

**Monstrous Desire:**  
***Frankenstein* and the Queer Gothic**

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**2006**

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## Summary

### Monstrous Desire: *Frankenstein* and the Queer Gothic

Focussing upon Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, this study explores the extent to which Gothic fiction and queer theory can be posited as mutually illuminating fields of academic inquiry. There is certainly much scope for developing the exciting perspectives made possible by the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler in relation to Gothic fiction. But, in my view, it is no less important to consider how Gothic texts can be utilised to discuss queer scholarship and illustrate queer reading practices.

Romantic Gothic texts produced during the early nineteenth century are well placed to engage with the discursive practices through which modern western ideas about sex, gender, sexuality and desire have materialised. I have therefore structured the chapters in this study around some of the pressure points in modern sexual discourse. In relation to critical and cultural issues surrounding the family, marriage, same-sex desire, sexual rhetoric and the author, the questions raised by these texts can be shown to complement questions which have been raised by queer scholarship. I propose that the genre still has much to reveal about the way we have come to think, speak and fantasise about the field of the sexual. I will also attempt to highlight areas where Gothic fiction could be developed as a site of queer critical pedagogy because these texts could provide accessible and enjoyable routes via which to introduce students to queer theory and reading practices. Overall, this study is intended to contribute productively to queer studies, Gothic studies and the emergent fields of Queer Gothic and Queer Romantic inquiry.

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**Introduction:****Queer and Gothic**

the attractive possibility of a queer gothic, rich in all the paradox and sexual indeterminacy the word *queer* and the word *gothic* generally imply  
- Ellis Hanson ('Lesbians who Bite' 184)

Gothic signifies a writing of excess  
- Fred Botting (*Gothic* 1)

As a form of popular cultural production, Gothic texts have long been perceived to enjoy a privileged role in the representation of sexual fantasies and fears. There is even a commonly expressed opinion among readers, students and critics that, on one level, Gothic horror fiction is indeed all about 'sex,' especially sex of the most dangerous, deviant and perverse varieties. Since the advent of academic queer theory in the early nineteen nineties, the appearance of numerous publications addressing the presence of queer meaning in the genre suggests that Gothic fiction and queer theory may be complementary fields of inquiry. In my view, queer criticism is fascinated with the Gothic because Gothic texts have always been fascinated with the 'queer,' to such an extent that I read the genre as one that is devoted, in no small part, to speaking about the 'queerness' at the heart of culture. Like queer theory, the Gothic is a discursive space concerned with difference, otherness, marginality and the culturally constructed boundaries between the normal and the abnormal. Focussing upon Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, my research extends upon the exciting new perspectives made possible by queer reading methodologies. But, the contribution of this study to the field also lies in utilising these seminal early nineteenth-century texts

to explore the extent to which Gothic fiction and queer theory can indeed be posited as mutually illuminating areas of academic inquiry.

The term 'queer theory' is notoriously resistant to definition and its refusal to be fixed has often been deemed necessary to its continuing usefulness, for if the work of queer theory were ever to be finally defined, 'queer' could lose its shifting and open ended power to challenge. Queer resistance is therefore partly enacted through its own refusal to become a stable academic discipline, and most scholars attempt to use queer theory in their own way, but without attempting to pin down its possibilities. That said, queer theorists generally insist upon interrogating all sexual categories, radically critiquing normative concepts of sex and gender identity and exposing heteronormativity in all its manifestations. For myself, I make use of the term 'queer' to describe a conceptual tool and a position of critical resistance to heteronormativity and, in a sense, heterosexuality. But although there is much scope for developing the groundbreaking work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler in relation to Gothic fiction, in my view, it is no less important to consider how Gothic texts can be used to further the work of queer theory. After all, queer theory is not known for its easy accessibility and is often associated with a particularly dense style of academic writing. For this reason, scholars and teachers should work to find ways of making queer theoretical thinking accessible to readers and students. Gothic fiction may prove particularly useful in this respect, for while queer theory provides new ways to talk about *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, these texts may offer useful routes into exploring the concerns of queer theory. Although my research is not primarily concerned with critical



pedagogy, I will therefore attempt to highlight areas where the texts could be used in the classroom as a site of queer pedagogy.

Questions of (queer) reading are important throughout this study. The formulation 'monstrous desire' in the title refers not only to the themes of monstrosity and monstrous desire pervading *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, but also to the activity of queer reading, which can itself be likened to a kind of monstrous desire to produce resistant, disruptive and even dangerous readings. When I make use of the term 'queer reader,' I refer to a hypothetical reader who might take up variously non-normative, off-centre, or resistant positions in relation to the text. It is also important not to try and 'fix' the role of the 'queer reader.' I conceptualise queer reading specifically as a 'performance,' in order to draw attention to the fact that reading is, in the words of Stanley Fish, 'an activity, something *you do*' (70). Following reader response theorists who understand reading as a productive, rather than a consumptive activity, I conceive of queer reading as a complex engagement between the reader and the text in which the reader takes part in the creation of meaning. However, it should be acknowledged that the activity we have recently come to call 'queer reading' has in fact *always* necessitated an interactive and creative relationship with the text. As Wayne Koestenbaum observes, gay readers have always read 'resistantly' for inscriptions of themselves that will 'confirm a social and private identity' (165). 'Gay' reading has always been 'political' in the sense that readers aware of their sexual and gender nonconformity have always had to read against the grain and re-write texts in the light of their own desires and experiences. But, in relation to the Gothic, this question has further implications because in many ways the genre can be said to actually invite and even *encourage* us to read queerly.

As a remarkably productive Gothic text, seemingly ever open to re-interpretation in each new cultural moment, *Frankenstein* appeared an obvious choice for reading in the light of queer theoretical thinking.<sup>1</sup> The text is attractive for its representation of monstrosity and excess, its interest in the possibilities and the limits of power, desire and transgression, and its tendency to render the supposedly normal world open to question. Fred Botting has questioned whether *Frankenstein* should be called a ‘ghost story,’ as Mary Shelley terms it in her ‘Introduction’ to the 1831 edition, for ‘the supernatural is almost, if not entirely, absent’ (*Making Monstrous* 38). But the text can be considered a ‘ghost story,’ in the sense that it is a story about what haunts culture. Through many critical readings and film adaptations, *Frankenstein* has returned over and over again in new incarnations to take up the question of what haunts culture on many different levels, including the level of the sexual. Moreover, the homosexual connotations discernible in *Frankenstein* films from the 1930s onwards suggest that the text has already been recognised as one that engages the haunting question of ‘queerness.’ In this study I will therefore make a case for reading *Frankenstein* alongside some of its film and theatre adaptations, because these later re-productions can reveal much about the way in which the sexual meanings in the text have been re-interpreted by contemporary culture.

It is worth noting that the mystique surrounding the writing of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* has been both ‘Gothic’ and ‘queer’ from the outset. In 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and Percy Shelley, considered sexual outlaws in England, travelled to Geneva and visited Lord Byron, who was staying nearby at the Villa Diodati accompanied by his personal physician Dr John Polidori. Byron had fled from England to escape dangerous gossip about his relationship with his half-sister, and his liking for

other men. One night in June, he proposed that the members of the party should each try their hands at writing ghost stories. Shelley later claimed this 'ghost story competition' provided her with the impetus to write *Frankenstein*. Meanwhile, excited British tourists gathered outside and attempted to observe the group 'through telescopes [...] and reported bizarre happenings, including group sex, in the Villa Diodati' (Frayling 10). The telescopes may have been replaced with the lenses of literary theory, but there is an ongoing critical and cultural fascination with the aura of sexual non-conformity surrounding this event and the texts it produced. In addition to *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, I will make reference to Byron's fragmentary unfinished contribution to the 'competition,' because it was upon this text that Polidori based his own story. Polidori's appropriative rewriting of Byron's 'Fragment' as *The Vampyre* has long been of interest to Gothic studies for its representation of the first coherent vampire figure in English Literature. In recent years, the inscription of queerly coded sexual rhetoric in both texts has attracted further critical attention. Together, all these 'ghost stories' present deeply and disquietingly queer narratives, and raise a nexus of fascinating issues around sex, sexuality, gender, identity, and desire.

In my view, modern sexual discourse is a crucial area of mutual queer theoretical and Gothic fictional concern, and Romantic Gothic texts written during the early nineteenth century are well placed to engage the discursive practices through which modern ideas about sex, gender, sexuality and desire have materialised. It is striking to observe that the popular Gothic rose to prominence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, during roughly the same period identified by Michel Foucault as coextensive with the 'deployment of sexuality,' as outlined in the first volume of his

*History of Sexuality*. According to Foucault, the sexual categories and identities we recognise today are historical constructs which developed from the seventeenth century onwards and became codified in the later nineteenth century. During this period, he contends that sexual material was not 'repressed' as has traditionally been thought; instead, methods of speaking about sex proliferated, and 'around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion' (*History* 17). The quantity of sexual material produced in Gothic fiction suggests that the genre developed, in part, as yet another means to speak about sex. As Troy Boone observes in an essay on Polidori, popular Gothic texts still 'have much to teach us about the regulation of sexuality (365) and, as I will argue, the deployment of sexuality. For this reason the chapters within this study are structured around some of the pressure points in modern sexual discourse, namely, the family, heterosexuality and marriage, same-sex relations, and the association of sexual meaning with knowledge, truth and power. Moreover, these sites of crisis in Gothic fiction are also areas of particular interest within queer theory.

People whose sexuality or gender does not conform to accepted norms have, in a sense, become the 'monsters' of modern sexual discourse, with all its normalising and regulative impulses. The figure of the monster has rightly been privileged in queer readings of Gothic fiction, for monstrosity has long served as a trope for sex and gender nonconformity in western culture.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, critics have interrogated the phobic agenda underlying this tradition, but, on the other hand, they have worked strategically to re-appropriate and re-deploy the monster's power in the service of queer critique. Emphasising the strange power of Gothic monsters throughout, I will focus upon their capacity to undermine, reveal and de-familiarise the supposedly normal world. In this

context, it is always worth remembering the etymological root of the word ‘monster’ in the Latin noun ‘monstrum’: “‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’” (Cohen 4). The word monster therefore shares the same root as the English verb to *demonstrate*.

Monsters and queer criticism do share an affinity, insofar as both seek to ‘de-monstrate,’ to ‘out’ culture, and show it up in a different light. In *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, the monster gives strongest expression to the queer voice in the text, the voice of difference, marginality and transgression. *Frankenstein’s* monster and the vampire Lord Ruthven are very different creatures but, as they move through the texts, both leave in their wake a revelation of the productive potential of Gothic fiction to disturb and even to prey upon that which passes for ‘normal.’

I use the phrase ‘queer Gothic’ to describe the various ways in which these texts allow readers to experience certain anxieties, resistances and transgressive pleasures in relation to sexual norms. In recent years, critics have often re-read nineteenth-century Gothic texts as illustrating the troubled development of a western, white, middle-class, heterosexual identity, which is still culturally privileged and dominant to this day.<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud’s theory of the ‘return of the repressed’ has been widely cited to explain how the genre encourages its implied readers to encounter the contradictions that are fundamental to their existence. As Jerrold Hogle observes, Gothic texts allow a ‘simultaneously fearful and attractive confrontation with the “thrown off” anomalies that are actually basic to the construction of a western middle-class self’ (8). In the context of this argument, Gothic fiction represents the haunting of the white middle-class subject by whatever s/he must exclude at the level of class, race and sex, in order to shore up the boundaries of ‘normal’ subjectivity and identity. The repressed returns in the shape of

monsters, supernatural terrors and dark forces and the boundaries of subjectivity and identity are never represented as stable or secure. Gothic fiction is of particular interest to queer theory because it always presents the dominant discourse as troubled, unstable, and ever threatened by the excluded others it has made necessary to its own construction. Moreover, the Gothic appeal evidently extends well beyond its implied, anxious but excited, middle-class readership, for Gothic texts always contain counter-voices and, as such, also have much to offer those 'other' readers who find themselves at odds with 'the normal, the legitimate, [and] the dominant' (Halperin 62).

I do not intend to become caught in the critical debate over whether Gothic texts are ultimately politically and ideologically conservative or subversive. In my view, one should resist agreeing to the terms of any argument that presumes a reductive binary either/or interpretative framework can be applied to the texts at hand.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Rhona Berenstein observes, this debate distracts from Gothic horror's important cultural function as 'a site of ideological contradiction and negotiation' in which there are 'dual operations of convention and transgression' (*Attack of the Leading Ladies* 10). I agree, and would suggest that we read Gothic fiction as being partly all about the 'dual' operations of convention and transgression, by which I mean as a discursive space in which conflicting desires *for* convention and *for* transgression are played out and performed. Because the Gothic has a special interest in speaking about 'abnormal' desires and behaviours, the genre draws attention to queer theory's own concerns with the discursive practices that have produced the possibility of sexual non-conformity as something dangerous and repellent, but also exciting and transgressive.

### Monsters and Modern Sexual Discourse

Initially, it may seem a little incongruous to begin this exploration, as I do, with a focus upon the family when, in the context of queer reading, the spectacle of monstrosity appears more immediately striking. After all, queer theory is often associated with an attention to otherness, while family discourse is perceived as one of the bastions of heteronormativity. But I have placed the chapter on the family in *Frankenstein* at the beginning of the study, because I think it important to pay close attention to what passes for 'normal' before it is possible to fully appreciate that which appears to be 'queer' in the text. Moreover, the family is in fact very much at issue within both queer theoretical work and Gothic fiction. *Frankenstein's* ambivalent engagement with family discourse opens a space for discussing queer theory's concerns with a seductive, but regulative and exclusionary ideal. The text draws attention to the various ways in which the performative language of family works to re-iterate and promote its own privileged status as the location of peace and happiness. Queer theorists have argued that heteronormativity actually depends upon the exclusion of certain subjects in order to shore up its own boundaries, and *Frankenstein* certainly depicts the institution of family as an exclusionary matrix. In a fantasy of disillusionment the Monster, embodying the ideology's disturbing discontents, finally enters and shifts the meaning of family to a place from which it cannot return. Although the family is often idealised in Gothic texts, the institution is also plainly under attack and I argue that, in this respect, the genre engages its readers' investments in the norm at the same time as it performs their doubts

about its stability and their less acceptable, arguably queer, desires to see it shaken and exposed.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the troubled representation of marriage in *Frankenstein*, *The Vampyre* and some of the film adaptations, for these texts raise serious questions about the signifying practices of heterosexuality. In the first instance, *Frankenstein* certainly calls attention to the workings of what Adrienne Rich has referred to as ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and the role of romantic fantasy in promoting the desirability of marriage. But, from a queer perspective, one of the most striking aspects of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* is the way both texts implicitly de-link sexual desire between men and women from social desire for the benefits offered by marriage. The texts are underscored by a deeper anxiety that marriage does not mean what it is supposed to mean. The desire for marriage takes on further sinister meaning because the most powerful relationships in these narratives are between men and male monsters, not men and women. Ultimately, both texts illustrate Eve Sedgwick’s concern with the damaging effects of a homosocial and homophobic culture in which women pay a high price for repressed male desire.<sup>5</sup> As they work to gradually shift the meaning of marriage from joy to horror, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* point towards a dangerous situation in which marriage functions as a cover up for lawless male desire, with a resulting deadly impact upon women. It is also possible to propose a contingent and mutually illuminating alliance between feminist and queer approaches in this chapter, for together feminist and queer approaches reveal these texts to contain serious critiques of compulsory heterosexuality within male-dominated culture.



The focus now shifts from heterosexuality to homosexuality or, rather, to the Gothic engagement with the discursive practices through which same-sex desire is made culturally legible. Because male relations in *Frankenstein* have already received a great deal of critical attention, I have decided to begin with the women's narratives in Chapter Three. It has often been argued, quite rightly, that powerful male desires structure *Frankenstein*. Meanwhile, traditional criticism has tended to reduce questions of female desire and subjectivity in the text to marginalisation. Queer approaches can take the analysis of relations between women beyond the male homosocial structure which appears to dominate the novel, and there is scope to twist existing feminist readings in exciting new directions. Through close readings of the relationships between Caroline Frankenstein, Elizabeth Lavenza and Justine Moritz in *Frankenstein*, I focus on moments in the narrative where the representation of female friendship begins to shift perceptibly into the domains of desire. This text, in which there are no identifiable 'lesbians' as such, does have something to tell us about the way in which desire between women has been constituted as, on the one hand, something unimportant and invisible and, on the other hand, as a terrifying, monstrous threat. Misha Kavka notes that there has been a 'lesbian register' in the Gothic 'at least since Coleridge's poem *Christabel* (1816)' (223). The threat of sapphic monstrosity is much more strongly foregrounded in *Christabel*, but I am going to suggest that this discourse lurks in the narrative background to *Frankenstein*. While queer theory throws a different light upon the women's stories, I will also show how the text can illuminate queer theory's insistence on reading beyond heteronormative interpretative paradigms and creating perverse, unexpected readings. Mary Shelley's own intense female friendships are also of interest in this chapter. Some biographical

responses to these relationships open further questions concerning how our ontological dependence upon modern sexual categories, such as 'lesbian,' informs and sometimes constrains the way we respond to the representation of relations between women.

Featuring men who traverse the explosively tense lines between compulsory homosocial relations and the prohibited horrors of homoerotic desire, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* have both recently been read in the light of Sedgwick's work analysing the continuum of homosocial desire, homosexual panic and homophobia. Relations between men are clearly sites of crisis in these texts and, in Chapter Four, I pay particular attention to questions of homoerotic and homophobic signification. These texts draw striking attention to the various ways in which homophobic culture diffuses homosexual meaning into a 'vast array of signifiers' (Edelman 6), and makes it available to readers through connotation. As such, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* offer much material for discussing queer theory's concerns with the inscription of male homosexuality as a threat that seems to lurk everywhere. *Frankenstein* does allow some space for reading love between men sympathetically, but ultimately both texts point towards an increasingly homophobic nineteenth-century society in which desire between men was viewed as monstrous. The language of homophobia impacts heavily upon the language of these narratives and, I will suggest, creeps insidiously into subsequent critical readings and film adaptations.

Most readers probably would not find it difficult to agree that Gothic narratives can usually be read as sexual nightmares on some level. In Chapter Five, I consider the extent to which the signifying practices of queerness are written into the signifying practices of Gothic fiction. Many recognisably Gothic conventions, such as forbidden knowledge, recognition, secrecy, confession, madness, social ostracism and dangerous

space, can also be recognised as ‘conventions’ within the language of sexual nonconformity. Because Gothic fiction seems to have developed as a genre with a special interest in dangerous sexual meanings, these narratives do reveal much about the cultural language that has produced queerness as a kind of horror story. But, by creating what D.A Miller calls ‘a charged atmosphere’ (128) through connotation and sexually coded language, Gothic texts have always allowed readers to enjoy a sense of having got away with reading something transgressive in relative safety. It should be said that the aim here is not to ‘liberate’ the apparently repressed sexual meaning in Gothic texts. Instead, I draw upon Foucault’s account of the ‘deployment of sexuality’ to consider how these texts demonstrate the *production* of queer meaning as something that must be repressed and which is, therefore, experienced as thrillingly subversive, as well as dangerous. Keeping the problems and pleasures of queer reading an active concern throughout, I propose that Foucauldian approaches can tell us much about the sexual content of Gothic texts, what we have come to expect from them, and perhaps even *why* we read them. Sedgwick has observed that ‘no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional’ (*Coherence* 9), and I propose that speaking about ‘queerness’ may in fact be one of the most pervasive of Gothic conventions.

I did not originally intend to devote an entire chapter to the author, having decided from the beginning to privilege a poststructuralist emphasis on textuality, language and meaning. Chapter Six is the consequence of my realisation that the fascination with the author manifest within my field of study might itself be of interest to queer inquiry. In their heterogeneous, contradictory textuality, Mary Shelley and John Polidori have

become somewhat akin to Frankenstein's patched together creature. Their cultural significance has been produced from a complex nexus of autobiographical and biographical material, academic critical perspectives, as well as popular fiction and film. They can even be said to have become 'monstrous' in the sense of the word theorised by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen: 'The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read' (4). If most monsters also, to some degree, reflect sexual fears and desires, it is appropriate to find that Shelley and Polidori have both been read and reproduced as sexualised author-figures. In this final chapter, I explore how popular perceptions of the Gothic, as a form of cultural production particularly concerned with sex, can impact upon the way we think about Gothic authors. The 'queering' of Shelley and Polidori will probably not tell us any 'truths' about their lives or works, but it may reveal something about the discourses which have made sex into what Foucault calls 'a problem of truth' (*History* 56), and non-normative sex into a site of especially intense epistemological pressure.

My research identifies affinities between Gothic fiction and queer theoretical thinking in order to extend upon the 'queer Gothic' as a field of academic inquiry which has much to offer. While this study is intended as a contribution to *Frankenstein* and Gothic scholarship, it is important to make it clear that my research is as much concerned with discussing queer theory and reading practices as it is with producing new readings of the texts at hand. Since I am utilising Gothic texts to discuss and illustrate queer scholarship, the theoretical texts cited and discussed are as important as the Gothic texts. For this reason, I have not included an overview of the extensive body of scholarship pertaining to *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*. Instead, the critical heritage will be

engaged strategically, where relevant, to show how queer reading can intervene to fill gaps or present alternative points of view. I will, of course, engage critics who have already offered lesbian, gay, queer or transgender perspectives in relation to these texts. Furthermore, when I began this research I originally intended to explore a number of nineteenth-century Gothic texts, but my insistence on close queer reading necessitated a reduction, until *Frankenstein* became the core work. However, it is important to be clear that the arguments which follow are intended to raise implications for the study of other Gothic texts, and this discussion has been conceived as a point of departure for further explorations rather than a final statement on the subject. I hope that this study will contribute usefully to queer studies, Gothic studies and the emergent fields of queer Gothic and queer Romantic inquiry.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this study, I am using the 1831 revised edition of *Frankenstein* as the default text because I think this text is the one with which most readers are familiar. But, where relevant, I will also refer to the 1818 first edition.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Halberstam notes that monstrosity has become 'almost a queer category' (27). Many critics working in the field of queer studies have explored the representational relationship between monstrosity and sexual nonconformity, but I find Rhona Berenstein's articulation particularly compelling: 'Monsters do not fit neatly with a model of human sexuality. Instead, they propose a paradigm of sexuality in which eros and danger, sexuality and destruction, human and inhuman, and male and female blur, overlap, and coalesce. In this schema, sexuality and identity remain murky matters, steeped in border crossings and marked by fuzzy boundaries' (*Attack of the Leading Ladies* 27)

<sup>3</sup> As Halberstam observes, Gothic monsters 'have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, these novels make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual' (22). For a detailed discussion of this argument, see also Jerrold E. Hogle's 'Introduction: the Gothic in western culture' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*.

<sup>4</sup> Although I focus specifically on queer readings in this study, I follow theorists who argue that Gothic texts are really neither subversive nor conservative because they always contain many voices and lend themselves to multiple interpretations. George Haggerty notes, 'it is central to the nature of Gothic fiction that differing interpretations of the material will seem equally valid' (8). Meanwhile, Halberstam argues that 'multiple interpretations are embedded in the text and part of the experience of horror comes from the realization that meaning itself runs riot' (2).

<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick's work focuses upon 'the oppressive effects on women and men of a cultural system in which male-male desire became widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman' (*Epistemology* 15).

## Chapter One

### ‘What Can Disturb Our Peace?’:

#### Family Mythology and its Discontents in *Frankenstein*

“family” [...] is a dangerous word  
- Michael Lynch (qtd; in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* 71)

The representation of family presents a productive point of departure for this study exploring interactions between *Frankenstein* and queer theoretical thinking. I make use of the term ‘queer’ to describe a creatively resistant reading practice, for in the words of Michel Foucault, ‘to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process’ (qtd; in Halperin 60). Queer reading therefore operates throughout this study in terms of resistance to dominant norms, but is never conceptualised only in negative terms, because positive, creative approaches are vital if such reading is to remain innovative.<sup>1</sup> The family is a constructive site from which to begin showing how queer critical practices can work to resist and unravel heteronormative textual representation and create dynamic new perspectives. However, as my aim here is not simply to produce fresh readings of this novel, but also to claim Gothic texts as resources for illustrating queer theoretical thinking, this chapter draws connections between the challenges to the institution in *Frankenstein*, and queer scholarship’s insistence upon paying serious attention to family representation. In other words, while queer scholarship throws light upon the troubling questions about family raised in *Frankenstein*, the text provides much material for discussing queer theoretical concerns about family discourse.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick raises a pertinent question here: if ‘Redeeming the family isn’t, finally, an option but a compulsion; the question would be how to *stop*

redeeming the family' (*Tendencies* 72). Initially this query seems strange, but it is no doubt intended to startle readers out of unquestioned assumptions and encourage us to think about how we are all compelled, at times, to 'redeem' the family. Queer approaches are enlightening in this respect, because as Sedgwick explains, to 'queer' is to render 'those culturally central, apparently monolithic constructions [such as family] newly accessible to analysis and interrogation' (*Tendencies* 9). In terms of teaching students about queer theory, *Frankenstein* opens a space for discussing our own often contradictory desires to uphold and transgress a culturally central and apparently monolithic norm. If Sedgwick's question provides one point from which to develop this discussion, another is to be found in the novel when Elizabeth Lavenza asks Victor Frankenstein 'while we love – while we are true to each other [...] we may reap every tranquil blessing - what can disturb our peace?' (90). Gothic texts tend to suggest that family ideology is always already 'disturbed,' and disturbing the peace of family representation is precisely what should be on the agenda for a queer study of Gothic literature. Moreover, we should also attempt to disturb the way in which the text has been read so far, for while critics have read *Frankenstein* as a critique of family ideology, queer perspectives can now take the implications of this perceived critique in new directions.<sup>2</sup>

*Frankenstein* is a text deeply concerned with the reading and, perhaps more importantly, the *mis*-reading of family. Making family ideology visible from more than one perspective, this text offers different answers to the question of what family *means* and speaks to us as family subjects in more than one voice. *Frankenstein* certainly contains seductive voices which appear to support and endorse traditional family



ideology: on the narrative surface, the family appears to be located as an idealised site of love and harmonious tranquillity. But the text also contains possibilities for counter-readings, discernible at moments where the representation becomes troubled, contradictory, and more complex than it might at first appear. There are other voices, expressing ambivalence, doubt, anxiety and discontent. In this chapter, I want to elaborate upon the various ways in which this text has already 'queered' (inquired into) family representation. The text can be read, in part, as a Gothic fantasy about the cultural desire for family, a desire always subject to anxiety and disillusion, for family power masks its regulative and exclusionary agenda through the performance of loving inclusion. Ultimately, a radical perceptual shift is effected by the Monster, who reveals *Frankenstein* as a troubled and troubling exploration into the way in which family discourse actually produces its very own 'monsters.' In terms of the 'queer Gothic,' the text's complex and ambivalent engagement with family mythology also illustrates how Gothic fiction allows its readers to experience certain anxieties and resistant pleasures in relation to dominant sexual norms.

### **Performing the Family:**

#### **From Overdetermination to Resistance**

Domesticity is always political  
- Adam Komisaruk (423)

In my view, *Frankenstein* is not so much concerned with endorsing the privileged naturalness of family as it is with representing the effects of an ideology which determinedly proclaims its own natural and privileged status. This text has something

particularly important to say about the political deployment of the *language*, or rhetoric, of family. In any given historical moment the meaning of the word ‘family’ is produced by the reiteration of norms and ideals which are inscribed over time until they come to appear ‘natural.’ The language of family is therefore ‘performative’: it is a ‘discursive practice’ through which a set of norms are naturalised by repetition until, as Judith Butler puts it, ‘the social unilaterally acts on the natural’ (*Bodies that Matter* 4). In this context, family meaning can be understood as an effect of reiterative and citational practices that work to produce the ideal they purport simply to describe. It may also be useful here to draw upon the work of Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957), and read the representation as an example of a performative ‘mythology.’ Barthes conceptualises ‘myth’ as a type of language which makes us aware of something, tries to impose it upon us and, crucially, attempts to convince us that it is natural, rather than historically and politically constructed.<sup>3</sup> Cultural historians argue that the installation of the ‘family values’ so familiar to us today has been ongoing since the early modern period.<sup>4</sup> If the success of the myth relies upon the invisibility of its ‘constructedness’ and its ‘performativity,’ a queer reading might then begin by focusing upon how *Frankenstein* does render the family ideal visible.

It is worth noting that the first edition of *Frankenstein*, published in 1818, is framed with a piece of family values rhetoric. In the anonymous ‘Preface,’ written by Percy Shelley, he states that the author’s ‘chief concern’ has been ‘the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection’ (3 - 4). This moralising voice now seems a little surprising for, if asked what *Frankenstein* is all about, I doubt many readers would respond with ‘the amiableness of domestic affection.’ Percy Shelley’s attempt to frame

the text with a conventional moral was no doubt intended to tone down its subversive, even blasphemous, implications for publication. But his assertion of domesticity also takes part in a long tradition and reminds us, did we need reminding, that when anxiously attempting to court public acceptability, then as now, it is wise to invoke ‘family values.’ Shelley’s ‘Preface’ therefore reveals more about the performativity of family discourse than it does about *Frankenstein*. Still, it is interesting, insofar as it makes the signifier ‘family’ visible as an ideal cynically deployed to convince readers that *Frankenstein* is an acceptably moral work. Contemporary reviewers were not for the most part seduced. Some read the novel as an impressive but shockingly ‘wild fiction’ (Anonymous 191), while others regarded it as ‘a tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity’ (Croker 187). However, Hirsch observes that until quite recently many critical readings were actually typified by a ‘blind acceptance of the moral offered by Percy Shelley’s preface’ (123). Even now most critics do not seem to consider the text to be critiquing the *idea* of family per se, but only specifically nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology. Consequentially, some have responded by attempting to identify precisely what Shelley thought was wrong with her culture’s family discourse and have suggested how she believed it could be changed for the better.<sup>5</sup>

I therefore want to make it clear from the beginning of this discussion that interpreting *Frankenstein* as a text which appeals to its readers to create more inclusive and ‘better’ versions of the traditional family will *not* be adequate to the demands of queer reading. Nor would such a reading illustrate the work of queer scholarship, since redeeming the traditional family is not on the queer theoretical agenda. As Sedgwick observes, the signifier ‘family’ is so unbudgeably installed at the centre of a cultural

value system that ‘a rearrangement or reassignment of its *signifieds* need have no effect whatever on its rhetorical or ideological effects’ (*Tendencies* 72). Sedgwick’s point is a crucial one here because, in my view, it is precisely the rhetorical and ideological effects of family mythology that are most at issue in *Frankenstein*. This text’s engagement with family values propaganda is in no way simplistic or monolithic. With a shift in perspective, *Frankenstein* appears to be less about the endorsement of the ideal as about the effects of the overdetermined, but always anxious, language of family. From a queer perspective, the text presents a deeply, and admittedly appealingly, cynical story which actually sets the family ideal up for a profound fall from grace; namely, the fall from appearing natural into becoming visibly *political*.

If family meaning is always performative, by which I mean it is something that is always in the process of being ‘done,’ the question here is not simply, what does this representation mean? It is also, how does this text *do* the family? Initially, *Frankenstein* appears to ‘do’ an excessive, quasi-utopian, nostalgic fiction which is clearly constructed in relation to certain ideals. The text engages conspicuously with the discursive shift away from older models of extended dynastic patriarchy and towards what is now recognisable as the middle-class, nuclear family. The Frankenstein and De Lacey families constitute representational engagements with developing early nineteenth-century family discourses. It is even possible to read the text as an example of family performativity in action, insofar as it embodies what Hirsch calls, ‘the then nascent, now firmly entrenched, ideology of bourgeois “family values”’ (123). In his opening narrative, Victor Frankenstein presents a benevolently patriarchal, proto-bourgeois, upper middle-class family. Here we find his venerable, public-spirited father, tender-hearted

mother and saintly adopted sister/sweetheart, all located within an idealised domestic home. Victor proclaims, 'No human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself' (37). This is not surprising, as all the ideological and structural components of a mythical westernised 'happy family,' including patriarchy and gender division, appear to be present and correct. Consider the words used to describe Victor's father: 'public,' 'respected,' 'integrity,' 'indefatigable' (31), 'protecting,' and 'upright' (32). His mother, meanwhile, is termed 'fair,' 'exotic,' 'soft,' 'benevolent,' 'weakened,' 'tender' (32 - 33), and a 'guardian angel' (33). As the narrative proceeds, the text continues to represent the performance of family as both highly overdetermined and very seductive.

Evidently, the extent to which a reader will be seduced, or will feel resistant towards the family narratives in *Frankenstein*, depends upon his or her own political and personal investment in family ideology. But I am going to hazard a guess that for many early twenty-first century readers, Victor's narrative will appear to draw heavily upon well-worn popular stereotypes and clichés. At this point, the very overdetermination of the representation opens the way towards resistant reading because 'the note of self justification is sounded so loudly that it immediately invites suspicion' (Newman 17). For instance, Victor endorses a vision of hyper-femininity so excessive that it begins to collapse under its own discursive weight. It is difficult to take seriously such fanatical metaphors as that describing Elizabeth as a 'shrine-dedicated lamp' (37). This is partly because the intertextuality of the representation is not very subtle, alerting us, as it does, to the presence of the 'already read,' to intertexts which may or may not be locatable, intertexts which have combined to make the popular stereotype recognisable in the first place.<sup>6</sup> If we already 'know' this story, it is because we have already read similar

narratives in numerous western texts. Of course the family narrative must be recognisable and, therefore, 'intertextual' in order to be intelligible, but over familiarity institutes a representational fine line which, when crossed, reminds us that the meanings of family have been drawn, not from nature but, as Barthes might put it, from a tissue of cultural citations.<sup>7</sup> When *Frankenstein* crosses that line it makes family strikingly visible as a mythology so overdetermined that it calls attention to its own construction. In this context, it is interesting to note that when Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Columbia Tri-Star 1994), takes the novel's family narrative at face value, the result is the portrayal of an excessively joyful home environment in which everyone appears to be literally dancing with happiness in others' company. As a consequence, the family again invites suspicion, becoming a frenetic site of excess, too uncomfortably obvious in its attempt to seduce the audience to a certain point of view. A queer reading should pay attention to such moments when family self-promotion becomes excessive, because it is at these moments that the family begins to appear 'unnatural' and even 'queer,' in the strange sense of the word.

While it is true that some readers might interpret the narrative simply as a voice of endorsement, it is also possible to read family overdetermination as itself symptomatic of doubt. In other words, *Frankenstein* draws attention to the family as what could be called a desperate discourse. From this point of view, Percy Shelley's moral in the 'Preface' is an appropriate frame for the text, insofar as his invocation of domesticity is itself symptomatic of anxiety rather than certainty. No matter how privileged the ideology appears to be, representational discord echoes from the juxtaposition of excessive idealisation with the family's utter failure to achieve its own stated aims within the terms

of the text. Beth Newman concludes that '*Frankenstein* makes domestic tranquility an unattainable ideal, a state that can never, in the world it represents be achieved' (183). Critics disagree about the extent to which Shelley critiques the family, but most agree that she presents the ideal as unachievable. However, I would go further and answer the question of how this text 'does' the family by suggesting that, in the final analysis, *Frankenstein* actually 'does' family discourse 'in.' An ironic, even blackly humorous, voice might be read into the various characters' perseverance in telling themselves, and each other, that family life will provide happiness and security, despite all the evidence to the contrary with which they are faced. As such, the text draws upon discourses that, to this day, work to convince us all that family is the source of peace and joy, no matter all the evidence countering this narrative which surrounds us in our culture. While engaging its readers' desire for the norm, *Frankenstein* therefore speaks to very real cultural anxieties rooted in our awareness that the language of family cannot live up to its promises. Victor rings the dissonant note early in his narrative when he informs the reader, 'in drawing the picture of my early days, I also record those events which led, by insensible steps, to my after tale of misery' (38). This dissonance, this sense that there is something wrong with the story we are ostensibly being told, is echoed throughout the novel. It is a 'queer' dissonance, insofar as it opens a gap where queer reading can work to reveal the various ways in which this text has already undermined the family narrative.

It is often possible to discern a voice of critique, even a transgressive voice, speaking within narrative moments that initially appear dominated by the language of patriarchal (hetero)normativity. The recurring image of a woman kneeling before an old or dead father, for instance, as enacted by Caroline, Agatha De Lacey and Safie at

different points in the text, depicts a world in which the performance of feminine submission is necessary to maintain the stability of the patriarchal family. Butler observes that performativity is ‘a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted’ (‘Critically Queer’ 22). One could say, then, that the women’s family position in *Frankenstein* symbolically and performatively constitutes them as ‘kneeling’ subjects. The portrait of Caroline in the family library is an interesting example of an archetypal, strategically positioned fantasy of femininity: ‘an historical subject, painted at my father’s desire,’ it represents ‘Caroline Beaufort in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father’ (75). Clearly an image of helpless, father-worshipping, virginal, passive femininity awaiting rescue by a male protector, its source in patriarchal ideology is confirmed by its commissioning at ‘*my father’s desire.*’ The portrait is performative, insofar as it performs (repeats, reiterates and sustains) the ideological fiction, and demonstrates the patriarchal narrative desire to ‘frame’ women in terms of its own representational requirements. Caroline is neatly framed in a narrative symbolisation expressing the fantasmatic containment of women within the patriarchal imagination. In this context, it is again possible to read a darkly ironic meaning in Victor’s reference to Elizabeth as ‘the inmate of my parents’ house’ (35), when all the women in the novel are the ‘inmates’ of patriarchal discourse. Their predicament may be neatly encapsulated by Caroline’s portrait, but throughout the text they all perform and sustain the representational language of family mythology, although it does nothing to protect them.

Yet it is also possible to (re) read the portrait of Caroline as a site where family fantasy begins to unravel and resist the intended meanings of its own deployment. Mary



Poovey argues that 'Shelley elevates feminine helplessness to the stature of myth' (142). But I would suggest Shelley draws upon the pre-existent elevation of deeply inscribed cultural myths about women and family only to trouble and question patriarchal rhetoric. In the first instance, the painting plainly draws attention to its own nostalgic construction and reflects femininity as what Butler calls, 'a socially instituted and regulated fantasy or "fetish," not a natural category, but a political one' (*Gender* 126). Another serious problem at the centre of the portrait's narrative is of course Beaufort's coffin: the dead body of the father serves as a reminder of the failure of fathers. His inability to protect his daughter strikes at the core of a system that justifies its very existence upon a claim to offer protection to women. Damsels in distress may be alluring, but they can only come into being via the failure of a male protector. When Beaufort is ruined he responds passively, dies from despair, and leaves his daughter to her fate. From this perspective, the text makes something of a mockery of Caroline's grief-stricken father worship. Kneeling to the coffin, she performs female submission to an ideal that has always already failed and that is, like the portrait itself and Victor's own family narrative, only ever a reconstructed nostalgic fantasy. If the picture is a sign of failure rather than success, it may be no coincidence that Victor notices it at about the same point in the narrative as his family begins their descent into destruction at the hands of the Monster. Throughout the text, the reader continues to be presented with moments where the family ideal is juxtaposed with evidence of its failure.

From the death of Beaufort to Victor's rejection of his creature, *Frankenstein* performs the failure of the patriarchal family and works to shift its meaning to a more troubled position. There is perhaps another ironic undertone in Victor's statement that

Alphonse came like ‘a protecting spirit’ to the ‘poor girl’ (32), because Alphonse, like all the other fathers in this novel, proves incapable of protecting his family from harm.

Fathers in *Frankenstein* function well only so long as they are not placed under much pressure and their position remains unchallenged. Repeatedly drawing attention to the gap between the patriarchal ideal and the failure of individual fathers, *Frankenstein* again plays upon the overdetermination of family only to undermine the rhetoric. U. C. Knoepfelmacher argues that this is ‘a novel of omnipresent fathers and absent mothers’ (90). It seems to me, rather, that *Frankenstein* attempts to represent the effects of a value system in which fathers are indeed *supposed* to be ‘omnipresent,’ and then raises serious questions about the myth that gives them such enormous signifying power. Having made the norm of family promotion visible, *Frankenstein* then proceeds to portray the effects of a powerful discourse that cannot truly provide happiness or stability because it is not, in fact, what it appears to be.

### **‘The Ties of Domestic Love’: Productive Family Power**

They performed towards him every little office of affection and duty  
with gentleness; and he rewarded them by his benevolent smiles  
- The Monster (107)

As *Frankenstein* progresses, anxieties about the family ideal deepen and a pattern begins to emerge, a pattern which suggests that inclusion comes at a price, is not open to everyone and, furthermore, family discourse might actually produce the very discontents it seeks to repress. Through calling attention to the masked power of the institution, *Frankenstein* can further illustrate queer theory’s concerns about the seductive, but

exclusionary, nature of family discourse. The rewards of love and inclusion *are* indeed offered by the Frankenstein and De Lacey families, though only on condition that all members adhere to their already-written family roles, and only for those subjects deemed acceptable. Foucault has proposed in his *History of Sexuality* that power is not necessarily negative, for to be most effective, power must also be positive and productive. However, ‘power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms’ (*History* 86). The Frankenstein and De Lacey families present good examples of productive family power, insofar as they do successfully mask their own mechanisms from their members. In the 1818 edition, Victor’s mother is described as hoping to ‘bind as closely as possible the ties of domestic love’ (20). Her desire brings into view two important aspects of family ideology in the novel, namely, the ability to bind, tie and regulate, together with the capacity to offer the rewards which make family membership appear so desirable. When Victor says of his parents ‘We felt that they were not the tyrants to rule our lot according to their caprice’ (37), it matters not so much that Alphonse and Caroline were not tyrannical, as that the children did not *feel* tyrannised. This kind of parenting is metaphorically conceptualised in Victor’s expression, ‘I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment’ (33). However enjoyable it seems, it is, nonetheless, a tie that binds or, as Komisaruk more darkly suggests, ‘a manacle or a noose’ (422).<sup>8</sup>

Some critics have positively differentiated the De Lacey family from the Frankenstein family, arguing that this representation is less inward looking and hierarchical and proves to be more inclusive and egalitarian.<sup>9</sup> But are the De Lacey

really less ideologically objectionable or are they more successfully seductive? After all, both the De Lacey and the Frankenstein families are founded upon the performative normalisation of gender division and patriarchal order. The De Laceys adhere faithfully to an inside/outside, masculine/feminine division: 'The young man was constantly employed out of doors, and the girl in various laborious occupations within' (107). All members likewise defer to an apparently benevolent patriarchal hierarchy. Perhaps the critical view that they represent a 'better' family model is more symptomatic of the cultural compulsion to redeem the family than any quantifiable difference between the two representations in the text. Instead of becoming caught in this debate, it may therefore be more productive to consider what both have to reveal about the workings of family power.

