The animal is no woman. He will not win it over with sweet words, wine and roses' (90). As with Michael's short story, these moments of reverie signal fantasies of convergence, tiger and scientist, tiger and hunter, prey and predator. At one point M fantasises that the thylacine will turn on him, and he imagines the thrill of being killed: 'it is possible. If she was crazed, she could lure him into some secret spot and then — from behind, or above — launch herself at his throat, rip it out. Like taking candy from a baby' (116). The reference to the infant signals the proximity of reproduction and death, the entwining of the pleasures of terror and theft, consumption and consummation, destruction and reproduction.

At the end of the novel, after he has killed, M prepares the tiger's body for surgical invasion, removing ten samples of blood in a kind of reverse insemination. What is then described is a kind of surgical rape, during which M removes the tiger's ovaries. His last task is to hide the remains, to preserve the exclusivity of what he has killed to obtain.

Still wearing his rubber gloves he moves his pack away from the carcass (when it became a carcass he isn't sure, but the bloody gutted thing is no longer a body to him). Next — destroy the evidence, ensure no-one else can access the material. Only he will have it, he will be the only one. Building a pyre with the branches, lifting the limp carcass onto the pyre, he tells himself that he is the only one. This thought grows light in him, incandescent. All the energy of the sun runs through him and into the earth; he is the source of all animation. Petrol-blue flames lick up over the pyre, and burn and burn and burn. And burn, until the focal point of the dirty black smoke could be anything at all. M pours water over the blackened bones, carries them into the scrub and, working up a sweat, buries them deep beneath the ground.

There, now he is the only one. (166–67)

If this scene resembles any one of a number of passages from *Frankenstein*, including the spectacular appropriation of light and energy, and the 'final' scene the reader never sees of the monster's planned self-immolation, it also signals that curious doubling of monster and maker that we see in Shelley's novel. But whilst Leigh's narrative has to this point tended to double M and the tiger, what is presented here is a moment of radical differentiation, a grim reassertion of human prerogative and power over the animal. This power is something Michael critiques when she satirises the journalists' pleasure in hearing that human beings really can 'play God'.

Leigh's *The Hunter* makes a fairly uncomplicated equation between modern bio-industrial capitalism, the destruction of species, and masculinity, whilst echoing the story of genocide. The line 'There, now he is the only one' emphasises the contrast between the story of M and that of 'the last Tasmanian', Truganini or Trugannana, the woman whose death long authorised the claim that Tasmania had no remaining indigenous inhabitants.⁵ What Leigh seems to be signalling is that the ambition to take control of reproduction is entwined with the ambition to destroy; that the preparedness to kill an individual implies a preparedness to annihilate a species; and that Tasmania is a 'natural' home for stories of this kind. Perhaps that is why so much of the novel presents the hunter 'becoming native', caressing his traps, defeating the landscape, implicitly taking control by killing the 'tiger'. But in 'The Origin of the Monster Dogs', the reproduction of the thylacine by a female scientist is represented as monstrous in very different ways: as a failure to be properly female (having children of the wrong species), and a failure to be a proper scientist (able only to replicate her femaleness). All three stories seem to imply that science can aggrandise the work of creation by placing it against the backdrop of fears about extinction, a situation in which scientist heroes must take over from flawed animals, human or thylacine, the work of making life.

If we read Shelley's novel as being about ambition, we can commensurately read Victor's refusal to make the female as a refusal to risk being usurped as the sole creator of a species; and if Victor's work makes him 'monstrous', then part of this monstrosity is his appropriation of the female function, acting as both father and mother: 'A new species would bless me as its creator and source', he dreams, 'many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs' (102).⁶ Better that the species die, than that he risk losing the exclusivity of his power as maker. In a remarkably obverse way, by the end of 'The Origin of the Monster Dogs', the female scientist seems to disappear, at which time it is no longer clear whether the thylacine pups are the creation of the scientist, or she theirs. She hunts and haunts the embalmed joey that inspired her work, becoming her own shadow, becoming the thylacine, disappearing into the story:

All heads turn to the peerless scientist, caught in the flare of their flashes, as though they sense they're about to see something they're not meant to watch. Are already seeing something the cameras cannot catch. She seems to be shrinking. Indeed, she's already become so slight she takes up no more room than her dark slip of a shadow. Slim enough to slink between the bricks. Skinny enough to skulk away.

Noticing them no more than anyone ever noticed her, the professor pads towards the original specimen's century-old prison. She sees her rabid reflection in the imperfect glass and senses that this time she's haunting its slumber. The Thylacine pup keeps its nose tucked between its paws, its never-to-open eyes closed to the professor's hungry stare. It seems it's dreaming her. (49–50)

The flashes of the press photographers' cameras recall the technologies of surveillance described repeatedly in *The Hunter*. Such an ending makes sense if it is read as emblematic of the tension between reconstitution (revivifying the past) and discovery (making a future) which is inherent in the very notion of reproductive/science, the former term tied to the maternal, the material, the archaic, the latter to the paternal, the ideational, the modern, which claims dominion over all the earth.⁷ In asserting this difference, both 'The Origin of the Monster Dogs' and *Frankenstein* feature a decisive moment in which the monstrous feminine is dismembered and discarded. In *Frankenstein*, the fragments of the female monster's body are cast into the ocean. In a sense these are textual fragments: parts of a story Victor cannot bear to tell. *Frankenstein* and 'The Origin of the Monster Dogs' show the psychic structures which hold the rational or scientific self in place dissolving in and being dissolved by the ambition to create life, represented here as the desire to produce a different self: not a clone at all, but a new and different form, unimagined by any god.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Melissa Boyde, Georgine Clarson, Anne Collett, Sarah Ferber, Vera Mackie, Nicola Marks, Julia Martinez, Paul Sharrad and the two anonymous readers for responses to a draft paper, and for suggesting references.

