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33rd Annual Conference of the Far West Popular Culture Association

20 February 2021

She Lives: Bringing the Bride of Frankenstein to Life in the Comics

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) recently celebrated its two-hundredth anniversary, and its story remains vibrant in popular culture, especially in the comics medium. Creators of comics have been especially prolific. According to a search of the *Grand Comics Database*, as of February 2021, there are over four thousand five hundred adaptations of the *Frankenstein* story in comic books and graphic novels produced from the late 1930s to the present. To this corpus, there are also an uncounted number of representations of the novel's characters and themes in cartoons and comic strips, forms of comics that are not as easily reckoned but stretching back to exemplars from the 1840s. Collectively, all of these comics represent a massive text base to explore the reception of Shelley's work in modern culture, and, while scholarship on this material is growing (especially since the bicentennial), investigations still remain limited. As part of my ongoing work in cataloging representations of *Frankenstein* in comics, I've looked at the careers of the Creature and his creator, Victor Frankenstein, but I've only recently begun to look at how the character of the Bride of Frankenstein has been depicted. I'd like to use this opportunity to further that work and look more closely at continuations and recastings of her story. My efforts are inspired by and seek to extend many of the ideas presented in Erin Hawley's recent essay "The Bride and Her Afterlife: Female Frankenstein Monsters on Page and Screen" (2015). This presentation also builds directly upon the framework for adaptations of

*Frankenstein* I presented on last September at the Science Fictions, Popular Cultures Academic Conference at Hawai'iCon (now published in their proceedings volume) and adds a further set of examples.

The Bride has no chance at life in Shelley's novel, as she is aborted by Victor. She briefly experiences life in the film *Bride of Frankenstein*, but that is also terminated.<sup>1</sup> However, the comics have allowed her an extratextual existence beyond the limits of these earlier works. She thrives and flourishes in continuations of *Frankenstein*. Sometimes, she merely makes a cameo appearance, but in other works she is more vital to the narrative, acting either to save the world or damn it. Further, new versions of the character also populate various recastings. Often, her surrogates merely don her costume, yet a growing number are more active, again making an impact. All of these comics illustrate the vitality of the Bride and her power to inspire creators of the comics.

Works that continue the life of the Bride are especially prevalent in popular culture. Most often these build not from Shelley but the Universal film, yet ignore (or forget) her destruction in the film. This resistance to the text recalls (as Hawley remarks) the insistence of Neil Gaiman that "Elsa [Lanchester] and [Boris] Karloff are the perfect couple, too vivid, too alive to have died in the final explosion. Even as Henry and Elizabeth fade from the imagination, the monster and his mate live on forever, icons of the perverse, in our dreams" (qtd. in Hawley 226). This occurs throughout popular culture, and the comics have added many more continuations of the Bride's story.

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<sup>1</sup> See Hawley 219-225 and Torregrossa 166-68 for more details on the Bride in Shelley's novel and the *Bride of Frankenstein* film.

Continuations probably offer the best known examples of the Bride in the comics. Most of these are humorous in intent. For example, versions of Universal's character feature in cartoons (like Gary Larsen's *The Far Side*), comic strips (such as Mark Tatulli's *Liō*), and Halloween-themed covers to the comic book (including BOOM! Studios' *Garfield*).<sup>2</sup> Other Brides of Frankenstein, inspired by both the novel and film versions of its story, occur in more serious comics offering more thoughtful continuations of their narratives. All of these extensions of the Bride's story are especially important, as Hawley remarks, because (unlike other examples of the character) they give the Bride a voice. In the comics, the most extensive continuation of the Bride's story occurs in various DC Comics, where she and her husband are both members of S.H.A.D.E., a secret organization of monsters dedicated to saving the world.<sup>3</sup> DC's Bride is a hero, but not all Brides are, fulfilling one prediction made by Victor in the novel that "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness" (165). This is attested in the comic book series *Joe Frankenstein* (2015), written by Graham Nolan and Chuck Dixon and illustrated by Nolan, where she murders innocents in search of fresh organs to replace hers as they wear out. The action comes to head here, when she kidnaps Victor's descendant and Joe Frankenstein (her mate's modern-day identity) must protect him.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to continuations, the Bride also features in recastings of the *Frankenstein* story. Universal's representation of the Bride appears the most prolifically in this regard and has also inspired many recastings in humor comics and related media. These are often created with a

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<sup>2</sup> See Higdon 53 and Torregrossa 169-70 for further discussion of these items.