The De Laceys are not so very different to the Frankensteins insofar as they also reflect the fact that family performativity works to promote and perpetuate the desirability of family. Take, for instance, one occasion when Agatha begins to weep. Her father speaks to her and the Monster describes how 'the fair creature, leaving her work, knelt at his feet. He raised her, and smiled with such kindness and affection.' In response, the Monster feels 'sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature' (104). He is moved because he reads the scene as natural and desirable, but this is precisely the impression the performance is intended to convey. It is as if the Monster is watching the perfect family narrative unfold, but what he cannot see, and what none of us are supposed to see in relation to the family, is the fact that inclusion is bestowed upon Agatha in reward for her submission. Although the power relationship is masked, love is the reward for obedience to her, albeit benevolent, father. The text's wider concern with

family acceptance is highlighted once again when Safie joins the De Laceys. Her abandonment of her tyrannical father is an important instance of female resistance in the novel, but when she arrives at the De Lacey's door she enters a new state of subjection. Performing the required symbolic act of feminine submission, 'the young stranger knelt at the old man's feet and would have kissed his hand, but he raised her, and embraced her affectionately' (114). Safie is quick to submit to her new father in order to gain access to the advantages of family membership. In throwing herself down willingly at the cottage door, she symbolically performs the successfully productive power of nineteenth-century family discourse.

It is important to note that old De Lacey is as quick to raise Agatha and Safie from their knees as they are to kneel down before him. He foregoes Safie's attempt to kiss his hand because such displays are unnecessary and undesirable. Liberal power does not like the sight of submission when it draws attention to a power it wishes to mask from view.<sup>10</sup> The repeated acts of kneeling and raising reflect a family narrative which insists that its members submit, but at the same time pretends that no one *has* to submit. The fact that it is De Lacey's prerogative to raise the women from their knees also implies that he still has the power to keep them kneeling were he not such a kindly affectionate father. Many Romantic Gothic texts are more directly concerned with patriarchal excesses, but in *Frankenstein* the possibility of paternal tyranny hovers in the back ground, represented by Safie's father – the Turk. However, the threat represented by the Turk is actually an important part of the family narrative, for one means through which the nineteenth-century bourgeois family causes itself to appear more desirable is through defining itself in opposition to more obviously oppressive forms of patriarchy. Unlike

the Turk, the new family ideology perceives the possibility that visible tyranny is likely to produce resistance. However, *Frankenstein* is actually more concerned with problems inherent within the developing bourgeois model than with supposedly archaic patriarchal tyranny.

One of the deepest concerns about the family in *Frankenstein*, and queer theoretical thinking, centres upon the discursive production of acceptable 'good' family subjects and 'bad' family subjects – those who must be excluded. Such anxieties about the family are already visible in Victor's early narrative. Although he insists that family life will provide peace, his story is underscored throughout by a sense that he is in fact irrevocably alienated. His unacknowledged discontent with the supposedly idyllic home appears in his childhood eagerness to seek the 'raising of ghosts or devils' (40). Foreshadowing the creation of the Monster, his desire to bring dark forces of monstrous difference into the family domain runs counter to his insistence that he is in harmony with them. I would therefore suggest that we could now read Victor's early narrative as an allusive story about what Michael Warner calls 'queer childhood,' with its 'profound and nameless' estrangement and 'sense of inner secrets and hidden shame' (*Trouble with Normal* 8). Victor takes up the position of the 'queer' in the family: the one who, despite all his protestations, knows that he does not fit, but has no language to articulate his sense of alienation. From the moment of the Monster's creation onwards, his story reads very much like a 'closet' narrative in which love for his family vies with resentment, a sense of estrangement, as well as guilt, shame and fear of exclusion. These fears are now recognisable as the terrors of the closet which families have always had a privileged role in perpetuating. The family, so we are often told, is a protective, inclusive and loving

environment but, on some level, we are all fearfully aware of the fact that families are ascribed the power to marginalise or exclude certain individuals, especially those identified as sexually deviant, for the purposes of social control. As Gayle Rubin observes, 'Families play a crucial role in enforcing sexual conformity. Much social pressure is brought to bear to deny erotic dissidents the comforts and resources that families provide' (22). Monsters, in western culture, have traditionally been linked to the representation of dangerous sexuality. Once Victor's creature is read as embodying all those desires and practices that cannot be acknowledged or brought 'home' into the family domain, his story 'brings out' a threat which has actually been implicit throughout the De Lacey and Frankenstein family narratives.

Appropriately, it is the excluded Monster who brings the text's inquiry into family power to a crux. Because his narrative moves in parallel and divergent lines to the progress of Victor's, at times it can appear that the same story is being told twice from two very different perspectives. Victor begins with a reading of family from his privileged 'inside' position, while the Monster's story parallels and inverts this progression with a reading of the De Lacey family from an excluded 'outside' position. Victor is educated within the home; the Monster secretly watches the De Laceys teach Safie; Victor feels cooped up at home; the Monster is physically cooped up in the hovel where he hides; Victor escapes voluntarily to university; the Monster is involuntarily expelled from the cottage. In other words, Victor wants to get 'out' of his family, while the Monster tries to get 'in' with the De Laceys. The Monster's own 'queer childhood' also parallels the desire, fear, secrecy and resentment in Victor's narrative, but with far greater intensity.

In a sinister internalisation of modern family discourse, the Monster constructs his identity in relation to the same order that demands the exclusion of ‘monsters’ – those subjects who do not ‘fit’ into the family picture. Hiding in a hovel adjacent to the cottage, gazing in upon the De Lacey’s, the Monster is utterly seduced by the performance of productive family power. Initially, his idealisation of family is even more overdetermined than Victor’s narrative. But the fact that his view is so limited, that he can only observe them via an ‘almost imperceptible chink through which the eye could just penetrate’ (104), neatly illustrates his blindness to the ‘bigger picture.’ Taking the performance of loving inclusion at face value, the Monster cannot see that this order is founded upon a reward system in which love is offered for adherence to the regulatory narratives of patriarchal heteronormativity. The Monster’s experience leads me to suggest, again, that *Frankenstein* is not so much about the family as it is about a culture that encourages us all to buy into the ‘fiction of the family’s radical detachment from the political realm’ (Hirsch 133). His aim is to gain inclusion and be recognised as a family member: ‘my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition’ (128). Watching the family performance causes him to presume, quite logically, that if he is submissive and ‘good’ enough, he might eventually be welcomed: ‘they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour and afterwards their love’ (111). Understanding that a reward system is in operation, but not fully appreciating its implications, he sets about aiding and supporting the De Lacey’s in secret. The promise of inclusion for anyone prepared to take up a role within the already-written family narrative is important to the maintenance of



family power but, as the Monster later discovers, it is in many respects misleading. Since the reader knows that no matter how 'good' he is the Monster will never be accepted, *Frankenstein* also speaks to us as family subjects, causing us to confront our own desires for recognition and fears about exclusion.

It is interesting to note that the women's stories also parallel the Monster's story and, when read together, compound and advance *Frankenstein's* dark and ugly message about the politics of family inclusion, for the particularly constraining effects upon women reflect sharply upon the broader ideology. As the text repeatedly confronts the reader with the spectacle of a woman being embraced into the home, it tells us something about the qualities acceptable to the family and the price of acceptability. Caroline, Elizabeth and Safie are all 'adopted' into their families apparently *because* they all embody desirable feminine norms.<sup>11</sup> Some critics have read the inclusion of Safie as another factor that differentiates the De Lacey's from the inward-looking Frankenstein family, because it proves they can at least expand enough to embrace an outsider. But should much be made of the fact that they are willing to welcome a beautiful wealthy woman who brings much needed money and reproductive potential? As Marilyn Butler comments, 'Driven by modern selfish individualism, the De Lacey's acknowledge only those strangers who are, like Safie, as beautiful and polished as themselves' (xxxix). In any case, Safie's rebelliousness is quickly subsumed, as she becomes a 'blank' surface upon which the De Lacey's inscribe the language and values of western culture. But once we read Safie and the Monster as another pair of narrative doubles, her inclusion can be understood as part of the text's wider engagement with the politics of family inclusion and exclusion. They both have faith in a family discourse which claims that everyone has

a clearly defined role and anyone prepared to support the family may be included, but while Safie's story demonstrates what *is* acceptable to the family, the Monster's illustrates what is *not*.

Although *Frankenstein* certainly does acknowledge the attractions of domestic ideology, the rewarding power of family is not ultimately productive of peace and happiness in the novel. Instead, the text strongly implies that this kind of family will inevitably produce some disturbing discontents. Critics have already taken note of the tension between Victor's idealisation of family and his desire to create monsters. Despite his claims to the contrary, there is nothing particularly reluctant about the speed of his steps away from the family home and towards his deviant scientific activities. A sinister undertone has been read into the fact that he does nothing to protect his family from his Monster, leading William Patrick Day to argue that the Monster enacts Victor's secret desire to destroy his family (141). In response to the text, other critics have also explicitly linked the family ideal with Victor's creation and read the Monster as embodying the return of his repressed hostility and resentment against an apparently perfect, but actually oppressive, childhood. This in turn suggests that domestic ideology pushes resistance into dangerous avenues and may itself be responsible for the eruption of monstrosity. Ellis, Hirsch, Smith and Komisaruk all offer variations on this view and, altogether, they give convincing credence to locating the source of the monstrosity in the 'family values.' But a queer approach can offer a fresh perspective on the question of how and why domestic ideology might make monstrous desire inevitable.

As Judith Butler observes, 'repression may be understood to produce the object it comes to deny' (*Gender* 93). If family discourse has a role in producing the desires and identities it seeks to repress, it can be said to have produced the Monster, who seems to embody everything that must be excluded from the family domain. But does not family discourse also *depend* upon creating the objects it claims to deny? It is now possible to suggest a twist on Rhona Berenstein's argument that Gothic horror fiction expresses anxieties about 'society's failure to enforce its own rules of conduct' (*Attack* 18). Doubtless, it is true to say that Gothic texts do depict such anxieties but, in my view, *Frankenstein* is more concerned with the way society's rules of conduct actually create and depend upon the horrors they are supposed to protect against. There is, then, a dangerous paradox in the fact that productive family power must create dangers in order to shore up its own privileged ontological status, because what happens if the family cannot withstand its own discontents and if the monsters it has created return to make demands? When Victor travels home from Ingoldstadt, it is not surprising to find the Monster blocking his way: 'A flash of lightening illuminated the object [...] it was the wretch, the filthy daemon to whom I had given life' (73). In putting his body in the way of Victor's return home, the Monster is not only illuminated; as we shall see, he also illuminates the link between family discourse and the breeding of 'monsters.'

### **Burning Down the Cottage: Family (Dis)illusions**

The violent response is the one that does not ask, and does not seek to know.  
It wants to shore up what it knows, to expunge what threatens it with not-knowing  
- Judith Butler (*Undoing Gender* 35)

The Monster presents a different reading of family from what is, literally and metaphorically, a site of 'difference' in the text. He gives strongest expression to what we might call the 'queer voice': the excluded voice on the margins, the voice that causes us to question the representation of normality. He offers not so much a new conception of family as a different perspective on the grid of cultural intelligibility through which the meaning of the signifier 'family' is constructed. From a queer perspective, one of the most intriguing aspects of the Monster's narrative is the way it demonstrates the reiterative power of family discourse to produce the very phenomena it claims to exclude. In so doing, the text opens a space for discussing queer theory's need to expose the way in which modern sexual discourse produces the 'queer' desires and identities it is supposed to deny. The Monster's story reveals family discourse as an 'exclusionary matrix,' and reflects a culture in which the production of 'normal' family subjectivity necessitates the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, who are not recognised as normative family subjects. Such 'beings' form the constitutive outside to the domain of the acceptable family member and appear as sites of 'dreaded identification.'<sup>12</sup> In defining certain subjects as acceptable members, modern family discourse must inevitably define, and therefore *produce*, others as unrecognisable monsters. Although the De Lacey's and the Frankenstein's might deny it, the Monster is always a family 'member,' but he will never be welcomed because he is in fact already

included in the narrative under the sign of the abject monstrous other who threatens the borders of the family.

The Monster's effect upon the family also draws attention to the revealing and defamiliarising function of Gothic monsters. At this point, it is worth remembering the etymological root of the word 'monster' in the Latin verb 'monstrum': to show and to warn. For his story shows up the family in another light and warns us about some of the dangers contained within its ideological construction. Concealed within the hovel, his family 'closet' is cramped and limiting, but it hides his deviance from view and offers an, albeit restrictive, safety. The Monster's intention to come 'out,' or rather 'in,' and make himself known, produces narrative tension from the promise of a spectacular transgression of the border between what is seen/unseen, inside/outside and normal/abnormal. It is possible to read the Monster's position in the light of Affrica Taylor's conceptualisation of the closet as 'a paradoxical post-modern site' which conceals something that 'can at any moment be revealed' (14). As such, it 'always has the potential to radically disturb what is taken for granted to be 'normal' (14). His intrusion certainly disturbs the peaceful normality of family representation in the novel. However, the most paradoxical, post-modern and defamiliarising quality of the Monster's 'closet' does *not* in fact lie in the revelation of the Monster to the family. It is found, rather, in the way his 'coming out' reveals what has been concealed by the performance of family mythology. After all, we as readers already *know* that there is a monster hiding in the hovel, so it is not him we are waiting to see. Instead, we are anxiously waiting to find out how the family will respond to his presence and, when he does make his appearance, it is family that begins to appear disturbing.

The Monster 'outs' the family performance as something other than it claims to be. The De Lacey's investment in boundary marking, regulation and otherisation is brought sharply into focus in his horror story of exclusion. Many readings have assumed that Victor's violation of 'nature' and 'normal' sexual reproduction is the central horror in the novel, but there are readers for whom the horror of the Monster's expulsion from the cottage might have deeper resonances. This moment can certainly figure as one of the most unsuccessful 'coming out' narratives in literature, with all the hallmarks of secrecy, shame, tension, fear, disclosure and its consequences. Appealing to the symbolic head of the family, placing himself in an appropriately submissive and 'feminine' kneeling position, the Monster requests the benefits of family membership: 'seizing the hand of the old man, I cried, "Now is the time! Save and protect me! You and your family are the friends whom I seek' (131). In an outburst of violence, 'Felix darted forward, and with supernatural force tore me from his father, to whose knees I clung: in a transport of fury, he dashed me to the ground and struck me violently with a stick' (131). Displaying the exclusionary politics of family in what Foucault might call, their 'murderous splendor' (*History* 144), Felix's stick brings the potential for violence into shocking visibility. The stick is, of course, the hidden flip side to the family reward system. Felix's burst of 'supernatural' strength is deeply symbolic, inasmuch as he embodies, at this moment, the boundary marking power of family to circumscribe the right to its own 'life' at the expense of the 'lives' of its abjected others.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, the Monster's story brings out anxieties about the family that reverberate in more subtle forms throughout the text. The queer paradox lies in the fact that the family actually makes the Monster monstrous; his outing in the cottage leads directly to his second

‘coming out’ under the sign of ‘monster.’ Ugly though he may be beforehand, he only fully identifies himself as a ‘monster,’ in the destructive sense of the word, once he has been defined as such by the De Lacey family.

It is important to pay attention to the women during the Monster’s expulsion from the cottage because their predicament yet again demonstrates something sinister about family politics. When the younger De Laceys return, the Monster informs the reader that he is clinging to the old man’s knees and, on sight of him, ‘Agatha fainted, and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage’ (131). There may be more in this scene than a simple expression of fear at the Monster’s ugliness. The monstrous spectacle presents the women with a terrifying imitation of their own performances in kneeling to the father in the hope of receiving love. In re-enacting the performance that reiterates the norm of female submission and confronting them with their own behaviour, the Monster forces Agatha and Safie to visualise a very different, but always possible, response to their acts of supplication. As Butler observes, the norm of femininity ‘is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment’ (‘Critically Queer’ 23). No matter how well women embody the feminine ideal, their position is always precarious, for it always includes the potential for punishment and exclusion. The scene almost appears to be an ironic black joke at their expense. This aspect of *Frankenstein* can be read in the light of Diane Long-Hoeveler’s proposition that the nightmare at the core of much Gothic writing by women is the sense that ‘middle-class women can only experience the male-identified patriarchal-capitalist home as either a prison house or an asylum’ (19). In such a home, women like Agatha, Safie, Elizabeth and Caroline are reduced to ‘the status of an object, decorative or functional’ (19). If they do not

'function' adequately, like the Monster, they are presumably subject to exclusion. It is not therefore surprising that Felix says they will 'never recover from their horror' (134). How could they recover from such disillusionment? Some feminist critics argue that the Monster occupies a 'female' position in the text, and perhaps this is partly because *Frankenstein* illustrates such a strong awareness that, in patriarchal culture, the female position is always potentially that of a monstrous other.<sup>14</sup>

But why is the life of old De Lacey left 'in the greatest danger'? He is, after all, the only family member who knows that the Monster solicits friendship and who does not see its terrible face. However, once the Monster has been expelled from the cottage, Felix insists that the 'life of my father is in the greatest danger, owing to the dreadful circumstance' (134). Perhaps the life of old De Lacey is really in danger because, like the women, he has been forced to undergo a profound unmasking of his position. Learning to identify the apparently unified, unifying signifier, the Monster observes, 'The youth and his companion had each of them several names, but the old man had only one, which was 'father'' (109). Logically enough, he presumes he should make his initial application to this figure: 'if in the absence of his children, I could gain the good-will and mediation of the old De Lacey, I might by his means be tolerated by my younger protectors' (128). His reading of family, especially the women's kneeling performances, conveys the impression that De Lacey controls access to the home. Again, this is precisely the impression family performativity works to create. What the Monster misses, however, is the fact that De Lacey's role is largely symbolic and de facto power has already passed to the future patriarch – Felix. The Monster therefore makes his supplication to the wrong person. Felix defers to his father because he has much invested



in the perpetuation of the myth, but there is nothing old De Lacey could actually do to prevent him bringing Safie into the home, just as he cannot prevent him from driving the Monster out.

I would also like to suggest that the endangered life of De Lacey figures metonymically as a 'part' which stands for the larger threat to the 'whole' life of patriarchy in *Frankenstein*, for the Monster does indeed threaten the paternal signifier. His story again points towards a larger concern with the gap between the patriarchal ideal and the failure of the text's fathers to protect their families. In this respect, Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* offers an interesting interpretation of the text in which Alphonse (Ian Holm) appears as an emotionally fragile figure who collapses into mental breakdown on the death of William. After Victor (Kenneth Branagh) and Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) leave on their honeymoon, the Monster (Robert De Niro) is shown in Alphonse's bedroom, walking up to his bed and closing the dead man's eyes. It is unclear whether the Monster has murdered him, but the action neatly symbolises his shutting down of the family at its patriarchal source. It is also appropriate to represent the Monster in the father's bedroom: the rejected family member, a kind of grandchild to Alphonse, enters the family's central generative space and brings death to its paternal signified. Other twentieth-century film and theatre adaptations have also responded to the Monster's, albeit non-normative, family membership. The final toast at the end of James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), for instance, can be viewed either as a comforting return to normality or a joke at the expense of the foolish father and the patriarchal family. 'Here's to a son to the house of Frankenstein!' proclaims the Baron, who is represented as a very foolish figure. But, as

the text implies, the Frankensteins have already been provided with a 'son,' one who reflects their qualities better than they realise.

The Monster's murder of William Frankenstein can be understood as another aspect of the broader attack on family ideology in the text, especially as the child appears to be a proper little patriarch in training: Elizabeth tells Victor 'He has already had one or two little *wives*' (64 - 65). When the Monster tries to kidnap him, his death is a consequence of his attempt to protect himself by invoking the privilege of his father's name, status and power: "Hideous monster! Let me go. My papa is a syndic – he is M. Frankenstein – he will punish you. You dare not keep me" (138). William has already been inculcated with the belief that his father *should* represent an all-protecting power, but this form of self-defense is unlikely to work on the Monster, who needs no such reminders of the family's capacity to regulate, categorise and punish its members. However, they are both in fact mistaken, William for believing patriarchal privilege will protect him, and the Monster for imagining that young children will not already have been inculcated with a horror of difference. In this context, Victor's inability to parent his own creature is not at all surprising. His initial belief that 'No father' will be able to 'claim the gratitude of his child so completely' as he will be able to claim the gratitude of his creature (52), is based upon the same reward system in operation elsewhere. Later, his abandonment of the Monster is entirely appropriate in relation to his acculturation and, within the terms of the text, he cannot respond in any other way. After all, his attitude to the Monster is a de-romanticised version of the exclusive family ideology performed by the De Lacey and the Frankensteins throughout the text.

In terms of teaching, the Monster's story can be utilised to discuss the queer theoretical insistence upon shifting the meaning of family. Although he is defined by family discourse, the Monster at the heart of the family is also ascribed a certain power to unmask the 'monstrousness' at the heart of family politics. Significantly, the spectacle of violence in the De Lacey cottage is also the moment of their representational dissolution. The family cannot return because after their encounter with the Monster they no longer mean in the same way: 'we can never again inhabit your cottage' (134). A Foucauldian perspective suggests that family power cannot tolerate the sight of its own mechanisms, for once unmasked as a violently excluding matrix of power relations, the representation appears to dissolve. If family power is dependent upon perpetuating the myth of loving inclusion, once this performance is unmasked as a myth, the family cannot bear the sight of itself. The De Laceys can never return because they never truly existed in the form imagined by the Monster. The ultimate dissolution of both the text's families indicates an underlying suspicion that family mythology might disintegrate were its fantasmatic nature to become apparent. There is dramatic and appropriately queer symbolism in the Monster's final setting fire to the 'devoted cottage' where he learned the meaning of family. Dancing with fury, he literally and metaphorically burns down the cosy fantasy: 'with a loud scream I fired the straw [...] The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames' (134). The Monster's performance in family deconstruction resonates with queer reading practices which also take up unapologetic, often angry positions, seek to dismantle the exclusionary fantasies through which the family is constituted, and work to shift the meaning of the norm to a place from which it cannot return.

### Quitting the Habitation

We're fierce; in a world of "traditional family values," we need to be  
- Susan Stryker (245)

As soon as I was convinced that no assistance could  
save any part of the habitation, I quitted the scene  
- The Monster (135)

When read in the light of queer theoretical thinking, *Frankenstein* challenges the notion that we should ever unquestioningly 'inhabit' family representation. Insofar as we are all, to some extent, subjects of modern western family discourse, the Monster stands as a kind of double for each 'us' as we read the novel. By encouraging us to identify with the site of dreaded identification, the text causes us to confront our own investments in family mythology, and poses important questions about inclusion, exclusion, and the price of subjecting oneself to family discourse. Not only does the Monster act out anxieties about the family's inability to protect its members, he also raises the possibility that the politics of family might be unnatural, and even dangerous. Together, *Frankenstein* and queer theory open politically loaded questions for the classroom. After all, we still live in a culture in which the 'Name of the Family' is powerfully seductive and endowed with what Sedgwick calls 'numinous prestige' (*Tendencies* 72). Generally speaking, western culture still ascribes families the right to read and reject any sexually non-conforming person as 'a monstrous simulacrum of a family member' (Hirsch 128 - 129). Homophobic discourse continues to construct lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as the enemies of the family, to such a degree that exclusion, abuse and even murder are regularly carried out in the name of protecting the institution from its supposedly dangerous others. *Frankenstein* is therefore a potentially constructive text

for encouraging students to think about the cultural production of 'normal' and 'abnormal' family subjects. But, it is important to be aware that, like the Monster, people identified as being sexually threatening are not truly 'other' to the family. Their queer 'monstrosity' is partly an effect of a discourse which needs to create sexual monsters in order to shore up its own ontological privilege. The life of the family is not therefore threatened by 'queers' so much as by its own discursive construction, which has reproduced the norm as one that is always under threat. But, as a threatened institution, the family ideal has certainly become dangerous to some people. Queer theory acknowledges the fact that we can never resist from a position entirely in exteriority to the norm, because we can never completely extricate ourselves from the hegemonic discourses that define us all as family subjects – whether acceptable or unacceptable.<sup>15</sup> However, like the Monster, we as queer readers and family discontents, also have the ability to resist, to expose and critique family mythology and, to a certain extent, to quit the traditional habitation.

Although *Frankenstein* allows us to experience certain anxieties about family discourse, in broader generic terms, I would argue that we also expect and desire to see the spectacle of the family under attack in Gothic fiction, for the genre has never been comfortable with the family. Family dissolution and disaster is common, even normal, in such texts and, as in *Frankenstein*, any representation of peaceful family happiness is almost always a sign of oncoming trouble. Although some texts do redeem the ideal at the end, evidently we do not read Gothic fiction for representations of unproblematic family happiness. It is therefore important for students to consider how the genre plays to our needs for a kind of permitted cultural 'pressure valve,' even as it depends upon our

investments in convention. It may even be possible to discern a witty comment on the desires of Gothic readers in *Frankenstein*. Just before he describes the creation of the Monster, Victor digresses into moralising about domesticity, speculating that many tragedies would be avoided 'if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections.' But then he stops and observes, 'I forget that I am moralising in the most interesting part of my tale, and your looks remind me to proceed' (54). Does Victor refer only to the 'looks' of Walton, or also to the looks of the impatient reader, more eager to find out about the pursuit of non-normative desire than domesticity? In terms of the wider performativity of Gothic fiction – the various ways in which it reiterates its own norms and conventions – perhaps this repeated performance of family destruction acknowledges the reader's secret desire to see the family being 'done in' over and over again. Maybe it is the role of Gothic fiction to repeatedly perform this counter narrative and reiterate certain challenges to the family. If *Frankenstein* is, on one level, a horror story about family discourse, the violent horrors surrounding the representation of marriage in the text offer further possibilities for exploring Gothic fiction's complex engagement with heteronormativity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As David Halperin insists, resistance to heteronormativity must remain 'positive and dynamic and creative' (66).

<sup>2</sup> There is considerable variance of opinion as to the nature and extent of the critique of family in *Frankenstein*, but it is now generally accepted that the representation is troubling. I have been most influenced by David Hedrich Hirsch's essay, 'Liberty, Equality, Monstrosity: Revolutionizing the Family in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*' and Adam Komisaruk's article "'So Guided by a Silken Cord": *Frankenstein's* Family Values.' Both read the text as a radical critique of the self-interested, nineteenth-century domestic ideology which led the way towards the capitalist bourgeois nuclear family. Hirsch argues that the novel presents family as 'a fiction-based Paradise' and a 'source of monstrous alienation' (135). Komisaruk proposes that Mary Shelley 'views domesticity as an aspect of human alienation rather than its solution' (410). Feminist critics have also produced useful work on this topic. Kate Ellis's essay, 'Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family' is particularly good on *Frankenstein's* critical engagement with bourgeois family socialisation. Meanwhile, Joanna M. Smith's essay 'Cooped Up in Feminine Domesticity' discusses the impact of contemporary gender ideology on the family in the novel.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes argues that the 'very principle of myth' is to 'transform history into nature' (129). It has a double function: 'it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us' (117).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Belsey describes how 'Family values became a major object of propaganda' after the Reformation, but they 'took a long time to instil [...]. It was probably as much as two centuries before the new model would seriously begin to be established in widespread practice' ('Denaturalizing the Family' 291, 292). In her book *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* she writes, 'This ideal of the loving nuclear family reached its fully developed form in the eighteenth century and was sanctified in the nineteenth' (21). Gothic texts produced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are therefore well placed to engage with the debates and discussions surrounding the developing family ideal.

<sup>5</sup> Mellor, for example, argues that *Frankenstein* portrays the 'consequences of the failure of family, the damage wrought when the mother – or a nurturant parental love – is absent' (39). Ellis, meanwhile, considers separate spheres ideology to be the 'root of all this evil,' and ends with an optimistic proposition: 'If the family is to be a viable institution for the transmission of domestic affection from one generation to the next, it must redefine that precious commodity in such a way that it can extend to "outsiders"' (140). Mellor and Ellis therefore read *Frankenstein* as a novel which works to critique and, in so doing, improve the family.

<sup>6</sup> See Worton and Still (10). They go on to note that this kind of 'aleatory' intertextuality does not come from any 'particular text,' but is produced when a variety of sources combine 'to create a popular stereotype' (5).

<sup>7</sup> In 'The Death of the Author' Barthes proposes that 'the text' is 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (170).

<sup>8</sup> Komisaruk is not the only critic to consider this metaphor significant. Perhaps this is because it seems so neatly to sum up *Frankenstein* family values. Smith calls the 'silken cord' the 'cord or bond of constricting domestic relations' (279). And, as Peter Brooks notes, 'The metaphor of the chain is one that will reappear in various guises throughout the novel' (84).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Mellor claims that the De Lacey's represent 'an alternative ideology; a vision of the polis-as-egalitarian-family, of a society based on justice, gender equality, and mutual affection' (118). Even Hirsch argues that 'Shelley's description of the De Lacey hut comes closer than any other familial arrangement

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depicted in the novel to the ideal of a non hierarchical domestic space' (130). Komisaruk dissents, claiming that 'no family in this novel escapes reproach' (410).

<sup>10</sup> As Halperin observes, 'liberal power does not simply prohibit; it does not directly terrorize. It normalizes, "responsibilizes," and disciplines' (18).

<sup>11</sup> Caroline, for instance, is rewarded with marriage and the 'worship' of her husband 'inspired by reverence for her virtues' (32). In the 1831 edition Elizabeth is chosen for adoption because Caroline notices 'her blue eyes cloudless, and her lips and the moulding of her face so expressive of sensibility and sweetness' (34). Later, the De Lacey's welcome Safie, a woman with 'a countenance of angelic beauty and expression' (113).

<sup>12</sup> I am here drawing upon Butler's argument that the reiterative power of discourse actually produces the very phenomena it claims to regulate and constrain (*Bodies* 2). She describes how the 'exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (*Bodies* 3). Butler is here addressing the discursive materialisation of sexed and gendered subjects, but the basic theory is useful for thinking about how abject beings, who are not acceptable family subjects although they are subject to the family, are produced through the exclusionary matrix of family discourse.

<sup>13</sup> In the words of Butler, 'the site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject, is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection' (*Bodies* 3). To put the point another way, the acceptable family subject is constituted through the exclusion and abjection of others with whom s/he is not supposed to identify.

<sup>14</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar for a sophisticated analysis of the Monster's 'female' position (237 – 241).

<sup>15</sup> One of the most famous insights in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is his claim that, 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (95).



## Chapter Two

### 'With You on Your Wedding Night':

#### Shifting the Space of Heterosexual Representation

##### in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*

There were two great systems conceived by the West for governing sex: the law of marriage and the order of desires,  
- Michel Foucault (*History of Sexuality* 39 - 40)

Marriage in *Frankenstein* is a site of striking representational dissonance. On the one hand, it is viewed as a force of sexual stability, a privileged and ideologically weighty cultural norm but, conversely, it is at the same time presented in the text as a deeply troubled site of crisis. Building upon my analysis of family, this chapter explores further interactions between Gothic fiction and queer theoretical thinking, especially in terms of unraveling heteronormative textual representation. Judith Butler defines the 'heterosexual matrix' as a grid of cultural intelligibility via which bodies, genders and desires are naturalised, 'through the compulsory practices of heterosexual desire' (*Gender n.6.* 151). In my view, *Frankenstein* illustrates the way marriage works as a double-edged definitional axis within the heterosexual matrix because it has a role in defining both what *is*, and what is *not*, sexually 'normal.' As a consequence, marriage, like family, is an institution haunted by its 'others,' those desires and identities defined as dangerous and excluded from marriage. But, at the same time, *Frankenstein* depicts a world in which everyone seems to be as haunted by the marital ideal as they are by the threat of monstrous desire. This chapter introduces additional reference to John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, a text which, like *Frankenstein*, draws attention to marriage as a site of crisis

rather than resolution. I will also make more extensive reference to film, for while some adaptations perceive *Frankenstein* to be partly about marriage, the different interpretations further complicate the question of what the text has to say on the subject of heterosexuality.

In troubling the meaning of marriage, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* present a point of departure for further questions concerning heterosexual representation. Queer theorists and critics have become increasingly concerned about the way in which heterosexuality has defined itself ‘without problematizing itself’ and elevated itself ‘as a privileged and unmarked term’ (Halperin 44). The interrogation of ‘heterosexuality’ has long been discouraged by heterosexist culture and queer scholarship encourages us to think seriously about what it means to read heterosexuality in a text. But, in some respects, hermeneutic problems are compounded by the fact that ‘heterosexuality’ is a historically and culturally specific term ‘of relatively recent vintage, and only make[s] sense against a certain cultural background’ (Warner, *Trouble* 10).<sup>1</sup> Although I make use of the term throughout this chapter, I do so primarily because there are no more flexible alternatives yet available to designate desire between men and women. ‘Straight’ presents itself as a possibility and is often used in queer criticism, but I prefer not to use it because it connotes an even less flexible sexual demarcation and, as such, could mask the complexity of what we call ‘heterosexuality.’ In my view, the notion that heterosexuality is ever *straightforward* is precisely what should be resisted.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Gothic fiction is again productive of queer inquiry, for the relationships between men, women and monsters in these texts cannot be called ‘straight’ in any sense of the word. Indeed,

Gothic fiction illustrates queer concerns about marriage precisely because its own engagement with this issue is often decidedly 'queer.'

The first axiom of my argument is a proposal that marriage should be understood as a shifting space of cultural representation. Warner rightly observes that 'Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity' (*Trouble* 47), but *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* trouble this kind of presumption. Initially presenting the institution as a desirable ideal, these texts gradually shift the meaning of marriage until it signifies as a site of panic and crisis. Victor eventually discovers that his 'paradisiacal dreams of love and joy' lead only to his 'miserable marriage' (185). Since miserable marriages are as common in Gothic fiction as shattered families, I would suggest that the horror stories about marriage contained within these texts represent another aspect of the genre's larger inquiry into heterosexual culture. Again the figure of the monster is invested with the queer power to undermine, as Frankenstein's monster and the vampire Lord Ruthven dramatically attack and mock the sexual norm. Ultimately, I will argue that the narratives of romance and marriage appear to function in these texts as a kind of cover up for monstrous male desire and women appear as 'signs' into which male fantasies about the all-solving power of marriage are channelled. The effect is nothing less than deadly, as women become objects of hostility for men whose less acceptable desires are repressed. It is also possible to formulate a productive alliance between feminist and queer approaches in this chapter, for these horror stories about marriage can illustrate interrelated feminist and queer concerns about compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia.

**‘The Magnificent Appearances of Things’:**

**Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Deployment of Marriage Fantasies**

all wore a smiling appearance  
- Victor Frankenstein (185)

In modern western culture, marriage does indeed wear a ‘smiling appearance.’

The historical conflation of marriage with peace and happiness confronts us with a mythical ideal, one that is no less powerfully compelling for its thoroughly phantasmatic construction. The meaning of marriage is, like that of family, inscribed performatively: its association with romance, love, joy and fulfillment is reified through repetition, until it appears natural, even eternal. As Berlant and Warner observe, heterosexual culture ‘is neither a single symbolic nor a single ideology nor a unified set of beliefs. The project of social saturation succeeds [...] precisely to the extent that it convinces us that heterosexuality is singular and all encompassing’ (qtd; in Kopelson 22). Evidently, the rhetoric of marriage works to inculcate desire *for* the joy that married life is supposed to offer. In *Frankenstein*, everyone desires the wedded state, which is repeatedly conceptualised as an idealised site of vaguely defined but desirable future happiness.

Victor refers to his expected union with Elizabeth as ‘paradisiacal dreams of love and joy’ (183). Meanwhile, in *The Vampyre*, Aubrey approaches the marriage market filled with ‘high romantic feeling’ (4). But one function of what I call the ‘queer Gothic’ is to speak about anxieties which could not be so openly spoken of elsewhere in middle-class culture. The fact that such marital hopes are invested with a dream-like quality hints at a warning, for as these narratives progress the characters find their expectations radically

shifted until, ultimately, neither text seems convinced that heterosexuality is stable or that marriage means what it is supposed to mean.

*Frankenstein* certainly depicts the cultural tendency to mask that which Adrienne Rich calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ from immediate view with the promise of marital happiness.<sup>3</sup> The ‘ideology which *demand*s heterosexuality’ (Rich 228), is clearly perceivable in the text, but the question of whether there is any evidence of identifiably heterosexual *desire* is less easy to answer. *Frankenstein* is of interest to queer inquiry and pedagogy precisely because the text opens a space for discussing queer theory’s concerns with the damaging effects of ‘compulsory heterosexuality.’ Moreover, the text repeatedly suggests an anxious cultural awareness that the marital ideal does not necessarily have anything to do with desire between men and women. This anxiety reverberates throughout both *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* on several levels. Initially, the women’s stories are especially revealing in this respect, insofar as they trouble the presumed link between (hetero)sexual desire and desire for the institution of marriage. Victor, for instance, presents his parents’ marriage as a perfect union ‘in bonds of devoted affection’ (32). But, as Caroline’s only other option in life is destitution, the text reveals little about her desires. When considered from a queer and feminist perspective, it is possible to see how *Frankenstein* inquires into the way heterosexual hegemony promotes marriage by convincing everyone, but women especially, that it is their only tolerable option in life. When we are told that Elizabeth enjoys contemplating ‘the magnificent appearances of things’ (36), this comment reverberates on a deeper level because marriage can indeed be read as a ‘magnificent appearance’ by which she has been seduced.

The women's predicament also illustrates Jackobsen's observation that normativity is a complex field of power relations 'that forms the possibilities for and the limits of action' (517). The limits and the possibilities of action for Caroline and Elizabeth are certainly circumscribed by compulsory heterosexuality. Since Caroline's own desires are quite meaningless in the context of her marriage, it is appropriate that she exhibits no interest in whether or not Elizabeth and Victor desire each other. In a performative deathbed speech/action, Victor describes how Caroline 'joined the hands of Elizabeth and myself: - 'My children,' she said, 'my firmest hopes of future happiness were placed on the prospect of your union. This expectation will now be the consolation of your father' (42). Foreshadowing and rehearsing the performative wedding ceremony, Caroline's speech act not only confers a binding power, it also draws together two important aspects of marriage in *Frankenstein*. On the one hand, it is the location of fantasised future 'happiness' and, on the other, a force of regulative sexual conformity imposed (here upon both sexes) by the family. Heterosexual desire, as we would now understand that concept, has little relevance to Victor and Elizabeth's marriage.

In this context, it is worth re-reading the marriage of Safie and Felix De Lacey because this appears to be the most successful romantic relationship between a man and a woman in the novel. As Safie makes such a determined effort to marry Felix, there is no obvious reason to claim that she does not want to do so. However, all things are clearly not equal if her only other option is an 'abhorrent' harem in Turkey (123). Critics have read Safie as a resistant figure in comparison to the other women, but if marriage is unavoidable, Felix may be her least objectionable option. Moreover, Safie invests in a fantasy of western womanhood: 'The prospect of marrying a Christian and remaining in a

country where women were allowed to take a rank in society was enchanting to her' (121). The seductive power of marriage is again here predicated upon its figuration as an enchanting prospect in the future, but Safie's marriage also suggests that women must work within the heteronormative economic system to gain the best 'deal' possible.

The issue becomes yet more complex if we shift the perspective and interpret Safie's story as a study in the workings of male-dominated homosocial culture. In the intensely homosocial worlds of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, bonds between men are of paramount importance and, as Sedgwick argues, such a culture demands 'the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men' (*Between Men* 25 - 26). The Turk promises Safie to Felix in order to secure his help, and although Felix rejects his first offer of money with 'contempt,' he is less sensitive about accepting the sexual reward of Safie's body. His desire is articulated in plainly economic language: 'when he saw the lovely Safie [...] the youth could not help owing to his mind that the captive possessed a *treasure* which would fully *reward* his toil and hazard' (120, my emphasis). This pact is not frowned upon in the narrative, but what is criticised is the Turk's betrayal of the homosocial system when it is revealed that he never intended to allow Safie to marry Felix. Their eventual union may be the closest the text comes to representing desire between a man and a woman, but evidently there are other factors to be considered. Of course, the fact that there are factors *other* than desire involved in marriage is precisely what the deployment of romantic fantasy is supposed to mask from view.

Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, raises further questions about the ideology that demands heterosexuality, for this film tries to present a

version of *Frankenstein* in which relationships between men and women are indeed both 'straight' and 'straightforward.' But in attempting to sublimate the novel's troubling of marriage, this film actually throws more light on the tensions underlying compulsory heterosexual representation. The novel is rewritten as a tragic romance and, as Sinatra observes, the script demonstrates 'a strict heterosexual agenda' (253). Much time is spent in emphatically creating a sense of sexual passion between Victor and Elizabeth. In fact, with regard to women, the film tries to do away with all the evidence of compulsory heterosexuality I have so far identified in the novel. Elizabeth is given a more vocal role and is represented as desiring a sexual encounter with Victor. Sinatra argues that the film turns Elizabeth into 'an active, strong willed character' (255). In my view, however, it also undermines this strength by having her turn down Victor's impromptu marriage proposal because she must remain behind 'to make this a great home for our children.' This statement puts her firmly back in her domestic place and implies that, although it has become desirable for the woman to perform strength and independence, the status quo remains much the same. Nevertheless, as Sinatra points out, the repeated performative invocation of the 'wedding night' institutes a sense of 'forthcoming heterosexual pleasure' and invests Victor's sexuality in Elizabeth (265). Whereas, in the novel, Victor's repeated deferral of the wedding throws serious doubt upon his love, the film counters the implications of his marriage resistance by presenting him proposing to Elizabeth passionately: 'Come to Ingoldstadt. Marry me now.' At the same point in the novel, homosocial, even homoerotic, bonds are privileged, since it is his friend Henry Clerval whom Victor desires to take with him to university. This is not to say there is nothing 'queer' about Branagh's version and I would agree with Sinatra that the film



ultimately subverts its own aims by ‘overemphasising’ Victor’s heterosexuality (258), but the politics of this overemphasis are worth some more attention.

This film inadvertently emphasises the status of heterosexuality as a shifting space of cultural representation precisely because some of the more interesting aspects of the adaptation are the telling alterations made in order to produce a late twentieth-century style ‘heterosexualisation’ of the novel. In the first instance, the alterations imply that the novel no longer performs heterosexual desire credibly enough to meet audience expectations, if, that is, it needs to be reinforced in the film. The film does *not* therefore bring out a hidden romance underlying the text but reveals, rather, how film makers in the 1990s assumed an audience expected to see desire between men and woman believably performed – whether or not the audience did have such an expectation. In this context, it is also worth noting that *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* is a mainstream ‘big-budget’ studio release, whereas earlier, smaller budget and independent productions have brought out the homoerotic and queer undertones in the novel to far greater effect.<sup>4</sup> To put the point another way, this film is intended for a popular mass market and it *must* therefore proclaim the desirability of heterosexuality, because heterosexuality is indeed ‘compulsory’ in this context. The alterations may then have less to do with *Frankenstein* than with the performative inscription of the importance of heterosexual romance in late twentieth-century culture.

