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Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein:

A Crippled and Queered Thesis Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

This working annotated bibliography explores a selection of academic works to take a measurement of how scholars working in crip (disability) studies and in gender and queer studies have responded to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Collectively, scholars continue to gather new insights. These scholars often use Victor Frankenstein’s creation (also called “creature” and “monster”) as a point of departure, with transgender people especially finding validation in also (re)claiming an identity as monsters and conventionally disabled people demanding full humanity, for example.

Thus far, crip and queer interpretations remain almost entirely isolated scholarly conversations. Applying contemporary identities and concepts can help correct this. My previously-coined concept of “cripnormativity” can help merge and expand existing scholarship on *Frankenstein*. For example, the blind man can be seen as cripnormative (or acceptably disabled) and cishet (cisgender heterosexual). The monster, however, is not acceptably disabled and is forced into asexuality. The monster’s disability, as defined by society’s social constructions, comes from his (a)sexuality, his queer appearance, and his queer creation—he is literally made of deliberately selected parts. Victor even performs a proto-trans surgery even, making the monster’s transness another form of disability, which the monster is fully wanting to embrace and celebrate.

Another thesis, one that acknowledges the education Victor receives and the equipment he uses, can queer his process of creation/challenge Victor as *the* creator. It shows how no one is “abled-bodied” enough to create and work in complete isolation—everyone needs community. This interpretation also allows us to consider why Victor does not make the monster to be truly “perfect” and ask if the adoption of what Virginia Woolf’s terms the androgenous mind, the mind essential for creating, could have helped.

There is further room for a thesis that looks at Victor’s fear of his monster (and the fear others have) in terms of the creature’s (assumed) abnormally large phallus, which symbolizes both disability and (sexual) power and how the monster challenges what we call (normal) compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness in 2021.

And finally, we should note, that analyzing and legitimatizing disability and queerness/non-normativity—whether in literature or in “real” life—is both a crip and a queer act. Given our ableist, anti-intellectual sociopolitical realities in the United States studying a work as queer as *Frankenstein* is a queer act and one that requires thoughtful considerations, and how we think—especially in an cultural environment that discourages thinking and effectively sees thinking as the radical, non-conformist, disabled act—is of interest to crip studies.

Annotated Bibliography

Haggerty, George E. “What is Queer about *Frankenstein*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, edited by Andrew Smith, Cambridge UP, 2016, pp. 116-127. Haggerty’s informative anthologized overview of his monograph *Queer Gothic* argues that everything about Gothic culture and literature is by its very essence queer. He points to the taboo genders, taboo sexualities, taboo characters, and taboo settings that help define the genre, soundly explaining that all of these are counter to the normative. Of sex/gender

specifically, he argues that Gothic fiction creates a kind of laboratory space for safely experimenting with different possibilities. And then of *Frankenstein* in particular, Haggerty argues that the creature's creation is an asexual, masculine birth and that the creature—being the first and only of his kind—is anything but normative. He then points to the homosocial bond between Victor and the creature, rightly saying that their relationship is characterized by closeness and hostility, hostility such that they aggressively pursue each other. (Haggerty also points to the same kind of homosocial relationship between Felix and Safie's father.) He analyzes Victor's behavior in graveyards and his dreams and points toward Victor's queer interest in necrophilia and his sexual desire for his mother. Haggerty also suggests that Victor's depression and illness emasculate him. Further, Haggerty finds parallels between the "monster" and queer individuals: They mostly all experience loneliness, have deferred or impossible dreams, frustrations, and levels of monstrosity—that imposed, internalized, and reclaimed. In sum, he says, they all howl together.

Holmes, Martha Stoddard. "Born This Way: Reading *Frankenstein* with Disability." *Literature and Medicine*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2018, pp. 372-387. Holmes, a disability studies expert with over twenty years of experience in the academy, provides an excellent and thought-provoking analysis of *Frankenstein* through lenses of crip studies. She laments the dearth of such work, with the exception of Victor and corresponding discourses in the medical humanities, arguing that Shelley provides countless ways to engage with disability. Holmes advocates for a variety of interpretations with the monster being the focus, including fully accepting the monster as a "child born with unexpected disabilities," seeing the monster as a victim of a surgery gone wrong, imagining the monster as a

