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Deconstructing the Monstrous She-Male: Castration and the Invisible Genital in the Liminal Personae

Jeremy Miller 04'

Both the creature in *Frankenstein* and Frank from *The Wasp Factory* exist in a position of liminality. Iain MacKenzie, in his essay, "Limits, Liminality and the Present: Foucault's Ontology of Social Criticism," explains liminality as a period of transition when "the past has lost its grip and the future has not taken definite shape. Such times are those which problematise the existing moral and social structures...from the process of transition itself" (MacKenzie). Monsters serve as configurations of the liminal, as the *liminal personae* who cannot escape the experience of liminality, or marginality. As such, they have been separated from the existing social structure with no promise of aggregation, of unification into a new society (and it would take a "new society" to include uncategorized, i.e. monstrous, persons such as these). Thus, the liminal personae is considered "structurally invisible" - "they are at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (MacKenzie). Victor Turner furthers the idea of the liminal to constitute a *realm* "of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise;" an *arena* "where we are dealing...with the essentially unstructured," and a *time* "associated with the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless" (Mac). Turner emphasizes the transitional element of liminality, marking it as both conceptually and physically unrealized. I will argue that liminal constructions are unrealized for one of two reasons: 1) we have not created a category to place the liminal in, or 2) we willfully refuse to categorize the liminal. Either way, they become monstrous formations, or as Jeffrey Cohen puts it, "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (6). Cohen argues that because of the monster's "ontological liminality," the monster "notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematises the clash of extremes—as that 'which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis'" (6).

In both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*, the monster's liminality helps to reveal the transcendental conceptions of sex, gender, and power. Both the Creature and Frank deal with the anxiety of their marginality by seeking to destroy the system that created them (and abandoned them) as well as the "perfect beings" who fit neatly into the ordered system. However, while the Creature in *Frankenstein* desires to be included into the dominant structure of being—into a categorized structure, Frank insists on resisting categories, and, as a result, disrupts the binaries of dominant society. Frank says, "But

I am still me; I am the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appalling) crimes to my name" (182). Even though Frank finds out he is a girl, and not a castrated boy as he was led to believe by his father, he still defines him/herself as the uncategorized, inviting us to include him/her into the structure of being; or rather, and more appropriately, to *exclude* us.

In this essay, I will use a gender analysis to explore the monster as the liminal Other. First, I will portray the Creature from *Frankenstein* as a sexless liminal personae whose despair is caused, in part, by society's inability to include it into the structure of being. Second, I will argue that Frank from *The Wasp Factory*, like the Creature, is a sexless monster of the not-fully-functional variety (castrated). When given the opportunity to become fully sexed (operational female), Frank refuses to throw away his/her/its identity as the "unsexed," which is part of who Frank is, part of Frank's history of liminality. Finally, I will argue that while Mary Shelley's Creature is a liminal monster that disrupts gender, its longing to be included into the bourgeois system of gender and class protects the author and her audience from any real or dangerous threat of destruction. Put simply, the Creature is a monster who wants to reject its monstrosity, its power to destroy the way things are. Frank, on the other hand, accepts his liminal status, and unlike the Creature, is not head-over-heels in love with beautiful, perfect beings who define what it means to be normal. The key turning point for Frank is not when he is supposedly castrated at the beginning of the novel, but when Frank is told that [he] is actually a "normal" female. It is Frank's rejection of femininity and embrace of a female masculinity that keeps [her] outside of the situated gender categories. Frank is the more disruptive monster of the two novels. By accepting her monstrosity, she remains a continuing threat to everyone not in her position of liminality.

Shelley's Monster: The Creature Wants to Play, Too

Cohen argues that the monster is "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (7). The difference for the Creature lies in the inability to classify it as anything human or natural. As a non-human, it is difficult to establish the creature's sex, even though it was constructed in the likeness of a "male." Victor, the monster's creator, initially avoids referring to his creation's gender or sex. His first conceptions of it are "a being of gigantic stature" and "a new

species" (58). We are led to ask, does this mean that the Creature simply has the features of a male, whose unsurpassed strength, gruff voice, and stature serve as an antithesis to "female"? Or does this mean that the Creature actually has a penis? Given the time *Frankenstein* was written (early 1800s), it can be speculated that terms such as "transsexual" or "hermaphrodite" were not in wide use. The binary structure of gender and sex of the time period is interdependent with the language of the time, which was centered on the he/she distinction. There were no words other than "he" or "she," so it is not surprising that the Creature may be more "like" a he or a she, without fully being either. This sexual un-classification adds to the mystery of the Creature, and it is this mystery which makes such an aberration scary. Not only is the question of a penis key to the conceptualization of the imperfect Creature, it is a question Mary Shelley may even want you to ask: Is the creature like us? It is the difference *from us* that identifies who, or what, the monster is—and vice versa.