In making such an effort to sublimate the queerer aspects of the text, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* only draws queer critical attention to the fact that the politics of its own heterosexual agenda are not in the least bit straightforward. However, there is another question to be considered here: is this film actually responding to the novel

*Frankenstein* or is it really an answer to earlier film adaptations? I am thinking in particular of James Whale's classics *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Whale's versions clearly abound in queer connotation, and have been immensely influential upon later interpretations. Their influence has probably played no little part in creating the tradition of homosexual meaning found in many *Frankenstein* films.<sup>5</sup> *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* may in fact be an answer to this tradition, in which such a 'heterosexual' version is actually something of an anomaly. If the privileging of romance in the film is a response to the presence of homosexual meaning in earlier versions, it cannot be called truly 'heterosexual,' because it is partly about responding to, and reacting against, the presence of queer meaning. But I think Branagh was quite correct to perceive the text as being partly about romance and marriage, although the film misses the more radical points which the novel makes on this subject and ignores something realised in some of the older adaptations long ago. While *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* presumes that its audience desires to see heterosexual romance performed, the novel seems more concerned with setting up the marital ideal only to shift expectations. As the text progresses, it offers an increasingly dark investigation into a culture which, in Carolyn Dinshaw's words, works 'to promote heterosexuality against all odds' ('Getting Medieval' 127). Ironically enough, in attempting to rewrite the text as a heterosexual romance, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* misses the possibility that *Frankenstein* is partly all about a culture that does indeed attempt to offset the threat of queer desire through the promotion of marriage.

### Burying the Past: The Wedding Closet

I shut up, as well as I could, in my own heart the anxiety that preyed there  
- Victor Frankenstein (185).

In *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, the desire for marriage has little to do with love between men and women and a great deal to do with fears about other, less acceptable relationships. Insofar as marriage functions as a kind of ‘cover up’ in these texts, it can even be conceptualised as a ‘wedding closet,’ for it is apparently supposed to contain and regulate dangerous male desire. In both narratives, the most desiring, dynamic and compelling relationship is that between the protagonist and the monster, and a crisis finally becomes inevitable because the marital ‘closet’ cannot bury this conflicted desiring/hating relationship. Recently, both these texts have been re-read in the light of Sedgwick’s identification of the ‘paranoid Gothic’: ‘the literary genre in which homophobia found its most apt and ramified embodiment’ (*Epistemology* 186). The intense anxiety about male relations in such ‘paranoid Gothic’ texts is often now read as being symptomatic of the homophobic society from which they were produced.<sup>6</sup> In this theoretical context, the closeting function of marriage in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* cannot be considered in isolation from the workings of homosexual panic and homophobia. For the protagonist’s desire to marry is inextricably bound up with his desire to bury his relationship with the monster, and the unspeakable threat this relationship represents, in marriage. However, it is important to make it clear that the problem in these texts does not stem from the lawlessness of male desire in itself. A queer reading would argue, rather, that the crisis surrounding marriage is one aspect of these texts’ engagement with a homosocial, homophobic culture in which heterosexuality

is 'compulsory' and marriage is posited as curative of non normative desire, a society which, in other words, attempts to 'shut up' its sexual anxieties in marriage.

The male protagonists in these narratives invest marriage with a tremendous and apparently all-solving power of containment, a power which becomes embodied, for them, by the women who offer acceptable alternatives to their dangerous relationships with the monsters. For Aubrey, Ianthe represents the promise of the ideal norm but, importantly, this does not mean he desires the woman herself. Indeed, she is an appropriately phantasmatic figure: another 'ghost' in this haunted text, the feminine phantom of an ideal which no woman can approximate, but which persistently haunts culture. As she becomes the object of his 'bright and fairy visions' (12), Ianthe initially appears to diffuse the possibility that he desires Ruthven. Like *Frankenstein*, *The Vampyre* forges a link between marriage and fantasy; while Aubrey 'ridiculed the idea of a young man of English habits, marrying an uneducated Greek girl, still he found himself more and more attached to the almost fairy form before him' (10). Aubrey knows that the idea of marrying Ianthe is ridiculous, but he is attracted to the peace, happiness and normality she represents to him. For Victor, it is Elizabeth who symbolises the possible realisation of marital bliss, and she also diverts attention away from his strange bond with the Monster. Ianthe and Elizabeth stand for the safety of heteronormativity, as opposed to the dangerous desires embodied by Ruthven and the Monster and, as such, they also represent the 'wedding closet' – the drive to bury non-normative male desires in marriage. If marriage is supposed to contain and regulate the unruliness and instability of desire, it can then be said to represent the *avoidance* of desire rather than its consummation. The repeated equation of marriage with 'peace' actually suggests a male

wish to have no desire, to move beyond that conflict altogether and into a state of stasis. For Victor, his future with Elizabeth represents, ‘a union from which I expected peace’ (146). Likewise, in *The Vampyre*, Aubrey posits his halcyon relationship with Ianthe against the demands of both sexually assertive society women and Lord Ruthven. Women such as Elizabeth and Ianthe represent what the protagonist thinks he should desire in a woman – and that is, ironically enough, *not* to desire the woman herself. Victor’s belief that marriage to Elizabeth will put an end to his dangerously desiring relationship with the Monster even veers close to identifying desire itself as a ‘queer’ condition, insofar as his understanding of desire always seems to lie outside the boundaries of marriage.

The relationship between Victor and his monster certainly throws a queer light on all the supposedly normal sexual and familial relations in the novel, and illuminates the ‘wedding closet’ produced and perpetuated by the Frankenstein family’s persistence in a state of suspicious not knowing. One of Victor’s primary fears is that he will be ‘outed’ by the disclosure before his wedding of a ‘tale to thrill all connected with me with horror’ (147). When his family perceive that all is not well with him, marriage is immediately proposed as the means by which he will be re-assimilated. No matter the disasters that befall them, Alphonse continues in his obstinate belief in marriage, insisting that if only Victor will marry Elizabeth everyone will be happy. All the characters repeat and reiterate this performative discourse positing marriage as the ‘happy ending,’ a cure-all solution to an otherwise sexually problematic narrative. This discourse is, of course, still familiar and widely available in our contemporary culture today. When Victor delays the wedding, Alphonse presumes that either he regards Elizabeth as his sister or ‘you may

have met with another whom you may love; and considering yourself bound in honour to Elizabeth, this struggle may occasion the poignant misery which you appear to feel' (146). He reads Victor's marriage resistance as a rejection of Elizabeth personally, rather than heterosexuality per se, because it is important for the family to maintain their conviction that he does want to marry a woman. But despite Victor's repeated statements of commitment to the marriage, they continue to question him until even Elizabeth demands, 'Tell me, dearest Victor, Answer me, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth – Do you not love another?' (181). As Frann Michel notes, the family are in fact absolutely correct to suspect that there is 'someone else' (248). What they clearly cannot countenance, however, is the possibility that, if Victor does not want to marry Elizabeth, he does not want to marry any other woman either. Needless to say, the possibility that his desire might lean in a different direction altogether is unspeakable.<sup>7</sup>

If *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* works to closet the queerness in the text, James Whale's adaptations work to bring out the closet in the text. Unlike Branagh's version, Whale's *Frankenstein* elaborates upon the 'closeting' function of marriage in the novel. The family hopes that his approaching wedding will reform Frankenstein's (here renamed Henry) strange behaviour. His father (Frederick Kerr) expresses ambiguously termed but unmistakable suspicions when he demands to know, 'What's the matter with my son? Why does he go messing around in an old ruined windmill when he has a decent house [...] and a darn pretty girl to come back to?' His question reflects the confused and paranoid inability of the patriarchal family to admit that it suspects what it suspects. Their refusal to see what is happening in front of them can be viewed as an aspect of what Sedgwick calls 'the privilege of unknowing,' a phrase by which she means

to describe 'the killing pretence that a culture does not know what it knows' (*Tendencies* 51). Although the Baron does raise the possibility of another woman, everyone is aware that something is not quite *normal* about Henry: 'Unless Henry comes to his senses there won't be any wedding.' The Baron cannot define the condition his son must snap out of before he can embark upon his marital future, but everyone is aware that Henry's desires are turned away from them and towards something definitely unacceptable. On the morning of the wedding, Elizabeth (Mae Clarke) says to Henry, 'something is coming between us. I know it! I know it!' Her outburst is the culmination of an anxiety-ridden family dynamic of ignorance laced with hints of dangerous knowledge. Elizabeth cannot articulate what she suspects is coming between herself and her fiancée perhaps because it is the unspeakable possibility that her marriage is indeed being undertaken in order to contain 'something.'

The sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein*, pays yet more attention to the closet-like qualities of Henry and Elizabeth's marriage. When the film begins, Henry is supposed to be recovering from his first episode with the Monster. Although the film exhibits a nominal allegiance to heterosexuality, the subtext plays heavily upon a sense of marriage under threat from deathly encroaching queerness.<sup>8</sup> This danger is embodied by the disruptive intrusion of Dr Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger) into Henry and Elizabeth's bedroom. Described in the film as a 'very queer looking old gentleman,' Pretorius has the honour of being considered 'one of the most visibly gay characters in American film of the period' (Benshoff 50).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in this film, marriage is explicitly equated with a return to health and a removal from temptation, as Henry initially attempts to rebuke Pretorius by invoking his oncoming marriage: 'As soon as I am well, I am to be married

and I am going away.’ But having invaded the supposed sanctuary of the couple’s future bedroom, Pretorius easily tempts Henry away from his fiancée and back into less acceptable activities. Whale’s adaptations are interesting because they seem to read the novel as an allegory about the struggle between heteronormativity and dangerous, unruly male (homo)sexual desires. Although these films cannot be considered ‘faithful’ adaptations of the story in Shelley’s book, with respect to the ‘wedding closet,’ I do not think Whale included meanings which are not available in the novel, rather, he elaborated upon the queer allegory already available within the text from a twentieth-century perspective. Together, the two films read the text as a story about heterosexuality and its failure to contain ‘monstrous’ desire and, in this context, they are ‘faithful’ to the sense of panic surrounding marriage in the novel.

The concept of the wedding closet makes it possible to understand why Victor both desires and resists his wedding. Although there is an apparent contradiction between his emphatic proclamation of love for Elizabeth and his actions – which predominantly involve avoiding her – we would be much mistaken to assume that he simply does not want to marry her. Victor’s desire *is* paradoxical because marriage, with its supposed power of containment, is indeed both desirable and undesirable. He clearly wants the benefits and tells no lie when he informs Elizabeth, ‘My future hopes and prospects are entirely bound up in the expectation of our union’ (146). But it is no less true when he says, ‘Alas! To me the idea of an immediate union with my Elizabeth was one of horror and dismay’ (147). Victor must marry in order to bury his relationship with the Monster, but on some level he desires the Monster more than he does Elizabeth. While he knows that the ‘monster’ of desire must depart before he can enjoy the



marriage, *Frankenstein* suggests it is not so easy to get rid of your ‘monsters,’ and the fantasy of joy soon gives way to anxious concealment. Such tension is inevitable, because those positioned as ‘queer’ in the text can no more escape the pressures of social and sexual conformity than those positioned as ‘normal’ can ignore the terrifying threats embodied in the Monster. I am here drawing on Diana Fuss’s argument that ‘heterosexuality’ can ‘never fully ignore the close psychological proximity of its terrifying (homo)sexual other,’ anymore than ‘homosexuality’ can escape ‘the equally insistent social pressures of (hetero)sexual conformity’ (3). We do not have to limit her point strictly to analysis of the heterosexual/homosexual binary opposition. It can be used to address the more general way in which sexual conformity haunts, and is haunted by, all the possible ‘queer’ others it has made necessary to its own construction at the level of sexuality, desire, gender and identity. Victor’s response to his wedding conveys a sense of what might be termed ‘heterosexual panic.’ In a narrative characterised by tension between faith in the power of marriage and unacknowledged resistance to the forces of conformity, such panic reminds us that the ‘wedding closet’ is symptomatic of a world in which everyone is also haunted by the marital ideal.

The Monster has his own views on marriage and, in this respect, his narrative again ‘outs’ the heterosexual matrix. His demand for a mate emphasises the seductive power of marital normativity and constructs another version of the ‘wedding closet,’ but he also brings the more sinister undercurrents informing the desire for marriage to light. We might find a further queer allegory in the Monster’s belief that an approximation of ‘normal’ marriage will solve his problems by enabling him to ‘become linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded’ (143). In comparison to the

ideal of marriage, Warner argues that 'Non-standard sex has none of this normative richness, this built-in sense of connection to the meaningful life' (*Trouble* 47). The Monster is haunted by this exclusive ideal and believes that access to marriage will render him less monstrous. His conception of the 'chain of existence' represents his understanding of what dominant culture considers the meaningful life and this is, of course, inextricably tied up with heteronormativity. His proposed solution is to create a simulacrum of normal marriage with a female monster: 'Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel' (141). This monstrous imitation would also be a final wedding closet, removing the non-standard body of the Monster forever.

However, from a different point of view, it could also be argued that the Monster cynically manipulates the performative inscription of marital privilege within patriarchal ideology and homosocial culture. Perhaps he is aware that his request for a female companion is likely to have persuasive weight because what he really appears to be proclaiming is an admirable desire to be 'normal.' That he does not really care about the sex of his companion has already been implied by his first attempt to kidnap William Frankenstein. Yet more sinister is the way he plays upon the cultural framework in which women are passed between men: 'You must create a female for me [...] I demand it of you as *a right* which you must not refuse to concede' (140, my emphasis). It is not surprising when Victor initially concedes to the Monster's demand, for he never once questions his own 'right' to possess Elizabeth. In terms of what he has learned from watching human society, the Monster's assumption that he has a 'right' to a mate is understandable. Human culture has taught him to believe that women exist primarily to

serve the needs of men because the exchange of women is naturalised, but the Monster's blunt unromantic view on the matter brings this factor into monstrous visibility.

Marriage might sublimate some of the problems but, ultimately, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* suggest that it cures nothing. The questions raised in these texts are still relevant in a culture which continues to invest marriage with normalising power and in which 'marital benefits are vast' (Warner, *Trouble* 117). After all, we still regularly encounter the enduring narrative proclaiming heterosexual marriage as healthy and even curative of 'deviant' desire. This is especially the case within some strands of conservative political discourse where sexual nonconformity is often equated with unhealthy self-indulgence. Evidently such thinking has sinister ramifications, and not only for people identified as 'queer,' for in a male-dominated society the role of curing or closeting deviant desire must fall to women. If sexual normality can only be achieved through marriage, the body of a woman becomes a necessary possession for men who are anxious about their own desires. To put the point another way, the woman comes to represent the 'wedding closet.' In her analysis of the film *Bride of Frankenstein*, Elizabeth Young finds that women do not serve only 'as a medium of exchange in the homosocial system but also as a desperate cover-up, a means of channeling suspicion of homosexuality into heterosexual appearances' (133). These texts open a space for discussing the damaging effects of compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia upon the lives of everyone, but they also reveal the belief that marriage banishes the monster of desire to be a fantasy with particularly dangerous implications for women.

**‘The Corpse of my Wife’:**

**Women and the Dangers of Heterosexual Significance**

as conduits or objects of exchange between men whose desire for each other is repressed, women become not merely objects, but objects of hostility  
- Frann Michel (248)

The narrative pattern in which women become lightning rods for a monster’s aggression emphasises their dangerously overdetermined significance within heterosexual hegemony. The fact that *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* are littered with dead female bodies points to the potentially lethal effects of repressed male desires upon women, as they are maneuvered into standing, or rather ‘signing,’ between men and their monsters. As Sedgwick argues, the figurative closet within the paranoid Gothic is ‘explosively mined’ and women often become victims when the narrative tension explodes (*Epistemology* 79). This represents another point at which the concerns of Gothic fiction, and queer critical thinking, intersect with some of the concerns of feminist theory, for the violent attacks upon female bodies are symptomatic of a narrative world in which the proclamation of marriage is linked to the forces of homophobia. The homophobic male paranoia, endemic in these narratives, leads to a deadly form of unacknowledged misogyny, as the women appear to be repeatedly punished for their inability to meet the demand that they solve and contain the problem of monstrous male desire.

In the male-dominated narrative worlds of *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, all the women seem to mean the same ‘thing’: they represent the bliss which marriage is supposed to offer men and they act as conduits through which unacceptable male desires are routed. As these narratives progress, a pattern develops and, appropriately enough,

most of the women suffer the same fate: death. In the first instance, the Monster's response to the locket portrait of Caroline Frankenstein neatly symbolises the way women signify the joys of marriage when he realises that he is 'forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow' (138). But the picture also symbolises the mythical sign/object (woman) that is literally passed between men, just as Caroline was passed in marriage from her father Beaufort to his friend Alphonse. The locket sparks the Monster's hostility towards women as he constructs a vengeful fantasy of denied marital delights around the sleeping body of Justine Moritz: 'Here, I thought, is one of those whose joy-imparting smiles are bestowed on all but me [...] she, shall suffer [...] because I am forever robbed of all that she could give me' (139). The Monster has ascribed the same meaning to all women and Caroline and Justine can easily be substituted for one another in his imagination.

In *The Vampyre*, the women fall victim to the desiring and hating obsession between Aubrey and Ruthven, as both Ianthe and Aubrey's sister become conduits through which the men conduct their battle. Initially, Ianthe appears to be a safe love object for Aubrey upon whom he can impose his fantasies. Sexually non-threatening and apparently non-desiring, she does not even reciprocate his interest, remaining 'unconscious of his love' (10). In killing her, Ruthven shatters Aubrey's fantasies and violently re-inscribes Ianthe's position as the female principle in a deadly triangular relationship. The dead female body is indirectly linked to the paranoid disavowal of male same-sex desire when her parents 'ascertained the cause of their child's death they *looked at Aubrey and pointed to the corpse*' (13, my emphasis). The implication that homosocial culture is dangerous to women is compounded yet again when the triangle of

vampire, protagonist and female sign is reconfigured, this time with Aubrey's sister as the doomed female principle. *The Vampyre* echoes *Frankenstein* in featuring the motif of a portrait locket, but offers a slightly different angle on the significance of women. Unaware that Ruthvan has been courting her, Aubrey opens his sister's locket only to behold 'the features of the monster who had so long influenced his life' (21). The portrait locket presents a neat symbolisation, marking the body of Miss Aubrey with Aubrey's feared and desired monster. In a nightmarish signifying overlay, the dangerous sexual sign of the vampire, concealed within the locket, again emphasises the woman's role as a signing device between men. Another female victim to this narrative pattern is the body of the Monster's potential mate which Victor tears to pieces before completion. Remaining only ever a sign between Victor and the Monster, the destruction of the female creature's body prefigures the murder of Elizabeth when the desiring triangle is reconfigured again with the same violent effect upon a female body. Victor takes power over the Monster by destroying the body of the mate and the Monster attacks Victor by killing Elizabeth. Over and over, they perform the same deadly cycle as men wage their battles with each other through the bodies of women.

Despite rewriting the text as a romance, the film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* ultimately confirms Jacqueline Labbe's argument that the 'wifely ideal' in *Frankenstein* is a 'monstrous fiction' (346).<sup>10</sup> After the Monster has murdered Elizabeth, Victor sews her head onto the dead body of Justine, constructing a female creature who then becomes the object of both his and the Monster's desire. In this scene, the film presents a gruesome version of the erotic triangle described by Sedgwick, in which the choice of a beloved is determined by the beloved's already being the choice of the chosen rival

(*Between Men* 21). What is striking is that, within the context of Victor's relationship with the Monster, Elizabeth and Justine are basically interchangeable. Although their heads and bodies may be substituted for each other, it is what they signify – the female object between two desiring men – that must be kept 'alive.' Justine/Elizabeth is resurrected as the conclusion to women's significance for men in *Frankenstein*, a female monster embodying the monstrous fictions underlying male fantasies about marriage. In the novel, Victor compares Elizabeth to a 'shrine-dedicated lamp' (37). It is therefore rather fitting that the Justine/Elizabeth creature makes use of an oil lamp to immolate herself and burn down the family home.<sup>11</sup> After all, Elizabeth's obedience to Victor in the novel is a form of self-immolation. Just as the Monster burns down the cottage of family fantasy, the fantasy 'woman' Victor has created, finally refuses to play along, rebels, and destroys both his and the Monster's fantasies about marriage. This is one point at which the film does elaborate on the novel's implicit critique of marriage rhetoric and its implications for women.

Over the course of *Frankenstein's* narrative, the effect upon Elizabeth is certainly tantamount to what Sedgwick calls, 'the horribly thorough and conscientious ravages on a woman of the man's compulsion to pretend he desires her' (*Epistemology* 196). Shortly before the wedding Victor observes, 'She was thinner, and had lost much of that heavenly vivacity that had before charmed me' (184). Throughout the novel he assumes her only function is to serve his needs and expresses no concern that her condition is due to him. From a feminist perspective, this leads to one of the sinister moments in the text, as Victor manipulates and deceives Elizabeth in order to attain the marriage. When she expresses doubts about his commitment he replies, 'Chase away your idle fears; to you

alone do I consecrate my life' (183). Of course the reader knows that Victor is not 'consecrated' to Elizabeth, and nor are her fears in any respect 'idle.' He continues: 'I have one secret, Elizabeth, a dreadful one; when revealed to you, it will chill your frame with horror [...] I will confide this tale of misery and terror to you the day after our marriage' (183). But, until then, he conjures her not to mention the secret. Victor refuses to 'come out' with the truth until he has secured her and, presumably, consummated the marriage. He assumes this power to manipulate Elizabeth without fear of resistance. In this respect, both *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* offer dark and sceptical stories about the way women are conditioned to imagine that a performance of feminine submission will protect them, but in these narratives adherence to the ideal saves no woman; if anything, it contributes to their deaths.

*Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* point to a deadly double bind at the heart of women's signifying practices within the heterosexual matrix. From Victor's perspective, Elizabeth embodies the all-solving power of marriage, but of course she cannot resolve the problems presented by cultural prohibitions against male same-sex desire. She is therefore doomed to fail and become an object of hostility. There is a darkly ironic play upon the marriage vows in Victor's claim that he looks upon Elizabeth as 'mine to protect, love and cherish [...] since till death she was to be mine only' (35). Not only does he fail to protect Elizabeth, she dies because she belongs to him, and because she is maneuvered into standing between himself and the Monster. It falls upon her to try and draw him back into family normality. When she begs him to 'banish these dark passions,' he wonders, 'could not such words from her whom I fondly prized before every other gift of fortune, suffice to chase away the fiend that lurked in my heart?' (90).



The answer is ‘no,’ she cannot, because the ‘fiend’ – whether he means the Monster or his anxiety about the Monster – is lodged more heavily in Victor’s heart than Elizabeth. In both *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, the protagonist finds himself bound to his monster by a vow that overrules all other considerations and can only be dissolved by death. The promise is, appropriately enough, a Gothic parody of the wedding vows. But as long as non-normative male desire is inscribed in male subjectivity as a lurking ‘fiend,’ women pay the price, because the men in these queerly allegorical narratives are more firmly ‘wedded’ to their homophobia than they are to the women.

Both James Whale’s films pick up on the link between women and heterosexual regulation in the text. Over the course of *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, Elizabeth appears to be an increasingly desperate and endangered enforcer of conformity. As she tries to persuade Henry to abandon his strange proclivities and commit to their marriage, she becomes subject to attack. In *Frankenstein* she is neglected, abandoned by Henry and attacked by the Monster; in *Bride of Frankenstein* she is abandoned (again), kidnapped and terrorised. Attempting to repress Henry’s desires in the first film, she remonstrates with him about his experiments: ‘you’re not to think of those things anymore, you promised.’ On the morning of the wedding, Henry ostensibly attempts to protect Elizabeth by locking her in the bedroom, but the Monster (Boris Karloff) climbs in through the window and attacks her. Significantly, the attack takes place immediately after Elizabeth expresses her fear that ‘something’ is coming between herself and her fiancée. Consciously or not, the film here confirms the novel’s inference that male ownership of women’s bodies places them in danger. When monstrous desire invades the domestic space its first victim is again the woman who signifies the possibility of a

sexually normal future for the protagonist. Moreover, by acting out Frankenstein's sublimated hostility towards women, the Monster also acts out his desire to defer the marriage yet again.

Elizabeth's embodiment of heterosexuality under threat is even more conspicuous in *Bride of Frankenstein* where she is characterised from the beginning as an extremely anxious figure. Opening the film with a hysterical collapse, she tells Henry that she has already foreseen 'a strange apparition' in the room, 'it comes, a figure like death, and each time he comes more clearly, nearer. It seems to be reaching out for you as if it would take you away from me...its coming for you, there, nearer, nearer!' Perhaps the script hints here at a knowing awareness that the sinister encroaching 'queerness' is indeed clearer and nearer to the surface in this sequel. Just as Elizabeth expresses her panicked sense of a death-like force stealing Henry away from her, a knocking at the door heralds the entry of the 'strange apparition' of Dr Pretorius. The disruptive intrusion of queer desire into the supposed sanctuary of heterosexual marriage has rarely been better represented in horror cinema.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the entire film can be viewed as a battle over the body of Henry, fought between the forces of sexual conformity represented by Elizabeth, against the transgressive queer desires represented by Dr Pretorius. Elizabeth appears to win at the end, but her success is highly precarious and it is not achieved before the film makes some disturbing points about the position of women in a culture in which they are forced to represent heteronormativity.

In *Bride of Frankenstein's* final scene, Frankenstein and Dr Pretorius bring the female monster to life as the ultimate embodiment of women's significance in homosocial culture: a woman created by men to serve the needs of men.<sup>13</sup> But, to their

dismay, she screams in horror at what she sees. One could argue that she is simply appalled by her potential mate's ugliness. However, the bride also sees what Elizabeth cannot see – the three men who together have created her. Elizabeth, Caroline, Justine, Ianthe and Miss Aubrey are all, on some level, fantasy constructions within male dominated narratives, but the 'bride' is the only one who sees that what she is being offered is in fact 'monstrous.' Perhaps her wordless screaming expresses not only the 'unspeakableness' of the male desires that have created her, but also the unspeakable horror underlying the deployment of romantic fantasies about marriage – the monstrous fictions to which women are particularly subject in a patriarchal culture. When she resists and disrupts the myth of an obedient silent wife, she causes the Monster to perceive his own monstrosity and she must, therefore, be destroyed. The Monster blows up the laboratory but allows Elizabeth and Henry to escape. The rubble is a final 'closet,' covering over the deviant meaning embodied by the three dangerously revealing 'monsters' beneath, closing down Henry's queer space and, presumably, enabling the couple finally to enter their marriage. But the fact that Henry and Elizabeth are left cowering in the ruins suspends their fate between happy resolution and the possibility of more horror to come. In a world in which heterosexual marriage is constructed as a homophobic institution and is supposed to ward off the possibility of queer desire, the film is quite right to remind the audience that the couple will never be free from the threat of the Monster's return.

### **This Miserable Marriage**

there is almost always the sense that the monster represents  
the eruption of a sexual force which cannot be contained  
by the heterosexualized normal couple  
- Harry M. Benshoff (130)

When Frankenstein's Monster threatens, 'I shall be with you on your wedding night' (163), his disruptive intention draws together threads of anxiety underlying the entire text. For in a culture in which marriage is always haunted by what it excludes, the spectre of dangerous desire will always be with 'you' on your 'wedding night.' Insofar as Gothic texts present doubts about the capacity of marriage to contain the lawlessness of desire, or provide peace and happiness, they raise significantly queer concerns and interesting questions for the classroom. Not only do these fantasies counter the dominant discourse by presenting marriage as a problem rather than a solution, they appeal to queer criticism because they question the notion that marriage solves anything. In presenting a wedding night as the apotheosis of violence and horror, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* express anxieties about marriage that could not be depicted so sensationally in more mainstream canonical literature. The shifting of marital meaning from something to be celebrated to something dreadful is brought sharply into focus in *The Vampyre* when Aubrey discovers his sister's engagement. Initially, the news sparks a recovery from his insanity: delighted he 'began to speak with all his wonted warmth, and to congratulate her upon her marriage' (21). But his presumptive equation of marriage with happiness is undermined when he discovers that her prospective husband is his enemy Ruthven: 'with a frantic expression of countenance, he bade her swear that she would never wed this monster' (21). Aubrey finds himself hopelessly pitted against the cultural weight of

marital meaning. In a sense, he becomes positioned as a kind of queer reader in the text, because he is the only one who knows that this marriage represents something very different to what it appears: ‘Aubrey heard, with a horror that may more easily be conceived than described, the notes of busy preparation’ (22). As I argued earlier, Frankenstein’s monster attempts to manipulate the sexual norm to achieve his ends, but Lord Ruthven is more successful in this area because he is able to pass as a normal man. He certainly shows himself to be adept in manipulating the norms of heterosexual romance. Ultimately, Miss Aubrey’s ‘guardians,’ representing the ever-inadequate forces of sexual regulation, arrive ‘too late’ to find that ‘Lord Ruthven had disappeared and Aubrey’s sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!’ (23). Marriage does not contain the danger; instead it serves the vampire’s ends and actually releases him back into society.

If the norm is always dependent upon the existence of monstrous otherness in order to shore up its own boundaries, it would seem that the Gothic black ‘joke’ in these texts is implicitly directed at the heterosexual matrix. Appropriately, both monsters, but Ruthven in particular, exhibit a propensity to mock. Their laughter echoes a narrative undercurrent through which the jeering monster shakes what Carolyn Dinshaw has called ‘the heterocultural edifice’ (‘Queer Touches’ 89). It is a mockery that also expresses the monster’s queer ability to reflect heteronormativity back upon itself in a disturbingly de-familiarised form. Throughout *The Vampyre*, Ruthven mockingly manipulates the norms of romance and marriage to achieve his own ends; it serves him to marry Miss Aubrey in order to torment Aubrey and, eventually, to drink her blood. Boone argues that Lord Ruthven’s ‘sustenance depends on perpetuating – not eradicating – the status quo’ (359).

I agree; but the implications of his monstrous investment in the status quo are disturbing, for if the norm serves the Monster, Gothic fiction again suggests that the status quo must itself be 'monstrous' on some level. The politics of marriage certainly appear monstrous where women are concerned. This perspective adds another layer of meaning to Ruthven's 'stifled exultant' laugh (11), when he murders Ianthe, the woman who embodies male fantasies about marriage in the text. He is joined by the Monster in *Frankenstein* when he kills Elizabeth: 'A grin was on the face of the monster; he seemed to jeer, as with his fiendish finger he pointed towards the corpse of my wife' (190 - 191). This 'jeering' can be read as another aspect of what I call the 'queer Gothic.' As they parody, mock and ultimately assault the structures of marriage, these monsters 'point' towards a sexual norm that will always be haunted and, in a sense, 'mocked' by the spectre of monstrous desire. Through their monsters such texts can also be said to 'jeer' at the claims made by heterosexual culture.

Frankenstein's monster and Lord Ruthven can certainly be said to queer the 'text' of marriage. But this monstrous 'shaking' of the heterocultural edifice is, I would argue, precisely what we want from Gothic fiction. We do not come to Gothic horror for representations of happy marriage anymore than we do for peaceful families; it is the representation of monstrous desires and relations that provide the transgressive reading pleasure. Again it would seem that these texts do not simply express anxieties about the rhetoric of marriage and the instability of heterosexuality; they also allow the reader to enjoy the spectacle of the norm being undermined. Neither *Frankenstein* nor *The Vampyre* return their readers to even nominal safety. Some Gothic texts, such as Ann Radcliffe's novels, do end with ostensibly happy marital resolutions, but even when this

occurs it is left up to the reader to decide whether the conclusion can ever be fully secure after the horrors that have preceded its achievement. The queer Gothic ultimately works to confirm ‘the fragility of the heterosexual couple, and the precariousness of patriarchal institutions and values’ (Berenstein, *Attack* 59). The Gothic’s doubts about marriage therefore connect nicely with some of queer scholarship’s concerns. At the end of *Bride of Frankenstein*, the audience is probably more interested in the promised possibility of a sequel and the return of the Monster, than in Elizabeth and Henry’s banal relationship. Refusing a comfortable marital resolution is one aspect of the larger Gothic propensity to pose questions about the stability and desirability of marriage.

Immediately after their wedding, Elizabeth says to Victor, ‘Something whispers to me not to depend too much on the prospect that is opened before us, but I will not listen to such a sinister voice’ (186 - 187). Elizabeth is, of course, wrong to ignore this voice and the reader should not make a similar mistake; we should always pay attention to the sinister voice, the queer voice in the text whispering that something is wrong; everything is not as it appears. Women, such as Ianthe and Elizabeth, appear marginalised in these narratives, but in my discussions relating to the family and marriage, I have returned repeatedly to their stories for insights into the depiction of sexual culture in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*. However, I have, in a sense, re-inscribed male and heterosexual narrative dominance over the women in my own reading, insofar as I have only read their stories in relation to men, family and marriage. Making relationships between women the more overt focus opens up further possibilities for creatively resistant reading and takes this study into another important aspect of the queer Gothic, namely, its engagement with the question of same-sex desire.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, for instance, notes that the ‘very idea of there being categories of sexuality – homo-hetero, bi, for starters – is a culturally and historically specific system of classification’ (‘Heterosexuality’ 261). The term ‘heterosexual’ was first coined in 1880, about ten years after the creation of ‘homosexual’ during 1869/70. For a book length discussion on this subject, see Jonathan Ned Katz’s *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (1996).

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, my thinking throughout has been influenced by Janet Jackobsen’s work on queer theory, normativity and resistance. As Jackobsen writes, ‘What we would resist – the norm, the normal, or heteronormativity – is a site of frequently overlooked complexities’ (513). Unless we are able to acknowledge the complexity of heteronormativity, we will not be able to resist effectively.

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ is drawn from Rich, one of the first theorists to argue that heterosexuality needs to be recognised and studied as a ‘*political institution*’ (232). According to Rich, we must learn to identify and interrogate ‘the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable – even if unsatisfying or oppressive – components of their lives’ (234). Of course, heterosexuality is also ‘compulsory’ for men in homosocial, homophobic culture, although it is deployed differently and has different effects to those upon women.

<sup>4</sup> Some particularly spectacular queer interpretations include Christopher Isherwood’s *Frankenstein: The True Story* (T.V. Film: Universal 1973), a film made for television, which features strong homosexual overtones. Recasting the *Frankenstein* myth in terms of even more outrageous queer sexuality are *Andy Warhol’s Frankenstein* (1974) and the cult film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1975). For more detail on these versions and others, see Albert J. Lavalley, ‘The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein*.’ There is also a comprehensive list of the *Frankenstein* films that explore sexuality in Timothy Morton’s *Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (73 - 74).

<sup>5</sup> As Benschhoff notes, this ‘core idea – that of a mad male homosexual science giving birth to a monster – can be found to a greater or lesser degree in almost every filmic adaptation’ (18)

<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick goes so far as to call the nineteenth century the ‘Age of Frankenstein,’ a period ‘distinctively and rhetorically’ marked by the absolute omnipresence of homophobic paranoid tableaux such as that of Victor and the Monster pursuing each other across the Arctic ice (*Coherence* x).

<sup>7</sup> Sinatra comments: ‘That Victor might have met another man is clearly not a possibility for his father, and to a certain extent neither is it for Victor himself, though he is certainly much more excited physically by the thought of the Creature and its physical presence than he is by Elizabeth’ (258 - 259).

<sup>8</sup> As Berenstein observes, *Bride of Frankenstein* is actually ‘a narrative of illicit homosocial desire, a film in which conventional masculinity and heterosexuality are under attack’ (*Attack* 146).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the queerness of Dr Pretorius, see Berenstein’s analysis in *Attack of the Leading Ladies* (138-146), Harry M. Benschhoff’s book *Monsters in the Closet* (50), and also Elizabeth Young’s essay ‘Here comes the Bride’ (133).

<sup>10</sup> Labbe argues that the novel is informed and underpinned by a critique of marriage and ‘further, wifehood, within a marital system that positions itself as the proper and necessary condition of “true” womanhood while limiting, even erasing, the woman herself’ (345).



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<sup>11</sup> The female monster's act is a gruesome representational confirmation of Botting's view that women in *Frankenstein* are 'destroyed by their obedience to their prescribed roles' (*Making* 101).

<sup>12</sup> Berenstein describes the scene in the following terms: 'There in the privacy of their bedroom – the site of heterosexual legitimacy and desire – Henry mutters about men in his sleep, while Elizabeth assumes that these men are rivals of the most profound and intimate sort [...] her husband is lost to her and, moreover, that their bedroom has been invaded by monstrous male forces' (143). Dr Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger) fulfils Elizabeth's (Valerie Hobson) worst nightmare and intrudes into the Frankenstein bedroom as a monstrous rival for Henry's (Colin Clive) affection' (*Attack* 142). Elizabeth Young also argues that this 'scene serves to consolidate a sexualised relation between the two men' (143).

<sup>13</sup> For a sophisticated analysis of the film's gender politics, see Young's essay 'Here Comes the Bride,' (135).

### Chapter Three

#### 'A Strange Perversity':

#### Bringing Out Desire between Women in *Frankenstein*

Many journal entries chronicle the tremendous devotion  
Shelley showed to women friends,  
- Ann Frank Wake (494)

I was apt to get tousy-mousy for women,  
- Mary Shelley

In her 1988 literary biography of Mary Shelley, Muriel Spark writes, 'It should be recognised that Mary was a little in love with Jane, if that phrase can be used about two women without implication of abnormal behaviour' (116). In the context of a work devoting considerable space to Shelley's famous heterosexual romantic life, this is an eye-catching denial. Mary Shelley is frequently read in terms of her relationship with Percy Bysshe Shelley. The suggestion that she fell 'in love' with Jane Williams therefore has the potential to de-stabilise the assumption of her exclusive heterosexuality. In terms of a queer reading, Spark's comment could shift the question of Shelley's sexuality from an unquestioned given in the biographical narrative, to a more sexually complex and, importantly, more *visible* position. Such an unsettling of the narrative's and perhaps also the reader's sexual presumptions has a twofold effect. On the one hand, the 'queer touch'<sup>1</sup> of a suggestion that Shelley experienced same-sex desire leads the way towards a possibility for rethinking her life in less concrete sexual terms. On the other hand, the resistance to desire between women, implied in Spark's disavowal of 'abnormal behaviour,' causes the biographical text to reveal its own unstated homophobia. The second part of the sentence is a sharp reminder of the heterosexism implicit in any

reading that does *not* take into account the possibility of erotic experiences for Shelley other than heterosexual desire. However, Spark's anxiety is at the same time a pertinent one, because in a heterosexist, homophobic culture it plainly *is* difficult to discuss same-sex relating without the implication of 'abnormal behaviour' creeping into the narrative.

I have taken this example from a biographical text to show again how queer critical practice can operate as a reading tool that works towards the unravelling of heteronormative textual representation. Once the text is read from a creatively resistant queer position, and relations of same-sex love are made the primary focus of the analysis, Spark's pointed denial becomes a significantly suggestive queer narrative moment. This is because the denial that Shelley's relationship with Jane was 'abnormal' immediately suggests to us that it might have been, and the attempt to refute the idea that Shelley experienced a so-called 'queer life' paradoxically opens up the possibility that she did. At this point, the heteronormative narrative becomes dissonant and undercut from within. Although it is predicated upon resistance to abnormal love, conversely, the reader cannot escape awareness of that supposedly proscribed possibility. In Diana Fuss's words, the spectre of same-sex desire can be said to operate here, as it so frequently does in heterosexual culture, as 'an indispensable interior exclusion [...] a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such' (3). The text is therefore subject to a paradox in modern sexual discourse, for in marking out heterosexual boundaries through the disavowal of same-sex desire, it becomes necessary to raise the possibility in order to deny it. Once queer desire is acknowledged to exist, it is not easy to banish.

When Mary Shelley did articulate her feelings for Jane, she did so in a style likely to disturb future biographers attempting to pin down her meaning. In 1835 she wrote, ‘ten years ago I was so ready to give myself away - and being afraid of men, I was apt to get *tousy-mousy* for women [...] I am now proof as Hamlet says both against man & woman’ (Bennett, *Letters* 11. 255- 256). This playful, sexually ambiguous comment certainly has the potential to unravel the tidy weave of heteronormative presumption. In terms of Sedgwick’s understanding of ‘queer,’ Shelley’s relationship with Jane figures as a site at which the constituent elements of her sexuality can no longer be made to signify monolithically (*Tendencies* 8). Of course Shelley’s statement does not prove her ‘lesbianism,’ as we would now understand that modern sexual category, but it does undermine her ‘heterosexuality’ and represents a moment at which queer possibilities become imaginable. It also opens a space in which the biographical ‘heterotext’ can be rewritten and Shelley’s life re-imagined from an alternative point of view.<sup>2</sup> I do not make use of biography here because I think speculations concerning the author’s sexual desires have any direct bearing on her novel *Frankenstein*; rather, I hope to show how shifting the reading lens to a queer position opens new critical possibilities when it comes to reading the women’s stories in the novel. The questions raised by Shelley’s relationship with Jane frame my discussion because, with respect to female desire, *Frankenstein* also raises and illustrates queer concerns about reading, desire and visibility in relation to the discourses through which same sex love between women has been made culturally intelligible.

**‘So Much do I Esteem and Value Her’:**

**Re-reading the Women’s Stories**

Perversion is something different; reading a different way;  
comprehending a different way  
- Patricia MacCormack (3)

If *Frankenstein* appears to privilege narratives of male homosocial desire, how do relations between women function in the text? Questions of female same-sex desire have often been ignored in feminist and psychoanalytic readings, but academic queer studies have made it possible to stretch existing critical work in exciting new directions. This analysis demands a series of perceptual shifts, forcing the novel to be read even more queerly from off-centre angles, uncovering potential relations of desire between women, and exploring narrative moments where representations of friendship begin to perceptibly shift into the more subversive domains of desire. In this chapter, I offer a close reading of the relationships between Caroline, Justine and Elizabeth as textual sites where it is possible to read a slippage between friendship, love, and ambiguous but dynamic same-sex desires. My reading is indebted throughout to Frann Michel’s essay ‘Lesbian Panic in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*’ (1996). I want to expand upon the ramifications of her claim that the novel ‘reveals a triangulated and mediated relationship – a relation of difference and, potentially, of desire – among Elizabeth, Justine, and Caroline’ (244). However, I take issue with the application of the potentially reductive signifier ‘lesbian’ in relation to the text, and would like to pose a different question: how can we bring out and negotiate desire between women without diminishing the meanings of that desire through an over-dependence upon modern sexual categories? To put the point another

way, if the text cannot support a 'lesbian' reading because there are no identifiable lesbians visible, and if such desire is always ultimately disavowed in the text, what are the possibilities for queer reading?

