

# Interpretation

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*Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

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CHARLES T. RUBIN

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

*rubin@duq.edu*

*Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child: Political Philosophy in "Frankenstein"* casts an even wider net than its already eclectic-sounding title might suggest. Ultimately it is an argument by Eileen Hunt Botting for the right, understood in a literal political sense, of children to love and be loved. Botting gets to her own argument, though, by a process that includes a critical examination of the troubling role, or lack of role, of children in the thinking of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant (chapter 1) and the significantly improved, but still not entirely satisfactory, picture of children's rights in Mary Wollstonecraft (chapter 2). These chapters lay out the positions that Botting takes the young Mary Shelley to be responding to by a series of five nested literary "thought experiments" in *Frankenstein* (chapter 3), the results of which lead her to develop various aspects of the idea of a child's right to love and be loved. The last chapter applies lessons learned from Shelley to the cases of stateless orphans, children with birth defects, and genetically or otherwise engineered children.

Throughout the book Botting also puts her main subjects in dialogue with contemporary literary and political theorists she takes to be important. The clarity of her writing throughout is excellent, which is noteworthy to the extent that, as the book proceeds, Botting's own "postmodern" theoretical commitments become more and more evident. Yet she *almost* entirely avoids the "playful" obfuscation so common among postmodern scholars, and their

tendency to write as if some neologism or innovative use of punctuation marks can explain or advance an argument.

Whatever its virtues, the argument of the book stands or falls on two major propositions. The first is that classical liberal theorists do not have, nor provide a basis for, a satisfactory account of the rights of children. The second is that *Frankenstein* can be read as an exploration of the question of the rights of children.

Botting makes a good, but not great, case for the unsatisfactory treatment of children in classical liberal theory. In some specific instances, her critical zeal overwhelms the carefulness of her reading. She is hard on Hobbes for mentioning the terrible possibility that in the state of nature a mother might expose her child in exigent circumstances “without a chance of gaining protection of a sovereign under a social contract” (35). But Hobbes’s point would be precisely that the possibility of preventing or punishing infanticide is one more reason to prefer living under a sovereign authority than in the state of nature. Hobbes may be wrong in his portrait of the state of nature, but it should hardly count against him if he sees that under the circumstances he describes the situation of children would be particularly parlous. And even if Hobbes knew that some sovereigns over the course of history condoned infanticide, Botting offers no evidence that (unlike Kant) he regarded it as normative in a well-run civil society. Or again, she seems shocked at Rousseau’s assertion that in the state of nature parents would let their children wander off and thereby abandon them. But, perhaps excessively influenced by stories of Rousseau’s abandonment of his own children, she missed his point that in a state of nature strictly speaking we would see protohumans, human-precursor animals that look more or less human. Rousseau can be forgiven for noting that animals do not by and large form enduring families, and for failing to anticipate the results of ape- and chimp-family-life studies that were only undertaken in the second half of the twentieth century, results that might be taken to call his description of protohuman behavior into question.

Although she does not stress the point, eventually Botting acknowledges that classical liberalism’s failure to say much about the rights of children is connected with the placement of family within a private realm. As part of Locke’s effort not to ground political authority in parental power, for example, we see him build family life on mutual obligations of parents and children rather than rights claims. While on the parental side there is a duty to raise the child such that, upon reaching the age of majority, he can exercise his rights as a free and equal human being, as a child with highly imperfect

capacities (including the capacity for reason), those rights are not relevant. “Children, I confess, are not born in this full state of equality, though they are born to it.” But because she says so little about how in the liberal view the incapacities of children may make them poor rights-bearers, Botting is also able very nearly to take for granted how her own vision of children’s rights justifies a great legalizing and politicizing of familial relationships. With terrible cases of child abuse and neglect all too common, the state has enough trouble securing “merely” the physical and mental health of victims. Aiming lower than Botting would think appropriate, the existing child-welfare system in the United States already has all too often an aspect of bureaucratic nightmare. The public obligations attendant on enforcement of a right to love and be loved sound like they would create another order of difficulty, likely to spawn the kind of bureaucratic and litigation-encouraging infrastructure that has burgeoned in our “rights talk” society—all without much guarantee of hitting the mark aimed at.

Whatever its practical difficulties, the moral justification for such a regime is, according to Botting’s argument, to be found in *Frankenstein*. Botting acknowledges the first hurdle for this argument: it seems a stretch to call Frankenstein’s oversized, powerful, and preternaturally intelligent “creature” (the word she prefers to “monster”) a child. Botting argues that Shelley presents us with a being that physically speaking is not at all childlike in order to get us to focus on his childlike emotional and social vulnerabilities. The creature is able to survive his physical abandonment by his creator; here Botting rightly highlights Victor Frankenstein’s almost unbelievably irresponsible behavior. But without the protection of his parent, without a parent to make special arrangements appropriate to his particular vulnerabilities (i.e., his frightening size and face) and without a parent to love him and be an object of his love, the creature faces the insurmountable odds created by a world prejudiced against him because of his looks. It is for that reason, Botting argues, that he turns into the monster that his appearance had suggested all along.