In Judith Halberstam's essay, "Making Monsters: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," she contends that "the monster is pre-sexual, his sexuality, in other words, does not constitute his identity" (42). This I can agree with, as the monster is constructed within the liminal realm, where sexuality is essentially unstructured and limitless. However, Halberstam goes even further and says, "[Victor's] creation of 'a being like myself' hints at both masturbatory and homosexual desires which the scientist attempts to sanctify with the reproduction of another being...The suggestion that a homosexual bond in fact animates the plot adds an element of sexual perversity to the monster's already hybrid form" (42). Halberstam argues that while *she* considers the monster pre-sexual or unsexed, Mary Shelley constructs sexuality as identity through the figure of the monster. I have to refute this. There is reason to believe that Mary Shelley intended the monster to be severed from "normal" categories of male and female, thus making homosexual configurations between Victor and the Creature erroneous, because homosexuality is a concept borne out of the he/she binary that Shelley avoids when constructing the monster. To frame the Creature in a homosexual light misunderstands the de-structuralizing effect of its liminality, of its pre-sexness, or anti-sexness. The Creature's desire for a companion, for instance, is not primarily for "sexual mating," as Halberstam alludes to, although Victor does in fact equate the she-monster to his "mate" (144). This, however, can be understood as a "complement" or "companion," rather than sexual partner and opposite. We must remember that the Creature's goal is not to make monster-babies, but to have a companion "as deformed and horrible as myself," because "man [humans in general] will not associate with me" (128). The Creature

also says, "My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects" (128). The Creature wants a companion to exist with him in a state of uncategorized deformity, in a state of liminality. Victor didn't destroy a female monster with the ability to orgasm and to bear children; he destroyed "another like the fiend I had first made" (148).

Banks' Monster: The Bearded Lady Goes Berserk

If we were to use the most up-to-date medical terminology of today, we could argue that Frank, at the end *The Wasp Factory*, is a polymorphous transsexual who suffered the castration of male genitals (which never existed) but whose lack thereof causes Frank to conceive of himself as unsexed, and thus cut off—or castrated—from a masculine society, which, in turn, causes him to live liminally outside of the structured order of things, an order that, because of its power to define and assign, still affects the way he perceives his own gender. Like the Creature, Frank is a castrated male—he is supposed to be a male but lacks the biology that normally distinguishes one as such. Still, his father feeds him hormones and a healthy dose of soldier propaganda, which Frank digests and reenacts to a disturbing degree, declaring war on those who "have grown into the one thing [Frank] could never become: an adult" (183). As a boy, Frank must remain a hyper-masculine, unsexed individual. He can never be a fully realized adult. His liminality is central to his lack of identity, and the anxiety that accompanies his sexlessness surrounds his "personal Factory" of meaning. The fact that he chose a "wasp" factory suggests that sex, or the lack of it, haunts him. Some wasps are known to mate/reproduce end-to-end (like the cover of the novel suggests), which could represent a sort of blind union, a sexual act that fails to recognize the "other half."

Robyn Wiegman, in her essay, "Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory," explains how masculinity boils down to prescribed categories which can be disrupted and turned inside-out:

The seeming naturalness of adult masculinity—heterosexuality, fatherhood, family governance, soldiery, and citizenry—can thus be viewed as a set of prescriptive norms that contain potential contradictions within and between men...By interrupting the normative employment of the relationship between bodies, acts, and identities, a whole range of scholarly investigation has emerged to rethink desires, identifications, and psychic formations... (43)

Weigman's analysis is an attack on ideology, at term James Kavanagh defines as "a rich 'system of representations,' worked up in specific material practices, which helps form individuals into social subjects who 'freely' internalize an appropriate 'picture' of their social world and their place in

it" (310). This "framework of assumptions" is interrupted when Frank cannot fit himself into the prescribed normative relationships between body, acts, and identities. He has not been fully formed into a social subject, but he still desires to be one, to be what he perceives to be an "ideal man." His liminality, like the Creature's, is a reluctant one (at first).