Because it is so often asserted that the women are excluded in *Frankenstein*, my proposed intent to excavate evidence of desire between them might initially appear to be a strange and perverse critical aim. If there is evidence of such desire discernible, it is certainly more elusive than that which is readable between the men, because the women clearly do occupy more circumscribed positions. If women are marginal, any appearance of desire between them is most likely doubly so – more sublimated and less visible. As Michel observes, broadly defined feminist readings often repeat 'the novel's evasions,' and a radical 'optical shift' will therefore be necessary 'to perceive even the (foreclosed) possibility of erotic relation between women [...] marginalised as they are by the homophobic and heterosexist paradigms both critiqued and constructed in the novel' (243, 241). Michel refers here not only to the text itself but also to the heterosexist paradigms underscoring critical responses to the text which 'replicate' and 'exacerbate those patterns' (241). In *Frankenstein* criticism, it is not uncommon to read such final and definite statements as 'Shelley had rendered women absent from her novel' (Laplace-Sinatra 262). Some of the most influential work on the text tends towards critical variations on this theme. As the women seem so excluded, it is not surprising that feminist readings emphasise the victimised positions they occupy. To reiterate this again would not therefore contribute much that is new to the discussion. Moreover, the charge of *who* renders women absent from the novel should not, I think, be laid entirely at Mary Shelley's door. We should not forget that criticism is itself performative: it is a

discursive practice which creates its own norms and 'normal' ways of reading. In this respect, the repeated claim that women are repressed and silenced to some extent *generates* that sense of exclusion and institutes a critical norm. This critical performativity becomes problematic if the reiteration of female marginalisation actually begins to produce the effect (of marginalisation) that it names and discourages readers and students from interpreting the text on any other terms. While I acknowledge the women's marginal positions in the text, I will perform an alternative queer reading and propose that their very marginality can become the source of troubling possibilities.

'Perverse' is an appropriate term with which to describe my reading strategy, drawing as I do upon Bonnie Zimmerman's concept of 'perverse reading.' Zimmerman reclaims a word 'defined by the dictionary as "wilfully determined not to do what is expected or desired" [...] a perverse reader is one highly conscious of her own agency' (139). Although she uses this term in the context of lesbian reading, it is possible to expand Zimmerman's concept to less specific 'queer' reading strategies. But my approach can also be called 'perverse' in terms of the basic cultural definition of perversion, 'as primarily whatever is not traditional heterosexuality' and 'any desire beyond socially sanctioned forms of heterosexuality' (MacCormack 1, 2). To read a text 'perversely' is therefore to read it for moments and instances that diverge from, disturb or exceed the representation of 'traditional' heterosexuality. It is to try and see beyond the heterosexist paradigms which so often silently govern acceptable interpretative possibilities. Paying attention to the women's stories in *Frankenstein* illustrates some of the possibilities and the limits of this perversely queer reading. However, before anything radical can be achieved, it is first necessary to stop presuming female

heterosexuality in the text.<sup>3</sup> Many critical works imply this basic presumption, but as I argued in the previous chapter, the women's marriages and relationships with men in the novel do not prove their heterosexuality. There are few definite 'heterosexual' relationships in *Frankenstein* and all the important bonds, between the men and between the women, are same-sex. Mellor argues that the women in the novel are 'sexually repressed, even sexless' (120), but perhaps we have been looking for love and desire in the wrong places.

I certainly do not describe the alliances between Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth Lavenza and Justine Moritz as specifically 'lesbian.' In any case, the important point here is not to discover 'lesbianism' in *Frankenstein*; it is rather to explore how the signification of desire between women appears in the text and impacts upon reading possibilities. That said, I do want to begin with a reading of the women's relationships from a broadly 'lesbian,' or as Zimmerman describes it, a 'woman seeing' perspective which can be defined as an attention to 'the primacy and duration of the female friendship' (137, 138). Adrienne Rich's theory of 'woman identification' within the 'lesbian continuum' is also useful here. It is possible to trace a story of female-identified-experience in *Frankenstein* when we focus upon narrative instances of 'primary intensity' between and among women, especially in Rich's terms of sharing an emotional life, giving and receiving practical support and, to an extent, bonding against male tyranny (239).<sup>4</sup> For instance, Caroline Frankenstein constructs a supportive group of women in the male-dominated family, as mother/ aunt/ protectress to her adopted 'daughters,' who are sisters/friends to each other. First she adopts Elizabeth and later incorporates Justine as a privileged servant. Elizabeth notes, 'My aunt conceived a great attachment for her'



(63). Whether or not these relationships are ultimately read as encompassing a charge of desire, they do appear to constitute a largely engulfed, but just visible alternative story.<sup>5</sup>

It is a story that begins with Caroline's adoption of Elizabeth, moves through the adoption of Justine, and ends with her execution finally leaving Elizabeth alone in a male world

Rich would argue that it is impossible to draw an absolutely 'firm' line between what we now call 'lesbian' experience and other female relationships (Zimmerman 138). However, it is of course important to consider the possibility that the text does not necessarily imply a sexual dynamic of desire. After all, the novel's loving friendships could simply be read from a feminist perspective as important but non-desiring supportive relationships, such as when Elizabeth refers to 'Justine, whom I loved and esteemed as my sister' (83). *Frankenstein* does contain a powerful representation of courageous female friendship in Elizabeth's refusal to believe the discourse of condemnation when Justine is accused of murdering William. Ann Frank Wake argues that Justine's trial illuminates the necessity of 'female communities that supported women's emotional survival within the patriarchal construct,' and opens a space for women's subculture in the text (493). Although she does not approach the question of desire, Wake's essay is a notable exception to the critical norm, and emphasises something important and often overlooked in *Frankenstein* criticism. Elizabeth identifies with Justine against men, such as Alphonse and Ernest Frankenstein, who are allied with the male authorities and assume Justine's guilt without question. Elizabeth is the only family member who verbally defends Justine in court. She does not shy away from an implied reproach against the rest of the community: 'when I see a fellow creature about

to perish through the cowardice of her pretended friends, I wish to be allowed to speak' (81 - 82). She takes risks to defend Justine and her speech is an implicit rebuke to the cowardly male members of the family who sit in silent collaboration with the court, and perhaps especially to Victor, the 'pretended' friend who knows the identity of the true murderer but still refuses to speak.

In terms of Rich's work, Elizabeth's defence of Justine can be read as a literary example of 'woman identification,' an instance of female resistance to dominant patriarchal power relations. She bases her presumption of Justine's innocence upon the quality of her relationships with other women: 'She nursed Madame Frankenstein, my aunt, in her last illness, with the greatest affection and care, and afterwards attended her own mother during a tedious illness' (82). The logic of Elizabeth's argument is that Justine cannot be a murderer because she cares for women. This opens a point in the narrative where it is possible to glimpse an alternative story in which women are defined by their relations to one another, rather than to men. Kate Ellis argues that Safie displays an independence that 'would be unthinkable to Elizabeth' (126). But this reading trivialises Elizabeth's defence of Justine and privileges female independence only in the context of heterosexual romance. It is always interesting to note which representations of female resistance are taken seriously and which are devalued, for to identify female agency only in the context of heterosexual romance is to privilege a heteronormative reading of the text. From a queer perspective, I would suggest that Elizabeth's lone support for Justine is *more* radical than Safie's abandonment of her tyrannical father for marriage. Michel also notes the fact that Safie and Agatha abandon each other in the face of monstrosity. As she points out, 'The women who [...] do not attend to each other are

those who survive. Those who are touched by the monster, and who stand by each other – Justine and Elizabeth – die’ (244). Perhaps Elizabeth displays a different kind of independence which would be unthinkable to Safie and Agatha. Indirectly, the text also seems to comment here upon the fact that in a patriarchal homosocial culture it is dangerous for women to stand together against men.

In my view, the representation of women’s relations in *Frankenstein* is really too complex and shifty to be assimilated to a reading of female friendship under patriarchy. These intense relationships have the potential to function as sexual pressure points in the narrative when understood in terms of Marilyn Farwell’s concept of a ‘disruptive space of sameness.’<sup>6</sup> This statement immediately begs a further question: *what* is specifically disruptive about a space of female sameness? The answer could vary, but in *Frankenstein* apparently coherent representations of feminine heterosexual submissiveness can be de-stabilised when close attention is paid to subtextual undercurrents in relations between women. One such potential ‘pressure point’ in Victor’s narrative is Caroline’s adoption of Elizabeth because she ‘had much desire to have a daughter’ (33). Elizabeth is the object of Caroline’s maternal desire from the moment she ‘fixed eyes of wonder and admiration on this lovely girl’ (34).<sup>7</sup> The death of Caroline represents another pressure point, a potentially disruptive space of sameness in the narrative. This claim might at first appear unlikely, for Caroline is also represented as a feminine stereotype and her death initially seems a conventional case of female self-sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> But close examination reveals another, or perhaps an *othered*, story below the surface of Victor’s narrative.

At this point, it becomes possible to discern evidence of male anxiety about female bonding as a site of potential resistance. When Elizabeth contracts scarlet fever, the men of the family attempt to prevent Caroline from nursing her: 'many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother to refrain from attending upon her' (42). At first she 'yielded to our intreaties,' but there is a limit to her obedience: 'when she heard that the life of her favourite was menaced, she could no longer control her anxiety' (42). Caroline saves Elizabeth and 'the consequences of this imprudence were fatal to her preserver' (42). This incident is altered from the 1818 version, which reads, 'when she heard that her favourite was recovering, she could no longer debar herself from her society, and entered her chamber long before the danger of infection was past' (26). Depending on the reader's choice of interpretative emphasis, the 1818 version could cause the reason behind Caroline's death to appear frivolous. But it could also enhance a reading of love between women if it suggests Caroline cannot physically bear to be out of Elizabeth's company for long. Victor tells a story about foolish, over-emotional femininity causing unnecessary death through irrational behavior. But if we read 'perversely' beyond the terms of his blinkered narrative, this moment may appear instead as a case of intense and tragic love between women. On closer inspection it may not be such a clear-cut case of feminine self-sacrifice to male ideology after all.

Although there are no identifiable 'lesbians' as such in the text, in a culture in which lesbianism has been discursively produced as a form of resistance to men and the family, the bonds between women hint at a shadowy threat lurking in the narrative background. In this context, Caroline's death actually has the potential to fracture the assumption of female submission, because the crucial male element is missing from the

heteronormative equation: she does *not* sacrifice herself for a man, but for a woman. I want to emphasise the important sentence which slips past almost unnoticed: ‘the life of *her favourite* was menaced’ (42, emphasis mine). The problem, in patriarchal terms, is not then that Caroline is *not* devoted and self-sacrificial, but that she sacrifices herself for the wrong person, abandoning the male members of her family in the saving of her *favourite* - her much desired ‘daughter.’ Elizabeth appropriates Caroline’s self-sacrificial maternal attachment and Victor hints at this threat when he says ‘she could no longer *control* her anxiety’ (emphasis mine), and labels her action as ‘imprudence.’ The suggestion is that love between women might lead to a manipulation of the norms of gender behaviour. Out of control, imprudent, blinded by her attachment to Elizabeth, perhaps Caroline manipulates the stereotypical female role, only to deviate from the male imperative and die saving her daughter. Her performance of femininity could therefore mask something more resistant than might at first appear, namely, primary attachment to another woman. This haunting threat can attach itself to any representation of close female friendship, for the lurking unspoken fear in the text amounts to a belief that the ‘primary threat’ of female bonding is ‘the elimination of the male’ (Chris Straayer; qtd in Berenstein, ‘Monsters’ 255). As Victor indirectly accuses Elizabeth of stealing Caroline’s affections and life from the family, the text contains an echo of the longstanding construction of love between women as dangerous to men and the family because it appropriates women’s loyalties away from them.

At this point it is worth pausing to consider the way text is altered in the film adaptation *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*. Rather than choosing to risk nursing her chosen daughter, the film presents a more obviously patriarchal fantasy in which Caroline



(Cherie Lunghi) is represented dying in childbirth. As she begs Alphonse (Ian Holm) to let her die in order that the baby son might live, her death is shifted from a female-identified tragedy to male-identified maternal sacrifice. Insofar as this heterosexualised film adaptation renders relationships between women unimportant, it also reflects the general cultural tendency to dismiss and ignore the significance of such relationships. In the wider cultural field relations between women continue to be marginalised, or only considered important when they serve or threaten male-dominated and heterosexual narratives. Of course, it is possible that, like Victor, the filmmakers simply could not see far enough beyond the heterosexual paradigm to ascribe any real importance to the details of Caroline's death in the novel. Then again, perhaps they did not want to risk any hint of an improper relationship between Caroline and Elizabeth. In my view, the problem that the novel sublimates, and the film rewrites, centres upon the problem of representing love between women.

### **Remembering Justine Moritz:**

#### **Femininity, Monstrosity and Queer Reading**

In the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*, Elizabeth writes to Victor, 'Do you not remember Justine Moritz? Probably you do not' (46). Her question serves as a reminder that Justine is not only one of the most marginalised figures in the novel, but also one whose significance is often passed over in critical readings. She should not be so easily dismissed and I now want to emphasise the importance of remembering and renegotiating her position. At times her positionality is surprisingly complex and from a queer reading

perspective she is actually one of the more intriguing figures in *Frankenstein*. In terms of reading Justine, the power of the perceptual shift is illustrated more than once within the narrative. Elizabeth tells us that ‘through a strange perversity, her mother could not endure her’ (63). It seems clear that the text means the reader to understand that her bad mother’s ‘strange perversity’ has led to her rejection, but from the rejecting mother’s point of view, it is Justine who embodies the ‘strange perversity’ or, in other words, the alarming ‘queerness.’ By calling attention to the fact that there is another way of reading – a ‘perverse’ perspective – Justine’s story does not only illustrate possibilities for queer reading, it also has something to reveal about the dangers of being *read queerly*. For if Justine comes to represent a disruption to stable definitions, this trouble emerges not from her character as such, but rather from *how* and *where* she is positioned in the text and from the meanings attached to that position. Neither really a servant, nor truly a family member, Justine occupies an oddly liminal space and a role which, as Hirsch observes, leaves her always open to being read as ‘a monstrous simulacrum of a family member’ (128 - 129). Her precise status is questionable in relation to acceptable norms and this lack of definition sites her as a potential problem. If Caroline and Elizabeth are marginalised, Justine’s position, as an orphan, a servant and an unmarried woman, is highly precarious from the start.

Justine is undeniably feminine and submissive, but her position resists monolithic signification on more than one level and a close analysis reveals her to be a more ambiguous figure than might at first appear. I propose that Justine *does* unintentionally fail in her assigned role and that it is not in fact surprising when she is condemned. Judith Butler argues that in a culture in which gender is a ‘*compulsory* performance [...]

acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence' ('Imitation' 24). Justine suffers all these consequences, but it is necessary to read the text carefully to perceive the subtle points at which she is 'out of line' with the standard norms of sex, gender and desire. In the first instance, if Michel is correct to argue that 'Justine's primary attachments are to other women' (244), then she is positioned as a source of trouble no matter how submissive she appears. In a heteronormative culture such attachments cannot be other than troubling. On a related note, the fact that she is the only woman in the text with no living male attachments is also important. To be fatherless and unmarried implies helpless exclusion from patriarchy, but also a state of radical possibility and dangerous freedom. As Tania Modleski observes, 'nothing could be *more* 'historically and ideologically significant' than the existence of the single woman in patriarchy' (qtd; in White 102). As a marginal, off-centre, female-identified figure, as well as an ideologically significant unmarried woman, Justine's position always contains the possibility for her being read 'queerly.' She clearly does not represent a modern 'lesbian' identity. What is suggested rather, and what I want to emphasise here, is what Patricia White calls 'a deviation from heterosexualized femininity' (94). In terms of this 'deviation,' it becomes easy for the Monster to ensure she will be accused of the crime he has committed because Justine is already positioned as a site of 'difference' and potential, if not actual, perversity. The chain of signification which shifts her meaning from a model of femininity to a female monster in the narrative includes intense female friendship, a certain level of detachment from patriarchy and heterosexuality, a tendency to occupy marginal spaces, and identification with women and 'monsters.'



The Monster's touch does not make Justine strange, so much as it reveals a potential for strangeness that already underlies her position. Like Justine, the Monster is a marginal member of the Frankenstein family who becomes read as a 'monstrous simulacrum' of a family member. Moreover, they are both associated with significantly 'outside' spaces. In fact, Justine's unwitting transgression is in part spatial. When she remains outside overnight searching for William, after 'the gates of Geneva were shut' (80), she places herself in a dangerously marginal place. Once outside the city walls (read civilisation/society), she is a woman of insecure status beyond social control and boundaries. Justine stays outside with the monsters and inadvertently becomes one when the Monster transfers his identity to her by placing the miniature portrait of Caroline upon her body. Her attempt at independent action leads to her downfall. After all, women who stay outside the home all night are perhaps bound to attract suspicion. Eventually, Justine confesses to the crime, not because she is guilty, but because monstrosity is imposed upon her with such discursive weight that she begins to believe it herself: 'I confessed a lie [...] my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was' (84). Justine could reasonably join her voice with that of the Monster when he asks, 'Was I, then, a monster [...] whom all men disowned' (117). Disowned by all but Elizabeth, Justine is identified with the creature, who likewise comes to believe that he is a monster because he is read as one.

In her monstrous capacity, Justine also has something to *de-monstrate*, to show, reveal and warn about culture. In the first instance, the juxtaposition of her body with that of the Monster draws attention to the way in which the discursive construction of

femininity is always haunted by the discursive construction of monstrosity. Justine comes to stand for the dreaded deceptive potential which, in a misogynist society, is perceived to inhere within the representation of 'perfect' femininity. This problem is neatly, if less subtly, illustrated in *The Vampyre*. In a striking figure of speech, the apparently virtuous women whom Lord Ruthven has encountered are said to have 'thrown even the mask aside' and 'not scrupled to expose the whole deformity of their vices to the public gaze' (7). Ruthven's monstrous touch 'outs' these women as something other than they appear to be, namely, sexual monsters. Whereas *The Vampyre* plays for effect upon the idea that women may in fact be monsters 'passing' as feminine, *Frankenstein* takes up a more interrogative, and less misogynist, position on this male anxiety. The Monster's touch does not 'out' Justine as a monster, but it does 'out' a society poised and ever ready to *read* certain subjects as monsters.<sup>9</sup> What her trial truly showcases, then, is the ever-present possibility for slippage from meaning 'feminine' to meaning 'monster.' There is an important irony in the fact that this monstrosity is read onto the body of one of the most passive women in the novel, as the text suggests awareness that the performance of perfect femininity can actually provoke suspicion. It is easy for the community to condemn Justine. Once accused, her gender performance no longer protects her: 'all the kindness which her beauty might otherwise have excited was obliterated in the minds of the spectators by the imagination of the enormity she was supposed to have committed' (79). Her 'beauty' and gentle demeanor fuel, rather than diffuse, the imagination of 'enormity,' because her performance is now read as deceptive.

But I would agree with Michel's conclusion that the Monster also points to the 'crime' of which Justine really *is* guilty, namely, primary attachment to women and

raising the spectre of same-sex desire. Her 'monstrosity' takes on further significance if she also figures as the site in the narrative at which it becomes possible to read a slippage from love and identification to desire between women. For the placing of Caroline's portrait upon the body of Justine signifies more than transference of the Monster's guilt and punishment; it also draws attention to her love for and identification with women and brings out the masked triangle of potential female desire in the Frankenstein family. In this respect, the portrait locket does indeed become a sign of monstrosity, for any potential desire between women is culturally considered monstrous. Justine loves Caroline, is one of her desired 'daughters' and, as Elizabeth observes, she goes so far as to act out and perform her identification with Caroline:

I do not mean that she made any professions [...] but you could see by her eyes that she almost adored her protectoress. [...] she paid the greatest attention to every gesture of my aunt. She thought her the model of all excellence [...] so that even now she often reminds me of her (63 - 64).

Justine's love for Caroline is expressed through the gaze and imitation of her object. This is clearly a 'performance' in the theatrical sense of the word, but it is also 'performative,' in the sense that Justine repetitively enacts, embodies and comes to stand for the bonds between women in the text. Elizabeth reminds Victor that everyone was too preoccupied to notice 'poor Justine,' who attended Caroline 'with the most anxious affection' and also become 'very ill' (64). The fact that Justine nurses Caroline also gives weight to the

subtle hints of same-sex love in the text, for as Ashley Tauchert observes, the trope of nursing has often been used to denote sexual intimacy in literature (5 and *n.* 11). Of course it is possible to read Justine's response to Caroline as an instance of non-desiring, feminine identification. Butler explains that, in the context of some psychoanalytic theories, identification and desire are constructed as mutually exclusive relations, in which case Justine cannot both want to *be* Caroline and to *have* Caroline at the same time. In this theoretical context, their feminine sameness would preclude the possibility of desire. However, as Butler proceeds to argue, 'It is important to consider that desire and identification can coexist, and that their formulation in terms of mutually exclusive oppositions serves a heterosexual matrix' ('Imitation' 26).<sup>10</sup> The assumption of an opposition between desire and gender identification also allows readers to dismiss representations that might be read as desiring, if it is allowed that the terms can coexist. As the relationship between Justine and Elizabeth proceeds to further challenge this supposed opposition it opens the way towards resistant reading.

### **'My Beloved and only Friend':**

#### **Locating the Shifting Space of Female Desire**

If she is condemned, I never shall know joy more. But she will not,  
I am sure she will not; and then I shall be happy again  
- Elizabeth (1818 edition, 60)

The final scene in which Justine and Elizabeth are together expands the possibilities of the discernible continuum of female bonding in *Frankenstein*. When the saintly Elizabeth enters the dungeon to visit her innocently monstrous friend, it is possible for

her to express more than she normally might, and it may be the very marginality of the space, its difference to the norm, that makes an expression of unorthodox desire possible. I would agree with Michel that, in this scene, the representation shifts from supportive relations to something more subversive, almost but not quite sliding over into a representation of desire between women (239). If, as the text implies, women's powers are highly constrained, a dungeon cell is a symbolically appropriate place in which to site the longest and most revealing exchange between them in the novel. The dungeon is a place out of the ordinary, an othered and abject domain. Throughout the text women are disciplined and imprisoned by expected feminine gender norms within heterosexual hegemony and, appropriately enough, it is only in the strange 'wild zone'<sup>11</sup> of this physical prison that escape becomes imaginable. As a narrative space, the scene set in the dungeon also opens the 'wild zone' of queer reading.

Victor's presence in the cell and control of the narrative initially appears to break down any lingering queer or Sapphic potential between the women as their declarations become increasingly ardent: 'Farewell, sweet lady, dearest Elizabeth, my beloved and only friend' (85). Sedgwick argues that in homosocial culture a woman often appears in scenes where two men are represented together in order to divert the threat of homosexual possibility (*Epistemology* 15). But, based upon Sedgwick's theorisation, I would propose that if women function in patriarchal homosocial culture as mediums of exchange between men, it may be possible to theorise a necessary reversal in which men function as sexual barriers against desire between women. In other words, homosocial culture does not only route male desire through triangular relations involving a woman, it can also block women's desire for each other through triangular relations involving a

man. In this context, Victor's presence in the cell distracts the reader away from Elizabeth and Justine's interaction. Whether or not he desires either woman, his narrative dominance could obstruct the significance of their relationship, because it is invisible and unimportant to him and he is in control of the narrative. Moreover, Victor *is* literally as well as figuratively the 'block' preventing any further progress in their story, because it is he, through the actions of his monster, who has indirectly caused Justine's death. This is also apt because while male dominated narratives have constructed love between women as a monstrous threat, they have also tried to render it invisible and silent by refusing to ascribe it any importance. That said, close queer reading makes it possible to see, resist and read around such masculine barriers.

With a shift in perspective, Victor's presence does not so much affirm male dominance as raise questions concerning his narrative's reliability. As Wake argues, Victor is an 'unknowing and uncomprehending male observer who tells the story his way' (500). He cannot see what is in front of his eyes. Moreover, he is silenced and excluded while Justine and Elizabeth say their farewells. He has no role to play other than to watch, listen, and describe a relationship he does not appreciate or understand except insofar as it relates to him: 'I had retired to the corner of the prison room' (84 - 85). Ignoring him, Justine throws 'herself at the feet of Elizabeth, weeping bitterly' (83). She defines herself as belonging to Elizabeth: 'your Justine' (84) and, when she does notice Victor, she defines him in relation to Elizabeth as 'your cousin' (85). In the first chapter, I discussed the repetitive, performative re-enactment of female kneeling to male protectors in *Frankenstein* and, in the context of this discussion, it is striking that Justine offers the only representation of a woman kneeling to another woman in the text. The

action is still submissive, implying a class rather than a gender-based hierarchy, but it does suggest that Justine responds to a world of female-centred power relations and expects women, rather than men, to protect her.

The potential for reading desire between Elizabeth and Justine is ultimately generated from a narrative play upon fantasy and gender slippage. The possibility is actually dependent upon the foreclosure of the relationship implied by Justine's imminent execution. Elizabeth fantasises herself into the role of a hero who will save Justine from death at the last moment, although it is already too late to do so:

Do not fear. I will proclaim, I will prove your innocence. I will melt the stony hearts of your enemies by my tears and prayers. You shall not die! You, my playfellow, my companion, my sister, perish on the scaffold! No! No! I never could survive so horrible a misfortune (84).

Elizabeth's rescue fantasy could be constructed as traditionally 'masculine,' insofar as it is active and verbal, but it is also conventionally 'feminine' – dependant on 'tears and prayers.' In a fantasy of gender slippage and role reversal, Elizabeth imagines the possibility of rescuing Justine through a radically contradictory 'feminine' stance, an assertive proclamatory attack upon Justine's enemies, who will paradoxically be subdued by her performance of traditional religious and tearful femininity. This suggests the gender slippage of an imagined femininity so assertive as to become heroic and, perhaps by implication in terms of cultural gender constructs, 'masculine.' Elizabeth's

expressed desire also denaturalises femininity by suggesting that it can be manipulated. This might remind us of the way Caroline's performance of maternal femininity could have masked a primary love for Elizabeth. But throughout *Frankenstein*, the text repeatedly shows awareness that femininity is something women are forced to 'perform,' consciously or unconsciously, in order achieve certain ends.

More radically, Elizabeth positions herself as the 'lover' and Justine as her 'beloved.' Her rescue fantasy opens the fracture of a possibility for imagining another story in which she somehow saves Justine from execution. This might be experienced as what Zimmerman calls a 'what if' moment (139), a fissure in the dominant narrative where an alternative story can be glimpsed or imagined. Furthermore, if Elizabeth and Justine can be said to express desire for each other from 'feminine' positions, their relationship lacks the constituting presence of the 'masculine identification,' presumed necessary for such desire to exist within what Butler calls, the '*imaginary* logic' of the 'heterosexual matrix' ('Critically Queer' 28). It is precisely moments such as these that are of interest in queer critical readings, moments where the accepted representational relationship between gender intelligibility and desire begin to shift and break down. Elizabeth's final statement creates further complications: "I wish," cried she, "that I were to die with you; I cannot live in this world of misery" (85). Her wish ruptures heteronormative textual representation because her construction of her future life as 'a world of misery' expresses a sense of profound female disillusion, as well as a desire for ultimate union in death with a beloved of the same-sex. Her statement defamiliarises the 'normal' world, and suggests the possibility for imagining an alternative narrative in which same-sex love is primary and women rescue each other and die together. Eric



Savoy formulates what may be a useful approach to the representational dynamics of desire between Justine and Elizabeth in this scene. He argues that queer desire resides in the ‘unaccountable’ moment: ‘that which can never quite be accounted *for* – the moment that cannot be subsumed within the heterosexist strategies of containment, but remains in excess precisely *as* excess’ (168). This excessive moment is neither definitely ‘lesbian,’ nor ‘straight,’ but it is subversively and queerly ‘unaccountable.’

It is not surprising to find that when Justine has appeared in mainstream film adaptations she has been ‘heterosexualised.’ In *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, for instance, Justine (Trevyn McDowell) is represented as being in love with Victor (Kenneth Branagh), telling Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) to go to Ingoldstadt, because if he belonged to her she would have already gone to find him. This positions her not only as a ‘normal’ woman who expresses desire for a man, but also as a self-sacrificing facilitator of the heterosexual romance between Victor and Elizabeth which this film rather desperately champions. It is important to be aware of the ways in which heteronormative interpretative and representational paradigms inform the ascription of significance to certain characters and events in film adaptations. Because mainstream films are usually made for ‘heterosexual’ audiences, characters such as Justine, who express no heterosexual desire, may be omitted as simply uninteresting, or, as in Branagh’s film, altered to serve a heterosexual agenda. However, in many *Frankenstein* adaptations the connotation of male homosexual desire is still clearly visible, while women’s relationships are ascribed no real importance. I would suggest that this reflects a sexist, as well as a heterosexist, drive to privilege the men’s story – even if it is a ‘homosexual’ story. Justine appears as an important character in Terence Fisher’s *Curse*

of *Frankenstein* (Hammer 1957), but in this version her 'heterosexualisation' is taken to extremes. Appearing as a camp spectacle of deviant heterosexual femininity, as signified by her 'French maid's' uniform, Justine (Valerie Gaunt) is positioned as the rival of Elizabeth (Hazel Court). She has a sexual relationship with Victor and may even be pregnant. Evidently, this Justine is a very different figure from the innocent girl of Shelley's novel but, as a deviant heterosexual woman, she retains her place as one of the Monster's first victims.

In the novel, Justine signifies the culmination of female bonding: the point of crisis at which the possibility of proscribed same-sex desire fractures the female continuum and more troubling possibilities open. It is no coincidence that she falls foul of the Monster, for she not only figures as a site of radical possibility; she is the point at which such possibilities must be closed down, or literally killed off. Her death is also the death of the desiring possibility and the end of the continuum of female bonding in the narrative. I agree with Michel's conclusion that 'the crime of which Justine is convicted' is not so much murder, as it is 'her raising the possibility of a relation between women that is *not* constituted by identification' (248). But, to push the point a little harder, perhaps we could also say Justine raises the possibility that 'woman identification' and desire *can* coexist in a text. In this respect, she does open a critical space in which lesbian and queer reading can begin to re-write the text. Savoy suggests, usefully I think, that we should try and negotiate a space between lesbian specificity and queer unaccountability, arguing 'for the shadowy realm of connotation, a lesbian specificity that interlines and pulls against, without dismantling, a heterosexual narrative trajectory' (151). Students should be encouraged to think about how such 'shadowy' realms of

connotation can indeed pull against the dominant reading and offer fresh perspectives on the text. But, we must always remind ourselves to be wary of the many ways in which cultural discourses about relations between women inform and shape the way we respond to texts. Although there may be no lesbians as such in the text, in *Frankenstein*, its film adaptations and some scholarship, it is possible to perceive cultural narratives through which the significance of such relations has been constituted as both something to be silenced and a lurking threat to the male-dominated world. Queer reading should work to bring the often unspoken effects of such narratives, within the text and in responses to the text, into the light. At the same time, it is important to try and read beyond and around heteronormative interpretative paradigms and to keep pushing open possibilities for seeing the text differently.

### Seeing Differently

Here, to see at all means seeing outside the assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality, seeing that there *is* an outside to them. It is the frame of compulsory heterosexuality that renders all unions except those between a man and a woman illegible  
- Geraldine Friedman (16).

Mary Shelley's own playful remembrance of her youthful tendency to get 'tousy mousy for women' serves as a nicely queer concluding point to this discussion about the possibilities for reading desire between women in *Frankenstein*. Shelley's statement is neither an affirmation nor a denial; it refuses final interpretation and leaves her relationship with Jane tantalisingly suspended in meaning. Geraldine Friedman has traced the etymology of the phrase 'tousy-mousy' and found that it meant 'to pull around roughly,' with connotations of roughing up, disturbance and dishevelment (31, *n.* 41).

Such a definition is an appropriate frame for this entire discussion. After all, to disturb, to 'rough up,' 'tousle about' and pull a text around, in the aim of producing new reading possibilities, is a primary objective for queer reading practices. Friedman goes on to note that a variant 'towsy-mowsy' was actually used as slang for the female pudendum. Quite aside from the new angle this knowledge might provide on Mary Shelley's sense of humour, in the context of this discussion, it also adds another layer of queer meaning. For my attempt to re-read *Frankenstein* has indeed been undertaken against a backdrop of silenced and masked sexual meaning both in the text and the wider cultural field.

As a sexual pressure point, a disruptive space of sameness, a consideration of Mary Shelley's relationship with Jane Williams compliments and extends my discussion concerning relations between women in *Frankenstein*, because it has disrupted biographical endeavours and forced a perceptual shift with regard to the way Shelley's life has been received. In particular, some biographical responses to the queerly unaccountable 'text' of this relationship further illustrate the constraining and impoverishing effects of heteronormative interpretative paradigms. Attempting to negotiate the truth regime of modern sexual categorisation has actually caused a proliferation of difficulties for Shelley's biographers. Miranda Seymour, for example, gives sympathetic consideration to a 'lesbian' possibility in Shelley's life:

Mary described herself as wedded to Jane; should we conclude that she had entered, or sought, a sexual partnership? [...] Was she hinting that her love for Jane was not platonic? The possibility cannot be ruled out (369 - 370).<sup>12</sup>

However, Seymour's analysis soon becomes caught in a cycle of fascinated, contradictory, and sexually suggestive disavowal. She proceeds to explain that Mary and Jane's friendship with another woman, Mary Diana Dods, whom she does define as a 'lesbian,' 'should not lead us to conclude that their own relationship was sexual although it was undeniably intense' (370). In other words, the fact that they may have had lesbian friends should not be taken as evidence for their own involvement in lesbian practices. But of course this argument adds another layer of suspicion and yet another sexually suspicious female figure to the situation. Strangely enough, Seymour goes on to reassure the reader that Shelley probably was not sexually involved with Dods herself, because she 'remained much too deeply attached to Jane Williams [...] for it to be likely that she embarked on a sexual relationship with Mary Diana Dods' (375). The logic of the argument here appears to be that Shelley did *not* have sexual relations with Dods (then why suggest the possibility that she did?), because she was at the time so deeply involved with another woman, with whom she likewise probably did not have sexual relations. The use of the signifier 'lesbian' in relation to these women only serves to complicate matters in Seymour's narrative. In her book about Dods, Betty T. Bennett also discusses a wide range of sexual possibilities, only to conclude, 'it appears that her [Shelley's] love relationships with the women she loved were nonerotic' (249). These attempts to read the text through the lens of cultural knowledge about lesbianism therefore result in lengthy discussions which, while enjoying all the speculation, come finally to the same basically normalising conclusion that there is 'probably' nothing to be seen.

In my view, the most important refusal here should be a refusal on the part of the reader to become caught up in this cycle of suspicion, speculation and disavowal. As in the case of the women in *Frankenstein*, there can be no productive progress as long as the lens of heteronormativity is permitted to frame this discussion. From a queer perspective, it is important to note how these biographers apply sexual categories, such as 'lesbian,' only to underpin basically *heteronormative* reading agendas. I am certainly not suggesting here that the concept of lesbian identity is inherently restrictive; in this chapter, I have shown how lesbian theory and queer theory can inform and play off one another in a productive way. What I am arguing, however, is that all critics working under the banner of GLBTQ studies should be ready to critique those moments when (homo)sexual categories are used to shore up narratives which ultimately seek to contain or disavow the presence of unruly, unaccountable, queer desire. While we must remain aware of our own ontological dependence upon sexual categories, we must also be wary of the way in which terms such as 'lesbian' can be used as a containment strategy. Moreover, what Bennett calls the 'nagging question' of lesbian experimentation (247), tells us a great deal more about modern sexual epistemology and cultural responses to the possibility of same-sex desire between women, than it does about Mary Shelley and her friends. It tells us, in the first instance, that 'lesbianism' has been produced in heterosexual culture as a 'nagging problem,' as a site of interpretative crisis. In relation to Shelley, the difficulty revolves around the fact that such desire is culturally represented as 'an enigma that incites an obsessive desire for knowledge' (Friedman 3). But, at the same time, this epistemological drive vies with the impulse to disavow representations that do not appear to fit into the accepted categories of 'lesbian,' or 'heterosexual,' desire.

Both Seymour and Bennett try to fit Dods into the lesbian category.<sup>13</sup> But, at the risk of imposing yet another modern sexual identity upon her, her life seems to present something closer to what we would now call 'transgendered' subjectivity. Eventually, 'Doddy,' as s/he was affectionately known, broke free from the female identity into which s/he plainly did not fit, adopted male clothes permanently and reinvented him/herself as Mr Walter Sholto Douglas. The problem is not Dods, it is the fact that the word 'lesbian' is inadequate to describe her identity and actually works in these texts to shut down transgender possibilities.

In her fascinating essay devoted to Dods, Friedman observes, 'To see what is there [...] one must see differently' (15). A brilliant, illegitimate, physically disabled and queer individual, Dods all but disappeared from literary history until his/her story came to light through the careful detective work of Bennett, as described in her book *Mary Diana Dods: A Gentleman and a Scholar* (1991).<sup>14</sup> Bennett found she could not make progress in her investigations until she shifted her perspective, admitted the possibility that Dods worked under more than one male pseudonym and realised that the mysterious male figures she was attempting to trace were in fact Dods. She then had to accept the fact that this individual eventually took on a male identity and married a woman. But once she took this radically queer leap of faith, she was able to see the 'queer life' that had been in front of her eyes all along. Dods had disappeared partly because s/he had escaped so many heteronormative sex and gender categories. Unsurprisingly, the contemporary social commentator Eliza Rennie described her in the language of monstrosity: 'Nature, in any of its vagaries, never fashioned anything more grotesque-looking than Miss Dods [...] you almost fancied, on first looking at her, that some one of the masculine gender

had indulged in the freak of feminine habiliments' (qtd; in Friedman 7). The trope of monstrosity is often put into play when people are confronted with someone who appears unintelligible in relation to accepted representational norms and, like all monsters, Dods has something important to reveal.

Dods's friendship with Mary Shelley led to one of the queerest, most intriguing and unseen incidents in Shelley's life: her role in the arrangement of a transvestite marriage between Doddy and Isabella Robinson, a young woman who needed a father for her illegitimate baby.<sup>15</sup> Shelley, who was often described by contemporaries as beautiful and feminine (Friedman 13), struck up an immediate rapport with Dods, perhaps because they were both, in their own ways, sexual and social outcasts. Despite Shelley's often supposed moral and social conservatism, she showed no compunction about changing Dods's gender from female to male, as long as her friend could pass successfully. Maybe she understood that all women must, in some sense, 'pass' in order to survive. Dods's transformation happened to coincide with a visit from the philanthropist Fanny Wright, who came in search of the daughter of her heroine Mary Wollstonecraft (See Seymour 383 - 384). She found Shelley tense and somewhat disappointing, and during the visit was introduced to a young couple with their baby: Mr and Mrs Walter Sholto Douglas. Like Victor Frankenstein in the dungeon cell, Fanny Wright could not 'see' what was in front of her because she could not see beyond the constraints of heteronormative representation. Together, the stories in *Frankenstein* and Mary Shelley's own queer story bring us finally to the larger point. When we try and read beyond the constraints of heteronormative and heterosexual interpretative paradigms, it sometimes becomes



possible to see something much queerer, and more interesting, than we initially expected to find.

I decided to discuss the women's relationships before turning my attention to questions of same-sex desire between men. This is partly because relationships between men have been a primary focus for queer critical readings of *Frankenstein*, to such an extent that it has almost become 'normal' for critics to pay attention to this aspect of the novel. While it is good to see queer approaches becoming more widely applied, this privileging of male relations has also re-inscribed the masculinist bias evident in much queer theoretical work, a bias I hoped to resist by bringing the women forward and discussing them first. But what of the men? In a sense, the shift from discussing the women to talking about desire between men is tantamount to a shift from trying to talk about what does *not* appear to be in the text, to addressing something that appears to be *everywhere* in the text. For desiring relations between men and monsters seem to dominate *Frankenstein* and readings have increasingly come to the conclusion that this novel is, on one level, all about male 'homosexuality.' However, the issue continues to be tied up with sexual epistemology, intelligibility and the signification of queer desire. The answer may be different, but I would propose a similar question: how does the discursive production of desire between men make itself felt in *Frankenstein* and how has it informed the way in which the text has been read?

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the 'queer touch' is taken from Carolyn Dinshaw who asks us to consider how a touch of queerness 'invites us to see how such a sense of the sexual norm has been constructed' ('Queer Touches' 78). In the context of my example, the queer touch works by drawing attention to the construction of 'normal' female sexual desire, reminding the reader that Mary Shelley's heterosexuality is presumed until her relationship with Jane suggests otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> I am drawing here upon Zimmerman's essay 'Perverse Reading: the Lesbian Appropriation of Literature' (139). Zimmerman argues that lesbian-feminist readers appropriate resist and rewrite "heterotexts."

<sup>3</sup> As Adrienne Rich observes, 'This assumption of female heterosexuality seems to me itself remarkable: it is an enormous assumption to have glided so silently into the foundations of our thought' (232).

<sup>4</sup> Rich's essay is one of the most admired and contested works in lesbian studies. Rich used the phrase 'lesbian continuum' to denote a wide range of woman-identified experience, while woman identification is understood as 'a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality' (244). Some self-identified lesbian readers have been uncomfortable with the essay because they read it as de-sexualising lesbianism and collapsing the term into other more generalised forms of female relating. But, up to a point, this text throws pertinent light upon the relations between women in *Frankenstein*.

<sup>5</sup> Rich calls the lesbian possibility 'an engulfed continent which rises fragmentally into view from time to time only to become submerged again' (238).

<sup>6</sup> Farwell develops her understanding of the lesbian narrative moment as a 'disruptive space of sameness' as opposed to the "'difference' which has structured most western narratives' (93). Farwell theorizes the space of female sameness as disrupting the binary male/female structure in western narratives. She notes how feminist theorists 'have explored the importance of women's bonding [...] as a powerful tool for breaking narrative codes' (93).

<sup>7</sup> This version differs from the 1818 edition in which Elizabeth is Alphonse's niece and is bestowed upon the family after her mother's death. Some critics argue that this alteration is intended to tone down the incestuous overtones of her being Victor's first cousin, as well as his adopted sister and future wife in the first edition. If so, this attempt to tone down the text actually results in a more intriguing reading of the relationship by making Caroline the instigator of Elizabeth's adoption. Many critics have commented upon the incestuous nature of Victor's relationship with Elizabeth, and Gilbert and Gubar go so far as to argue that almost all the relationships in the novel are at least metaphorically 'incestuous' (228 - 229).

<sup>8</sup> Mellor, for instance, reads this incident as proving that Caroline 'incarnates a patriarchal ideal of female devotion and self-sacrifice' (116).

<sup>9</sup> As Patricia MacCormack notes, at 'the primary level of monstrosity, the very first departure from the white integrated subject is a woman. In this way, any woman is a monster to begin with, and has been for as long as can be historically traced. A body of difference, while being (especially in a compulsory hetero normative culture) an object of fascination, is simultaneously that of disgust' (7).

<sup>10</sup> In her essay 'Critically Queer' Butler concludes that the 'heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire are mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments' (28).

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of a 'wild zone' is taken from Elaine Showalter (qtd; in Zimmerman 141). Showalter uses the term 'wild zone' to describe the opening of spaces of female sexual possibility in literature which take place out of sight of men.

