

Mary Shelley Makes a Monster

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)



Conversation Pieces
Volume 70

Mary Shelley Makes a Monster

by
Octavia Cade



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Mary Shelley:
MARY SHELLEY
MAKES A MONSTER

1

The monster has no heart.

Mary has two.

There is the one she keeps in her bureau—
wrapped up in silk and parchment,
burnt about the edges and stinking of salt.

It is the heart of the man who was her lover
and it is less damaged than the heart inside her chest.
That is a mangled and un-pretty thing,
but she takes it out of her chest
sits it beside the other:

two hearts on a writing desk.
The vibrations send the papers flying.

The hearts are both shriveled and blackening, but hers
is about to bite and his just slumps there,
as though all its work was done in drowning.
There is no question which is the stronger.

Mary takes her own strong heart and puts it back
into the cavity behind her ribs.
The monster has to be loved, and with that leaking scrap
sitting in a silver box inside the monster's chest
she will be able to love it.

(If she gave it her own heart it would rip her to pieces.)

Octavia Cade

(If she took his heart for her own,
grief would catch at her like undertow,
yank her down into deep water.)

2

The monster has no foresight.

Mary doesn't have much either,
but the monster is one of her creations
and she would like to do better for it than herself.

She smashes a glass and collects the fragments,
picks shards out of her palms
until they're wet with blood, and then she shapes the
 little pieces,
paints them with red and silver on one side only
and she has her mirrors.

These she pastes to the monster's fingers for nails
so that it can see its face
(when it has a face)
in everything as it creates.

But the monster is a baby still and sucks its fists,
buries its thumbs in the blank crevasse of mouth,
and all the nails come off.

Mary breaks more glasses, paints more mirrors,
and this time before she pastes them
she doesn't round off the edges.

When the monster sucks its thumbs its blood runs black
 as engine oil.

It learns not to suck anymore.

Mary's face is reflected ten times, and harshly.

3

The monster has no history.

Mary papers the inside of its skull with dreams of
her mother,
with vindications of a life that she herself cut short.
She impregnates it with rights,
and the monster comes to believe that it has them.

Of course you do, says Mary—
but when it comes time to take the monster out
(to display it)
she pretends it has been made by somebody else,
lets it stumble about blindly
searching for the mother that abandoned it
until everyone has gone home and she is left with
the reminders of her imperfections.

You are just a copy, she says, mocking.
Poor copy.

4

The monster has no will.

Mary fills it with mice.

She can hear the squeaks,
and the monster vibrates with their movement,
with the scampering under skin and the appearance
of vitality.

The little bodies run through hollow bones
and get lost there.

They die one by one.

Nothing Mary does can keep them alive.

(The monster scratches at itself with mirrored fingers
until it finds mouse tails and pulls the bodies free,
buries them quietly in unmarked graves.)

5

The monster has no children.

Mary has had four children, and her life ends with theirs.

She takes pieces of them

(locks of hair and teeth and little balls)

sews them up nicely and makes the monster watch

as she scrapes away its genitals,

leaves it smooth and mute below the waist

because if there are no grandchildren for her

there will be none for it either.

She gouges out its abdomen

and leaves the little sewed sack there,

packs it in with clay and surrounds it with batteries

so that the whole will light up with interference

and with absence.

6

The monster has no face.

It is bald as eggs.

When Mary sings to it there is no ripple of response
and no expression in it.

The face she would like best for it
has been eaten off by fishes and burnt in iron.
She could recreate it, she thinks, in parts—
but she has already used those parts,
and for others.

She did not think ahead, and all her mirrors are broken.

Mary writes a face upon the monster instead,
substitutes words for flesh.

She puts *Arctic* in the eye-sockets
and *Alps* along the cheekbones.

She writes *Geneva* on its forehead,
and the lips are made from electricity and the death
of young women.

The pressure of the quill leaves scars
that ink and imagination will not cover up,
and when the monster opens cold white eyes
to see the poor reflection of its face
it finds little comfort there.

Octavia Cade

The comfort is in Mary's face:
the face of vanished bloodlines
and children who murder their mothers at birth.

These are things that will be familiar, thinks the monster.
In its chest, the little salt heart remembers
what it was like to love.

(The monster sees Mary's face, and covets.)

7

The monster takes Mary's face and wears it.

The monster takes Mary's womb and bears it.

The monster takes Mary's will and buries it.

The monster takes Mary's past and carries it.

The monster takes Mary's future and meets it.

The monster takes Mary's heart and eats it.

Welcome home, heart, it says.

You should not have locked yourself so far away.

When it goes out into the world, no one can tell
the difference.