<sup>3</sup> See Torregrossa 170 for some treatment of the Bride in recent DC Comics.

<sup>4</sup> See Torregrossa 170 for further details of the *Joe Frankenstein series*.

spirit of whimsy as they celebrate the character's legacy. A great example is the Bride-inspired cow depicted on Gary Larson's cover to his collection *Bride of the Far Side* (1985), but, usually, it is more recognizable characters that are transformed into alternatives of the Bride, such as in Halloween-themed covers of comic books series, including Arlene in BOOM! Studios' *Garfield* and Marge Simpson in Bongo Comics' *Treehouse of Horror*. Similar representations occur in media tie-ins, such as Lucy from the *Peanuts* in a Halloween-themed ornament from Hallmark and April O'Neil from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in a monsterized action figure from Playmates. However, the most prolific recaster of the Bride is Archie Comics, with its female cast (Betty Veronica, Sabrina, and, even, Midge) all standing in for Lanchester in cover art and pin-up pages.<sup>5</sup>

Other recastings in humorous comics move the dress-up a step further. Here, the costume has a purpose and relates to a complete story. For example, Dan Parent's "Monsterbash 2003," published by Archie Comics in the promotional giveaway *Archie & Friends Monsterbash 2003* (2003), has Veronica dress as the Bride in the hopes of winning a "Queen of the Ghouls" at a costume party. Meanwhile Marge Simpson portrays two versions of Bride in "One Bart and Stormy Knight," a story from Chris Yambar and Tone Rodriguez in *Treehouse of Horror* No. 18 (2012). The tale opens with her son, Bart, who is depicted as an adult Batman-like superhero, captured by a Joker-inspired version of her daughter, Lisa. The rest of the family have been made into monsters by the deranged girl, with Marge and husband Homer now sinister versions of the Bride and her mate. The trio move in for the kill as the page ends, and the next page opens with Bart—a young boy again—running across the house in terror, a image revealing that it was all

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<sup>5</sup> All of these recastings of the Bride—from Larson to Archie Comics—are described in greater detail in Torregrossa 170-71.

just a dream. According to Marge, now dressed as a less horrific depiction of the Bride, the preceding was merely a nightmare brought on by Bart's consumption of too much Halloween candy.

Additional recasting of the Bride occurs in further stories inspired more directly by *Frankenstein* and/or its filmic adaptations. To start, the comics have offered some light-hearted attempts at recasting the Bride in this way. For instance, multiple characters from the *Simpsons* play at being the Bride of Frankenstein in Jim Valentino's "The Bride!," another story in *Treehouse of Horror* No. 18. Here, various residents of Springfield try to recall the plot of the *Bride of Frankenstein* film.<sup>6</sup> Moe the Bartender comes close to the film, when he imagines Patty Bouvier (Marge's sister) as the Bride. She is created by Krusty the Clown as a mate for Ned Flanders. It's not clear that Flanders is a construct too, but Patty-Bride, nevertheless, rejects him (as Lanchester's Bride did Karloff's Monster), when Patty states (replacing the animalistic sounds of Lanchester) that "He's not *MacGyver!*" An interesting gender swap occurs next when Waylon Smithers retells the story. He casts Bart and Ralph Wiggum as the creator and his assistant and himself as a variant of the Bride. The Smithers-Bride is costumed similar to Lanchester, again in a white outfit and with a shorter, male version of her hair. Like other versions of the Bride in popular culture, Smithers grants his a happy ending as he discovers his

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<sup>6</sup> My comments on Valentino's "The Bride!" omit only a discussion of the first attempt at retelling the film, as it seems very at odds with the rest (which is saying a lot given what follows it). Very loosely inspired by the film, the Comic Book Guy offers a kid superhero Bartman (it's not clear if he has been reanimated) as a sidekick to adult hero Radioactive Man.

intended is Montgomery Burns Smithers's employer and long-time crush. Finally, Homer settles the matter by inserting a DVD of *Bride of Frankenstein*, but the images are still not true to Whale's film. Instead, the Bride is again Marge, and the reason for her screams (and presumably rejection of her mate) is because the Monster is depicted as Homer himself sitting in his underwear drinking beer and eating donuts. Homer vows it is a happy ending (stating, "He had donuts...and beer!"), but, given Marge-Bride's reaction, I feel the relationship is doomed from the start.