<sup>12</sup> Seymour is here referring to a letter written by Shelley to her friend Leigh Hunt 1825, in which she wrote, 'the hope & consolation of my life is the society of Mrs W[illiams]. To her, for better or worse, I am wedded' (qtd; in Seymour 369).

<sup>13</sup> Friedman refers to Bennett's discussion 'as a veritable orgy of prurient speculation' (17). Her speculations certainly do appear symptomatic of a culture with a mania for sex and gender categorisation, as Bennett first suggests, and then denies, that Dods might have been 'a lesbian,' 'a transvestite' (256) a 'true hermaphrodite' (258) or a 'transsexual' (260).

<sup>14</sup> In the words of Friedman, Bennett's book 'records the author's serendipitous discovery of Dod's male personas and the difficult, slow, and frequently interrupted task of linking these identities to a woman.' Bennett's research uncovered 'a series of transgender careers so successful that they remained undiscovered for over 150 years, until Bennett discovered them in the process of preparing a new edition of Mary Shelley's correspondence' (3).

<sup>15</sup> For more, see Friedman's essay and also Seymour's chapter entitled 'A Curious Marriage' (378 - 389).

## Chapter Four

### The Company of Men:

#### *Frankenstein, The Vampyre, and the Monster of Homosexuality*

it is so much a novel about men,  
- Frann Michel (238)

Desire between men is certainly a privileged site of anxious interest in much Gothic fiction and *Frankenstein* is no exception to this rule. The denotation of homosexual desire is necessarily foreclosed in a nineteenth-century novel, but when Walton decides to record Victor's tale because he, in some sense, desires 'this wonderful man' (28), it would appear that the possibility of such desire is not the *end* of this story. Rather, male same-sex desire instigates, underlies, and structures the entire narrative, even if it appears only as haunting potential. An erotic undercurrent is plainly discernible when Walton waits, with baited breath and pen poised: 'as I commence my task, his full-toned voice swells in my ears; his lustrous eyes dwell on me with all their melancholy sweetness' (29). *Frankenstein* appears to figure eroticised male bonding as a generative force of narrative reproduction. But if the narrative is thus *conceived* as the textual progeny of Victor's bond with Walton, a bond expressed through motifs such as gazing, speaking, listening and writing, a monstrous tale with a speaking monster at its heart is perhaps to be expected. In a culture in which the possibility of same-sex desire creates deep anxiety, what else should we expect to find in a narrative produced from such an ambiguously charged desiring dynamic? Lurking outside on the ice while Walton transcribes Victor's story, the Monster of unacceptable desire always threatens to intrude, symbolising a danger underlying all male relationships in nineteenth-century homophobic culture.

This chapter draws upon the work of theorists, such as Sedgwick and Lee Edelman, who follow the Foucauldian line of argument that ‘homosexuality,’ as a category of identity, crystallized from the seventeenth century onwards, becoming increasingly codified and available to phobic representation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> While I do not necessarily agree with Foucault’s proposition that there was no real sense of homosexual ‘identity’ before the nineteenth century, his theory is still useful for considering how the historical discourses which surround and, importantly, *constitute* the significance of sexual relations between men have developed over time. Moreover, the relationships presented in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* appear to run the gamut of what Sedgwick calls the ‘continuum of male “homosocial desire”’ (*Between Men* 1). They range from the affectionate, homoerotically inflected friendships of Victor Frankenstein, Henry Clerval and Captain Walton, to Aubrey’s repressed homoerotic desire for Lord Ruthven, to the homosexual panic and homophobia discernible in Victor’s relationship with his Monster and Aubrey’s deadly bond with Ruthven. No doubt it is significant to see Gothic texts foreground problematic male relations, because the early nineteenth century was an intensely homophobic period in England.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Gothic fiction is again productive for discussing queer theoretical concerns, this time with regard to the discursive construction of homosexual identity in a society in which homophobia is wielded as, what Sedgwick calls, a ‘mechanism of domination,’ regulating the sexual behavior of all men ‘by the specific oppression of a few’ (*Between Men* 87, 88).

Although they do not bring out any inherent ‘truths’ about desire between men, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* do have a lot to tell us about some of the ways in which

homosexual meaning has been constituted in western culture as a site of compulsive and phobic *reading*. In forcing us to spend so much time in the ‘company of men,’ these texts offer much scope for exploring the complexities and tensions involved in reading male relations. It is important to be clear that the identification, or definition, of the desire represented in the text is *not* the issue in this chapter; for it is not my intention to engage in arguments about whether or not the relationships in the text should be read as ‘homosexual.’ Instead, the primary question here is one of sexual epistemology and cultural intelligibility. I want to show how these texts draw attention to the interpretative matrix through which relations between men are made legible *as* desire, and demonstrate the deployment of various taxonomies and ‘knowledges’ surrounding the subject of what it means for a man to desire a man. My contribution to the field therefore lies not so much in the identification of homosexual meaning as in its *production* and, more precisely, its *signification*. What is at issue in this chapter is the extent to which the possibility of desire between men, and the horror it elicits, is activated as a connotative signifying system, and constituted as a series of syntagmatic relations between ‘homosexual’ signs in Gothic texts.<sup>3</sup> Much of the homosexual signification in these texts will still be recognisable as such to readers today. First, I propose that the homoerotic deserves more attention as a critical space in *Frankenstein*. Then I discuss the extent to which homophobic discourse impacts upon the language of both texts. Finally, I will suggest that a deep unease over the legibility of desire between men creeps into criticism and film adaptations more pervasively than might at first be apparent and I address some of the implications this raises for queer reading and pedagogy.

**'I Desire the Company of a Man':**

**The Possibilities and the Limits of Reading the Homoerotic**

How do we think we know?  
- D. A Miller (123)

In my view, *Frankenstein* presents a more complex and sophisticated engagement with homoerotic meaning than has so far been explored in depth. In putting into play cultural knowledge about what signifies homoeroticism, the text opens a space for considering how such meaning is made available through connotation and constituted as a site of definitional crisis. I make use of the word 'homoerotic' throughout this discussion to describe narrative moments where, for various reasons, a potential for male same-sex desire becomes readable. It is possible to identify a syntagmatic chain of signs, or codes, which produce homoerotic signatures in the text through tapping into the 'knowledge' about homosexuality available in the wider cultural field. In this representational context, desire threatens to make itself felt when the pressure point, already created by the representation of an intensely expressed same-sex relationship, converges with other narrative factors to produce a space in which the configuration of sex, gender, desire and power exceeds, or differs from, (hetero)normative expectations. Building upon the previous chapter, I would suggest that particular attention should be paid to moments where representations of same-sex friendship are located in (homo)sexually significant spaces, mediated through a foregrounding of the gaze, and the normative relationship between gender identity and desire is, in some sense, troubled.

Presenting compelling moments of slippage from friendship into something more than, or other than, friendship, *Frankenstein* seems to push homoerotically-informed

male bonding to the limits of acceptability within the constraints of homosocial representation. The dynamic between Victor Frankenstein and his friends could be termed liminal homoeroticism, a phrase which I use to express the sense of undecidability in these friendships, which are difficult to categorise and appear to exist in a state of representational flux. They are neither safely non-sexual homosocial bonds, nor definable as homosexual relationships. Walton's statement, 'I desire the company of a man' (17), is a disquieting site of definitional crises, situating him, as it does, in the strange position of a man who desires *to* desire another man. The sense of 'lack' from which his desire stems is the lack of male company, but what he means by 'a more intimate sympathy with a fellow mind' (27) is left crucially undefined. The potential for interpretative crises here has its source in what Louis Crompton calls 'the friendship problem' (6). Evidently, a friendship such as Victor and Walton's can be placed somewhere within the spectrum of homosocial bonds, but the crucial question in a homophobic culture is where, exactly? After all, Walton's expedition is a socially acceptable venture; its success is predicated upon the corollary success of close male bonding, and surely there is nothing inherently suspicious in his feeling 'the want of a friend' (17). But, his desire for a closer friendship with 'a man who could sympathise with me; whose eyes would reply to mine' (17) is troubling, because it threatens to cross the invisible, carefully blurred line from being a 'man's man,' to being 'interested in men' (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 89).

*Frankenstein* has more to reveal about the homoerotic than *The Vampyre* because it gives affective same-sex bonds more space, whereas Aubrey's desire for Ruthven deteriorates quickly into the type of hostility which is often now read as 'homosexual



panic.’ But *The Vampyre* also draws attention to the risky representation of male friendship, for it is Aubrey’s desire for a friendship with Ruthven which first causes the relationship to appear potentially desiring and therefore dangerous. Of course, one set of interpretative problems would be solved if we could simply categorise Victor and Walton’s or Aubrey and Ruthven’s relationships as ‘homosexual,’ but homoerotic undecidability is more disturbing in a culture with a mania for sexual categorisation. To attempt to decide whether homosexual meaning is present in the text is to miss the point that homoerotic signification gains its power to disturb from its undecidability. The ambiguous homoerotic charge is intensified by a persistent foregrounding of the male gaze in *Frankenstein*. As a sign, the male gaze becomes an index to desire if it taps into the reader’s culturally inscribed ‘knowledge’ that homoerotic desire *is* something mediated through the gaze. Time and again the narrative focuses upon the look, as Walton says of Victor, ‘I never saw a more interesting creature’ (25). As a signifier, the gaze has long been the site of (homo)sexual trouble. D. A Miller notes that ‘perhaps the most salient index to male homosexuality, socially speaking, consists precisely in how a man looks at other men’ (131). In the convoluted logic of homophobic reading, homosexual desire is read through reading the male gaze. By gazing upon men who gaze upon one another, it is presumed possible to read their desire, but the gaze is a site of anxiety because it is impossible to be certain of the meaning conveyed. Depending on the reader’s point of view, the male gaze has more than one meaning: a sign of desire, a means of sexual communication, it can also convey a menacing sexual threat, or imply homophobic surveillance.

The homoerotic pressure gains yet more force when the appearance of men who gaze upon one another is overlaid with any slippage in masculine gender representation. Masculinity refuses monolithic signification in Walton's narrative. In terms of heteronormative representational logic, gender and sexual desire are intimately connected. In this context, Walton's self-identification as a toughly masculine but feminine-identified man, in addition to his expressed desire for close male companionship, is troubling. His position is difficult to navigate because, broadly speaking, in heteronormative psychoanalytic terms, a feminine identification means he should desire a man and a masculine one that he should desire a woman. Choosing to live in an all-male environment where brutality is the norm and the feminine is excluded, Walton claims to dislike aggressive men. Aspiring instead to what he vaguely constructs as a female value-system, he attempts to plot a course between feminine and masculine qualities in himself and others. Initially, he is 'desirous to engage' his first mate, impressed by his 'gentleness and the mildness of his discipline' (18). Attracted to a man who performs masculinity in a different manner to other sailors and against normative expectations, Walton implicitly critiques certain expected male behaviors. The received norm is challenged further when he proclaims his own feminine identification: 'my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage, has so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste to the usual brutality exercised on board ship' (18). Walton does not consider his identity sexually problematic. Instead, he claims that it makes him a superior sailor without undermining his power relation to other men: 'I voluntarily endured cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep; I often worked harder than the common sailors' (15). Evidently a class issue is also detectable and Walton's

self-differentiation from the other sailors can also be read through that lens. However, in terms of gender and desire, his position is problematic because he evinces no desire for women and instead desires a male companion from a position seemingly both masculine and feminine.

The very hyper-masculinity of the all-male ship environment and the fact that there are no women present is also (homo)sexually problematic. One of the tenets of Sedgwick's argument is that in homosocial culture male bonds become intelligible and acceptable 'primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman' (*Epistemology* 15). The lack of a female term therefore shifts the intelligibility of male bonds to something potentially other than heterosexual, and takes the representation of homosocial bonding to dangerous extremes. In this respect, it is not surprising that sailors have come to occupy such 'a privileged position in the popular mythology of homosexuality' (Dyer; qtd in Benshoff 105). It is also possible to tap into the homoerotic charge at the level of space, for the ship is already culturally coded as a fantasmatic homoeroticised space and has long been inscribed as a site of sexual fantasy, homophobic anxiety and camp humour. Of course, this again tells us more about the culture that reads and worries about the homoerotic than it does any truths about desire between men.

Victor's friendship with Henry Clerval produces another homoerotic signature through the same syntagmatic chain of signification identifiable in his relationship with Walton. Again, a close male bond is intensified through the gaze, a suggestion of gender slippage and the representation of same-sex proximity within a significant space. Like Walton, Clerval appears to occupy what can be called, at most, a 'non-heterosexual' position in the narrative. Victor cites him, rather than Elizabeth, as the 'wiser, better,

dearer' friend, who makes up his 'unfashioned' nature (27). The erotic charge is most strongly felt when Clerval nurses Victor through his first breakdown and subsequent convalescence. An intense friendship, certainly, but Clerval's undertaking also unsettles conventional assumptions about gender, insofar as nursing is traditionally a female role. There are other solutions available: Victor's family could come to him from Geneva, or a professional nurse hired to assist, and Elizabeth assumes this second option has been the arrangement.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Clerval actively keeps the extent of Victor's illness secret, compounding the impression of a closer than normal homosocial bond. If his claim, that he does not wish to worry the Frankenstein family, is taken at face value, it might be concluded that he only wishes to serve rather than resist their interests. But Clerval's reasoning can also be read as an easy excuse masking something potentially unacceptable, since the intrusion of the family would radically disrupt the exclusivity of their interaction. Moreover, as a marginal, potentially sexualised space, the sickroom/bedroom establishes the narrative pattern discussed in the previous chapter, whereby same-sex bonding is again relegated to socially and sexually somewhat ambiguous places. Within the wider male-only context of the university, this suggests that basically acceptable all-male environments can mask less acceptable (homo)erotic spaces.

If the presence of homoerotic signification presents readers with a certain amount of interpretative choice as to the extent to which they read a represented relationship as homosexual or not, it is again interesting to consider the 'choices' some film makers have made in response to this possibility. Walton, for instance, is notable by his absence from most mainstream adaptations, but the widespread availability of homosexuality as a

modern category of identity would probably cause any faithful portrayal of the novel's Walton to appear extremely effeminate, and therefore 'gay,' in twenty-first century eyes. Our present culture is, if anything, more not less saturated with what William J. Spurlin calls 'effeminaphobia' (77) than the culture of Mary Shelley's lifetime.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the language used in the interactions between Walton, Clerval and Victor might appear more homoerotic now than it did in 1818 or 1831 because, since then, the notion of a link between homosexuality and effeminacy has become more deeply inscribed and available to homophobic codification.<sup>6</sup> Rather than confront this challenge directly, it may be easier for filmmakers to simply omit the character.

However, the attempt to reinstate Walton in Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is even more telling than his disappearance elsewhere. Particularly striking is the way this film, consciously or unconsciously, attempts to reconfigure the interpretative matrix, presumably to encourage a less homoerotically inflected representation. The solution is to keep Walton, but delete the friendship and depict instead 'a Walton who is no longer very friendly towards, or in admiration of Frankenstein' (Sinatra 256). The description 'no longer very friendly' does not quite do justice to the immediate hostile and hyper-masculine competition between the two men: 'I give the orders here,' warns Walton (Aidan Quinn). This power struggle has the effect of causing Victor's sudden decision to tell Walton his story appear a little strange, but the scene may indicate a desire on the part of the film makers to get it 'straight' from the beginning. In this respect, I would again suggest that the film is not responding to the novel so much as to earlier adaptations. After all, members of the audience may well be aware of the homosexual connotations and camp humour put into play in older

*Frankenstein* films, such as Whale's adaptations and the Hammer series. Perhaps *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* sets this scene in order to try and convince the audience that there will be no hint of homoeroticism between these two men in *this* version of *Frankenstein*.

The film also offers what could be called a 'hetero-normalisation' of Clerval and Victor's friendship, rearranging the way in which the relationship is signified to defuse erotic potential. One of the first lines given to Clerval (Tom Hulce) is a claim that he wants to become a doctor in order to gain access to the daughters of rich old ladies. Proclaiming the character's heterosexuality as a priority again seems to get things 'straight' from the beginning. Later, when Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) is brought to Ingolstadt to nurse Victor through his illness, the period of male relating in the novel is broken down and everyone is put back in appropriately heteronormative gender roles. Clerval becomes Victor's doctor rather than his nurse. This change is also an interesting 're-masculinisation' with which to accompany the heterosexualisation of the relationship. Moreover, the introduction of Elizabeth reinstates the cultural system, identified by Sedgwick, in which male-male desire is made intelligible and defused by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman. This model is absent at the same point in the novel. The message is clear: it is still difficult to represent male friendship without introducing a female term to break down any hint of desire. The translation to film therefore indicates some areas where the novel now presses a little too closely on heteronormative nerves. The representational agenda appears to be to prevent the possible visibility of homoeroticism. However, the film's implicit resistance to this possibility cannot help but undercut its own agenda because such disavowal is predicated upon the presence of the possibility in the first place. And in *Mary Shelley's*

*Frankenstein*, it is difficult to escape the impression that homoeroticism has already been *read* into the text in order to be ‘cut.’ One of the most striking scenes in this respect is, appropriately enough, the moment of the Monster’s birth. Presenting the most homoerotic interpretation so far seen in a mainstream adaptation, with Victor semi-nude wrestling his nude creature in the ‘amniotic’ fluid, it appears ‘like an enticing parody of sexual intercourse’ (Sinatra 263). It may be the case that the relationship between Victor and his Creature is so strongly written into the novel as one of desire that the director could not help but allow an element of this possibility into the film.

In terms of reading the homoerotic, perhaps the most striking feature of *Frankenstein* is its repeated figuration of male happiness in terms of eroticised male bonding which initially appears to be remarkably unproblematic and free from the tensions of ‘homosexual panic.’ In this respect, the narrative offers a space in which it is briefly possible to read romantic male friendship sympathetically. As Victor says of Clerval, ‘How sincerely did you love me [...] your gentleness and affection warmed and opened my senses’ (68). He claims, ‘I loved him with a mixture of affection and reverence that knew no bounds’ (66). In implying that such love goes beyond normal boundaries, Victor suggests a radical and utopian conceptualisation of male friendship as theoretically boundless. He does differentiate this bond from what might normally be expected, noting that Clerval’s friendship is of ‘that devoted and wondrous nature that the worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the imagination’ (151). If this relationship enters realms of relating that would be for other people imaginary, Victor also implies that it is located beyond the bounds of normal representation. However, the apparent lack of danger in Victor’s intimacies with Clerval and Walton leads McGavran to designate

them ‘safely unsexual male homosocial bondings’ (56). He suggests that ‘we read Victor’s relationships with Clerval and Walton as examples of intense but “safe” homosocial desire, and his relationship with his creature as a deadly one based on homoerotic desire, homosexual panic, and the paranoid gothic’ (49). Eric Daffron also argues that the text ‘indicates no sexual desire’ between Victor and Clerval, but is less sure about Walton and insists all the male bonds in the novel exist along a continuum of desire (424). I would agree that there is an identifiable continuum of male desire in the text but, ultimately, I do not read Victor’s friendships with Walton or Clerval as unsexual, unproblematic or safe. Indeed, the homoerotic signification in the text is comprehensible as part of a larger cultural narrative in which the possibility of such desire does lead inevitably to the eruption of monstrous meaning.

It may be possible to read the continuum of male friendship in *Frankenstein* as tracing a cultural shift at a symbolic level. From the fantasy of a less sexually problematic past – represented by Victor’s friendships with Walton and Clerval – the text points towards a nineteenth-century future, in which phobic discourses about homosexuality would become more available and male relations would increasingly be read in relation to a cultural perception of desire between men as literally ‘monstrous.’ The text allows a brief space of seemingly unproblematic erotic friendship by displacing paranoia, panic and hostility onto the body of the Monster but, in the final analysis, *Frankenstein* implies that there is no such thing as a ‘safe’ homosocial male bond in a homophobic paranoid culture. As we shall see, the Monster haunts the representation of *all* male relationships in the novel. Walton’s expressed desire for Victor is channeled into narrative production and remains of an off-stage echo, much like the Monster waiting



outside on the ice. But the Monster of desire is actually present in the cabin all along; Walton only has to reach the end of the story to come face-to-face with the 'subject' of the narrative and feel the full effect of its embodied presence. Appropriately, what he finally meets is 'the wildest rage of some uncontrollable passion' (211), a force of desire beyond the boundaries of homosocial normativity. It is a 'body' too terrifying to look upon: 'I dared not raise my eyes to his face, there was something so scaring and unearthly in his ugliness' (211). If the Monster's role is to reflect culture back upon itself, it is of course no more frightening than the possibility of desire between men. No matter how safe their relationship seemed, as far as homophobic culture is concerned, all male same-sex desire is dangerous and, in the end, it all comes to signify monstrosity.

**'A Frightful Fiend Doth Close Behind him Tread'**

***Frankenstein, The Vampyre and the Gothic Rhetoric of Homophobia***

And in ancient Times, these criminals were burnt by the Common Law.  
Indeed, such Monsters ought to be the Detestation of Mankind,  
pursued by justice, and exterminated the Earth  
- Jeremy Collier, 1720 (qtd; in Crompton 35)

More than one 'monster' haunts nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, and *Frankenstein's* unnamable creature can stand for this other speaking unspeakable: the patched together, heterogeneous and massively overdetermined textual monster *of* homosexuality, a spectral presence that stalks culture as persistently as the Monster pursues Victor. *Frankenstein's* monster is especially telling insofar as he, and the figurative (homo) sexual monster he comes to embody, are *made* monstrous, constructed as dangerous and excluded by the same (hetero)normative world that has created them in the first place.

This paradox in the Monster's position fuels the analogy with homosexuality discernible in the text. As a 'hideous progeny' born in the homophobic 'workshop of filthy creation' (53), homosexual meaning is sent forth to be excluded but, at the same time, forced to reveal itself in order that 'we,' like Victor, may speak obsessively about the fact that 'we' will not accept it. *The Vampyre* also becomes more relevant here, for vampires such as Lord Ruthven are the monsters probably most immediately recognisable as putting into play the vividly imagined association between homosexuality and monstrosity.<sup>7</sup>

Although they are very different monsters, Frankenstein's creature and Ruthven both enact fears about male desire that just will not go away. It is therefore appropriate that Victor should also come to view his monster 'in the light of my own vampire' (74). His perception reminds us that homosexuality is indeed homophobic culture's very 'own vampire' and, as a result, homosexuals and monsters do have something in common. Cohen argues that the monstrous body is pure culture: 'A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read' (4). His view has clear affinities with Edelman's argument that homosexual bodies have been 'subjected to a cultural imperative that viewed them as inherently textual – as bodies that [...] could, and must, be read' (6). The monstrous homosexual 'body' is, likewise, pure culture; a construct and a projection, it exists to be read, and rejected, by the same culture that has produced it as a monstrous anomaly.

However, the longstanding association between homosexuality and monstrosity represents only one aspect, the culmination perhaps, of Gothic fiction's engagement with homophobic discourse. I now want to consider the virulently homophobic signification available in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* closely, in order to raise further questions

about the extent to which certain Gothic conventions actually double with the ‘conventions’ of homophobic rhetoric. In this respect, I argue that both texts can be read as drawing upon the homophobic discourse which has produced homosexual meaning as a paranoid condition, an ‘unspeakable’ secret, a terrible threat to male autonomy, a cause of madness and an unnatural, diseased, abject, monstrous, deathly condition. Since all these ‘signs’ of homosexuality are still at play within homophobic mythology to this day, it is not too surprising to find that these texts have been read as being, on one level, all about homosexuality and homophobia. In critical and pedagogical terms, they reveal something important about Gothic fiction’s investment in homophobia, and they also open a space for discussing queer theoretical concerns about the rhetoric that has made a Gothic horror story of male same-sex desire. Moreover, the doubling of Gothic and homosexual meaning in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* does not simply represent the increasing availability of a phobically constituted homosexual identity; it also illustrates the development of western culture’s own homophobic identity.

Paranoia is the first sign that I want to consider here, because it is such a key index to homosexual meaning in the language of homophobic mythology that it in some degree charges all the other signs and codes to be discussed. The concept of paranoia is so intimately connected to the cultural understanding of homosexuality that any character, behaviour, or articulation identifiable as meaning ‘paranoid’ can slide easily into meaning ‘homosexual.’ Indeed, paranoia is the site at which the reading and representation of homosexuality collapse into one another, insofar as the reading of homosexual meaning can itself be figured as ‘paranoid’ – oversensitive to the presence of homosexual and/or homophobic meaning. When Gothic narratives present men who are

paranoid in relation to other men, it is not difficult to perceive their condition as 'homosexual panic': 'the fear and loathing that set in whenever a man suspects either himself or another man of feeling homosexual desire' (McGavran 48). It is striking to note that *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein* present the eruption of paranoia within the context of an initially naïve desire for male companionship, a desire which becomes read as monstrous as the narrative progresses; or, perhaps it is rather the case that the appearance of the monster instigates the paranoid *reading* of male friendship. Their unguarded desire for male companionship certainly leads Victor, Clerval and Walton into confrontations with a monster. It would seem, then, that the eruption of monstrosity is the limit placed upon the possibilities for male friendship in these texts, insofar as the Monster's appearance literally and symbolically kills off the fantasy of unproblematic relations between men.

Victor's incipient paranoid subjectivity is brought to 'life' at the same moment as his monster, as his desire for the creation immediately collapses into panicked revulsion. Admitting he had 'desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation,' once he sees 'the dull yellow eye of the creature open,' he finds 'the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart' (56). The emphasis on the Creature's opening eye recalls to mind the erotic meaning conveyed in the male gaze, suggesting that Victor panics when he literally 'catches' the Monster's eye. He then finds his apparently harmless friendship with Clerval haunted by the Monster. On Clerval's arrival at Ingoldstadt, he fears that the Monster will be waiting for them in his bedchamber, but they find the room 'freed from its hideous guest' (60). Victor's relief is premature, however, for in *Frankenstein* the Monster of desire with its terrifying power

of disclosure is always a haunting presence in the 'bedchamber' of paranoid male subjectivity. The Monster's body may have vanished but the fear remains: 'I thought I saw the dreaded spectre glide into the room; *he* can tell. – Oh, save me! Save me!' I imagined that the monster seized me' (60). This hallucination can be read as a product of Victor's internalised homophobic fears, for the actual monster has by this time wandered into the woods never having had any awareness of the terror he holds for his creator.

The fact that paranoia is so endemic in Gothic narratives, and has become so strongly associated with homosexuality, suggests a relationship between the development of Gothic conventions and historically determined discourses about desire between men. The genre has become, in part, a textual space in which it is to some extent possible to speak about the 'unspeakable,' but it would seem that these texts are not so much about the actuality of such desire as about the fear it induces in a homophobic world. In this context, it is quite appropriate that the Monster's physical presence is not necessary to instill terror, for male same-sex desire has become such a source of horror that it no longer needs to be present, or even 'real,' in order to terrify. In *The Vampyre*, Aubrey 'left his house, roamed from street to street, anxious to fly that image which haunted him' (19). There is nowhere to fly to because the threat embodied by the Monster is already inscribed in male subjectivity as a haunting possibility. For Ruthven, the power to turn Aubrey's unacknowledged homosexual panic against himself is readily available in a society where homophobia is wielded as a mechanism of domination over the entire spectrum of male bonds. Within the terms of homosocial culture, Ruthven is an exceptionally dangerous monster. An adept manipulator, apparently immune to homosexual panic, he is, as Boone observes, 'Perfectly able to negotiate dangerously

intimate relations with men' (361). Ruthven is indeed homophobic culture's very own returning 'vampyre.' In a world in which men had good reason to fear accusations of homosexual behaviour, perhaps Ruthven stands for the nightmarish figure of the blackmailer, the man/monster who is prepared to use his knowledge to exert power over his victims. For the male protagonist, and perhaps also for the reader, there is no relief from paranoia, not only because the horror of homosexuality is culturally inscribed, but because it is also rendered 'unspeakable.'

The fact that 'unspeakable' is one of the most famous code words for sex between men and, as Sedgwick notes, one of the most distinctive Gothic tropes (*Between Men* 94), again suggests a relationship between the conventions of Gothic fiction and the historical representation of homosexuality. In putting this code into such insistent play, the genre could be said to play for effect upon the construction of homosexuality as a frightening, proscribed possibility. Although the 'unspeakable' is perhaps more commonly associated with later nineteenth-century Gothics, such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), or Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891), the theme is already well-established in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*. The code 'unspeakable' does not, of course, reflect a silencing of homosexual meaning; rather, it illustrates the production and spread, during this period, of an oppressively homophobic rhetoric figuring desire between men as unspeakable, unnamable and unthinkable. Many historical examples could be given, but the Latin formulation is the most famous: 'peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum' – the horrible sin not to be named among Christians (Bentham; qtd. in Crompton 20).<sup>8</sup> *The Vampyre* utilises the unspeakable as a plot device, literally shutting Aubrey up in an oath to conceal Ruthven's death and crimes.

Meanwhile, from the moment of his monster's creation, Victor Frankenstein is also locked in a psychic closet: 'How they would, each and all, abhor me, and hunt me from the world, did they know my unhallowed acts' (179). He repeatedly claims that his feelings are both unspeakable and unthinkable and the Monster, who embodies his 'unhallowed acts,' is indeed hunted from the world for the duration of the narrative. *Frankenstein's* twentieth-century reproductions have continued to put the unspeakable into play, and the repeated presentation of the title character as a secretive, paranoid figure may have contributed to the text's cultural status as a kind of queer myth, a story that appears to be about homosexuality. For instance, in Balderston's 1930 play, Frankenstein is given the line 'I am a man who must never speak of love!' (266). His statement echoes Lord Alfred Douglas's famous claim made in 1894: 'I am the love that dare not speak its name.' Under interrogation from Elizabeth, Frankenstein tells her 'I've done something that can't be told!' (266). It is intriguing to see how this text from 1930 has made use of a text from 1894 to read, and write, homosexual meaning back into a text from 1818. Through tapping into more recent and famous events in the history of homosexuality, the play works to heighten *Frankenstein's* association with unacceptable male desire and makes this meaning available to 'knowing' members of the audience.

Although a nascent sense of homosexual identity may be discernible in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, this emergent understanding is infused with what might be more appropriately called 'sodomitical' language. It is important to remember that the code 'unspeakable' originally referred, not to homosexual identity as we now generally understand that concept, but to the category of forbidden sexual acts which came under the heading of 'sodomy.' The male gaze is one sign where anxiety about sodomy seems

particularly visible, for in these Gothic narratives the language of the gaze is, appropriately enough, a penetrative language. Or, to put the point another way, it could be said that the language of penetration makes itself felt most forcefully through the sign of the male gaze. The power of the gaze to metaphorically ‘penetrate’ male subjectivity is gained from the more literal homophobic horror of male penetration.<sup>9</sup> Take, for example, Victor’s response to the Monster’s first approach: ‘He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me [...] one hand was stretched, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped’ (57). From Victor’s paranoid perspective, he cannot help but read the Monster’s desire as a sexual threat and its gaze, together with the physical reach through the curtains towards his body, figures his bedchamber as a potentially ‘sodomitical’ space. The penetrative gaze creates the ‘greatest agitation’ (57) every time it appears in these narratives.

In *The Vampyre*, the close physical relation implied when Ruthven nurses Aubrey through illness is enough to fuel his paranoia. Worse still, he finds Ruthven’s gaze ‘fixed intently upon him with a smile of malicious exultation playing upon his lips; he knew not why, but this smile haunted him’ (13). The malicious ‘smile’ suggests that Ruthven has a superior awareness of what it is that truly haunts Aubrey. His gaze becomes yet more threatening when combined with Aubrey’s helpless state in another potentially sexualised and sodomitical bedroom space under a Monster’s domination. The linkage between desire, threat and surveillance, mediated through the gaze, is also effectively symbolised in Victor’s nightmares: ‘I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness, penetrated by no light but the glimmer of two eyes that glared upon me’ (176). Again the gaze is a site of meaningful collapse. The fact that he has difficulty in his dreams



differentiating between the eyes of Clerval and those of the Monster is very apt:

‘Sometimes they were the expressive eyes of Henry, languishing in death, [...] sometimes it was the watery, clouded eyes of the monster’ (176). Once male friendship is perceived as potentially erotic, it quickly slides to the other end of the continuum, into monstrosity, madness and death. The Monster’s gaze here represents not only Victor’s paranoia, but also the accusing gaze of a society in which all male relations are subject to a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Theoretical work in the field of gay studies can throw more light on the doubling of Gothic and homophobic conventions in these texts, especially in terms of analyzing representational links between paranoia, the gaze and the loss of sanity. Both Aubrey and Victor are said to go ‘mad’ and this madness is clearly the consequence of stress caused by their relationships with the monsters. The sanity-eroding threat may be more specific than it appears, for as Edelman has argued, in the eighteenth century the connotative overlay in the cultural construction of sodomy was primarily as an anxiety ‘about the authority and autonomy of one’s own signifying practices’ (125). Aubrey and Victor’s loss of autonomy in madness could therefore figure their anxiety as paranoid fears about sodomy. This is not to say Ruthven or the Monster simply ‘represent’ eighteenth-century sodomites, but rather that the dispersal of homosexual signs could here lead them to be *read* as such by the protagonist and the reader. Critics such as Leo Bersani and Ellis Hanson have addressed the perception of anal sex as a shattering of male subjectivity. If the boundaries of male subjectivity have been phobically constituted as a refusal to be penetrated by another man, and if same-sex desire is frequently conveyed through the ‘look,’ the monster’s dominating gaze fixed intently upon the protagonist’s prostrate

body can be expected to cause the dissolution of autonomous male subjectivity supposedly inherent in sodomy.<sup>10</sup> Both texts can now be read as flirting suggestively with the possibility of male penetration and the loss of autonomy, in madness, which is elicited by such a threat.

The images of abjection, profanity, death, disease and the unnatural, so pervasive in *Frankenstein*, represent further textual sites at which the conventions of Gothic fiction double with the conventions of homophobia. The oppositions natural/unnatural, healthy/unhealthy, holy/unholy and life/death are all at play within the larger homophobic binary opposition heterosexual/homosexual. For instance, the idea of 'crimes against nature' has long been linked with non-reproductive sexual relations and the 'murder of the race' (Crompton 28). Victor's desire to create the Monster is presented as unnatural from the beginning: 'profane,' 'unhallowed,' 'filthy' and 'unwholesome.' Accordingly, his project affects his health; his 'slow fever' and 'incipient disease' (53, 55) hint at the sickness and contagion associated with 'unnatural' desire. Significantly, Victor's ill-health stems from courting abjection. He tells the reader how he 'dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave' (53). From this penetrative dabbling in the 'grave' emerges a Monster and, if we consider that the Monster *of* homosexuality also gains its status as an 'abjection' from its association with death, it is possible to see how abjection takes its place within the homophobic chain of signification in *Frankenstein*.<sup>11</sup> In her essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva conceptualises the corpse as 'radically excluded,' because it is 'death infecting life,' and therefore 'the utmost of abjection' (2, 4 and 3). Death is abject, sex between men is radically excluded and associated with death; homosexuals are perceived as bringers of death and are, therefore,

abject. The monstrous body constructed from corpses and the undead vampiric body are, like homosexual bodies, more than a force of disturbance to sexual identity, they are a form of death infecting life: abject. Were Aubrey a more capable sign reader, he would have been more wary of the sexual threat conveyed by Ruthven's 'dead grey eye' and 'the deadly hue of his face' (3). This equation is doubly apt during a period in which the death penalty for sodomy was used more widely in England than at any other time. According to Daffron, there were twenty-eight trials for sodomy between 1805 and 1818 – the year *Frankenstein* was first published (415). Until 1835, when the last execution for sodomy took place, if a man's body or behaviour did 'speak' of homosexuality, it could indeed lead to his death under the law. The death penalty remained on the statute books until 1861 and same-sex desire has continued to be strongly associated with death in homophobic rhetoric to this day. The homophobic signification in these narratives therefore has much to reveal about the culture that reads, reproduces and *punishes* the legibility of homosexual meaning.

### **'In the Light of my Own Vampyre':**

#### **Re-Reading the Homophobic Text**

a Foucaultian perspective might argue that the affirmation of  
 "homo-sexuality" is itself an extension of homophobic discourse  
 - Judith Butler ('Imitation' 14)

Despite the well-known figuration of desire between men as sterile, in *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* the possibility of such desire is in fact re-productive, but what these texts appear to endlessly re-produce are the monstrous, deathly narratives of homophobia.

If they remind us that the signification of desire between men has long been produced as a Gothic horror story, they also draw attention to the fact that the legibility of homosexual meaning has often been constituted as, precisely, a function of homophobia. The possibility that our understanding of what signifies homosexuality is produced by homophobic discourse evidently raises serious questions for queer reading and pedagogy. Is it ever possible to differentiate between reading homosexual and homophobic meaning? Moreover, if it is practically impossible to separate homosexual signification from homophobic signification in nineteenth-century representation, to read the play of homosexual 'signs' in a text is always to risk reading *homophobically*. Paying further attention to criticism and film can now reveal something more about what Edelman calls 'our heterogeneous and often contradictory mythology of homosexuality' (86 - 87). For the Monster of homosexual meaning does indeed return to haunt critical responses and film adaptations, where it is often re-inscribed yet again as culture's very own 'vampyre.' But considering some of the pitfalls involved in negotiating the play of homophobic/homosexual meaning will also point the way towards possibilities for resistant reading and queer critical thinking.

Misogyny is perhaps the most difficult to negotiate of the homosexual 'signs' in *Frankenstein*, and this is not least because it is also one of the most homophobic. I have decided to discuss the representational relationship between misogyny and homosexuality here because it illustrates some of the problems involved in reading homophobia *as* homosexuality. Influential feminist critics such as Mellor have read homosexuality into *Frankenstein* in relation to Victor's fear of female sexuality. Paying attention to 'the destruction of the female,' implicit in his 'usurpation of the natural mode of human

reproduction,' Mellor points to the violence done to women's bodies throughout the novel (115). She then goes on to note that Victor's 'most passionate relationships are with men rather than with women' and argues that he substitutes a 'homosexual obsession with his creature' for a heterosexual attachment to Elizabeth (122). While misogyny is undeniably an issue in *Frankenstein*, the question here concerns whether the discovery of homosexual meaning in the text should be used to buttress a feminist reading of misogyny. As Sedgwick notes, 'no assumption could be more homophobic than the automatic association of same-sex object choice with a fear of heterosexuality or of the other sex' (*Epistemology* 200 - 201). However, this presumption also underscores Margaret Homans's feminist, psychoanalytic reading where she construes the Monster's creation as 'an elaborate circumvention of *normal heterosexual* procreation' in which 'the demon's birth violates the *normal* relations of family, especially the *normal* sexual relations of husband and wife' (141, my emphasis).<sup>12</sup> This argument appears to replay the same chain of connotative homophobic signification as the novel and, although Homans does not quite 'come out' with it, she concludes, 'there is something monstrous about Frankenstein's sexuality' (143 - 144). It is not difficult to put a name to this unnatural, woman-hating, family-destroying, male sexuality, but homosexuality lurks around the edges of this reading without announcing itself directly, much as the Monster lurks outside family and sexual 'normality' in the novel.

It is not my intention to dismiss the critique of misogyny available in the text, but the interpretation of homosexual meaning in relation to woman-hating is problematic for readers wishing to support *both* feminist and queer positions. Ultimately, Mellor's claim that 'One of the deepest horrors of this novel is Frankenstein's goal of creating a society

for men only' (115) seems but a short step from saying that the deepest horror in this novel is, in fact, homosexuality. It is also striking to find homosexual meaning made to work in these critical readings in precisely the way many queer theorists suggest it works in the wider culture: as a haunting internal other against which sexual normality is defined. How then is it possible to acknowledge misogyny in the text without, on the one hand, reading homophobic representation *as* homosexual representation or, on the other hand, writing off *Frankenstein* as an irredeemably homophobic text in which misogyny is welded to homosexual meaning? One solution is to ascribe the homophobia to the author, as Mellor does implicitly when she observes, 'in Mary Shelley's feminist novel, Victor Frankenstein's desire is portrayed as horrible, unattainable, and finally self-destructive' (122). In this reading it is the author herself who posits an implicitly homophobic feminist agenda against Victor's 'horrible' homosexual vision.<sup>13</sup> It may be more useful to argue that, since *Frankenstein* represents a homophobic culture in which sex between men was indeed assumed to imply a dislike of women, it is not surprising to find the connection between homosexuality and misogyny in the text.<sup>14</sup>

However, in my view, Frann Michel offers the most productive approach, arguing that in *Frankenstein*, 'the real harms to women come not from this male desire but from the view of it as monstrous, from the failure to acknowledge it, and from the persistent attempt to achieve its sublimation through the subordination of women' (248). In the logic of this reading, *Frankenstein* offers not so much a critique of misogynistic homosexual desire, as a critique of a homosocial culture in which *everyone* is the victim of homophobia, homosexual panic and misogyny. After all, Victor is as terrified of excessive male desire (especially his own), as he is of female sexuality. The tragedy of

*Frankenstein* could have been avoided only if he had been able to perceive his desire for the creature as something other than an unspeakable horror, but paranoid sexual panic leads to a cycle of violence destructive both to women and relationships between men. A different kind of queer and feminist perspective might lie in acknowledging the damaging effects upon women of a homophobic culture in which they are forced to represent 'nature,' but also in resisting the re-inscription of sexual normativity in its privileged and naturalised position. From a queer perspective, the feminist readings cited above are doubly troubling because they also tend to re-inscribe the association of women with concepts of 'normal' and 'natural' (hetero)sexuality.<sup>15</sup> After all, as Spurlin notes, misogyny and homophobia are both 'concomitant' with 'compulsory heterosexuality' (92). One course of resistance to the re-inscription of homophobia and homophobic reading is therefore to be found in critiquing the insidious means by which we are acculturated to read desire between men through the lens of homophobia and encouraged to re-enact that homophobia in our own readings. For this reason, it is important to encourage readers and students to pay attention to 'the sites where misogyny and homophobia may intertwine in patriarchal culture' (Spurlin 96), and to continue to find ways of resisting the perpetuation of the homophobic agenda which sets women and feminists in opposition to homosexual men.