Botting’s sympathy for the creature is unquestionably consistent with Shelley’s text, but it is taken to such an extent that it almost becomes hard to see any trace of a monster in the creature. In a not unfamiliar trope of our times, her otherwise reasonable understanding of the sources of the creature’s string of murders comes perilously close to absolving him of responsibility for them. One telling instance of this tendency is seen in her description of the creature’s murder—his first—of Victor’s young brother William. The creature had hoped to “seize him, and educate him as my companion and

friend [so that] I should not be so desolate in this peopled earth” (170). Botting comments, “The loss of his dream of founding a small community of Frankenstein children drove him to become the horrendous monster that society had presumed him to be.” When she says “the loss of his dream,” however, it is as if Botting sees nothing monstrous already in the plan to kidnap a small child, permanently, as it would seem, stealing him from his family! The fact that Botting takes the creature as paradigmatic for how we should treat stateless orphans, children with birth defects, and genetically engineered transhuman or posthuman children reinforces the idea that ultimately she sees nothing monstrous in the creature. All blame goes to Victor for his initial abandonment and to civil society for not having institutions ready to find an appropriate placement for the monster, for instance, as a resident in a home for blind people.

In some contrast with Botting, Shelley seems to be capable of both creating a sympathetic creature and not losing sight of its monstrousness. That fact helps explain why Frankenstein is an extraordinarily rich text to which an extraordinary diversity of interpretative approaches have been applied and corresponding conclusions reached. So it is not much of a criticism of Botting to suggest that there is another way of looking at Victor Frankenstein and his monster that casts doubt on the proposition that the story is about the need for improved social services and attitudes towards those whose physical conformations are seen as “different.” It starts in strong agreement with Botting: Frankenstein behaved very badly in abandoning his creation. His reaction upon having successfully transformed dead matter into a living being is almost inexplicable. He had put this creature together: how at the very moment of his success could he be so surprised and horrified by what it *looked* like?

Did Frankenstein think—or, perhaps better, hope—that the dead parts he had pieced together would somehow be beautified by having been brought to life? There is certainly evidence in the story that part of what motivates his experiments is a quarrel with death itself. Yet his aspiration was not only to bring dead matter to life, which it seems he had already done before making the creature. He sought to create a more than human being of monumental size and beauty that would owe a debt of gratitude to him, that would be entirely a creature of his will. Seeing brought to life the monstrousness of what he actually achieved precipitates the first of a series of mental breakdowns, this one leaving his creation on its own.

Now, surely it is possible to imagine a whole series of intermediate steps between Frankenstein's first proof of concept success and creating an outsized, beautiful, sentient human-like being. That Frankenstein did not take this route, that he chose instead a process of creation involving, day after day, an all-consuming focus on terrible things and alienation from all his family and friends, tells us something about him and about his goal. Frankenstein was willing to sacrifice his own humanity in pursuit of overcoming human mortality and natality. His outsized project leads to an outsized dedication and, when the results fail to meet his expectations, to an outsized reaction.

In short, there is something disproportionate and disorderly about Frankenstein's project from the start. The "naive" reading of the text accuses him of "playing God," but the real charge against Frankenstein is that he fails as a human being; he fails his family, and his community, and his friends, and finally his wife. His confidence in his own power to overcome human limitation deprives him of all *effective* human sympathy, even if he can still torture himself into mental breakdowns convenient for avoiding the result of his failings. Frankenstein's failure to love and be loved is not specific to the creature; it is the problem of all his relationships once he embarks down his fateful path.

That a book so focused as Botting's on the well-being of children and the importance of love should fail to see the full extent of Frankenstein's failures to love appropriately is unfortunate, even if not entirely surprising. A good postmodern, Botting rejects the order-providing, yet in her view imperialistic, master narratives that provide the traditional, if always fragile, support for maintaining the well-being of children within loving families and responsible communities. As much as Botting admires the advances Mary Wollstonecraft makes over Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant with respect to the rights of children, she finds that Wollstonecraft problematically "justified children's absolute possession of these rights on the basis of their moral status as rational creatures of God" (72). Botting suggests that "one could even detach her view of humans (including children) as moral equals from its theological and metaphysical assumptions," a project that Botting herself seems to undertake.

In attempting such detachment Botting is more like Frankenstein himself than not. His creativity is detached from everything but his own will and desire, with terrible results for his creation and for those around him. Botting's implicit sympathy with this detachment means that while she calls his treatment of his creation into question, she does not seriously touch on

the decision to create itself. As her sympathetic account of those imagined and real children whom she labels transhuman and “post/human” indicates, she is impatient with a “hand-wringing” “bioconservatism” that would raise a warning flag about Victor’s aspirations.

So in the five nested thought experiments she uses to elucidate Shelley’s lessons about the rights of children, she omits consideration of an important literary-counterfactual sixth that frames them all. Imagine that Frankenstein undertakes the project of making his creature, and endures all its horrors, but just before he “pulls the switch” he has a good look at his creature—truly seeing it for the first time in weeks—and then takes a good look at his own ravaged, half-crazed face in a mirror. Horrified and ashamed by these two visions of the monstrousness he has brought into the world, he smashes his apparatus, buries the creature and all his notes, and returns home, grateful (as he would come to put it) to whatever Power it was that allowed him to step away from the abyss. In subsequent years he serves the cause of the well-being of children, of loving and being loved, as a good son, a faithful husband, a doting father, a good friend, and a generous benefactor to the orphaned and disabled. In short, by the standards of his community he is a pillar of his community.

Of course this is not the horror story the absurdly young Mary Shelley sought to write, and I do not know for sure that Shelley would prefer this moral universe to the one Botting reaches by interpreting her novel. In Botting’s world regard for children has been detached from theological and metaphysical commitments and the state stands as the ultimate guarantor of loving and being loved. Meanwhile we embark, in the spirit of Frankenstein, upon ever more ambitious manipulation and engineering of our minds and bodies, with all the prospects for “failures” such as his that are inherent in that process. My opinion, at any rate, is that the physical, emotional, and spiritual vulnerability of children, which after all is the key fact behind any effort to articulate the rights of children or otherwise give special concern to their well-being, is more likely to be protected when human beings celebrate their limits and not their power.