The comics have offered many extended stories recasting the Bride, and, in contrast to the earlier set, these are serious comics for older readers. Many of these recastings diminish the Bride figure, such as in Jamie S. Rich and Megan Levens's *Madame Frankenstein* (2014-15) in Chuck Dixon's *Dean Koontz's Frankenstein: Prodigal Son* (2008 and 2011) and Dixon and Rik Hoskin's *Dean Koontz's Frankenstein: Storm Surge* (2016), both based on characters created by novelist Dean Koontz. The Brides of these series are essentially props created to bolster the ego of their male creators and neither ends well once they rebel.<sup>7</sup> Other recastings give the Bride surrogate more agency. Both Steve Niles and Damien Worm's *Monster and Madman: The Secret History of Jack the Ripper and Frankenstein's Monster* (2015) and Marc Andreyko and Aneke's *Legenderry: Red Sonja* (2015) might be recommended here. The Brides of these series are more active and wrest control over their fate from their makers.<sup>8</sup>

Another interesting example of a recasting occurs in Paul D. Storrie and Eldon Cowgur's "Made for Each Other" (2011), part of the *My Boyfriend is a Monster* series of graphic novels.

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<sup>7</sup> See Torregrossa 171 for more discussion on these series.

<sup>8</sup> See Torregrossa 171, again, for further details on these comics.

Storrie and Cowgur offer a mashup of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Universal's films, and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* here and gives readers multiple versions of the bride (both male and female).

The premise of the comic is that it is a continuation of events recorded in Shelley's novel.

Instead of perishing, the Creature was flash-frozen in the Arctic over two hundred years ago, and

he now lives as funeral home director. Under the alias of Franklin Stone (an attempt at

Anglicizing *Frankenstein*), the Creature uses the bodies brought into his care as parts to create

his own family. There is no Bride initially, but Stone has fulfilled his desire for a family in

creating a teenaged son named Tom Bartholomew Stone (a.k.a. Tom B. Stone, a play on

"tombstone"). Tom meets and falls for a young girl with the surname McBride, and she is

essentially his intended, making her another version of the Bride of *Frankenstein*. As the comic

progresses, Stone continues to build his family and creates a daughter, Hedy, after three

cheerleaders perish in an accident. This new creature sees herself as Tom's intended—making

her yet another Bride figure—and goes to great lengths to get his attention. Her arc resembles the

nightmare vision that Victor, in the novel, imagined for the Creature's mate, and she is similar

also to the Bride in *Joe Frankenstein* acting for her own needs. Hedy goes on a secretive

rampage, killing townsfolk to build up her family (though she refers to them as her "friends").

Eventually, Hedy tries to kill McBride, but she lets her live having managed to drug and capture

Tom plotting to wipe his memory of the girl. However, McBride, her friends, and Stone come to

Tom's rescue. As they approach her base, Hedy is revealed in an outfit reminiscent of

Lanchester's smock from *Bride of Frankenstein*. The dress seems meant to be a female

equivalent to a male surgical gown, as she assumes a creator-type role in her experiments on

Tom. Yet, her linkage to Lanchester's character will go some steps further. First, McBride

rescues Tom by electrocuting Hedy. She seems dead but a Bride-like streak of white now shows

in her hair. Later, Heddy breaks from the lab. She is enraged, and her hair (now more noticeably streaked with white) stands tall on her head very much resembling Universal's Bride. In the end, Heddy (and all of the other creations besides Tom) meets her demise when the lab is engulfed in flames.

In conclusion, the Bride of Frankenstein, like all of the characters from Shelley's novel, has become a permanent fixture in popular culture, firm evidence of the novelist's wish (expressed in her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*) that her "hideous progeny" might "go forth and prosper" (10). While the Bride's appearances in the comics are more limited than those by her creator and intended mate, she, nevertheless has flourished through a variety of continuations and recastings. All of these attest to the vitality of the character of the Bride as a fundamental part of the modern *Frankenstein* story and the power she holds over our imagination.

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