*Frankenstein's* film progeny have continued to put homophobically constituted homosexual connotation into seemingly endless replay, presenting audiences with numerous paranoid, secretive, insane, unhealthy, hysterical, nervous, death-obsessed Frankensteins, who repeatedly abandon their families and neglect their Elizabeths. One might therefore argue that *Frankenstein* films have re-inscribed and elaborated upon the

same homophobic chain of signification that appears in the text. The opening scene in James Whale's first *Frankenstein* film is set in a graveyard and, as such, it sets the scene for a film, and a future film tradition, associated with homosexuality. For 'knowing' audience members, the camera's focus on a Memento Mori statue heralds the double-voiced 'queer Gothic' narrative: remember death/remember homosexuality. It also contains a warning: remember that homosexuality has long been constructed as a deathly condition; remember, in other words, homophobia. McGavran reads *Frankenstein* as 'a secret yet scarcely disguised gay adventure' (60). If the novel does contain a 'gay adventure' it has a telling conclusion when the Monster finally decides to burn himself to death. Burning was, after all, the classically recommended punishment for sex between men (Crompton 13). Burning is still the 'recommended' punishment for the Monster in *Frankenstein* films, as in the famous scene in Whale's version where the villagers trap the Monster in a burning windmill. The Monster's terror of fire has since become a tradition in the genre. In Branagh's adaptation the Monster finally joins Victor's body on an ice raft and sets alight to it, ending the film with a final focus on the Monster holding Victor in his arms as the flames rise. In offering a final consummation in death, denied by the novel, and in presenting a form of death linked with homosexuality in the cultural imagination, the film calls upon a long history of homophobic discourse to suggest, yet again, that a fiery death is the only true consummation of desire between men.

But instead of interpreting film adaptations as simply homophobic texts, I would suggest we view them as films that are, like the novel, partly *about* homophobia and therefore *about* the way in which desire between men has been read. *Frankenstein* film adaptations have also appropriated and used homosexual meaning to create texts that



contain much to interest and amuse, as well as to alarm, gay audiences. No doubt it is possible that the homosexuality of a director such as James Whale was a force in his vision for *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* (Russo 50). I do not think Whale introduced meanings that are not available in the novel, but as an openly gay man he may well have acted as a 'knowing' reader, sensitive to the queerness in the text and more willing to put it into play in his films. Moreover, in elaborating upon the queer subtext, he also managed to tell a resistant story about the victimization of the Monster and mounted challenges to the family and marriage. The transgressive implications of this undercurrent have since been brought out most fully in underground, cult and low budget films, such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), which goes to great length in representing *Frankenstein* as a celebratory tale about queer sexuality. It may be useful for students to watch the films alongside reading the novel, because doing so could help them think about how twentieth-century filmmakers have picked up on, appropriated, and played with the homosexual implications of the text to different effect.

### **Taking it seriously**

no classroom is free of ideological pressure  
Edward J. Ingebretsen S.J. (16)

In terms of putting forward suggestions for reading and teaching, I propose that it is first necessary to consciously take homoerotic and homosexual signification *seriously*. This might seem a strange statement, but when McGavran claims with confidence that 'Late twentieth-century readers of *Frankenstein* often are half embarrassed, half cynically amused by the erotic undercurrents in Victor's friendships' (56), the problem of taking it

seriously is precisely the one that presents itself. McGavran's statement is difficult to qualify, but it raises some disquieting questions. When Walton addresses his sister and the reader with the question: 'Will you smile at the enthusiasm I express concerning this divine wanderer?' (28), he might be answered on occasion with a smile of queer recognition, but more often perhaps by the cynical, mocking 'smile' of defensive homophobic humor. How then, should those attempting to teach the 'queer Gothic' encourage students to interrogate the presumptions they bring to the text? Historical awareness itself provides another defense mechanism for student readers who are aware that meaning changes over time, but are unsure whether this factor should affect their interpretative freedom. When the Monster swears to Victor 'by the fire of love that burns in my heart' (143), should they respond with a celebratory appropriation of queerly erotic desire, embarrassment at the excessive use of language 'back then,' or escape into disavowal on the consideration that if it probably did not mean what it appears to mean *then*, it surely does not mean anything important *now*? In my view, the fact that it is possible to raise such questions illustrates the importance of taking the issue seriously, for the role of the reader is a serious one.

I do not mean to discourage playful reading. Indeed, rather than becoming entrenched in one reading position, it may be more productive to interrogate, playfully, the various ways in which our own different responses to homoerotic, homosexual and homophobic possibilities are as culturally, historically and politically informed as the text. Students should be encouraged to consider how their responses to texts are informed by historically determined discourses concerning homoerotic and homophobic representation. Moreover, perhaps readers *should* feel uneasy on this subject and even

cultivate that sense of unease, because there are no easy or unambivalent answers to the problems involved in representing and reading desire between men. There cannot be, because homosexuality is produced as a site of trouble in our culture. Nor should we, as Leo Bersani argues, ever become complacent or ‘disingenuous about the relation between homosexual behaviour and the revulsion it inspires’ (219). The larger question is then perhaps: how do we read desire between men and what does the way in which we read tell us about ourselves and our culture? In this context, texts such as *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* can be appropriated to what Richard Zeikowitz calls queer ‘border pedagogy,’ an approach which ‘encourages students to turn a critical eye to the various codes that inform their own narratives and [...] their identities’ (69). This will include, of course, the narratives of lesbian, gay and queer studies, without which such discussions could not take place. Once homosexuality is queered, that is understood as a discursive construction inscribed in modern subjectivity, it is possible to consider how it informs our responses to the text, whether uneasy, mocking, disavowing or celebratory. This discussion now points towards broader questions concerning the inscription of queer meaning in the language of Gothic fiction. In this chapter, I have argued that the conventions of homosexual connotation and homophobia often double with the conventions of Gothic fiction. I now want to propose that this ‘doubling’ of queer and Gothic meaning is only one aspect of the genre’s larger investment in the language of queer desire.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Foucault famously argued that ‘The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history [...] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species’ (*History* 43). For a recent exposition on the ‘historical transition’ from a diffused mythic concept of sodomy in the seventeenth century towards a culture in which homosexuality is constituted as an ‘identity’ and widely read into the ‘social landscape,’ see Edelman (3 - 9).

<sup>2</sup> For more detail on nineteenth-century homophobia, see Crompton’s book, *Byron and Greek Love*. According to Crompton, from the mid-1770s until the 1830s, ‘scores of men were to be hanged, many more pilloried, and dozens of others prominent, like Byron [...] ostracized or driven into exile’ (24).

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of connotation and signification has been influenced by Kaja Silverman’s engagement with Roland Barthes in her book *The Subject of Semiotics*. See especially the chapter ‘Re-Writing the Classic Text’ (237 - 283).

<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Victor, Elizabeth regrets her inability to travel to Ingoldstadt: ‘I figure to myself that the task of attending on your sickbed has devolved on some mercenary old nurse’ (62).

<sup>5</sup> The situation has developed to the point at which ‘in western culture a man perceived as feminine is similar to being perceived as gay, and a man identified as gay is thought to be feminine (that is, not a “real” man)’ (Spurlin 76).

<sup>6</sup> Of course this issue is not clear-cut, for as Edelman has shown there *were* cultural associations joining effeminacy with sodomy before the eighteenth century, although it was not until the later nineteenth century that homosexuality and effeminacy underwent translation into the ‘essential or metaphorical equivalences’ often presumed today (11). Effeminacy is always a shady interpretative area, due to the lack of certainty as to what should count as effeminate and whether it should signify homosexuality.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this association, see Richard Dyer’s excellent essay ‘Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality and Homosexuality as Vampirism,’ Christopher’s Craft’s ‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,’ and also Ellis Hanson’s essay about AIDS entitled ‘Undead.’

<sup>8</sup> For more examples of this kind of rhetoric see Crompton (20 - 21). Sedgwick is also an excellent source on the varieties of ‘periphrasis and preterition,’ those ‘space clearing negatives’ used to ‘void and at the same time underline the possibility of male same-sex genitality.’ The list includes ‘things fearful to name,’ ‘the obscene sound of unbeseeing words,’ ‘A sin so odious that the fame of it will fright the damned in the darksome pit,’ as well as of course, ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ (*Epistemology* 202).

<sup>9</sup> My thinking here draws upon Miller’s argument that the male gaze assumes penetrative qualities in homophobic representation: ‘where homosexuality is concerned, the sense of sight no longer operates at or by a distance, and the object beheld may penetrate, capture and overwhelm the beholder’s body consciousness like a smell’ (131).

<sup>10</sup> As Hanson notes, in psychoanalytic terms, to engage the gaze of another man ‘would be a form of madness, an embrace of narcissism and death’ leading to a ‘dissolution of the self.’ He continues, ‘it becomes extremely important to avoid the gaze of the gay man. For a man, to fear the gay male gaze is to fear the Evil Eye or, rather, the Evil Not – I, the dissolution of the self in narcissistic looking’ (‘Undead’ 328, 329).

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<sup>11</sup> In his groundbreaking essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' Leo Bersani refers to a homophobic heterosexual association of anal sex with self-annihilation, arguing that sex between men has been conceptualised as a 'grave' and is associated with, 'the terrifying appeal of a loss of ego, of a self-abasement' (220).

<sup>12</sup> Homans's influential Lacanian reading views the novel as 'simultaneously about the death and obviation of the mother and about the son's quest for a substitute object of desire [...] The horror of the demon that Frankenstein creates is that it is the liberalisation of its creator's desire for an object, a desire that never really seeks its own fulfilment' (140 - 141). Ultimately, the 'demon is the form taken by Frankenstein's desire once his mother and Elizabeth (his mother substitute) have been circumvented' (145).

<sup>13</sup> However, if we were to indulge in biographical speculation, we could suggest that Mary Shelley might have been influenced by her husband's interest in the subject. Percy Shelley wrote an essay in which he did associate sex between men with the neglect and degradation of women. In 'On the Manners of the Ancient Greeks,' he argues that 'Among the Greeks those feelings, being thus deprived of their natural object, sought a compensation and a substitute' (221). If women are not educated to become fit companions with men and are treated with disrespect, Shelley argues that men will begin to look to other men for, at the very least, emotional companionship.

<sup>14</sup> According to Crompton, the idea that male homosexuality produced indifference to women had 'a great vogue in the eighteenth century, when it appeared in a remarkably wide range of contexts' (50).

<sup>15</sup> As Michel observes, 'The particular feminism of this reading thus depends upon its allegiance to heterosexuality' (247).

## Chapter Five

### Space, Desire, Knowledge:

#### Gothic Textuality and the Language of Queer Sexuality

What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*  
 - Michel Foucault (*History* 35)

To what extent is the language of Gothic fiction a queer language? Thus far, I have shown that *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* lend themselves well to illustrating queer reading practices. In these textual worlds of excess and danger, we find the spectacle of family and marriage under attack, concern with same-sex desire, the representation of monstrosity, extreme states of being, anxiety about the attractions of forbidden knowledge, and a preponderance of madness, secrecy, paranoia and guilt. In the previous two chapters, I focussed specifically upon the signification of same-sex desire and, with regard to male homosexuality, identified a doubling of Gothic and homophobic conventions. I now want to address broader questions concerning the way queer meaning is written into the language and, therefore, into the *signifying system* of Gothic fiction. This chapter explores how some of the conventions, signs, codes, linguistic figures, lexical devices and rhetorical tropes, that have come to be recognisable to us as ‘Gothic,’ can also be recognised as signifying ‘queer.’ I situate this reading in relation to Foucault’s concept of the ‘deployment of sexuality’ from the seventeenth century onwards. Foucault claims that methods of speaking about sex proliferated during this period and ‘a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified’ (*History* 17). I have already suggested that Gothic fiction has developed as a means to speak about sex. I now

want to pay closer attention to the relationship between Gothic textuality and the sexual discourses which have indeed paved the way towards a language charged and saturated with sexual meaning. Mobilising the rhetoric of allusion and metaphor, Gothic texts such as *Frankenstein*, *The Vampyre* and Lord Byron's 'Fragment' make the language of sexual nonconformity available to anyone able to read it, putting into play many of the cultural codes through which queerness has long been represented.

This chapter opens further hermeneutic questions in relation to the act of reading. I will argue that the sense that there is, as Alexander Doty might put it, 'something queer here' (71), is essential to Gothic reading pleasures. Evidently, this queer effect is dependent upon an engagement between the meaning apparently emanating from the language of the text, and the reader's own knowledge. There are, then, some interconnected problems to be addressed here concerning the way in which queer desire is written into language and the reading process itself, or how queer meaning is made legible to the reader. And what role does the reader play in actually producing this meaning? Up to this point, I have primarily addressed hypothetical early twenty-first century readers, particularly those interested in both Gothic fiction and queer theory. But I now want to broaden the scope to consider how readers before the advent of GLBTQ studies might have experienced the sexual thrills available in Gothic fiction. The precise nature of this engagement cannot be finally defined because, as Jody Norton observes, 'interpretation involves a complex triangular negotiation between reader, text, and culture, the specific dynamics of which will vary, as will the meanings experienced in the reading process' (97). Moreover, we can only speculate about the extent to which readers in the past may have been in the 'know' regarding sexual connotation. What I want to

cultivate, therefore, is a sense of how these texts create an atmosphere of sexual danger by tapping into cultural knowledge about what constitutes queerness. Considering how these texts may have played to their readers' sexual 'knowledge' will also open a space for discussing queer theory's concerns with the various ways in which knowledge about queerness has been coded and inscribed in language.

**'Do you Share my Madness?':**

**Recognising the Language of Queer Desire**

habits of reading, habits of recognising and responding  
to fictional character and plot, habits of *knowing*  
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Coherence* x-xi)

Of what a strange nature is knowledge!  
Frankenstein's monster (117)

Gothic fiction depends heavily for its effect upon a cultural awareness that the prohibitive law is eroticized and actually produces the desire to *know* which it is supposed to repress. Knowledge is almost always figured as dangerous or 'forbidden' in such texts, and because the trope of 'forbidden knowledge' has become a code for transgressive sexual awareness, when it appears in the text it often seems to suggest dangerous but exciting sexual possibilities. Of course, its very 'forbiddenness' causes such knowledge to appear all the more desirable. Scholars following Michel Foucault have discussed the various ways in which 'sex,' in the broadest sense of the word, has become a privileged site of 'truth' in western culture, and have argued that non-normative sex has become particularly subject to this epistemological pressure. In this respect, Gothic fiction can again illustrate queer scholarship precisely because it tends to confirm



the view that supposedly forbidden desires, identities and behaviours are actually considered *more* interesting, and *more* subject to the demand for truth, than those posited as sexually ‘normal.’<sup>1</sup> For nobody reading Gothic fiction is very interested in discovering the truth of acceptable, regular (hetero)sexuality. In *The Vampyre* and the ‘Fragment,’ the protagonist’s quest to unlock the truth about his male object of interest is both suggestively sexual and significantly epistemological, and his will to *know* can be called implicitly *queer* from the outset. After all, he is not likely or expected to discover any heterosexual truths in the mysterious, magnetic figure arresting his attention. I therefore want to begin here by considering how the highly charged Gothic tropes of forbidden knowledge and strange recognition dramatically depict the association of dangerous or subversive sexual meaning with knowledge and power in western culture.

These narratives, which are replete with sexually tense knowledge/power relationships between characters, also encourage a simultaneous sexually ‘tense’ knowledge/power relationship between the reader and the text. David Greven suggests that some nineteenth-century texts make use of a kind of ‘winking rhetoric’ through ‘coded and specific lexical devices’ whereby ‘queer content’ is potentially communicated to the reader (14). This is a useful argument, but Greven seems to be referring here to readers who are, or were, to some extent consciously ‘in the know,’ and on the look out for the codes that speak their ‘language.’ Evidently there have always been readers who have been aware of their own sexual or gender nonconformity and active members of sexual subcultures. But it is important to think about how readers not entirely conscious of the sexual discourses informing their responses to the texts could have experienced the language of Gothic fiction as sexually disquieting or exciting. These texts are masterful

at deploying the rhetoric of allusion and metaphor, the codes and tropes, through which queer possibilities have been produced as a connotative language. Such meaning is not simply inscribed in the text or in the reader; rather, it is produced through a reciprocal relationship, a kind of transaction, between the reader's (possible) awareness of the cultural conventions through which 'queerness' is made legible, and the sexual rhetoric which is available in the text.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most importantly, this transaction depends upon the reader's ability to recognise the fact that sexual nonconformity has been produced as a coded language. In relation to forbidden knowledge, for instance, these texts create an atmosphere of sexual danger by tapping into the cultural narrative which tells us that sex means danger, knowledge means sexual knowledge, and the promise of forbidden knowledge therefore contains the possibility of forbidden dangerous desire.

Recognition is a Gothic trope of narrative production *par excellence* and is figured as an instigating force in all the narratives discussed in this study. In each case, the protagonist is unexpectedly stopped in his tracks by a moment of recognition, after which he finds himself taking a very different journey to the one he initially expected to follow. More often than not, there is also something queer about recognition in nineteenth-century Gothic narratives. Uncanny, potentially erotic, overwhelming, and frequently inducing paranoia, recognition is presented as dangerous when it implicates the one who *sees* in the same forbidden knowledge as the one who already '*knows* too much.' Ideas about sexual nonconformity have long been linked with ideas about recognition and queer desires and identifications have been perceived as requiring an existence in which social survival is predicated upon passing within the heterosexual world and communicating through codes available to those in the *know* - those with the

ability to *recognise*. In Lord Ruthven and Augustus Darvell respectively, *The Vampyre* and Byron's 'Fragment' begin by presenting us with figures who 'pass,' masquerading as normal men, they play to their audience with the intention to 'mislead.'<sup>3</sup> In an effective description of the politics of passing, it is stated that Darvell has a 'power of giving to one passion the appearance of another' (247). This opens a hermeneutic question: do figures such as Darvell and Ruthven connote sexual danger because they pass or because we know, historically speaking, that 'queers' are supposed to pass and that passing is, therefore, a code for queerness? In any case, to read queer desire into these texts is necessarily to draw upon culturally inscribed knowledge about how such desire should be represented. These texts also play upon the notion that to be 'queer' is to be haunted by a strange and secretive past. The unnamed narrator withholds details about the 'peculiar circumstances' in Darvell's 'private history' which render him such 'an object of attention, of interest, and even of regard' (246). Similarly, in *The Vampyre*, Aubrey's interest is initially attracted by Ruthven's 'singularities' and 'peculiarities' (3), until he becomes 'Desirous of gaining some information respecting this singular character, who, till now, had only whetted his curiosity' (5). Up to a point, the protagonist is granted special powers of perception; he sees what everybody else apparently cannot, because he is the only one in the text, apart from the reader, who is able to recognise that his object is *passing*. Despite Darvell's attempts to 'avoid remark,' the narrator knows him to be 'a being of no common order' (247). The queer effect works if the reader is aware, on some level, that the language of passing, secrecy and recognition is also the language of sexual nonconformity.

*Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* dramatise a kind of triple-bind in relation to sexual knowledge. One desires to know, because knowledge is posited as desirable; moreover, one does need to know in order to protect oneself from certain dangers; but, at the same time, one knows that it is dangerous to know, or admit to knowing, 'too much.' The fact that the protagonist's desire for discovery conflicts with a fear that, once made available, the desired knowledge will contaminate and ultimately render him an outcast, engages a nineteenth-century culture in which certain kinds of sexual knowledge were becoming increasingly dangerous. In the early part of *The Vampyre*, we are told that Aubrey pays Ruthven attentions until 'he had so far advanced upon his notice that his presence was always *recognized*' (5, my emphasis). Aubrey's recognition of Ruthven as 'extraordinary' is dangerous because the code of recognition is always charged with the homophobic logic 'it takes one to know one,' a presumption which carries 'with it the stigma of too intimate a relation to the code and the machinery of its production' (Edelman 7). The gap in Aubrey's sexual knowledge lies not only in his failure to realise that a man such as Ruthven is a bad object choice, but also in his blindness to the dangerous implications of recognising and being recognised by Ruthven in the first place. Characters such as Aubrey and Walton, who naively seek such knowledge, can be read as innocent, willfully ignorant, or at least initially unaware that in a culture in which knowledge is sexualized, to seek it can be dangerous. D.L Macdonald calls Aubrey 'laughably naïve' to want to go travelling with Ruthven (97). Doubtless he is, but Aubrey's initial naivety is essential to the narrative's mobilisation of what Sedgwick calls 'ignorance effects,' effects which can work in collusion with the reader's sense of

superior knowledge to produce the pleasurable anxiety expected from reading Gothic fiction.<sup>4</sup>

The figuration of forbidden knowledge in these narratives does seem to pre-empt the way many people still think about non-normative desire to this day, insofar as it is still coded as something which is terrible, but also so tempting and infectious that it must be kept secret. Victor Frankenstein is yet another dangerous outcast possessed of fearfully desirable knowledge. Walton's desiring recognition of one such as Victor, who has already 'fallen' through the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, and his persistence in desiring to know him is, as Victor himself warns, 'madness.' He tells Walton that he is 'exposing' himself 'to the same dangers which have rendered me what I am' (29). Anxiety can be expected to follow the moment of recognition between the protagonist and his object, because the code 'it takes one to know one' situates the one who sees in the context of what Sedgwick calls 'fearful, projective mirroring recognition' (*Coherence* viii). Her description vividly portrays the shift towards increasing paranoia in characters such as Aubrey and Victor Frankenstein who find that they have risked recognising a monster and, in so doing, come too close to recognising themselves and their own desires as, in some sense, not normal. In the previous chapter, I argued that *Frankenstein's* narrative is founded upon a (homo)erotic energy of recognition when Walton, enthralled by Victor, identifies him as 'the brother of my heart' (26). Victor's response to Walton is likewise erotically inflected, but he also communicates the panic of one who has come to appreciate the dangers of knowing too much: 'a groan burst from his heaving breast and he spoke in broken accents – 'Unhappy man! Do you share my madness?'(27). Walton is all too willing to give up his privilege of unknowing to his sense of desiring recognition,

and, in return, Victor expresses a weighty anxiety that ‘the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you as mine have been’ (28).<sup>5</sup> Of course Victor’s panicked response fuels Walton’s desire to know more, just as Ruthven’s elusive behaviour whets the curiosity of Aubrey and, presumably, the reader.

One consistent quality of what I will call ‘queer Gothic recognition’ is an overwhelming sense of enthrallment to a more powerful, more knowing figure, one who wields an uncanny power to arrest, hold and dominate the protagonist. Time and again these figures call to mind Carolyn Dinshaw’s concept of the ‘arresting’ queer, that which forces people to stop and to look again at what they have been taking for granted as natural (77). Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) is often cited as an important influence upon *Frankenstein*.<sup>6</sup> It is doubly revealing here as another narrative structured by a knowledge/power relation figured as a moment of arresting recognition. This text can also be read as playing for effect upon the sexually sinister implications of the trope of recognition in the wider cultural field when the Ancient Mariner ominously intones, ‘That moment that his face I see,/ I know the man that must hear me’ (ll. 588 - 89). It is not surprising that the wedding guest resists nomination as the ‘one of three’ who is halted, held by the Mariner’s powerful gaze, and forced to listen to a narrative that will isolate him from others: ‘I fear thee and thy glittering eye’ (l. 228). Justifiably paranoid though he may be, the wedding guest’s predicament again reflects an awareness that forbidden knowledge is enthralling as he cannot escape the Mariner’s power: ‘The Wedding-Guest he beat his breast,/ Yet he cannot choose but hear’ (l. 37 - 38). The reader, who is presumably supposed to identify with the wedding guest, is also arrested, and positioned as subject to the queer power of

strange knowledge and dangerous recognition.<sup>7</sup> These narratives depend upon producing an illusion of disrupted narrative progress, as readers are encouraged to feel that they too are about to take an 'alternative' journey into thrillingly and frighteningly abnormal and unnatural realms of experience. I am struck by the fact that this recognition, that the story proper has now begun, occurs at the same moment as the text makes it possible for the reader to recognise that something queer is happening. It is, after all, this sense of perspective-shifting queer arrest which warns readers that they are about to embark upon a Gothic journey. Perhaps, then, it is this sense of 'queerness,' in the broadest sense of the word, that actually makes the text recognisable as 'Gothic,' and perhaps a sense of recognizable queerness is actually necessary to the Gothic reading experience.

Much of the queer Gothic reading pleasure lies in experiencing the play of recognition, knowledge and ignorance in these narratives and in being put in the alarming, but also thrilling, position of the other 'one' in the text who might recognise the meaning, and who might, therefore, be reading in dangerous proximity to the sexual code. *The Vampyre*, for example, depends entirely upon an 'open secret' structure: the reader is allowed to recognise what Aubrey does not – Ruthven is a vampire. The title forewarns us of this fact before the book is opened. In so doing, the text makes it possible for readers to fill in the gaps in Aubrey's knowledge and articulate the danger he, as yet, cannot perceive. If the reader is also aware of the Gothic semiotics of sexual danger, s/he will know that vampires always present a sexual threat.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the longstanding representational relationship between vampires and dangerous desire, the title of the story should in itself be enough to signify a doubling of Gothic and queer meaning. After all, vampires are probably the Gothic monsters most often read almost

exclusively as signs of sexual deviance. This meaning becomes available to readers who are, to some extent, aware of the way in which monstrosity has been figured as a kind of sexual 'language' in western culture.

The reading experience is thus both enjoyable and alarming, for the one who dares to admit to recognising the danger is also implicated in the forbidden knowledge. Victor Frankenstein's question addressed to Walton, 'Do you share my madness?' (27), appeals also to the reader who has been allowed to come dangerously close to recognising her or his own desire for the abnormal. But, of course the reader does not *have* to admit to knowing or recognising anything because the dispersal of queer meaning into coded language and connotation always allows him or her to remain officially and safely 'ignorant.' Perhaps the Gothic sexual/textual effect could be described as the 'queer uncanny,' and understood as a return of 'secretly familiar' sexual knowledge which has 'undergone repression' (Freud, 368). As Sigmund Freud observes, the 'uncanny' is 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (363 - 364). If Gothic texts produced a sense of 'queer uncanny,' it was because the capacity to recognise sexual 'deviance' was supposed to be repressed and stigmatised in the nineteenth century as something not to be acknowledged. But, at the same time, the language through which queerness is constituted and made legible would have been familiar in a society that liked to speak endlessly about the 'fact' that it did not speak about sex. Still, I think the crucial point to consider here is that Gothic fiction has always appealed precisely because its deployment of coded language allows its readers to experience the thrills of sexual connotation without having to openly admit to recognising



the possible meaning in the text. Through various configurations of ignorance, knowledge, desire and power, Gothic texts have produced a pleasurable dynamic of excitement, fear and expectation. Many student readers, coming quickly to the conclusion that these texts are really all about 'sex,' set themselves the task of liberating (speaking about) the apparently repressed meaning in Gothic fiction.<sup>9</sup> But, in attempting to break the codes, readers may be missing some important points. First, the fact that the source of the thrill is not actually denoted and does not have to be acknowledged is part of the pleasure, for such narratives have always allowed readers to enjoy a sense of having got away with reading something subversive in relative safety. Second, perhaps these texts are really about the way western culture has come to exploit sex as what Foucault calls *the secret*. As such, they also present a point of departure for discussing commonplace but often unspoken links between the construction of sexual 'deviancy' and popular entertainment (Ingebretsen 18).

### **'Prey to Some Cureless Disquiet':**

#### **The Tropolical Nightmare and the Gothic Exploitation of Queerness**

Where there is mystery, it is generally supposed that there must also be evil  
 - The narrator ('Fragment' 247)

Working with connotation and attempting to unpack the sexual symbolism in Gothic fiction feels at times akin to entering what could be called a tropological nightmare in which everything appears to mean something more than, or other than, it first appears. In Byron's 'Fragment,' Augustus Darvell is the haunted, haunting figure, 'prey to some cureless disquiet' (247). The word '*dis*-quiet' may indirectly allude to the code

‘unspeakable’: the meaningful discourse of silence through which the possibility of desire between men was connotatively produced throughout the nineteenth century. But the motif could be further appropriated here to express the deeper underlying sexual disquiet reverberating from the narrative. ‘Disquiet’ is actually an apt motif with which to frame this discussion, for what is queer reading if not a means of provoking disquiet and, as Sedgwick has suggested, investing fascination in sites, such as Gothic fiction, where the meanings do not ‘line up tidily with each other’ (*Tendencies* 3)? However, the problem for the reader is that the sense of sexual disquiet does indeed seem to be ‘cureless.’ For it is impossible to know for sure whether or not we are reading what we suspect we are reading, since it is in the nature of connotation to lead one into a maze of signification from which there appears to be no exit.

Rather than inviting the madness of trying to prove, categorically, that queer meanings are present in Gothic texts, I propose a more productive approach lies in considering how the inscription of sexual discourse in language actually encourages us to read the language of Gothic fiction queerly. In my view, it is easy to read these texts as being all about sex because they *exploit* the discursive production of dangerous sexual meaning as something that does indeed appear to be both everywhere and nowhere. In so doing, they illustrate a striking sense of awareness that the language of sexual nonconformity is in many ways constituted as a kind of tropological nightmare in western culture. It is possible to read multiple sexual dangers into *Frankenstein*, *The Vampyre* and Byron’s ‘Fragment,’ as these texts put into play codes such as the unspeakable, secrecy, passing, surveillance, monstrosity, madness, sin and threats of torment. I would therefore suggest that they put the coded language of queer desire to *work*, and actually

exploit the discursive construction of queerness as something that threatens the sexual norm and which is, as a consequence, thrilling as well as disturbing. Moreover, a Foucauldian perspective would suggest that we do *not* experience the repression of queer meaning when we read Gothic texts; rather, we are experiencing the *production* of queer meaning as something that becomes recognisable by virtue of the fact that it is *supposed* to be repressed. What we are really talking about here, then, is not the ‘uncanniness’ of queerness, but the discursive production of queerness as uncanny, as familiar but frightening. Instead of searching for the ‘truth’ of Gothic fiction in sexual meaning, I would therefore suggest that we turn to consider what ‘truths’ these texts might have to tell us about the way in which sexual nonconformity has been produced in western culture as a kind of nightmarish Gothic ‘fiction.’

*The Vampyre* develops not only into a nightmare of the closet, but also into a topological nightmare in which the protagonist finds himself increasingly locked up in figurative language. Before he dies, Ruthven forces Aubrey to swear an oath to conceal his death. The narrator of Byron’s ‘Fragment’ is likewise bound to silence by a performative oath of ‘great solemnity’ (250). Immediately before Darvell’s death, the two men watch a stork with ‘a serpent writhing in her beak,’ and Darvell informs his companion that she does not devour it because ‘It is not yet time’ (251). The snake is an apt symbol for the narrator’s position, apparently unaware that he may be prey to a predator who has chosen not to devour him yet. A stork with a snake in its beak is also a symbol of eternal torment.<sup>10</sup> This, too, is an apt warning, in the sense that any non-normative sexual identity or expression of desire can lead to a life of torment in an erotophobic culture. The ‘Fragment’ ends with Darvell’s death leaving the narrator

sealed in an unbroken code, but in *The Vampyre* Polidori expands upon the implications of the oath, as Aubrey enters a kind of hell, discovering that he has indeed sworn, as directed, by all his nature fears (15). If ‘nature’ often stands for ‘normal’ and queer desire is posited as unnatural, it is a short deductive leap to the conclusion that what Aubrey really fears is the predatory encroachment of deviant desire, so temptingly and alarmingly embodied in Ruthven.

In this context, it is not surprising that when Ruthven reappears Aubrey is unable to speak, while the vampire’s repeated exhortations to ‘Remember your oath’ (18) strengthen the linguistic lock on his figurative closet. ‘Remember your oath’ is one way of saying ‘Remember what you cannot say.’ Giving himself up to his ‘devouring thoughts’ (18), Aubrey is soon deemed mad and locked up by his guardians in a physical incarceration mirroring his psychic imprisonment. Madness is another Gothic trope which sometimes doubles as a cultural code for unacceptable desire. The tables have been turned, for now it is Aubrey who is no longer able to pass as normal and loses, as a consequence, any authoritative place to speak from. Thus marked by the vampire, he is removed from society, locked up by his guardians and placed under medical surveillance. Whilst Ruthven continues to pass successfully, Aubrey becomes visibly ‘queer.’ He goes mad partly because he is caught in this tropological nightmare – he cannot *read* the meaning of his situation or articulate the precise nature of the danger. The only way in which the text can speak about Aubrey’s problem is through the sign of madness, but his madness is not a surprising consequence in a textual world where almost anything can be read as encoding a sexual threat to his body, identity, and sanity. The protagonist is subject to the additional terror of the privilege of unknowing. Even if he could speak, it

is quite possible that people would, at best, refuse to believe him and, at worst, read him as deviant or mad, as is the fate of both Aubrey and Victor Frankenstein. As the reader is subject to a similar problem, because s/he is no more able to articulate the precise nature of the threat than is the protagonist, the text speaks to her or him about a culture that has produced (and fictionalised) the possibility of sexual nonconformity as an unspeakable cause of insanity.

*Frankenstein*, *The Vampyre* and 'The Fragment' can all be figured as closet narratives, insofar as they depend for their tension upon a dynamic of secrecy and revelation. The prevalence of the 'closet' as a narrative structure in Gothic fiction again suggests a doubling of Gothic and queer conventions, and further points towards the way in which the genre re-produces the deployment of sexual meaning as what Foucault calls, 'a problem of truth' (*History* 56). As such, these narratives can be said to engage a developing cultural compulsion to make sex 'mirror [...] something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative' (*History* 35). Gothic closets vary, but a closet narrative should always produce the sense that it is literally packed with meaning, and create the illusion that something dangerous, probably sexually non-normative and, importantly, posited as a 'truth,' may become subject to revelation at any moment. As the cryptic narrator of the 'Fragment' points out, 'Where there is mystery, it is generally supposed that there must also be evil' (247). In this context, it seems not unlikely that such suspicion encompasses sexual 'evil.' Significantly, the power of the closet is found in its structural effect within the narrative, rather than in any truth which might actually be revealed. After all, it is the impression of impending revelation that really matters, for we do not read Gothic fiction for actual revelation; we read it for the excitement and

suspense. In *The Vampyre*, the reader's desire, like Aubrey's desire, is kept in play by deferral – the denied gratification and 'constant excitement' generated by the 'wish to break that mystery' (7). This text utilises the closet as a narrative structure and plot device, beginning with Ruthven as an apparent site of mystery and ending with his revelation as a 'VAMPYRE.' In some texts the reader has access to a certain amount of knowledge about the nature of the secret and in others all information is withheld until the very end. Byron's 'Fragment,' for instance, presents an entirely closed narrative, in keeping its secrets it leaves it up to the reader to fill in the gaps and make something speakable of the heavily connotative language.

The trope of confession presents yet another exemplary convergence of Gothic rhetoric and modern sexual discourse, for confession is both a common generic convention and an important knowledge/power relation through which sexual meaning is constituted in Judeo-Christian culture. As Foucault observes, confession 'was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse on sex' (*History* 63). Again these texts can be read as exploiting the association of sexual meaning and truth: in putting confession into play, they play upon the discursive production of deviant desire as something which, on the one hand, must be kept secret and, on the other hand, must be confessed. Take, for instance, the madness-inducing tension between the 'unspeakable' and the desire to confess experienced by characters such as Aubrey and Victor Frankenstein. Their nightmare is produced by apparently, but not actually, opposing cultural imperatives constituting deviant desire as both a verbal prohibition *and* an inducement to confession. Victor states, 'I would have given the world to have confided that fatal secret' (180). But, at the same time he feels, 'I could not bring

myself to disclose a secret which would fill my hearer with consternation, and make fear and unnatural horror the inmates of his breast' (180). The double-bind is well expressed in his description of a 'hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe' (87). 'Hell' it may be, but the tension is not contradictory within the logic of the deployment of sexuality. In this context, non-normative desire is supposedly rendered unspeakable but, as Foucault explains, it is also mandated that 'you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse' (*History* 21). The secrecy/confession dynamic could contribute to the sense that these narratives are about sex, but perhaps they are really more about the production of sexual meaning as a secret that must be indirectly spoken.

It is important to consider that the atmosphere of sexual transgression and danger in these texts does not have its source in the sexual symbolism itself, but in the discursive production of that symbolism as sexual. In other words, these narratives do not repress sexual meaning, they re-enact the production of certain meanings which are supposed to be repressed. Gothic closet narratives, for instance, do not really hide dangerous sexual truths; they reflect the constitution of dangerous sexual meaning as something that should be hidden. Vampires such as Ruthven do not simply symbolise sexual perversity; they illustrate the fact that sexual perversity has been constructed as vampiric. These theoretical distinctions are important, because the popular success of the Gothic as a genre is predicated upon its capacity to allow the reader to enjoy *feeling* subversive, and therefore upon a signifying system that 'smacks of revolt' (Foucault, *History* 7). Desires constructed as 'queer' in the cultural imagination are of course considered to be especially transgressive. In this respect, Gothic fiction can also be said to play upon, or prey upon, what Foucault calls, the 'repressive hypothesis': the popular understanding

that sexual meaning is repressed, and reading and speaking about it is therefore a transgressive activity. Perhaps what is actually being exploited is the reader's faith in the repressive hypothesis, for without the presumption of sexual repression, the connotation of such desire could lose its power to frighten and thrill. If so, the Gothic reproduces the wider association of abnormal sex with transgression and positions the reader as subject to this imperative. The Gothic may therefore have developed as a genre that exploits culture's faith in its own sexual repression by putting the queer sign system into play at every opportunity.

The deployment of sexually connotative language is a means to achieve a thrilling subversive effect or, rather, to *affect* subversion while decreasing the risk of censorship. The resulting aura of queer Gothic transgression has since reverberated into cultural reproductions of texts such as *Frankenstein*. On viewing the first theatrical adaptation entitled *Presumption: Or the Fate of Frankenstein* in 1823, Mary Shelley took note of the decision to leave the name of the actor playing the Creature signified by a \_\_\_\_\_ in the programme. In a letter to a friend, she observed, 'this nameless mode of naming the unnameable is rather good' (Bennett, *Letters 1*. 378). The Monster is indeed both unnamed and unnameable, painfully excluded from the dominant, but also beyond its control. As his very namelessness is produced from the world that refuses him a name, the signifying of his presence with a meaningful silence is, as Shelley puts it, 'rather good.' Such a small hint of unspeakability may not seem very remarkable, but it gains more weight when considered in relation to the wider furore surrounding the production of *Presumption*. As tickets went on sale, 'some zealous friends of morality' took it upon themselves to protest. They distributed pamphlets advising the public not to view the



‘monstrous drama,’ founded upon an ‘improper work,’ warning readers, ‘Do not take your wives and families – The novel itself is of a decidedly immoral tendency; it treats of a subject which in nature cannot occur’ (qtd; in Forry 5).<sup>11</sup> This text takes part in a larger tradition of contemporary anti-theatre protest, and perhaps the pamphleteers intended only to refer to the novel’s almost blasphemous subtext. But, even so, the language of the text steers close to another popular subject for pamphlets during this period, namely, those sexual behaviours considered to be immoral, unnatural, monstrous and dangerous to family life. The theatre responded with a successful repudiation, but the protests had already worked to encourage ticket sales. As one contemporary commented, ‘You only have to tell a Cockney that an Exhibition is shocking – abominable – impious, and off he starts to bear witness to the fact’ (qtd; in Forry 6 - 7). If Gothic fiction taps into the discursive production of sexual nonconformity, it has come to depend upon the fact that desires considered ‘queer’ in the cultural imagination are also those considered to be especially transgressive and exciting. Queerness is thrilling precisely because it is supposed to be prohibited.

In 1824, another theatre manager planning to stage *Presumption* took note and actually designed a hoax ‘Caution to Playhouse Frequenters,’ apparently hoping to boost box office sales. This text described the play as ‘impious,’ ‘horrid and unnatural,’ a ‘piece publicly exposed by the Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality,’ concluding bizarrely with “The Wages of sin are Death” and referring to the theatre as a “Grave of the Soul” (qtd; in Forry 8). The ploy backfired, perhaps partly because the text steered a little too close to the language of sodomy for even the most curious of cockneys to stomach. What is interesting, however, is that *Frankenstein* had already attracted an

aura of what we could call sexual transgression by 1823, and people were attempting to sell Gothic entertainment with a language we can recognise as ‘queer.’ I am also struck by another aspect of the hoax protest – the location of the theatre as the ‘*Grave of the Soul.*’ Through its association with *Frankenstein*, the theatre space itself appears to have become metaphorically full of dangerous meaning. It has become, like the laboratory in the novel, located as the site of deviance and productivity: from this space the monstrous queer meaning of the play *Presumption* is to be produced.

### **A Voyage of Discovery to the Land of Knowledge:**

#### **Inhabiting Queer Gothic Textual Space**

what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central  
- Stallybrass and White (5)

The textuality of Gothic space is in no way exempt from infusion with the language of queer desire. The genre has foregrounded symbolic space at least since Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Ontrano* in 1764 and, as Botting notes, it is often presumed that the ‘gloom and darkness of sublime landscapes’ function as ‘markers of inner mental and emotional states’ (*Gothic* 91 - 92). Because the genre has always used spatial conventions to communicate fears and desires that cannot be spoken directly, readers may well expect to find an element of sexual meaning in Gothic spaces. Indeed, the overt psycho-sexual symbolism of crumbling castles, sinister monasteries, deep dark forests, dungeons and subterranean passages sometimes seems a little too obvious to be especially interesting. But, I include a spatial angle here precisely because I want to

utilise developments in queer theory to offer a fresh perspective on what sometimes appears to be a rather hackneyed generic convention. In my view, it is possible to discern a sexual textuality at work within Gothic spatiality and an attention to space will further illustrate just how embedded the language of 'queerness' has become within Gothic narratives. Of particular interest, in this context, are moments where the representation of unorthodox desire, strange knowledge and marginal space intersect. Located on the social, cultural, and sexual peripheries of the narrative, such liminal queer spaces are never entirely exterior to the normal world, but can be recognised as constituting places of difference.<sup>12</sup> These textual spaces are often strongly associated with otherness, monstrosity and death. *The Vampyre* and the 'Fragment' take the reader into eerie Greek and eastern settings, dangerous forests and sinister cemeteries; while in *Frankenstein*, such spaces include ships sailing Arctic seas, polar-regions, glacial mountains, appalling islands and yet more graveyards. Moreover, the strange wanderers and outcasts journeying through such narratives may ultimately function as 'markers' of a larger sexual and epistemological journey undertaken by culture during this period.

In spatial terms, *Frankenstein* opens in a strangely appropriate place, a dangerously unstable shifting sea of ice, and I would propose that it is only from a space such as this, that a tale such as *Frankenstein* can be told. This place, if it can be called a place, where nothing is certain, predictable, or known, sets the scene for the entire novel, forewarning of the uncertain boundaries and dangerous desires to be found within. Walton's narrative begins with an optimistic spatial fantasy: 'What may not be expected in a country of eternal light?' (13). Instead, he finds himself presented with limitless ice, liable to crack at any moment, over which passes the warning figure of the Monster.