survivor of a tragic accident or medical event who recovers by first learning how to walk and how to talk again, stressing the importance of community for the monster (and other Othered people), and acknowledging how the monster figures out ways to attempt surviving within normative society and self-advocates (374). Of this last point she says, “The narrative offers a developmental arc of how anyone with a visually startling appearance might learn to accommodate, resist, or redeploy the assumptions and expectations of others” (374). She emphasizes the social construction of disability, even more so when it comes to subjective, always-changing aesthetic judgments applied to the monster. Importantly, Holmes underscores the monster’s talents—“strength, agility, resistance to heat and cold, eloquence, an impressive capacity for learning”—and extreme humanness that we could call “more human than human” (382). Holmes calls out Victor’s murderous, eugenicist, social Darwinist behavior, while also acknowledging readings that honor well-known parental reactions that reject imperfect—disabled—child, feeling that they have failed and will be shamed by society. Holmes’s article is clear, engaging, and insightful, except for the unnecessary and problematic essentialism invoked in the title and for the complete lack of an intersectional reading as suggested by the introduction.

Knight, Amber. “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Disability, and the Injustice of Misrecognition.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2020, <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/7109/5809>. Amber Knight, writing an article abstracted from her dissertation, convincingly argues that Shelley was “a progressive social critic who believed that misrecognition creates monsters out of those who are negatively labelled as such” (par. 9). Knight places her work in conversation with and in contrast to political

scientists, conservative philosophers, and conservative politicians who suggest that the monster in *Frankenstein* symbolizes unchecked grassroots power and/or who believe that belittling disabled people as “monsters” does no harm and is mere words alone. Instead of seeing *Frankenstein* as a story with implications for science and theology or for a person’s unchecked ego, she sees Shelley’s novel as a story about the dangers of misrecognition and the associated feelings of shame. Knight also makes a case based on *Frankenstein*’s trajectory for how people beyond the novel also come to have identities based on interpersonal relationships and when beings (real or fictional) are misrecognized the psychological consequences are dire for the individuals in question and for society, a society that creates and release “monsters” who not-without-reason may invoke harm on others. While never using the phraseology of “nurture,” Knight invokes classic debates by arguing that positive acknowledgment and recognition from society is vital in achieving community and a positive self-identity. Knight further points to how Shelley carefully shows the creature’s intelligence and pain, his gradual change into an actual monster despite only having an abnormal appearance, and his complete rejection by other characters in the novel save for the blind man, all invoking the reader’s sympathy and showing the importance of looking beyond appearances. Further, Knight says that disabled people, like Shelley’s monster, must demand political recognition and acceptance in order to avoid a similar fate and must reject an identity of monstrosity. She does not address those who find power in reclaiming “monster” labels.

Nordmarken, Sonny. “Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness.”

Qualitative Inquiry, vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 37-50. Nordmarken’s autoethnography analyzes how taking testosterone and examining others’ reactions to his changing body

impacts his level of monstrosity. A sociologist with expertise in gender studies, a transmasculine man, and a personal colleague, Nordmarken builds from Susan Stryker by using *Frankenstein* as a way to name and analyze the positive and negative feelings that come with being *and becoming* something other than the compulsory (cis) standard. He finds comfort in establishing alignment with the monster, who also experiences a profound gap between body and self and is anything but aligned with proto-cis standards. In alignment with Victor's monster, Nordmarken traces the increasing and changing degrees of being monster, sometimes more visible and sometimes less visible, while undergoing medical, technological changes. Nordmarken's trans/monster self and Victor's monster are both possible by science alone. Both of our monsters are feared, fear other people, and carry collective trauma from isolation and being Othered. Both wonder, "Is there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?" (47). Nordmarken also works to reclaim earlier meanings of "monster," making him (and Victor's/Shelley's monster) visible and empowered in the process. Nordmarken says, "I 'monster,' ...rational ways of thinking," and adds, "this 'monsterring' brings me freedom and job, yet also danger and fear" (39-40).