The major difference between Frank and *Frankenstein's* creature is that Frank becomes aware of her own humanity and that she was fully sexed all along. In other words, the castrated "he" becomes a fully functional—albeit manly-looking—"she." This change reveals the precariousness of assumptions and of normative rules not only to Frank, but to us, who naturally read Frank's misogyny as an unfortunate byproduct of his inability to "make use" of women. The realization that Frank is a woman (and able to be pregnant) does far from clarify things. Where Frank was a castrated male whose masculinity was hyper-violent, aggressive, burly, etc., we now see Frank as having "female masculinity," a term Judith Halberstam evoked in 1998. Female masculinity characterizes women who do not "identify according to the logics and bodily tropes of femininity" (Wiegman 48). It is another way of saying that masculinity is separate from biological sex, and that they are not interdependent.

Shelley vs. Banks: Who Gets the Sequel?

The Creature lost the bout before it stepped into the ring. The Creature's "don't worry, be happy" suicide speech to Walton was preceded by an infatuation with bourgeois life and resulted in a devotion to preserve that life for everyone else. The Creature's unquenchable thirst for destruction becomes quenched; his evil fire is doused, and he reverts back to the elite's system of values. Instantaneously after his creator's death, the Creature adopts a bourgeois conscience and declares that he will destroy himself: "Fear not that I shall be the instrument of future mischief... Neither yours nor any man's death is needed to consummate the series of my being, and accomplish that which must be done; but it requires my own. Do not think that I shall be slow to perform this sacrifice" (188). Mary Shelley created an indestructible creature, one that the most perfect and able-bodied human could not even destroy. If every monster truly has a weak spot, then Shelley forgot to give one to the monster. Unlike Dracula, who cannot avoid the wooden stake, or the werewolf, who gets a steady diet of silver, the Creature seems to have no apparent vulnerabilities. Well, except for one. The Creature loves its creator too much.

The Creature's weakness is that it desires to be Victor *Frankenstein* (a human being with all the privileges). Thanks to a bourgeois education from the exiled cottagers, the Creature becomes aware of its place within a social system that values money, property, and sensibility. It says,

"Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property...Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!" (109). When the Creature loses its last hope of acquiring bourgeois happiness, it declares that it will destroy itself. It is as if Shelley's own creation was getting out of hand, and she had to kill it off with a last-minute suicide. If she did not do this, then the Creature would be in the driver's seat, so to speak. It would have power to destroy the social and cultural elite, and people like Shelley (the literate upper-class) would be vulnerable. As a reader in the 21st century, it is difficult to view the ending as anything other than cheap, safe, and all too convenient. In Hollywood, it would be similar to Jason from *Friday the Thirteenth* suddenly being overcome with guilt, then saying, "sorry for the inconvenience ladies and gentlemen, I just wanted a three-bedroom house in the suburbs, but don't worry anymore, because I am going to kill my indestructible self (as soon as I find a way)." Imagine Freddy Krueger retiring from his evil rampage, haunting and killing, because a coalition of parents handed him an anti-violence petition. Sure, Freddy might actually go along with it—then he'd retire *them*. Perhaps if Shelley were writing a monster story today, she would drop the censored ending and leave it open-ended. It would certainly present more opportunities for a sequel if the Creature busted out an evil laugh in the end—perhaps a toy-line or some other marketing deal.

Frank, like the Creature, is a monster defined by her liminality and resistance to categories. When Frank discovers her "true" sex, she resists the normal way of viewing the relationship between gender and sex. Still, it can be argued that where Frank was a fully functional monster—unsexed and stuck in eternal pubescent hell—Frank's new sex offers an escape from liminality and a retreat back into the dominant structure of being and categorization. But can the monster really be cured? Banks sets up a very bizarre scenario in which every part of Frank's monstrosity can be excused as a mistake, or as a consequence of ideology-gone-awry. But that's just the sort of thinking Banks has already turned upside-down. We, as readers, cannot trust in Frank's female sex any more than we can trust that Frank really was a castrated male. We are given a clue when Frank says, "I am still me; I am the same person, with the same memories and the same deeds done, the same (small) achievements, the same (appalling) crimes to my name" (182). Male or female, Frank is what he/she is, either a masculine female or a castrated male. Most likely, it is both. Furthermore, *The Wasp Factory*, the novel, is itself liminal. It is a *realm* "of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise;" an *arena* "where we are dealing...with

the essentially unstructured” (MacKenzie). Any conceptions of gender or sex within the novel can never be fully realized, only revealed. In the end, Frank is the more dangerous monster, because she remains the liminal Other, a threat to all the categories of gender because she refuses to be defined by those categories. The Creature from *Frankenstein* is only a part-time threat. Not only does the Creature consistently struggle to define itself according to the values of a bourgeois system, it eventually submits its life to the system, thereby ending its reign as the liminal monster.

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