Victor draws attention to the relationship between space and previously unimaginable possibilities when he says to Walton, 'Were we among the tamer scenes of nature, I might fear to encounter your unbelief, perhaps your ridicule; but many things will appear possible in these wild and mysterious regions' (29). His presumption links the space to the production of the narrative itself. By this I mean, the liminal (neither land nor sea) space of the Arctic is a wild zone, which opens the possibility for telling 'mysterious' narratives of 'wild' desire. Although it is not specified precisely what becomes possible in this location, both Victor and Walton imply that things may be said and may occur that are different from normal expectations. The opening of *Frankenstein* can stand as a metaphorical comment on the perceived cultural function of Gothic fiction as a kind of literary wild zone, an alternative space which is supposed to offer reading experiences that differ from more mainstream literature. If we were not in this Gothic space, says Victor to the reader, I might expect to encounter your unbelief, but here, it might be possible to envision dangerous narrative possibilities. Such spaces also create possibilities for producing readings that differ to normal expectations, opening not only the narrative, but also the textual wild zone of queer reading. Moreover, as the alternative possibilities that Walton had hoped to discover are found, not in the North Pole, but in his relationship with Victor, this space encompasses potential for a different relationship between men, as well as the bestowal of knowledge other than that which Walton originally envisioned. In this context, it is no coincidence that the two men are located in an unsafe marginal space of difference and radical possibility.

*Frankenstein* presents a spatial allegory in which the dangerous desire and forbidden knowledge embodied by the Monster is also metaphorically diffused and

expressed through the text's 'landscape of desire.'<sup>13</sup> Acting as a harbinger, ushering Victor in to tell his strange story, the Monster is symbolically central from the beginning. It is therefore his rightful place to precipitate the narrative and highly appropriate that Walton should see him first. The juxtaposition of the Monster's body with the Arctic setting implies a metaphorical relation between his body and the space he inhabits. The 'vast and irregular plains of ice,' described by Walton, are traversed by the embodiment of 'vast,' 'irregular' desire (23). Like the cultural construction of queer desire, the Monster is perceived to be 'out there,' displaced away from the normal world, ultimately unknowable and 'lost among the distant inequalities of the ice' (23). The strange space therefore heightens the sense of a queer allegory in the text. For the setting of the Monster's first appearance works to remind us that non-normative desires and identities have a long history of relegation to the cultural and spatial edges, as monstrous sites where the known demarcations of sex, gender and desire begin to break down. Insofar as he embodies a force of proscribed desire, the Monster's marginalised position also unmask a violence that may be done to any desire, identity or body that deviates from the required norm. The convergence, at this narrative moment, of a symbolically marginal dangerous space with a monster, and the forbidden knowledge he embodies, brings together space, desire and knowledge to produce a recognisably queer *figure* in both senses of the word. The Monster's 'figure' (his body) is strange, disruptive and frightening; it is also 'figurative' – packed with potential queer meaning. Significantly, in this space the sense of overwhelming recognition discussed earlier becomes most powerful. Consider Victor's linguistically climactic response to his recognition of the Monster during their final pursuit over the Arctic ice: 'I [...] uttered a wild cry of ecstasy

when I distinguished a sledge, and the distorted proportions of a well-known form within. Oh! with what a burning gush did hope revisit my heart!' (200). In response, one could argue that the erotic energy of queer Gothic recognition has rarely been better expressed.

The ship upon which Victor is located when he discloses the tale of *Frankenstein* might be understood as what Foucault terms a 'heterotopia,' a space where the 'subjugated knowledges' of 'those positioned in the social margins resist and contest the dominant social discourses' (Taylor 6). The recent renewal of interest in Foucault's spatial theory suggests to me that a dialectical alliance between the concept of 'heterotopia' and queer theory could provide a useful methodology for theorising queer Gothic space.<sup>14</sup> As Affrica Taylor explains, 'heterotopia' literally translates as 'place of difference,' and there are 'heterotopias of imagination, movement and passage' (8). Foucault describes the ship as 'the heterotopia *par excellence*': a 'floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea' ('Other Spaces' 27). In *Frankenstein*, Victor's narrative is therefore produced from an exemplary heterotopian narrative space and the frozen sea is certainly a 'place without a place,' land that is not land. When Walton takes Victor aboard his ship he provides a final heterotopia, a site that links together all the other sites and relations in the text which it also reflects and speaks about. Significantly, it is from this 'linking' site that Victor can finally 'speak,' for the primary function of a heterotopia is one of disclosure. Such spaces speak to us about the culture that has made them a necessity, just as the narrative of *Frankenstein*, spoken from this heterotopian space, has some important things to tell us about the culture from which it has been produced.

According to Foucault, we do not live in a homogenous and empty space 'but, on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well' ('Other Spaces' 23). There is a striking prevalence of heterotopian spaces in Gothic fiction and many of these sites, identified by Foucault as 'places of difference,' also speak to the reader about sexual culture. In this respect, Gothic texts have something to say about a world in which certain spaces have indeed been imbued with fantasmatic sexual qualities. Take the ship for example: in the previous chapter, I noted that sailors are often the subjects of homoerotic and homophobic fantasies. The ship space therefore discloses something about the homosocial culture that has made the all-male environment into a site of anxiety. Furthermore, Gothic fiction is also replete with the kind of spaces Foucault calls 'heterotopias of deviation,' places in which individuals 'whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' ('Other Spaces' 25). These include asylums and prisons, such as those in which Victor is repeatedly incarcerated. Such heterotopian/Gothic spaces also call to mind the historical criminalisation, and later pathologisation, of 'deviant' sexual behaviours and identities. Then there are heterotopias of movement and passage. In *The Vampyre*, for instance, Polidori is not very subtle about the sexual implications of male travel, referring to the Grand Tour as a rite of passage which 'for many generations had been thought necessary to enable the young to take some steps in the career of vice' (5). In my view, the Grand Tour could be conceptualised as what Foucault called a 'crises heterotopia,' a place which is not a place, where a young man's initiation into the 'world,' and by implication sexual activity, is achieved because it cannot occur at home.<sup>15</sup> Like all such

spaces the Grand Tour again tells us something about the culture that has made it a necessity.

Polidori leaves the nature of the vice to which Aubrey will be introduced on his tour characteristically vague, but as he and Ruthven journey into Greece the text travels towards heavily freighted sexual meaning. During this period 'Greek love' was a common euphemism for desire between men (Crompton 11). The Greek space therefore becomes another recognisable code for homosexuality in this text, a fantasmatic 'other' space imbued with dangerous meaning. At a time when particularly violent homophobic discourses were widely circulated in England, it is appropriate that Aubrey's desiring recognition of Ruthven leads him to this most (homo)sexually symbolic of spaces. Here he finds himself strangely bound to Ruthven at the same moment as their relationship begins to deteriorate into murderous hostility. Lord Ruthven dies and is buried in Greek soil from which he will return to torment Aubrey with his own 'unspeakable' fears. The textual space compounds the sense of queer significance already conveyed through the protagonist's desire for forbidden knowledge and his recognition of his strange companion, but it also points towards a culture in which certain spaces are produced as 'queer' and associated with sexual deviance.

A connotative linkage between space, desire and knowledge is put into play when the protagonist's sexual/epistemological quest is allegorically enacted through his journey of spatial discovery. Gothic texts abound with mysterious wanderers who seek knowledge, or have been forced to travel because they have already been endowed with too much forbidden knowledge. The tropes of the journey and the wanderer present another point in Gothic narratives where it is possible to perceive a doubling of Gothic



conventions and the conventions through which queerness has been made legible in the cultural imagination. Simply speaking, the Gothic wanderer's propensity to shift enacts his or her threatening sexual shiftiness. After all, endless travelling is not considered to be sexually normal and such texts often set up an opposition between the (hetero)normative stability of home, as against the queer traveller who literally refuses to be pinned down, and who has either rejected, or been ejected from, the cultural centre. The Ancient Mariner, Darvell, Ruthven, Walton, Victor's Monster and Victor himself are all variously travellers and outcasts. As Botting notes, the Romantic Gothic's isolated heroes and protagonists, 'wanderers, outcasts and rebels,' are 'condemned to roam the borders of social worlds,' as 'bearers of dark truth or horrible knowledge' (*Gothic* 98). It is little wonder, then, that back at home in London, Walton's sister Margaret regards his journey with 'evil forebodings' (13). In terms of both queer and Gothic conventions, she has good reason to be worried.

The lives of some early nineteenth-century Gothic authors may have played a part in perpetuating the association between the wanderers in their texts and forbidden knowledge and sexual transgression in the minds of readers. In 1897, having been released from prison and forced into exile in France, Oscar Wilde pertinently signed his name as 'Sebastian Melmoth' in the register of the hotel where he was staying. In so doing he identified himself with the title character of Charles Maturin's Gothic novel *Melmoth The Wanderer* (1820), a damned figure forced to wander the earth until the devil claims him for hell. As Baldick notes, 'Melmoth' is the 'badge of the eternal outcast.'<sup>16</sup> But Wilde tapped into another aspect of Gothic mythology, for his self-nomination is also, appropriately enough, the 'badge' of the *queer*. Exiled and forced to

wander, Wilde found that he had become a cultural monster and his monstrous pseudonym calls upon a longer tradition linking Gothic authors with transgressive sexuality. This mythology stretches back to Lord Byron, who was famously forced to travel abroad in 1816 to escape rumours about his relationship with his half-sister and his liking for young men. As a sexually notorious figure, Byron may have set something of a precedent for the popular fascination with the sex lives of famous Gothic authors and the queer touch of his presence has certainly 'framed' all the texts produced from the 'ghost story competition' in 1816. But there was also Horace Walpole, author of *The Castle of Ontranto* (1764), William Beckford, the author of *Vathek* (1786) and Mathew Lewis, the famous author of *The Monk* (1796), all of whom were associated with homosexual scandal or suspicion.<sup>17</sup> Mary Shelley was also considered a sexual outlaw during her lifetime and forced to travel abroad as a consequence. It is difficult to say for sure whether the sexual behaviours and punishments experienced by these authors impacted upon their propensity to write Gothic fictions and I will discuss authorship in more depth in the following chapter. But, for now, it seems clear that the tendency to travel exhibited by these writers had something to do with other tendencies in their lives. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that their texts point towards a culture in which certain desires and identities did necessitate a life on the move and, within the terms of this cultural narrative, travellers also become subject to the hermeneutics of sexual suspicion. The mystique surrounding these authors may well have encouraged readers to view Gothic wanderers in the light of their wandering, wayward authors, bearers of dark truth and horrible knowledge.

As a queer allegory, Lord Byron's 'Fragment' also presents a sexual textuality at the level of space, drawing upon the discursive production of desire between men as marginal and expelled from the mores of religion and society. Darvell may be a mystery, but one thing is known for sure and that is that he has 'already travelled extensively' (247). Reading his own desire to travel into Darvell's experience, the narrator confesses a 'secret wish that he might be prevailed upon to accompany me' (248). However, their relationship can only be represented through their journey into Eastern places 'not hitherto much frequented' (246). Along a 'wild and tenantless track through the marshes and defiles,' they travel past 'the roofless walls of expelled Christianity, and the still more recent but complete desolation of abandoned mosques' (248 - 249). Ultimately, the road in the 'Fragment' leads to an abandoned 'city of the dead' (249). Insofar as sex between men has long been representationally linked to death, this space also encodes a certain queer meaning. After all, in a period in which the death penalty for sodomy was being enforced in England, where else should such a narrative journey end, but in a cemetery? Surprised by Darvell's claim to have 'been here before,' the narrator responds naively with the question, 'what could you be doing in a place where no one would remain a moment longer than they could help it?' (249). What he misses, and what the 'knowing' reader might recognise, is the fact that Darvell belongs here in this deathly marginal space.

When space becomes imbued with such meaning, spatial ignorance becomes increasingly dangerous, as Aubrey discovers when he ignores warnings not to travel through woods: 'the resort of the vampyres in their nocturnal orgies' (10). 'Full of vampires' can easily be interpreted as 'full of sexual danger.' Aubrey has yet again left

the 'safe' path. In this de-regulated orgiastic space, his encounter with Ruthven explodes into violence echoing the language of rape: 'his enemy threw himself upon him, and kneeling upon his breast, had placed his hands upon his throat' (12). Ruthven is at his most physically dangerous in this dark space outside society. The relationship between Victor and his Monster is also realised through their journey into ever more strange and hostile environments. Ultimately, they are forced out to the Arctic where, as Rosemary Jackson observes, 'in a sterile polar region – the condition of their intimacy is a progressive alienation from society' (100). It is difficult to escape the impression that, at the symbolic level, this allegorical journey progresses towards the production of queer desires as paranoid, dangerous, sterile and socially alienating forms of intimacy and identity.

If the deployment of sexuality from the seventeenth century onwards paved the way towards a language increasingly charged with connotative sexual meaning, the Gothic journeys undertaken in these texts might stand in allegorical relation to the sexual/epistemological journey taken by the culture at large during this period. Again it is important to consider that these texts do not simply repress or push queer meaning into Gothic landscapes and journeys, leaving it there for the reader to discover. Rather, Gothic texts depict the production of certain spaces as queer, and the production of queer desires and identities as marginal, strange, deathly and even 'Gothic' conditions. Little wonder, then, that queer lives have become figured as dangerous journeys. Perhaps the destination of the Gothic journey is in fact modern 'sexuality' itself, especially the discursive construction of queer sexuality. The geography of the monster is, as Cohen notes, 'an imperilling expanse' (7), but it is not less 'imperilling' than the geography of

sexuality towards which these narratives and their monsters travel. It is therefore appropriate to find that the space in which Victor and Walton are situated becomes increasingly dangerous as the narrative progresses. By the end, the ship is ‘encompassed by peril [...] I am surrounded by mountains of ice, which admit of no escape, and threaten every moment to crush my vessel’ (205). Walton survives, but for others the journey leads inexorably toward a figurative ‘dead end.’ Where else is there to go in a culture in which social and sometimes actual death were penalties for non-normative sexual activities? As Foucault notes, by the nineteenth century there was a feeling that, ‘strange pleasures [...] would eventually result in nothing short of death’ (*History* 54). This feeling is well expressed in the deathly destination of so many early nineteenth-century Gothic journeys.

### **Cannot Choose But Hear?**

we know we are being subversive  
- Michel Foucault (*History* 6)

The language of Gothic fiction will remain a queer language for as long as the genre continues to play upon the discursive production of queerness. On one level, it is easy to read Gothic texts as being all about sex, because the genre depends for its effect upon the dissemination of sexual meaning into a wide range of signs and codes. The resulting charged atmospheres of danger, spirals of excitement and fear, projection, recognition and disavowal, have always been important aspects of the genre’s appeal. Instead of searching for the truth of Gothic fiction in ‘sex,’ I propose that readers and students

should consider what these texts reveal about the way modern sexual discourse has produced 'sex' as a source of truth, and sexual nonconformity as a site of particularly intense epistemological pressure. But, importantly, Gothic fiction does tell us some 'truths' about the way we, as a society, tend to speak, think and fantasise about the possibility of sexual nonconformity. The texts discussed in this chapter remind us that modern sexual discourse constructs queerness as forbidden knowledge, and as something that must be recognised, but which is dangerous because, once recognised, it is imagined to infect and overwhelm the subject. The truth of sexual nonconformity is depicted as a secret, something that should remain hidden, but despite the supposed prohibitions, sex is something fascinating that we feel compelled to speak about. Gothic fiction engages a world in which to be 'queer' is thought to lead to madness, death and social ostracism, and is to risk becoming a strange wanderer, forced to travel, outcast on the edges of society in marginal and dangerous spaces. As all the above assumptions about what it is to be 'queer' still inform ideas about sex and gender nonconformity to this day, in this respect, these texts could again be used to discuss queer theory's concerns with the way queerness has been constructed in western culture.

Queer theorists, such as Judith Butler, have noted society's tendency to produce the very desires it claims to repress and, in this respect, Gothic fiction can again illustrate queer theoretical thinking. In a sense, the pleasures of Gothic entertainment are themselves 'pleasures generated by the law they are said to defy' (Butler, *Gender* 98). Would readers be interested in the Gothic if it did not promise them transgression? Since the genre allows its readers to enjoy feeling that they have got away with experiencing something subversive in relative safety, it cannot be said to serve an entirely transgressive

function. However, the desire *for* transgression, which the enduring popularity of Gothic fiction represents, is itself of interest. For the desire for such entertainment represents a desire to at least imagine alternative possibilities, to see the norm challenged, and also reflects a pervasive cultural interest in that which has been produced as ‘other’ and deviant. Moreover, at the phenomenological level, the desire to read Gothic texts is transgressive, insofar as its readers have always experienced their reading pleasures as transgressive. For this reason, the suspicion and disdain with which Gothic fiction has been viewed by some critics since the eighteenth century is actually quite justified.<sup>18</sup> Not only do these texts contain possibilities for resistance; they depend upon the presumption that what is supposedly forbidden is as exciting and attractive, as it is alarming and dangerous.

But perhaps one of the most truly transgressive possibilities in Gothic fiction is the suggestion that the horrors of queer desire are ultimately little more than a rhetorically produced sign system within an erotophobic culture. More often than not, there is no ‘truth’ to be revealed in these narratives, no secret in the closet beyond the imagining of a sexual secret. In this case, Gothic narratives tellingly imply that the ‘truth’ of sex might be the real phantom haunting culture, and the Gothic black joke may be made at the expense of the deployment of sexuality itself. The sexual ‘truth’ in the Gothic closet is therefore the truth of a culture in which sexual nonconformity has been depicted as a Gothic horror story. Ken Gelder argues that at the end of *The Vampyre* the code finally breaks when Lord Ruthven’s identification is ‘uttered (or ‘outed’)' as a ‘VAMPYRE’ (59). But, in my view, this categorisation ultimately fails to pin him down. When Aubrey’s guardians finally arrive, they find that the truth of the monster they sought has

disappeared. Instead, he escapes, to pass yet again among the unsuspecting and those who cannot articulate precisely what it is they suspect. Moreover, if a vampire is itself a code for something perversely sexual, then to name Ruthven as such only substitutes yet another sign for the many dangers he embodies. Punter states that *The Vampyre* is 'almost entirely about sex' (103), in which case it is appropriate that those in pursuit, including the readers, are left holding nothing but a sign at the end. What is important, though, is that the text does leave us holding onto something essential to the Gothic, namely, the impression that the story *was* indeed entirely about 'sex.' A Foucauldian perspective suggests that readers probably will equate the 'truth' of the text with the sexual meaning they find therein, because they have been subjected to the discourses which have made sexual meaning into a privileged site of 'truth.' This leads back to the feeling that Gothic fiction is all about sex – indeed, sex becomes the hidden truth of Gothic fiction, because sex is considered to be *the* hidden truth. Queer meaning is inscribed in the language of Gothic fiction, but there is no centre to the maze of signification. There is no sexual truth to be found beyond the truth that the Gothic draws upon a culture in which 'sex,' and especially non-normative sex, is believed to be the dangerous centre of almost everything worth knowing.

Because this discussion has been primarily concerned with exploring questions of language and queer reading, I did not want to become caught in speculations as to whether Gothic authors intended certain sexual meanings to be present in their texts. Like the circling stork, which the narrator attempts in vain to drive away in Byron's 'Fragment,' the question of whether the author was someone 'in the know' who deliberately included sexual connotation in her or his text, returns us always to the same



spot, trapped in circular speculative arguments. I also avoided this question because I did not want to imply that texts with apparently 'heterosexual' authors should be read any less queerly than texts written by famous sexual non-conformists. But what of that other 'one' in the text writing in dangerously close proximity to the sexual codes? The author should not simply be ignored, and it is also apparent that the sexual lives led by some Gothic authors have had an important impact within their texts' reception space. There is a further question to be explored here, for if the genre is perceived as being about 'sex,' this perception has had a role in shaping the way we tend to think about both Gothic authors and their texts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> If, as Sedgwick notes, modern sexuality is defined as the site of the most intensive detection of 'truth' in western culture, these Gothic texts reflect the fact that the desires most subject to this demand are not those considered sexually 'normal' (See 'Gender Criticism' 50 - 51). In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed, efforts to find out the secrets of 'heterosexual monogamy' were abandoned, while all manner of 'perversions' were identified and came under increasing scrutiny (38).

<sup>2</sup> My thinking here has been influenced by Inge Crosman Wimmers in her book *Poetics of Reading: Approaches to the Novel*, especially the 'Introduction' (xiii - xxii).

<sup>3</sup> This formulation is taken from Freidman's article 'Pseudonymity, Passing and Queer Biography' (7 of 35).

<sup>4</sup> In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick argues that we should pay attention to the ways in which ignorance and opacity collude and compete with knowledge because 'ignorance effects' are harnessed for striking enforcements, especially around sexuality (23). Gothic fiction can be read as form of textuality which depends heavily upon harnessing such ignorance effects in relation to sexual meaning.

<sup>5</sup> It would be difficult to miss the intertextual echo referencing the deeply embedded religious cultural myth of the serpent who tempts Eve in the Garden of Eden, causing the 'Fall' of humanity into knowledge. The meaning of 'the Fall' has, of course, over time come to be read almost entirely in terms of sexual knowledge, which again tells us something about the deployment of sex *as* knowledge in Judeo-Christian culture.

<sup>6</sup> There is a famous story, now part of Shelley mythology and often encountered in introductions to editions of *Frankenstein*. It is told that 'when Mary and Jane hid behind a sofa to hear the poet Coleridge recite his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* [...] and Mrs Godwin threatened to pack them off to bed, Coleridge intervened, pleading that they be allowed to stay and listen' (Hindle, 'Introduction' xii).

<sup>7</sup> I do not have space here to discuss many examples of queer Gothic recognition, but I would like to draw attention to two more striking instances. In Charles Maturin's novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Stanton meets Melmoth and becomes obsessed with him. Finally, he finds and recognises him again: 'There was nothing particular or remarkable in his appearance, but the expression of his eyes could never be mistaken or forgotten. The heart of Stanton palpitated with violence, - a mist overspread his eyes, - a nameless and deadly sickness, accompanied with a creeping sensation in every pore' (43). James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) contains another wonderful example when Wringham first meets Gil-Martin: 'I felt a sort of invisible power that drew me towards him, something like the force of enchantment, which I could not resist. As we approached each other, our eyes met, and I can never describe the strange sensations that thrilled through my whole frame at that impressive moment' (116).

<sup>8</sup> As Gelder observes, the vampire is 'the most seductive of fictionalised monsters. Its proximity always, at some level at least, involves a sexual charge' (62).

<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that students respond in this way because, as Foucault observes, we are still subject to discourses which tell us that sexual meaning is repressed and must be 'liberated,' especially through speech: 'have we not liberated ourselves from those two long centuries in which the history of sexuality must be seen first of all as the chronicle of an increasing repression? Only to a slight extent, we are told' (*History* 5).

<sup>10</sup> According to Morrison and Baldick this image is an ancient one (n. 250, 278).

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<sup>11</sup> For the full story, see Forry's book *Hideous Progenies* (3 -11).

<sup>12</sup> I am drawing upon Phillips and Watts in *De-Centring Sexualities*, where they argue that the spatial margins are the site of queer possibility, because away from the hegemony of dominant institutions, sexual subjects are least stable. Thus, liminal or in-between spaces are ambivalent sites of critical power and danger (1 - 2). Gothic texts are, of course, replete with liminal, in-between spaces.

<sup>13</sup> The phrase 'landscape of desire' is taken from David Bell and Gill Valentine's editorial introduction to the book *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (1).

<sup>14</sup> Greven offers an interesting queer reading of the ship as heterotopia in his essay 'Flesh in the Word: *Billy Budd, Sailor*, Compulsory Homosexuality and the Uses of Queer Desire.' Greven draws upon Cesare Casarino's work reading 'the encounter of the crises of the ship as heterotopia par excellence with the crises in constructions of sexuality' (11).

<sup>15</sup> Foucault gives the 'honeymoon trip' as an example of a crisis heterotopia for girls: 'The young woman's deflowering could take place "nowhere" and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers' ('Other Spaces' 24 - 25). I am here attempting to locate the Grand Tour as a similar kind of heterotopia for young men.

<sup>16</sup> Baldick comments: 'Upon his release from prison in 1897, Oscar Wilde travelled to France under an assumed name carefully contrived to announce him as both martyred saint and blasted sinner: it was 'Sebastian Melmoth' ('Introduction' vii).

<sup>17</sup> Sedgwick observes that a 'case can be made about each that he was in some significant sense homosexual – Beckford notoriously, Lewis probably, Walpole iffily' (*Between Men* 92).

<sup>18</sup> According to Botting, 'attacked throughout the second half of the eighteenth century for encouraging excessive emotions and invigorating unlicensed passions, Gothic texts were also seen to be subverting the mores and manners on which good social behaviour rested [...] Gothic fictions seemed to promote vice and violence, giving free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desires beyond the prescriptions of law or familial duty' (*Gothic* 4)

## Chapter Six

### Desiring the Author: Mary Shelley, John Polidori and the Sexual Politics of Gothic Authorship

The author still reigns,  
- Roland Barthes

The authorial mythologies surrounding Mary Shelley and John Polidori have produced figures who appear at times to be as monstrous, as Gothic, and even as 'queer' as their texts. In western culture, the author has long been the object of intense epistemological desire for textual origins and authority.<sup>1</sup> In my view, this interest in the author becomes a possible focus for queer inquiry when it appears that the significance of certain authors has been sexualised. While researching *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre*, I have been increasingly struck by evidence of critical concern with what it means to write Gothic horror fiction, a concern often underlined by a feeling that it probably means something 'sexual.' The critical and cultural interest in Shelley and Polidori does indeed seem to be deeply entangled with issues of sex, gender and sexuality. It then occurred to me that the way in which we have read and reproduced the significance of these authors cannot be understood in isolation from the way we understand sexual meaning as what Foucault calls, 'a problem of truth' (*History* 56). In a genre in which the critical heritage remains deeply invested in the author, queer theoretical thinking may now enable a fresh perspective on the extent to which modern sexual epistemologies have contributed to our continuing fascination with the sexual aspects of these Gothic authors' lives.

In 2003, I included earlier portions of this chapter in a paper about Polidori and *The Vampyre* which I gave at a conference in Dublin entitled 'Queer Romanticisms.' Afterwards, one of the other speakers told me that he enjoyed my paper because nothing he had read about Polidori seemed to make much sense to him. He continued: 'but you explained that it doesn't make sense because he doesn't make sense or, rather, the way he has been read so far doesn't.' Considering his comment later, I realised it is precisely the desire to 'make sense' of the author that I find problematic. This is not only because the 'sense making' activity has been framed by the traditional bio-critical desire to find a stable unified source of textual authority in the author. It is also because the critical sense-making tools are invested in heteronormativity and, as a consequence, authors are as subject to heteronormative textual representation as their texts. Polidori and Shelley have both been produced as sexually strange figures, but criticism appears unable to articulate how and why they have come to appear 'queer' in various ways, and unwilling to interrogate the assumptions informing its own sexual interest in these authors. In my view, we must stop trying to make sense of Gothic authors with such limited tools. Instead, we should begin paying attention to the question of whether the sexual interest in the author is symptomatic of the wider epistemological pressure applied to the field of the sexual.

The question here is also tightly bound up with issues of genre: it has much to do with the popular identification of Gothic horror fiction as a form of cultural production that enjoys a privileged relationship with the representation of queer desires and identities. Throughout this study, I have argued that Gothic fiction engages with the cultural construction of queerness on many levels. I now want to consider the impact this

engagement may have had upon the way we tend to think about Gothic authors.

Traditional biographical criticism still encourages us to read the text and the life of its author as mutually illuminating. For this reason, the feeling that Gothic fiction is particularly concerned with non-normative sex may have had specifically sexual ramifications for its authors. To put the point another way, if Gothic fiction is considered to be especially sexually compelling, it is most likely no coincidence that its authors have likewise become sites of sexual fascination. Moreover, a set of assumptions appear to have been mobilised around these figures, assumptions which basically conform to horror writer Stephen King's observation that 'Secretly or otherwise, there is the feeling that the taste for horror fiction is an abnormal one' (101). I would propose that the production of 'abnormally' sexualised Gothic authors has been informed by the association of 'sex' with 'truth,' the knowledge-seeking impulses of biographical criticism, *and* the coupling of Gothic writing with deviant desire in the cultural imagination.

Although I am supportive of the interpretative freedom offered by the post-structuralist focus upon textuality, language and meaning, the devotion to the author manifest within my field cannot be simply ignored and is itself of critical interest. Roland Barthes proclaimed the 'Death of the Author' in 1968, but within the established critical orthodoxy relating to Romantic Gothic fiction, bio-criticism remains very much the dominant norm. As Botting observes, with regard to Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*, in many accounts of the novel 'it becomes difficult to define where the novel ends and biography begins' (*Making* 75). It would also be practically unthinkable to write about *The Vampyre* without making reference to Polidori and his relationship with Lord Byron. Although I am inclined to resist the more conservative impulses of biographical criticism,

it does seem short-sighted to put aside the author only to enshrine a no less regulatory critical norm in its place. But, as Cheryl Walker pertinently observes, ‘Barthes’s real target in “The Death of the Author” was not so much biographical criticism per se as any practice that sought “to impose a limit on [the] text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing”’ (110). If it is counter-productive to kill authors off entirely, it may be time to rethink their significance and try to negotiate a space between the ‘death of the author’ and traditional biographical criticism. This work has already begun: I situate my discussion in relation to post-structuralist challenges to the outright rejection of the author in the book edited by William Epstein entitled *Contesting the Subject* (1991). The essays in this collection resist the notion of a stable, unified, authorial identity, but convincingly challenge the idea that biographical criticism *must* be a critically conservative endeavour and propose that it can instead be a crucial site of contestation. However, the collection lacks an essay that develops on these ideas from a gay, lesbian or queer theoretical perspective and in this chapter I hope to show that queer theory offers useful critical tools for extending this rethinking.

**‘So Very Hideous an Idea’:**

**Femininity, Monstrosity and the Performance of Female Gothic Authorship**

(So sleek and so smiling she came, people stared,  
To think such fair clay should so darkly have dared.)  
- Leigh Hunt (qtd; in Poovey 143)

As a feminine woman who became notorious for her sexual nonconformity and wrote fiction which transgressed the boundaries of contemporary gendered expectations, Mary Shelley provides some interesting answers to the question of what it means for a woman

to write Gothic horror fiction. Contemporary responses to her position suggest that the answer to this question is bound up with interconnected ideas about female authorship, feminine gender performance and sexual monstrosity circulating in the wider cultural field. During her life, Shelley had to negotiate narratives which had already constituted her position as at best problematic, probably gender dissonant and, importantly, as someone who was 'passing,' specifically, concealing a hideous 'truth' beneath a performance of femininity. I want to begin by unraveling some of the gendered, and also misogynist, assumptions that have worked to produce this author as an implicitly 'queer' figure from the beginning of her career. The tensions surrounding her position will not necessarily reveal any truths about Shelley or her writing, but they may tell us something about the various ways in which cultural discourses about women and ideas about writing Gothic fiction intersect.

Mary Shelley's famous sex life has attracted much bio-critical attention, but I want to focus first upon how the 'queerness,' by which I mean the sense of sexual strangeness, in her position has been articulated in relation to her gender performance. The poet Beddoes once stated that Shelley had 'no business to be a woman by her books' (qtd; in Spark 233). This supposition – that her writing disproved her womanhood – opens a discursive space in which to consider issues of identity and authorship in terms of gender and representation. The suspicion, that Shelley was not what she appeared to be, puts into play culturally inscribed assumptions about women, femininity, monstrosity and writing. Beddoes was not the only one of Shelley's acquaintances to perceive a dissonance between the monstrous novel *Frankenstein* and the woman often described by



contemporaries as beautiful and perfectly feminine.<sup>2</sup> Shelley's friend Lord Dillon enquired:

I should have thought of you – if I had only read you – that you were [...] outpouringly enthusiastic, rather indiscreet, and even extravagant; but you are cool, quiet, and feminine to the last degree - I mean in delicacy of manner and expression.

Explain this to me (qtd; in Spark 233).

In describing the assumptions he might have made had he only 'read' Shelley, Dillon draws attention to a crucial point, for it is precisely the way in which Shelley's sex and gender have been *read* in relation to *Frankenstein* that I want to address. Beddoes and Dillon did not seem to regard her femininity as essential; rather, they read Shelley as 'passing' in the sense of the word formulated by Friedman: 'S/he is playing to an audience, whom s/he would mislead; in other words, s/he is attempting to pass' (7). There seemed to be something dissonant about her, something 'queer' lurking beneath her performance of feminine perfection. Tantalised observers seem to have been excited by the idea that Shelley was in feminine 'drag,' and the representational problem was not that she was not feminine, it was rather that she appeared to be *too* feminine and her gender performance did not make sense in relation to the kind of assumptions generated by her writing. After all, when *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously in 1818, reviewers had no trouble gendering the author: as far as they were concerned it had to be a man. It certainly did not suit contemporary reviewers to countenance the idea that a

novel which ‘shook a little’ even the ‘firm nerves’ of Sir Walter Scott had been written by a young woman (Scott; qtd. in Baldick 57).

As an attempt to engage the signifying practices of the feminine in relation to, or even as Gothic writing, Mary Shelley’s ‘Introduction’ to the 1831 revised edition of *Frankenstein* is a text which both relies upon and troubles nineteenth-century gender norms. In this text, Shelley creates an authorial persona and opens the ‘Introduction’ with the very enigma posed by her acquaintances: ‘the question, so very frequently asked of me. ‘How I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?’ (5). The question depends upon the supposedly dissonant concept of a ‘young girl’ having ‘hideous’ ideas. Critics have already noted the uneasy tension in this text’s reliance upon a familiar discourse of self-deprecating feminine modesty, while at the same time it asserts authorial authority and promises its readers something ‘hideous.’ On the one hand, the voice demurs, ‘I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print’ (5) and, on the other hand, asserts, ‘And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper’ (10). This tension has been viewed as indicative of Shelley’s own conflicted psyche, but I would suggest that the passive voice can also be read as a deliberate and performative reiteration of familiar, ‘mundane,’ ‘socially established’ meanings (Butler, *Gender* 140). For instance, describing the summer of 1816, she positions herself as ‘a devout but nearly silent listener’ (8) to the conversations of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. There is perhaps a warning against taking this statement too seriously in the presentation of the author as a figure not dissimilar to her character Elizabeth Lavenza – that ‘shrine dedicated lamp’ in the Frankenstein household, who’s ‘sweet glance’ animates the conversations of Victor and Clerval (37). Is this authorial

voice truly representative of the 'real' Mary Shelley, or is it a playful, even an ironic construct, which draws for effect upon gendered cultural narratives such as passivity, modesty and wifely submission?

Hyper-feminine stereotypes are a common convention in Gothic writing of the period and the 'Introduction' is, of course, a Gothic fiction. Hoeveler argues that heroines in female Gothic narratives of the Radcliffean tradition survive by masquerading 'as professional girl-women caught up in an elaborate game of play acting for the benefit of an obsessive and controlling male gaze' (4). Shelley did not write novels in this tradition: she drew instead upon the German Romantic Gothic, which is more often associated with male writers such as Matthew Lewis. The fact that Shelley wrote in a tradition considered 'masculine' might itself have fuelled readers' suspicions concerning her gender. But she presents herself in her 'Introduction' as just such a professionally feminine 'girl-woman,' a heroine in her own female Gothic fiction, play acting to the gaze of imagined and presumably male readers who, like Beddoes and Dillon, demand she explain the relationship between her gender performance and her writing. Perhaps her performance in the 'Introduction' can be viewed through the lens of Luce Irigaray's argument that in order to best battle patriarchy, women must 'assume the feminine role deliberately' and 'mime the mimes that men have imposed upon them' (qtd; in Hoeveler 11, 12). In other words, Shelley may have attempted to negotiate the gendered power relations through which her position was constituted by deliberately assuming and 'miming' the role she was expected to play. There certainly is a sense of 'masquerade' in the text, but if Shelley was passing in the 'Introduction,' she was actually passing as a

female Gothic author, by which I mean, as a feminine woman masking her hideous ideas from immediate view.<sup>3</sup>

In the 'Introduction' Shelley herself draws upon intertextual 'knowledge' about women writers, such as their association with the imagination and domesticity, as well as the notion that they are ruled by the heart rather than the head and the unconscious rather than the conscious. Such ideas about women and writing are still familiar and widely circulated in western culture to this day. Shelley tells us that she was 'mortified' by her inability to think of a story, but eventually her 'imagination, unbidden' possessed and guided her in a waking dream from which she opened her eyes in terror and inspiration (9). Only slight attention to *Frankenstein* reveals a controlled, consciously literary and philosophical narrative, but the Gothic fantasy about a nightmare is of course more exciting, as well as more conventionally 'feminine,' than a long description of the research which must have informed the writing of the novel. James Rieger was one of the first critics to object that the 'Introduction' does not represent a piece of transparent autobiographical truth and is in fact 'an almost total fabrication' (461). His statement begs an immediate question: what made anyone think the 'Introduction' represented a piece of transparent truth in the first place and, furthermore, did this assumption have something to do with certain expectations of truth levelled more at women writers than at men? Truth it may not be, but the 'Introduction' is a masterpiece of literary marketing, so seductive that it has become almost as famous as the text it frames, spawning 'three full-length feature films in the 1980s alone' (Frayling 11). In my view, the clever play upon gender norms is part of the text's appeal, for in playing to the desire of readers who

want to be terrorised, Shelley taps into a feeling that the combination of a feminine stance with the promise of something 'hideous' is as tantalising as it is alarming.

Shelley's acquaintances were evidently excited by the idea that she was concealing something monstrous beneath a façade of perfect femininity, and the text of *Frankenstein* seemed to confirm their suspicions. But if she was no woman by her books, what was she? There is another voice in the 'Introduction,' a counter voice who answers this question in the language of female monstrosity. It is also a 'queer' voice, insofar as it queers the conventional narrative and creates the strange dissonant note in the text. This other Shelley proclaims a desire to terrify her readers, to write a story 'which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror - one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the heart' (7 - 8). The 'Introduction' is seductive because when *Frankenstein* confirms the suggestion that young girls do have hideous ideas, it seems to tell readers something they think they already 'know' about women. The apparently transgressive voice in the text is, therefore, no less a discursively produced history of received meanings than the conventional voice; indeed, they represent two aspects of the same mythology which always reads monstrous sexual potential into the performance of femininity.

In his journal of 1816, Polidori recounts a story that Shelley rather wisely omitted from her version of events. One night, Lord Byron recited the lines from Coleridge's poem 'Christabel' where the witch Geraldine uncovers her breast. Geraldine passes as beautiful and feminine, but when she drops her robe she reveals that 'half her side' is 'lean and old and foul of hue' and 'A sight to dream of, not to tell!'<sup>4</sup> At this moment, Percy Shelley, 'suddenly shrieking and putting his hands to his head, ran out of the room

with a candle.’ Polidori gave him ether, after which he said ‘He was looking at Mrs S, and suddenly thought of a woman he had heard of who had eyes instead of nipples, which taking hold of his mind, horrified him’ (qtd; in MacDonald 93). The monstrous sexual potential, which Percy read into his silent wife, had nothing to do with her personally and everything to do with male sexual fantasies about femininity and monstrosity. In this discursive context, the authorial persona’s narrative performance of feminine submission in the 1831 ‘Introduction’ does not contradict her assertion of monstrosity. For no matter how sweet, pretty and young a girl appears, she always has such potential in the misogynist cultural imagination. As a double-voiced text, perhaps the ‘Introduction’ does not then reflect Shelley’s conflicted psyche, so much as the conflicted psyche of a culture ever-ready and eager to read women as sexual monsters if they appear to slip in their gender performance. This mythology is critiqued in *Frankenstein* during the trial and conviction of Justine Moritz.

Showing awareness that the ‘angel in the house’ and the female monster play a part in cultural fantasies about feminine women who write horror fiction, James Whale’s film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) presents a rather sophisticated take on the 1831 ‘Introduction’ and the authorial mystique surrounding Mary Shelley. In this film she is presented archly performing hyper-femininity, while at the same time teasing and evading the male desire to pin her meaning down as she drops hints of monstrosity. In the opening scene, Byron (Gavin Gordon) poses the now familiar enigma: how could an ‘angel’ like Mary write ‘a tale that sent my blood into icy creeps. Look at her Shelley. Can you believe that bland and lovely brow conceived of *Frankenstein* [...] Isn’t it astonishing!’ Meanwhile, Mary Shelley (Elsa Lanchester), ‘dressed in a long white

gown' sits demurely on the couch 'embroidering carefully' (Young 132). Initially appearing powerless, objectified and prompted by the domineering gaze of two men, she subdues them by offering yet more horror. Whale goes further, however, because this film hints at a queer subject position for Shelley. In a line cut from the release print, Mary states 'We three are infidels, scoffers at all marriage-ties, believing only in living fully and freely in whatever direction the heart dictates' (qtd; in Benshoff 50). The doubling of the actor Elsa Lancaster as both Shelley and the monstrous screaming bride who, at the end of the film, rejects her male determined role is also telling. As Elizabeth Young observes, reading the film backwards, 'we can see Mary's opening words as forming the story that gives voice to the bride's scream; reading forward, we can see the bride's scream as the most visceral and impassioned version of the 'angelic' Mary's story' (135). The entire film could even be viewed as Mary Shelley's coming out narrative, a story in which the passing angel is finally 'outed' as a screaming female monster. In my view, the filmmakers were quite correct to perceive that it is she, the sexually active and creative female Gothic author, who is the truly 'hideous' and monstrous idea. To make the connections from angel, to queer, to monster, Whale simply had to elaborate upon narratives that had already constituted Shelley as a potentially monstrous queer figure passing as a feminine woman.

Mary Shelley also seems 'queer' because the language used to make her intelligible as an author draws upon the coded language of queerness. In the first instance, a poetics of passing is mobilised in contemporary responses to the relationship between her gender performance and her writing. As soon as she is read as 'passing' she is implicitly read as 'queer,' because her position begins to be made intelligible through a

language which presupposes a secret, or ‘truth,’ is concealed from immediate view and might be revealed. If her secret is brought ‘out’ in her writing, a ‘closet rhetoric’ is also discernible, for *Frankenstein* then becomes the hideous ‘truth’ of Mary Shelley. But, in Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein*, the bride’s inarticulate screaming conveys a residual unintelligibility in the author’s position, which even the deployment of the language of passing and the rhetoric of the closet fails to contain. When Shelley appears as a ‘monster,’ she appears yet more ‘queer.’ Or, to put the point another way, perhaps the apparent queerness in her position can only be articulated and made intelligible through reference to the trope of monstrosity. Monstrosity then becomes yet another queer rhetoric through which Mary Shelley is made intelligible as, basically, unintelligible. The putting into play of the trope of monstrosity reminds us that Shelley will never be entirely knowable, but also that as soon as a woman does not appear to fit the dominant sex and gender narratives of her cultural moment, she becomes open to being read as a monster.

Biographical criticism has perpetuated, even as it has critiqued, the aura of sexual monstrosity that has accrued to Shelley, because it has inevitably encouraged a feeling that the horror in the text, including the sexual horror, must be traceable into her actual life. For example, Gilbert and Gubar state that ‘she was never entirely to abandon the sublimated rage her monster-self enacted’ (246). In the context of this reading, the author becomes her very own monster.<sup>5</sup> Such readings again put into play a kind of passing and closet rhetoric, insofar as they also read *Frankenstein* as a monstrous ‘truth’ coming ‘out’ of the elusive and ladylike Mary Shelley. It seems to me that, when reading Shelley, we never come very far from her incarnation as the monstrous screaming bride in Whale’s



*Bride of Frankenstein*. But the bride does of course come out with an important cultural ‘truth.’ She stands to remind us that women, such as Shelley, who wrote beyond the bounds of gendered authorial expectations and had active sexual lives, have always been read as monstrous, mad, and unintelligible, and for this reason her screams of rage and resistance are fully justified. If there is one important truth illustrated by Shelley’s life it is, as Butler reminds us, that femininity is the forcible citation of a norm ‘indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment’ (‘Critically Queer’ 23). Female sexual and intellectual agency came at high price in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> But, as we shall see, more recent responses to Shelley, suggest that we still live in a world in which the female author’s sex, gender and sexual behaviour is considered everybody’s ‘business.’

### **‘No Woman by Your Books’:**

#### **Mary Shelley, Biographical Criticism, and the Fictions of Gender**

*Frankenstein is a woman’s book*  
- Marc A. Rubenstein (187)

The fact that the author of a work as startling and original as *Frankenstein* is a woman has long been considered significant, and has impacted heavily upon the way in which both the novel and its author have been received. From a queer perspective, responses to Shelley’s position as a woman writer are interesting for more than one reason, and open further questions relating to authorship, intelligibility and sex and gender epistemologies. The question here is not, ‘why does Mary Shelley’s gender or sexuality matter?’ I want to interrogate, rather, the epistemological pressure that criticism and popular culture has

applied to her sex, gender performance and sexual behaviour. In other words, what does the fact that these aspects of her life have come to matter *so much*, tell us about the discourses that do indeed posit sex and gender as privileged sites of meaningfulness? Paying attention to the critical impulse to seek truth in the sexual aspects of the author's life will also open a space for discussing the fact that criticism and biography do not simply reveal the author's significance, they also constitute that significance. Moreover, responses to Shelley's life draw further attention to what Alison Booth calls, the 'enforced intimacy between women and their writing' (89). For despite Beddoes's doubts on the subject, *Frankenstein's* reception space is so deeply invested in its author's female life that it might appear that Shelley is, after all, proved to be a 'woman' by her book, which thereby becomes a 'woman's book' by virtue of its author's gender.

Like most norms, the dominance of biographical criticism has been established performatively through repetition and has become, over time, somewhat regulatory in its effects. As Mary Jacobus observes, there is a feeling that some 'feminist interpretations [...] have no option but to posit the woman author as origin and her life as the primary locus of meaning' (138). It is now difficult to write about *Frankenstein* without making reference to Mary Shelley's life on the basis of an assumption that her specifically female experiences are significant. However, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the development of this critical tradition in the nineteen seventies clearly reflected urgent contemporary feminist need. Roland Barthes's proclamation of the 'Death of the Author' was premature with regard to Shelley, for it was not until 1977 that Ellen Moers's book *Literary Women* gave birth to her female life as a focus for *Frankenstein* criticism. No 'other Gothic work by a woman writer,' states Moers, 'perhaps no literary

work of any kind by a woman better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author' (92). Shelley, whose work had long been marginalised in a sexist canon, was reborn not only as an important woman writer, but as a writer whose womanhood really mattered. Moers's reading of the novel as a 'Birth Myth' posits Shelley's gender as a literally essential source of textual authority and is clearly rooted in the feminist identity politics of the time. Her reading depends upon the assumption of an existing identity, understood through the category of 'woman,' who initiates feminist interests (Butler, *Gender* 1).

The broadly feminist and psychoanalytic readings which have dominated the critical reception space since the nineteen seventies have continued to emphasise Shelley's troubled female life as a source of, albeit hotly debated, meaning. The significance of her femaleness has since been performatively installed through the repeated citation of biographical material in *Frankenstein* criticism, material which soon becomes familiar to anyone engaged in researching the text. In this context, certain aspects of her life have become areas of special interest, especially her gender performance, sexual behaviour, relations with men and experience of motherhood. Much work is therefore in implicit agreement with Gilbert and Gubar's view that Shelley's 'developing sense of herself as a literary creature and/or creator seems to have been inseparable from her emerging self-definition as daughter, mistress, wife, and mother' (224). Stories commonly cited as being of particular significance include Shelley's supposed guilt over her mother's death, her strong, perhaps excessive, attachment to her father, her sexual awakening and elopement with Percy Shelley at the age of 16, the trauma of consequential rejection by Godwin, the death of her first illegitimate baby and

her experience of unmarried motherhood. As Jacobus observes, one problem with this trend is that it rewrites the novel in ‘the image not of books but of female experience’ (138). Moreover, although the biographical material has been made to serve various critical agendas, the reiteration of its significance has, in a sense, also *produced* and instituted its importance as a critical norm.

*Frankenstein*’s critical heritage certainly illustrates some of the problems involved in conceptualising the relations between the body writing and the body of the text. Judith Butler’s theory of sex and gender performativity could now offer a fresh perspective on the uses to which criticism has put Mary Shelley’s femaleness. In the first instance, Butler’s work might suggest that the critical acts, gestures, and re-enactments which name *Frankenstein* a ‘woman’s book’ are themselves performative, insofar as they produce the sense of identity – the ‘womanness’ – they purport to describe. In other words, the sexed and gendered significance of Shelley’s authorial ‘body’ has been produced from citational practices within responses to *Frankenstein*. Butler argues that ‘woman’ is an unstable category of identity; a discursively produced, but compellingly normative social fiction, a regulatory ideal that can never be fully achieved or embodied. As such, ‘woman’ and ‘feminine’ can be considered political, not natural categories (*Gender* 136 - 141). In this theoretical context, the possibilities for constructing empowering feminist readings on the basis of Shelley’s more or less essential female ‘identity’ appear questionable, for Shelley’s textual body has no ontological status apart from the various narrative acts – critical, biographical, and autobiographical – which constitute its ‘reality.’<sup>7</sup> Instead of becoming caught in debates about the true importance of Shelley’s femaleness in relation to her writing, we might think about how the

discursive practices through which the significance of femaleness has been produced inform the way in which the author and her text have been read.

The point here is not simply to assess the extent to which 'sex,' in every sense of the word, has come to be located as the truth of Shelley's life and work, it is also a question of noting which sexual truths have been ascribed special importance. Barbara Johnson notes that, since Moers's seminal work, many critics have related 'the entire novel to Mary Shelley's mixed feelings about motherhood' (149). However, the 'birth myth' cannot help but re-produce *Frankenstein's* significance within the narrative framework of obligatory reproductive heterosexuality – implicitly privileging a heterocentric critical bias. The institution of motherhood is, as Butler reminds us, 'compulsory for women' (*Gender* 92). This compulsion is re-enacted and performed in *Frankenstein* criticism, where neither Shelley nor we can escape her maternal significance. Although such work does turn a critical eye upon Shelley's experiences of the institution of motherhood, it also re-inscribes motherhood as a literally essential source of meaning. Not only do these readings implicitly pin the meaning of *Frankenstein* down to one overreaching biographical reading, they also rewrite the novel in the light of female *heterosexual* experience. In rewriting *Frankenstein* as a barely disguised book about maternity, criticism also reflects the wider (hetero)normative cultural privileging of reproduction as a source of ontological significance in women's lives.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the notion that Shelley's feelings about motherhood must have dominated her work might tell us as much about the concerns of late twentieth-century feminism as it does about *Frankenstein*. After all, Shelley is one of the few female authors, allowed into the canon, who actually had children and this is perhaps a crucial

political point when it comes to the importance of her status as a mother. This bio-critical narrative has now begun to engender resistance indicative of shifting political and theoretical thinking. In 1979, Rubenstein could claim with confidence of Frankenstein's laboratory, 'It is, as is the entire novel, a womb' (178). By 1988, it is perhaps not surprising to come across frustrated rejoinders such as Joyce Carol Oates's query, 'Did Mary Shelley's brain or her womb write *Frankenstein*?' (554, n.5). In relation to reading *Frankenstein*, I think Oates is correct to perceive the overdetermination of Shelley's maternal body and experiences as having become limiting.

If the entire text of *Frankenstein* can be understood as an unconscious expression of 'women's troubles,' to call it a 'birth myth' or a 'womb' is really only a small step from calling it the hysterical text *par excellence*. Psychoanalytic biographical criticism has further encouraged readers to seek meaning in the sexual aspects of Shelley's life. Of course psychoanalysis has provided another productive lens through which to read the text, but I think it important to be wary of the way some responses have steered rather close to pathologising Shelley and her novel.<sup>9</sup> As Jacobus notes, criticism has sometimes caused *Frankenstein* to appear little more than a 'monstrous symptom' (138). By implicitly perpetuating the association of women's writing with the body, the unconscious, the emotional, the irrational, and even the pathological, such readings also draw upon and re-inscribe, even as they attempt to resist, narratives which continue to imply that women cannot help but use their writing as personal 'therapy.' The psychosexual approach is taken to its logical conclusion in Ken Russell's lurid film *Gothic* (Virgin Vision, 1986). This retelling of the 'ghost story competition' in the summer of 1816, presents Shelley as a literally 'hysterical' young woman, obsessed with the death of

her baby, prone to hallucinations and nightmares, and given to participation in what the film's blurb describes as 'rampant sexual frenzy.' Unsophisticated though it may appear, Russell's film represents the explicit end of a spectrum of responses which read *Frankenstein* as being secretly all about Shelley's unconventional sex life. But perhaps Russell's film is really all about a culture in which, as Foucault dryly observes, sex is considered 'the explanation for everything' (*History* 78). When critics make statements such as 'we will observe the author's preoccupation with her mother's sexuality' (Rubenstein 167), I would therefore suggest that we might instead begin by 'observing' our own preoccupation with the author's female sexuality.

I do not intend to dismiss the importance of the author's sex, gender or sexuality. On the contrary, I would suggest that these factors can never be automatically discounted, for as long as they are located as sources of truth and knowledge they will affect the way in which we read her text. But, I do think we should cultivate a more self-reflexive approach to the critical compulsion to seek meaning in the sexual life of the author, and the gendered politics underlying this drive. When Gilbert and Gubar call *Frankenstein* a 'female fantasy of sex and reading' (224), we would do well to ask whose sexual fantasies, whose femaleness, and *whose reading* is really at stake? Criticism has worked to produce Shelley as mother, as feminine, feminist, sexually unconventional, morally conservative, deceptive, queer and possibly pathological. She speaks to us in many voices, ranging from a conservative to a 'transgressive woman and even a criminal' (Friedman 13). No doubt Shelley, like the rest of us, had her transgressive and her conservative moments, but there is clearly more at stake here than a simple inability to comprehend the fact that a woman can occupy different subject positions and perhaps

even identities in her lifetime. The apparently polarized readings are symptomatic of the same impulse to make the author's gender and sexuality serve the critical agenda. For my part, I prefer the idea of a transgressive criminal Shelley, but of course this reveals as much about my political and critical agenda as it does about her life and work. However, the fact that the investment in Shelley's life has not provided any sense of unified textual authority or agreed meaning tends rather to confirm Butler's argument, insofar as it implies that there is no stability to be found in the political category of 'woman.'

Instead of viewing the 'multiplicity of Marys' as a problem, the phenomenon can be regarded as an opportunity to think differently about authorship.<sup>10</sup> After all, each 'Mary Shelley' has certain truths to tell us about the way in which criticism and popular culture have produced the significance of the author's femaleness in relation to discourses which tell us what it means for a woman to write Gothic horror fiction. If we can accept that there are many 'Mary Shelleys' open to various acts of critical interpretation, perhaps it is indeed time to make space for a 'queer' Shelley, an author-figure occupying a playful, elusive, sophisticated, and off-centre position. This 'queer Shelley' is, of course, no less a discursive construct than the other authorial positions and identities she has come to occupy – she could not even come into being without the availability of queer theoretical discourse. Like feminism and psychoanalysis, queer theory is another lens through which to read the narratives surrounding the author, but a queer approach should celebrate the fact that Shelley is fascinating precisely because she is so elusive, multi-faceted and difficult to pin down. I now want to turn to another resistant and shifty author who has been punished for his supposedly deceptive behaviour. For the mystique surrounding Dr. John Polidori has further truths to reveal and draws together some of the



themes running through this discussion in terms of authorship, intelligibility and sexual discourse. It is not a little ironic that Mary Shelley herself contributed to the ‘queerness’ of his position. If responses to Shelley illustrate the intersection between ideas about what it means to be a feminine woman and ideas about what it means to write Gothic literature, responses to Polidori and, more specifically, to his relationship with Lord Byron, reflect pervasive and haunting cultural anxieties about monstrous male desire.

**‘Poor Polidori’:**

**Queer Vampyre on the Margins of Romanticism**

this is all that vile & nauseous animal Polidori’s doing –  
 he will do you some mischief so prey send him away  
 - Claire Clairmont (qtd; in MacDonald 103)

Dr John William Polidori has become a troubling authorial figure, a ghostly presence haunting the margins of Romanticism, his complex significance produced from both high literary, and popular cultural traditions, as well as intergeneric networks of criticism and biography. On the one hand, the cultural impact of his work in creating the first coherent vampire figure in literature can hardly be overestimated. On the other, he has been marginalised and belittled by his famous contemporaries, often viewed as a victim, and his appropriative rewriting of an unfinished fragmentary story by Byron constructed as a plagiaristic, perhaps itself ‘vampiric,’ piece of publishing.<sup>11</sup> In her ‘Introduction’ to the 1831 revised edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley wrote ‘Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was so punished for peeping through a keyhole – what to see I forget – something very shocking and wrong of course’ (7). Her

reference draws attention to itself as a displacement, for like all monsters the ‘skull headed lady’ represents something more than, or other than, herself. In my view, Shelley has adeptly managed here to say something by saying something else. This anecdote about Polidori within an introduction which is, ironically enough, also a story about the process of storytelling – specifically the genesis of *Frankenstein* – reveals a nexus of ‘ghost’ stories within Shelley’s tale of a ‘ghost story competition.’ She does not here allude to *Ernestus Berchtold* (1819), the novel claimed by Polidori to have been written during the summer of 1816. Nor does she refer to *The Vampyre*, although she must have been aware of its scandalous distribution under Byron’s name in 1819. Questions of Shelley’s accuracy aside, the image of the ‘skull-headed lady’ is strangely appropriate if she stands for a story that cannot be told and which is, in a sense, ‘unspeakable.’

Consigned to a figurative ‘closet,’ Polidori and his work have come to occupy the elusive but overdetermined space of a known secret, both famous and unmentionable, shut away on the other side of the door, dangerous to look upon, and endlessly intriguing. To put it another way, the ‘skull-headed lady’ is a spectre standing in for the ‘ghost’ of ‘Poor Polidori’ himself, the man who haunted the margins of this famous gathering.

If Mary Shelley has become her own monster, Polidori has become his very own ‘vampyre’ and, as in the case of Shelley, the putting into play of the trope of monstrosity has become a means to say something about Polidori which cannot be said directly, because nothing certain is known. He, too, has been subject to culture’s sexual fascination with Gothic horror authors, but he has a different story to tell and responses to his life and work illustrate further possibilities for interrogating the sexual politics of biographical criticism and authorship. In my view, the disquieting cultural production of

Polidori as a strange, marginal and sexually suspicious figure, strikingly demonstrates the way in which the Gothic rhetoric of the 'unspeakable' can insidiously reverberate into our thinking about the author. Insofar as Byron and Polidori have together come to represent a vampire origin myth, I would suggest this authorial mythology has contributed to the subsequent analogous, coded relationship between vampires and queer sexual desire. By this I mean that certain rhetorical operations in their two coded, anxiety ridden Gothic narratives, work in conjunction with the sense that there is something strange about the relationship between these authors, and produce a complex connotative overlay of 'queer' meaning in successive criticism, biography and film.

No doubt it is tempting to speculate that vampires, as we know them, are the queer children of a textual union between Polidori and Byron, but there may be more productive approaches to this literary and cultural phenomenon. We do not need to speculate about whether the two men really were sexually involved, because what is at stake here is not what any of this tells us about Byron and Polidori themselves. My aim is rather to acknowledge, hopefully at a more sophisticated level, the way in which the discursive production of desire between men haunts the way in which we read the text and then rewrite the author as another sexual 'text.' As with Shelley, I would suggest that Polidori's queer monstrosity is also an aspect of the residual unintelligibility in his authorial position, for he remains uncomfortably elusive and unknowable. In a culture obsessed with sexual categorisation, Polidori's 'problem' is not that he may have been a 'homosexual.' On the contrary, he is troubling because we *cannot* say with certainty that he was 'homosexual' or, for that matter, 'heterosexual.' Queer theorists have argued that

the 'queer' lies in the uncategorisable and one of the 'queerest' things about Polidori is the fact that, in sexual terms, he cannot be finally or safely categorised.

During the summer of 1816, Byron and Polidori's relationship quickly deteriorated, a fact commonly ascribed to Polidori's jealousy. The doctor was dismissed in September. It remains a mystery how *The Vampyre* came into the hands of the *New Monthly* magazine's proprietor Henry Colburn in 1819. Colburn noted that the tale followed the pattern of some of Byron's poems and the name Lord Ruthven echoed another recent fictional portrayal of Byron as Clarence de Ruthven Lord Glenarvon in the 1816 novel *Glenarvon*, written by his vengeful ex-mistress Lady Caroline Lamb. The story was optimistically published as 'A TALE BY LORD BYRON,' appropriately enough on April Fool's Day 1819 (See Morrison and Baldick vii – xiii).<sup>12</sup> It was an immediate success, but scandal followed. Polidori declared himself the author, and in his introduction to *Ernestus Berchtold* freely admitted to building the story upon the groundwork of Byron's unfinished fragment. Consequently, he would never rise above the stigma of plagiarism.<sup>13</sup> As Rieger observes, he has been 'unfairly branded a pirate, parasite and liar' (462). Polidori's honesty and the extent to which he was involved in the publication of *The Vampyre* is still being debated. In order to distance himself from the tale and its author, Byron had his own piece printed as 'Augustus Darvell' in an appendix to his poem *Mazeppa* in 1819. It was, however, too late to prevent the beginning of a long association between Byron, Polidori and popular conceptions of vampirism.

Biographical criticism has also had a part in perpetuating the aura of 'queerness' surrounding Polidori. In the previous chapter, I explored the wealth of sexual coding and

connotation in *The Vampyre* and Byron's 'Fragment.' That the queer meaning in these texts has affected the way their authors have been perceived is not surprising, because traditional biographical criticism reads the author in the light of his text, which means that the text becomes a lens through which the reader attempts to access the truth of the author. But, it is also striking to observe how some readings repeat the texts' evasions and even proceed to speak about Polidori and Byron in a kind of sexually coded language. Critical responses to *The Vampyre* are so rooted in speculation concerning Polidori and Byron that there has been an assumption that these narratives reflect, and even stand as a code for that relationship. For example, Frayling writes, 'the unstable relationship between Aubrey and Ruthven [...] mirrors closely what Polidori felt about Lord Byron in the summer of 1816' (8). Polidori's relationship with Byron began as a homosocial bond, but soon developed into tense hostility. However, possibly homoerotic and homophobic factors are often implicitly dismissed, much like the doctor himself, from the poet's presence. Polidori's biographer D.L Macdonald details his jealous tantrums and emotional outbursts and then, without a hint of irony, goes on to discuss the situation in terms of a difficult father/son relationship (71,102). Skarda notes that the Shelley party were 'Polidori's rivals for Byron's affection' (263), but does not discuss the implications of this statement and uses the rhetoric of incest, rather than homosexuality, to discuss the relationship.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that there is an implicit homophobic undercurrent in this avoidance, and perhaps that is the case on occasion. But even Louis Crompton in his book *Byron and Greek Love*, in which he details Byron's relations with men, omits to mention Polidori except in relation to the poet's heterosexual exploits: he cites one entry in the doctor's journal describing Byron's advances upon a chambermaid

(241). I therefore think it more likely that these bio-critical evasions stem from a polite refusal to become implicated in crude and admittedly pointless speculations on the subject.

Such delicacy fails to address the impact this unspoken undercurrent may have had on the way Polidori and his text have been read. Moreover, although a lack of interest is often implied, critics cannot entirely let the question drop and there are hints of interest even in the maintenance of a language of discretion. Gelder dismisses the issue: 'there is no need to speculate here' (59). But after he has refused to speculate, he continues to say, '*Nevertheless*, as I have noted, Polidori sketches a younger man's attraction to an older man' (59, emphasis mine). For an audience already steeped in traditional biographical criticism, the implication of this comment is quite clear: the homoerotic and homophobic meaning, which Gelder finds in *The Vampyre*, might stand as a code for the relationship between Byron and Polidori. The concurrent dismissal of this issue serves as a reminder of the flip side to the dispersal of homosexual meaning: disavowal. The production of homosexuality as a narrative code always allows for its presence to be denied. Were I to claim that certain signs in *The Vampyre* prove that Polidori intended to convey homosexual meaning, it would be quite possible for someone to counter my assertion with the argument that I have read 'too much' into the text. Take, for example, Aubrey's dream in which he sees the dead, bloodied Ianthe going 'in quest of the modest violet' (14). A violet might function as a sexual sign, because violets are a longstanding code for homosexuality. The queerly symbolic linkage between this particular flower and the dead body of a woman killed by a paranoid relationship between men could then be worthy of note. But other readers would argue that the violet is

meaningless and arbitrary in the text. The shifty potential for homosexual meaning to be both nowhere and everywhere continues to be a double-edged interpretative weapon when it comes to literary criticism. In 1963, Rieger wrote, 'Mrs. Shelley was pleased with the queer man who had given her the vital spark for her story' (472). Did he mean the reader to pick up on a homosexual connotation or was it unintentional? After all, it would be perfectly possible for the critics cited above to counter my assertions with a claim that they meant nothing of the kind and I have again been reading 'too much' into their texts. But despite the apparent reluctance to discuss this issue, the suspicion of homosexuality and sexual perversity that followed Byron during his life has insidiously crept into the narratives surrounding Polidori. In the words of Sedgwick, the result is not a closet in which there really are homosexual men, but only the closet of simply 'imagining *a* homosexual secret' in the lives of Polidori and Byron (*Epistemology* 205). Again this 'closet' reveals more about the way we imagine and speak about homosexuality than it does about the authors concerned.

The production of Polidori as a queer skeleton in the Romantic closet has also been informed by his mysterious, probably suicidal death and the censorship to which his life was subject when his Aunt cut up his diary of 1816 (Barbour 95). Awareness that censorship has taken place will almost always cause us to suspect a sexual cover up has occurred, because the act is so strongly associated with the suppression of sexual representation. A good example of the oddly portentous way in which Polidori has subsequently come to stand for the 'unspeakable' at the level of the author is given in a biography written about his niece Christina Rossetti. Here, Maryan Zaturenska states that the name Polidori was 'not one that delicate, refined spinster nieces could remember

without a shudder. His name was never mentioned in the Rossetti or Polidori households.’ Proceeding to tell us that his portrait hung in Christina’s bedroom, Zaturenska speculates, ‘What memories of sin, of unbridled passions, and suicide, that sin for which in her mind there was no expiation, flowed down from the wall?’ (qtd; in Morrill 2). Polidori has become literally the ‘unspeakable’ in the family. The homophobically constituted language of queer desire forms the background for this commentary as Zaturenska puts into play a chain of signification which includes sin, unbridled passion and suicide. She actually gives us very little solid information in the passage, but when it comes to the ‘unspeakable,’ there are many ways of saying ‘nothing’ which seem to tell us ‘everything’. It is important to consider that the refusal to speak about homosexual possibilities in some texts and the queering of Polidori in others, are not actually contradictory phenomena, but proceed from the *same* homophobic matrix of cultural imperatives, which constitute homosexual meaning time and again as both unspeakable *and* overdetermined. While critics tend not to speak about homosexuality in relation to Polidori, it is clear that the language of homosexual possibility frames this author-figure. The undercurrent has been brought ‘out’ most strongly in film: Polidori appears in Russell’s *Gothic* (1986) as a pathetic figure jealous of Byron’s sexual preference for Shelley. Meanwhile, in Christopher Isherwood’s film *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973), Polidori is characterised as an evil decadent homosexual aesthete, not unlike Dr Pretorius in Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* (See Lavelley 279 - 280). These films are able to depict a suspicion which critics apparently do not want to confront, namely, the suspicion that Polidori was in fact a ‘difficult’ homosexual. But, ultimately, the fact that Polidori has become a queer and Gothic ‘vampyre’ on the margins of



Romanticism, tells us more about ourselves and our sexual culture than it does about the author himself.

### **The UnDead Author**

In this chapter I have proposed that queer theory can throw new light on the Gothic author's role as a sexed and gendered fantasy of origins, and opens possibilities for extending the poststructuralist critique of the author's tendency to 'haunt' the critical heritage. The author is not a 'real' person: s/he is a kind of text, a necessary fiction but, in my view, s/he is still important, if not quite for the reasons traditionally understood.<sup>15</sup> From a queer perspective, it is important to shift the question from an attention to the author's intentions, to our intentions upon the author, and especially our sexual 'intentions.' When the author becomes subject to sexual interest in criticism and popular culture, this interest is itself worthy of analysis because it has evidently had a serious impact on the way the texts have been read. Moreover, the tendency to trace the sexual meaning in the text into the life of the author, and vice versa, may not tell us any definite 'truths' about author or text, but it does reveal some 'truths' about sexual culture. To what extent is the sexual interest in the author a truth effect of the wider deployment of the entire field of the sexual as a privileged source of meaningfulness? Perhaps two key words here, as in so much queer scholarship, are *desire* and *resistance*: the focus now being our desire for the author and the author's resistance to that desire. This discussion has returned more than once to the question of how readers, critics and filmmakers respond to authors who elude or frustrate the sexual/epistemological desire for truth.

Queer theory can provide a fresh perspective on the apparent sexual unintelligibility underlying Shelley and Polidori's positions and its effects within the reception space.

The Gothic author therefore presents a point of departure for another productive area of 'queer Gothic' inquiry; for paying queer critical attention to authors such as Shelley and Polidori develops the discussion further in relation to the genre's wider engagement with modern sexual discourse. In this respect, it is important to cultivate a more interrogative and self-reflexive approach towards the way sex and gender epistemologies have contributed to our feeling that the author's life is the origin of the meaning in the text. From a pedagogical perspective, applying queer theoretical thinking to Gothic authors might help students subvert 'common-sense beliefs that gender and sexuality are fundamental truths of the self' (Kopelson 17), precisely by drawing attention to the way this assumption has underscored responses to the authors and their texts. Students should be encouraged to think carefully about how the norms of biographical criticism intersect with the norms of sex, gender and sexuality. Instead of looking to the author to support a queer reading of the text, they might consider how the author's sex, gender and sexuality have been constructed, appropriated and put to work to support different kinds of *reading*, including queer reading. We should also consider how authors, like their texts, have been read and re-produced in relation to heteronormative, and sometimes homophobic, interpretative and representational paradigms, and explore possibilities for creatively resistant reading in this area. Finally, focussing on the sexualisation of the Gothic author further illustrates queer theoretical concerns, insofar as it opens a space for interrogating some of the ways in which sexual

'knowledge' structures our experience of the world and the text, and both delimits and produces possibilities for interpretation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Foucault writes that the rise of the author is coextensive with the coming into being of a 'system of ownership for texts' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which enacted rules concerning authors' rights, author-publisher relations and rights of reproduction ('What is an Author?' 202). As William Epstein notes, this period saw the 'nearly simultaneous emergence of literary biography' (3).

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the social commentator Eliza Rennie described 'the gentle, feminine, lady-like Mrs Percy Bysshe Shelley, looking the very image of Miss O' Neill's portraits, which she greatly resembles, with her long fair silken ringlets' (qtd; in Seymour 373).

<sup>3</sup> Shelley was not the only female Gothic author subject to such suspicions. Take, for example, Ann Radcliffe, who presented herself as a pious paragon of domestic virtue and whose Gothic novels brought her fame and wealth (Hoeveler 1). Although Radcliffe was widely celebrated, the dark side of female Gothic mythology is tellingly conveyed in the circulation of a rumour that she died 'raving mad.' As Hoeveler puts it, the 'original' mad woman in the attic created the 'potent, primal visions of the female gothic, only to be consumed supposedly in death by its horrors' (1). The slippage from perfectly feminine to raving mad, and therefore deviant, was easily accomplished because no matter how perfect Radcliffe appeared to be, people already expected something of the sort to be the case.

<sup>4</sup> The lines which caused Percy Shelley's attack read as follows:

'Like one that shuddered, she unbound  
The cincture from beneath her breast:  
Her silken robe, and inner vest,  
Dropt to her feet, and full in view,  
Behold! Her bosom and half her side \_\_\_\_\_ \*  
A sight to dream of, not to tell!  
O shield her! Shield sweet Cristabel!  
(ll. 248 - 254).

\* The manuscript version includes here the deleted line, 'Are lean and old and foul of hue.'

<sup>5</sup> To give two more examples, Shelley's recent biographer Miranda Seymour cannot resist noting the 'deep' relation between the 'raging outcast creature of her first novel and its creator's darkest, most hidden self' (368). Meanwhile, Mary Poovey argues that 'As Mary Shelley imagines her female self, she gives her own conflicted energy the form of a monster' (139).

<sup>6</sup> After Percy Shelley's death, Shelley continued to be punished for her sexual transgressions with ostracism from polite society. She was also financially penalised by her own father-in-law. Later in life, she was castigated by Percy's admirers because she refused to become a mouthpiece for their radical politics and, ironically, she was then punished for what they perceived to be her political conservatism.

<sup>7</sup> I am here drawing on Butler's view of gender performativity: 'Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (*Gender* 136).

<sup>8</sup> Mellor, for instance, argues that Shelley 'thought of her ghost story as her baby' (52), while Rubenstein claims that the entire novel can be read as 'a guilty restitution' of her first lost baby (168).

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<sup>9</sup> In *Making Monstrous* Botting devotes a chapter to critiquing the influence of psychoanalytic theory in *Frankenstein* criticism. See 'Allure, authority and psychoanalysis: the 'case' of *Frankenstein*' (90 - 99).

<sup>10</sup> Botting also discusses this proliferation of 'Mary Shelleys' at length in his chapter entitled 'A multiplicity of Marys: the biographical and literary relations of *Frankenstein*' (*Making* 75 - 85). He suggests that Shelley has become 'criticism's fantasy, fix and fixation' (85).

<sup>11</sup> For the most complete analysis of this issue, see Skarda's 'Vampirism and Plagiarism: Byron's Influence and Polidori's Practice.' Arguing that in depicting Byron as a vampire, Polidori did not realise that 'Byron's literary and personal influence' had made him 'one of a different order' (265). Skarda concludes that he has indeed been 'vamped not only by Byron but also by his own publisher, reviewers, and by critics of the past and present' (269).

<sup>12</sup> I have here very briefly summarised a complex and convoluted train of events. For an in-depth analysis see Macdonald (177 - 203). I have also found Baldick and Morrison's 'Introduction' to *The Vampyre* usefully informative and succinct.

<sup>13</sup> According to Rieger, 'Polidori's immediate protest that the work was his own touched off a dog-fight which, even by the standards of the Regency publishing world, was exceptionally savage. From a free-for-all involving Colborn, his editor (who promptly resigned), John Murray, Messrs. Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, and Byron himself, only Polidori emerged with his reputation very much the worse for wear' (462). For more detail, see 'The Scandal of *The Vampyre*' in Macdonald (177 - 203).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, she writes, 'Embracing the strong poetic father smacks of incest far more threatening to the son than to the father, more threatening even than incest implied in a brother's love or a vampire's seduction of a female victim. Polidori, like a willing rape victim, sacrifices himself in life and Aubrey in his fiction to the father-god he found in Byron' (262).

<sup>15</sup> As Worton and Still observe, the author, 'like the coherent and autonomous subject, is revealed to be a necessary fiction, a reading effect' (19).

### Afterword

Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise;  
it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere,  
and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home  
- Judith Butler (*Undoing Gender* 29)

Gothic fiction and queer theory can be posited as mutually illuminating fields of academic inquiry: the genre still has much to reveal about the way we have come to think, speak and fantasise about the field of the sexual. For Gothic fiction is about 'sex,' insofar as the genre has developed as a form of textuality that does indeed speak to us incessantly about modern sexual discourse. In specific relation to literary and cultural issues surrounding the family, marriage, same-sex desire, sexual rhetoric and the author, the questions raised by the texts discussed in this study can be shown to complement questions raised in much queer scholarship. The term 'queer Gothic' can be used to describe all the various ways in which the genre engages with the cultural production of queerness as something opposed to the norm. But I would propose that 'queer Gothic' can also refer to the points at which the concerns of queer theory intersect with the concerns of Gothic fiction, and where the genre becomes particularly productive for illustrating queer reading practices. Together, Gothic fiction and queer theory offer real potential for thinking critically about a world in which queerness has always been at the heart of culture.

Throughout this study, I have suggested areas where Gothic fiction could be developed as a site of queer critical pedagogy because such texts might provide accessible and enjoyable routes via which to introduce students to queer reading practices. Since student readers often come to Gothic fiction already quite convinced that the genre is largely concerned with non-normative desires and identities, it may not be difficult to encourage them to think in terms of what these texts reveal about

the effects of modern sexual discourse. As I argue in Chapter Four, *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* could be used to cultivate Richard E. Zeikowitz's concept of 'queer border pedagogy,' an approach which encourages students to turn a critical eye to the cultural codes and narratives which inform their own positions, attitudes and responses (69). As they read these texts, students might be asked to think about and discuss what it means to live in a world in which people identified as 'queer' have long been perceived as monstrous, and in which the possibility of sex and gender non-conformity has been produced as a kind of Gothic horror story. At the same time, however, the genre clearly draws attention to, and depends upon, our often-ambivalent relationship with the everyday world. When used as a verb, 'to queer' has appropriate connotations of 'to inquire into,' but 'to queer' is also to make strange, to disturb that which has been taken for granted to be normal. In this respect, the performance of queer reading again points to its affinity with the Gothic, a genre which has always inquired into culture and presented alternative perspectives on our constructions of reality.

Queer theory's insistence upon unravelling heteronormative textual representation fits well with Gothic fiction's inquiry into dominant cultural narratives, such as family and marriage. In relation to heteronormativity, the genre is of interest to queer scholarship because it implies that the everyday world is always dependent upon, and may even produce, the haunting monstrous otherness it claims to repress and deny. *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* certainly depict the family and marriage as social constructs always terrorised by, even as they attempt to exclude, whatever is implicitly deemed 'queer' in the text. But the question as to whether Gothic texts uphold or subvert convention is never clear cut, and students should be encouraged to think about how the genre relies upon their investments in the status quo at the same

time as it plays to their desires to see it challenged. In this respect, it is striking to find that Gothic monsters often arrest the protagonist's, and also therefore the reader's, journey towards an ostensibly heteronormative resolution. The Ancient Mariner prevents the wedding guest from reaching his heterosocial destination of the wedding party. Once Aubrey forms Ruthven into 'the hero of a romance' (5), he, too, is thrown off course. His progress towards his married future is halted as he is literally and metaphorically led astray on a very different journey. In this respect, these texts could almost be 'speaking' to us about the cultural function of what I call the 'queer Gothic,' insofar as the moment of arresting recognition seems to stand for the wider Gothic tradition of producing alternative narrative journeys which go beyond the presumed safety of heteronormativity and allow 'other' desires to hold sway, at least for a time.

Queer Gothic studies should continue to cultivate a sense of the monster's revealing power to 'out' culture because, in this respect, monsters and queer theory have indeed come to share certain affinities. Marginal, but also disruptive, powerful and potentially dangerous, like all the monstrous figures I have discussed, queer theory is supposed to provoke epistemological shock and a sense that the supposedly 'normal' world cannot account for everything. In *Frankenstein*, the Monster halts Walton's journey. This 'strange sight' of an unnameable unknown moving across the Arctic ice arrests his attention, excites his 'unqualified wonder' (23), and throws into doubt all his preconceptions about what is natural, normal and possible. The Monster's appearance is 'queer,' undoubtedly, in the *strange* sense of the word, but the queerness of his effect deepens through his capacity to cause such a disruption to 'narrative equilibrium' and to set in motion 'a questioning of the status quo, and [...] the nature of reality itself' (Benshoff 5). Little wonder, then, that queer literary, film



and cultural scholarship has worked to appropriate the Gothic monster's strange 'power to evade and undermine' (Cohen 6), to challenge boundaries and shake the reader's faith in that which passes as everyday reality. People who are perceived as 'queer,' for whatever reason, have not been allowed to forget their imposed relationship with the monstrous, but even as the Gothic locates monstrosity as a source of fear, it also acknowledges the monster's power. Moreover, when the vampire Ruthven escapes and Frankenstein's creature is 'lost in darkness and distance' (215), these texts remind us that queer meaning cannot be contained; in the end, the Monster almost always eludes the reader's desire. The possibility that the Monster is still out there, and might return, is also important, for Gothic fiction repeatedly performs and replays society's inability to escape the conflicts it has made necessary to its own construction.

By persistently pointing to western culture's phobic, but also fascinated, investment in same-sex relations, Gothic fiction also provides a textual space for exploring epistemological anxieties surrounding the development of modern 'homosexual' and 'lesbian' identities. Applying queer critical practices to the women's stories in *Frankenstein* opens a range of new reading possibilities. But, in Chapter Three, I also argued that the text could be utilised to discuss the heteronormative interpretative paradigms that so often underscore responses to the text. In my view, more attention should now be paid to marginal relationships between women in Gothic texts and, especially, to moments where anxieties about female bonding feed into fears about sapphic monstrosity. It would be interesting to consider how ideas about what we now call 'lesbian' desires and identities have shaped responses to texts in which such anxieties are more strongly foregrounded, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Christabel' and, later in the nineteenth century,

Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). Queer scholarship has already recognised the Gothic investment in male 'homosexuality' and both *Frankenstein* and *The Vampyre* demonstrate a pervasive fascination with desire between men. In becoming a space in which it is, to a certain extent, possible to speak about 'the unspeakable,' Gothic fiction tells us a lot about how we have come to speak about homosexuality. From a queer critical and pedagogical perspective, the genre is therefore particularly productive for revealing the interpretative apparatus through which the signification of male same-sex desire has become legible in a homophobic culture.

Charged at the semantic level with cultural knowledge about what constitutes 'queerness,' the language of Gothic fiction also opens a space for discussing sexual rhetoric. The excitement surrounding forbidden knowledge, the moments of dangerous arresting recognition, the supposedly deadly secrets contained within Gothic closets, the confession narratives, the madness, paranoia and guilt, and the strange wanderers travelling through heavily symbolic spaces; all these Gothic conventions also figure within the cultural discourse of queerness. Instead of attempting to prove that queer meaning is present in the texts, we should concentrate on how such meaning is produced discursively and rhetorically as a figurative and coded language. When they perceive something 'queer' in the text, students could be encouraged to think about how such meaning is mediated through language and made available to readers. However, it is important to consider that Gothic texts do not simply 'reflect' or 'represent' the construction of those desires, identities and behaviours which have since come to be dubbed queer, because they resist or differ from the norm. I propose, rather, that we should pay attention to the various ways in which the genre engages with, and even takes part in, the discursive *production* and even the *dissemination* of knowledge about queerness – about sexual normality and

abnormality, about convention and transgression. On the one hand, the genre gives particularly strong expression to the queer voices in culture; but, on the other hand, all the texts discussed can be read as symptomatic of a society which has found many ways to speak about sex, while pretending to maintain silence on the subject.

Modern sexual epistemologies inform Gothic fiction on many levels, and when the author's gender, sex or sexuality becomes a site of critical and cultural interest, it is worth including this factor in the discussion. The 'sexualisation' of the Gothic author opens another area of potential queer Gothic inquiry and all the authors involved in the 'ghost story competition' have become subject to such interest. When it is apparent that an author led what we could call a 'queer life,' it is always tempting to speculate about the significance of their nonconformity in relation to their writing. I do not want to rule out possibilities for writing queer biographies but, in my view, we should first interrogate the drive to locate meaning in the sexual aspects of the author's life, because it has shaped the way we read the texts. Is it ever possible to read the work of Lord Byron without being influenced by our awareness of his sexual reputation? Can we read *Frankenstein* without thinking about Mary Shelley's life as a mother, and the lover and wife of Percy Shelley? Modern sexual categories such as 'heterosexual,' 'homosexual' and 'lesbian' have also informed twentieth-century responses to these authors. Students might now think about the anxieties caused by figures such as Polidori, Byron, and Mary Shelley, who actually seem to fall outside such categories and lack stable, unified sexual identities. Moreover, responses to their lives certainly enable further reflections upon the notion that 'an interest in horror is unhealthy and aberrant' (King 101). The sexual interest in the Gothic author therefore offers another angle on the epistemological pressure applied to the field of the sexual,

as well as confirming the long association between Gothic fiction and that which we experience as queer.

Gothic fiction has always had much to offer readers and authors aware of their own sexual nonconformity, but it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the genre appeals to the 'queer' in everyone. It is impossible to imagine a Gothic text that is not also a queer text, because the possibility of sexual nonconformity has become necessary to what Sedgwick calls, the Gothic aesthetic of 'pleasurable fear' (*Coherence* 11). Queerness can even be called a Gothic 'convention,' insofar as any Gothic text that did not put queer meaning into play at some level would certainly not be 'normal' within terms of generic expectations. If such texts were not rich in the connotation of sexual deviance, if they did not question the stability of sex and gender identity, if they left the structures of family and marriage unshaken, if they did not confirm our suspicions that desire knows no law, they would not be so desirable or so Gothic. We might now ask whether a text could be called 'Gothic' were it not already 'queer.'

This speculation leads to another question, which I would like to see provide the basis for further discussions. Could 'queerness,' as we now understand the word, exist without the Gothic and has the genre played a part in actually producing the way we tend to think and speak about sexual nonconformity? If so, it is not surprising to find queer scholarship returning so repeatedly for insights to Gothic horror texts, for it is there that we find the cultural 'text' of queerness. In their introduction to the recent special edition of *Romanticism on the Net*, entitled 'Queer Romanticisms,' I was pleased to find Michael O' Rourke and David Collings posing the question 'Is (Queer) Theory Always Already Gothic?' Considering the 'queering of normative codes and narratives,' they propose that 'the gothic already creates the terms and

strategies of contemporary hauntology, opening up the space now occupied by psychoanalysis, theory, queer theory, and the politics of living otherwise.' Perhaps, then, 'The gothic is our monstrous parentage' (30). If Gothic fiction and queer theory are complementary fields of inquiry, we should consider the possibility that this sense of an affinity may have its source in the Gothic's own *theory* of queerness. In addition to paying more attention to the genre's role in (re) producing cultural knowledge about the positions, identities, desires, and behaviours which we have come to call 'queer,' queer scholarship might now begin to further explore its own debt to the Gothic.

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