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Taylor & Frances Group, 2006, pp. 244-256. Susan Stryker's classic, excellent, field defining autobiographical-theoretical essay from 1994 uses *Frankenstein* (primarily Shelley's 1818 novel but also James Whale's 1931 cinematic adaptation) as a tool for theorizing about and for understanding transgender/transsexual experiences. Stryker is a transgender woman and a gender studies professor. Stryker traces the

“unnaturalness” and constructedness of both Victor’s creation and of transexual bodies. She finds connections between Victor’s words toward his creation and words toward transgender and other queer people. In particular, she argues that both transsexual people and Victor’s being are seen as monsters, are sometimes harmed or haunted by stories of their creation, are rejected by society, are made invisible, are embodied with rage and internalized hate, are challenging toward society’s mores, are threatening toward notions of predictable gender and social identities, are in-progress experts at navigating non-normative family/fictive kin situations, and are survivors. Stryker also uses Victor’s monster as a symbol of queer liberation: transsexual people can reclaim and celebrate their monstrosity and roar along with Victor’s creation. Both types of non-normative, science-created beings can and do use their bodies and language itself to enact resistance and such threatens society. Both are reminders of people who disobey authority figures. Both open doors to more and different forms of life with unpredictable results.

----- “More Words about ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein.’” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2019, pp. 39-44. In this very short piece, Stryker reflects on her original piece and offers some self-criticism. Namely, she wishes to acknowledge her whiteness and engage with the field known as queer of color critique and wishes to challenge queer theory’s homonormative, homonational bias. Otherwise, she maintains her analysis that sees *Frankenstein* as an empowering, subversive way to understand and describe transgender and queer experiences.

Wang, Fuson. “The Historicist Turn of Romantic-Era Disability Studies, or Frankenstein in the Dark.” *Literature Compass*, vol. 14, no. 7, 2017, pp. 1-10. Wang, a scholar of literature and mathematics, argues that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can help Romantic literary studies

finally engage critically with disability studies and that his work can serve as a template for future work. Wang claims that disability studies and its uses among literature scholars has been too political, has been too immature (he uses “mature” in problematic ways three times!), and has needed historicization to be real and legitimate. Wang’s comments go beyond analysis and suggest he wants a different book than the one Shelley wrote. He wants far more description than Shelly provides and does not acknowledge how such language might have further complicated a woman writers life in the early 1800s. In one place, he says, “Shelley’s original novel offers only unreliable narration, contradictions, half-truths, exaggerations, and strategic prevarication” (3). He also says, she “offer[s] all of the Enlightenment setup but none of the ethical payoff” (7). In other words, Wang wishes Shelly had written a (more) explicit narrative of disability with detailed monstrosity instead of a monster story that relies on readers’ imaginations. Throughout Wang’s article, especially given his interests in what the monster looks like and how audiences respond, he often seems to be confusing aural/visual adaptations of *Frankenstein* with Shelley’s actual novel. Wang does mention the blind man but says little beyond arguing that the monster effectively manipulates him—which I don’t see in the story. He approaches using blindness as an anchor for analysis but never goes beyond metaphor, despite his claims of valuing what he claims to call historicization. Even on the metaphor plane, Wang dances around but misses explicit discussions of how, for example, *Frankenstein* shows that society is disabled and *blind* ipso facto its prejudices. More problematic, he makes the atheistic judgment that the monster’s straight black lips are as a matter of fact devoid of beauty. Wang’s article is extremely poorly written and unclear with its substantial information that unnecessary for the argument, with its

spiraling sentences that contain non-normative and unnecessary uses of words, and with its lack of focus. Further, Wang is insulting to disabled people and misunderstands the political purposes and roots of disability studies. He says that he will provide a first disabled reading of *Frankenstein* and will do so applying historicism, but except for a few short paragraphs in the conclusion, never offers (semi)-straight-forward insights. Almost nothing in Wang's article is recognizably disability studies, disability studies being rooted in accessibility and explicit identity politics.

Zigarovich, Jolene. "The Trans Legacy of *Frankenstein*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2018, pp. 260-272. Jolene Zigarovich, an English professor with expertise in Gothic literature and interest in further "queering the Gothic," traces the legacies of Susan Stryker's aforementioned 1994 academic article/manifesto. Zigarovich is interested in the idea of "transgothic" —like transgender people who challenge and cross sex/gender binaries, a transgothic approach to literature challenges and debunks strict conventions and resist easy categorization. She sees the Gothic as encouraging "explorations, encounters, and experimentation" (264). In particular, Zigarovich traces how scholars such as J. Jack Halberstam, Sonny Nordmarken, Boots Potential, Jay Prosser, and Harlan Weaver have expanded on Stryker's ideas—fully cementing "trans monstrosity" as an important genre in the process. She argues that Stryker's impact now has roots in a range of disciplines, including physics, and has become a required reading on topics related to gender and Shelley, to the Gothic, to science fiction stories, and to Romanticism.

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