NOTES

- ¹ 'The Origin of the Monster Dogs' was first published in *The MUSE Anthology* 2006, by the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (see <http://www.gsa.unimelb.edu.au/muse2006/index.shtml>), and had been winner of the University's short story prize the same year. This information comes from the frontispiece of *The Asking Game* (2007), in which the story also appears (Michael 45–50). The complicated generic relationship between the novel and the two short stories within it — the other is titled 'Ready or Not' (167–71) — is beyond the scope of this essay.
- ² For a discussion of global capital in *The Hunter* see Borrell (2012). The oil and gas exploration company Octanex (website at <http://www.octanex.com.au/>) has projects referred to as 'Thylacine' and 'Frankenstein'. The 'Frankenstein' project is part of a group including 'Godzilla', 'Gigantor', 'Megatron' and 'Skelator'. See the Octanex N.L. Prospectus, at ASX ComNews, 15th October 2009, Factiva, <http://global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/ha/default.aspx>.
- ³ The line 'but when she does, that's what she thinks' echoes a line from Kenneth Slessor's epic modernist poem 'Five Bells': 'But when you do, that's what you think'.
- ⁴ In fact a poll on the Australian Museum's website showed 236 voting 'for' and 38 'against' (Barbeliuk 1999), while a later count recorded 2492 'for' and 276 'against' (Barbeliuk 2001).
- ⁵ For discussions of this trope see Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies* and Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*. On the tiger, see Robert Paddle.
- ⁶ Elsewhere in the novel, nature, personified as female and exemplified as spring, is repeatedly praised (in each of chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 at 102, 118, 110, 121).

- ⁷ In this sense this essay can be read as a disagreement with Cindy Hendershot's assertion, made in her reading of the same moments in Mary Shelley's novel, 'the female creature becomes conflated with modern science' (83).

WORKS CITED

- Barbeliuk, Anne 1999, 'Ethical Issue May Halt Tiger Cloning', *Hobart Mercury*, 21st September, Factiva, online, <http://global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/ha/default.aspx> accessed, 25th October 2012.
- Barbeliuk, Anne 2001, 'Expert's Fears as Vote Favours Tiger Cloning', *Hobart Mercury*, 30th October, Factiva, online, <http://global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/ha/default.aspx>, accessed, 25th October 2012.
- Borrell, Sally 2012, 'Small Areas of Ground: Writing Animals in Globalisation', *Animal Studies Journal* 1.1, online, <http://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol1/iss1/6/>, accessed, 15th October 2012.
- Brantlinger, Patrick 2003, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800–1930*, Cornell UP, Ithaca, New York.
- Hendershot, Cindy 1998, *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic*, U of Michigan P, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Keller, Evelyn Fox 1985, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Yale UP, New Haven, Connecticut.
- 1995, *Feminism and Science*, Oxford UP, Oxford and New York.
- 2010, *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture*, Duke UP, Durham, North Carolina.
- Leane, Elizabeth 2009, 'Eggs, Emperors and Empire: Apsley Cherry-Garrard's "Worst Journey" as Imperial Quest Romance', *Kunapipi*, XXXI.2, pp. 15–31.
- Leigh, Julia 1999, *The Hunter*, Penguin, Camberwell, Victoria.
- McGregor, Russell 1997, *Imagined Destinies. Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne UP, Melbourne.
- Marks, Nicola J. 2011, 'Science Fiction, Cultural Knowledge and Rationality: How Stem Cell Researchers Talk about Reproductive Cloning', *The Body Divided: Human Beings and Human 'Material' in Modern Medical History*, ed. Sarah Ferber and Sally Wilde, Ashgate, Franham, pp. 191–22.
- Martin, Emily 1991, 'The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male- Female Roles', *Signs*, 16.3, pp. 485–501.
- Michael, Rose 2007, *The Asking Game*, Transit Lounge Publishing, Yarraville, Victoria.
- Mooney, Chris 2002, 'Nothing Wrong With a Little Frankenstein', *Washington Post*, 1st December 2002, <https://www.msu.edu/~pennock5/courses/ALife/Wash%20Post%20Dec%202002b.html>, accessed, 25 October 2012.

- Owen-Brown, Michael 2002, 'Cloning of Tasmanian tiger one step closer', *Courier-Mail*, 29 May, Factiva, online, <http://global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/ha/default.aspx>, 25th October 2012.
- Paddle, Robert 2000, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Schulman, Mark 2002, 'Revive the Extinct Tasmanian Tiger — through Cloning?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 11th July, Factiva, online, <http://global.factiva.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/ha/default.aspx>, accessed, 25th October 2012.
- Shelley, Mary [1818] 1986, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus*, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth.