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“Be Men, or Be More Than Men”: *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein*, and Judith Butler

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This paper aims to explore two novels, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, through the theoretical lens of Judith Butler. Butler's works used as frameworks are *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993). The two books focus, among other things, on the notions of gender performativity and the body as the most material dimension of sex and sexuality. The main topics analyzed within the scope of this paper are the notions of gender performativity and gender identity, the body, naming, and phallogocentrism.

As the older of the two novels and the one that can be considered a part of the canon of English literature, *Frankenstein* has a stronger presence in both gender and queer studies. It is more analyzed and the questions of gender and body present in the story have been explored in more detail and from more sides. *Frankissstein*, in turn, also covers a number of the same topics, but often in more explicit ways, and offers a variety of interpretations and elements discussed in gender and queer theory.

In the analysis of the two novels, the focus is placed on the presence and representation of gender, how characters stray from the gender binary, or alternatively what place they have in it, what do their bodies constitute, and how do they function with and within them.

KEYWORDS
gender performativity, gender studies, queer studies, Judith Butler, *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein (Mary Shelley, 1818) and *Frankissstein* (Jeanette Winterson, 2019), written nearly exactly two centuries apart, share a number of characteristics, due in large part to the fact that the latter is deliberately inspired by the former. Be it implicitly or explicitly, they present many notions and ideas presented and prominently discussed in the works of Judith Butler. The aim of this is paper is thus to provide an exploration of the two novels using Butler's works, namely *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993).

Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus was written by Mary Shelley and published for the first time in 1818; the author's name appeared in 1821, when the second edition was published. It is the story of Victor Frankenstein, a scientist whose pursuit of knowledge culminates in an unconventional experiment that brings to life an intelligent creature, who is shunned from its creator and the rest of the world because of its monstrous appearance. The novel, written partially in epistolary form and as a retelling of a story, follows the confrontation of Frankenstein with his creation. *Frankenstein* is considered one of the first and most influential science fiction stories, and it has inspired a number of adaptations and rewritings. One such work which takes clear inspiration, storylines, and characters (and even the author herself in a fictionalized form) from *Frankenstein* is Jeanette Winterson's 2019 novel *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. Told in first person by in turns Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, and Ry Shelley, a young transgender doctor, it is a story set in the world of the present or near-future and explores the complexities of love and artificial intelligence. The similarities between the two novels range from characters, who are slightly altered in the hypertext (*Frankissstein*) when compared to their original iterations in the hypotext (*Frankenstein*), to plot points, images, and ideologies.

The theoretical framework against which the two novels will be analyzed is constituted by *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), both written by Judith Butler. In the two works, Butler posits her[1] significant theory of gender performativity and gender as a construction, how this construction affects the way gender, and by extension sex are viewed, how they relate to the notion of the body, what is the role of the heterosexual matrix, what is meant by women as a category, to name a few.

The notion of gender performativity – "not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (*Bodies That Matter* 12) – is the focal point in the two books. Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). In *Bodies That Matter,* the analysis also turns to the 'matter' and 'materiality' of bodies and their correlation to gender, sex, and language. The materiality of bodies is constituted through performativity of gender and sex; bodies that materialize the (heterosexual) norm thus also qualify as bodies that matter.

A notable fact to consider when analyzing the two novels is that they were written two hundred years apart, in 1818 and 2019, respectively, and that Butler's works appeared at the beginning of the 1990s, in 1990 and 1993, to be exact. The temporal placement of the novels is important because, especially in the case of *Frankenstein*, the contemporaneous politics and attitudes play a significant role in how certain elements appear and can be analyzed. Since the topics that will be discussed concern the notions of 'gender' and 'sex' in modern terms (with an understanding of feminism and queer studies), a study of *Frankenstein* must consider the novel's historical context. Despite the fact that the novel was written and published in the nineteenth century, it has been cited by Diane Hoeveler as being important in "numerous queer-theory readings (…), which are in part motivated by the feminist analysis of gender as a cultural construct" (57), an aspect that gained more significant traction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hoeveler references Anne K. Mellor and Eve Sedgwick when she states that the reasoning behind this feminist analysis is Victor's "homosexual obsession" (57) with the creature: "Victor and his creature/double are engaged in the classic homosocial dyad gone horribly wrong so that the murderous rejection of the bond between them can only end in both their deaths" (58). When we look at *Frankissstein*, we can see that the novel was published relatively recently and mentions certain terms and ideas connected to the topic at hand, and the analysis will thus in some cases be more overt. The study of the two novels is almost exclusively based on the elements tied to the characters of the creature in *Frankenstein* and Ry Shelley in *Frankissstein*. The two are characters who struggle the most (or are perceived to) within the confines of gender identity, which is the reason for their placement in the center of this analysis.

The main topics analyzed are those of gender performativity and gender identity, the body, naming, and phallogocentrism. In her work, Butler uses the notion of 'gender performativity', identifies the differences between 'gender' and 'sex' and tackles the binary on which they both function in the heterosexual matrix, that binary being the division between 'male' and 'female'. This is often matched by the binaries of 'culture'/'nature' and 'mind/'body', where culture and mind are paired with the male, and nature and body with the female. Butler argues that gender is "constructed" and is not biological, but she points out that that does not automatically equate it to being a purely cultural construct. In order to provide a more detailed definition of how gender is constructed, she goes on to underline that

> performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance'' is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not (…) determining it fully in advance. (*Bodies That Matter* 95)

The above-mentioned 'reiteration' and 'repetition' underscore the idea of performativity in the sense of 'subjection' and 'subjectivation'. Gender then exists in the acts which are repeated constantly. There is no singular act or deed, nor is there a singular actor or 'doer'; as Sara Salih explains in her book *Judith Butler* by referencing one of Butler's interviews, "the concept [of] 'performativity' [is connected] to the speech act theory of J. L. Austin's (…) and Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's ideas" (56). Salih goes on to clarify that "[g]ender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language" (56). The "gendered body" is "performative" (*Gender Trouble* 173), because the only way that its reality, or an illusion of it, is constituted is through the repetition of various acts, which are then in turn taken as the signifiers of a specific gender. Since there is not one single act or one single deed, gender is constantly in the act of being performed, but not necessarily by a specific subject that can be singled out. Instead, harkening back to Nietzsche, Butler states her idea that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed', but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (*Gender Trouble* 181). In this ouroboric concept, gender is performed, but simultaneously constructs the basis for its own performativity.

The issue of names and naming, presented in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, is evaluated by Butler in relation to the notion of patronyms and the 'law of the father'. The idea of the woman or bride given from one man to another to establish kinship lines, a "ritual exchange of women" (*Bodies That Matter* 153) finds its parallel in the story or Frankenstein and the creature, when the creature asks his creator to make him a bride. Had Frankenstein finished what he had promised to, he would have ceremoniously given the creature his bride. However, since Frankenstein, as the creature's creator, functions as a father/parent, he would have also been the father/parent figure to his bride, meaning that he would also be the creature's father-in-law, and the female creature would have been the sister of the male creature, as well as his wife (had they married). Similarly, the same relationship can be seen between Victor and Elizabeth, who were step-siblings and married (albeit briefly). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler dedicates a chapter to author Willa Cather and her writing, and presents Cather's play on words with the name of her novel *Tommy, the Unsentimental*. The main character, a young woman, takes on both the first and last names of her father, thus occupying a specific sort of position in relation to the notion of paternity. In *Frankenstein*, the creature is not given nor does he at any point take on a specific name; he is only ever described as "Frankenstein's creature" in numerous references. It is interesting to note that there are many cases in popular culture where the creature himself is mistakenly referred to as "Frankenstein". This way, he takes on his creator's name outside the text. As Butler states in reference to Lacan, "to be named is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law" (*Bodies That Matter* 72); the creature is then only erroneously and extratextually baptized. Butler also describes Saul Kripke's distinction

between "'rigid designators' and 'nonrigid or accidental designators'" (*Bodies That Matter* 211) and specifies in the *Notes* that the "name refers rigidly, that is, universally and without exception, to a person no matter in what way the descriptions of that person may change" (280). Frankenstein's creature can never take on any true human characteristic of his father, and Victor in turn becomes a very specific signifier. In *Frankissstein*, Ry shortens their given name, removing the 'Ma' ('mother') from 'Mary', and becoming an individual in their own right. They are also often mistakenly, and by several different characters, referred to as 'Ryan', even though they do not at any point claim this name. The standardized perception, that Ry must be short for Ryan, prevails here, bringing us back to the male/female binary and the dominance of the male over the female.

The creature's insistence that he be given a wife – "What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; (…) Oh! My creator, make me happy; (…); do not deny me my request!" (125) ties back into the idea of performativity. Jackie Docka suggests that "Victor's monster conceptualizes his own gender to be more like his creator" (10). By being given a wife, he can be completed, stating that "[i]t is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (125). Carol Margaret Davison notes in her chapter "Monstrous Regiments of Women and Brides of Frankenstein" that "[o]nly in this manner, Victor rationalises, may he appease his resentful, homicidal monster and regain peace and normalcy" (196). Instead of existing outside the "oppressive categories of sex" (*Gender Trouble* 160), the creature attempts to follow the established law. Butler notes Monique Wittig's claim that 'men' and 'women' are "political categories, and not natural facts" (147), describing that "[t]he 'naming' of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality" (147). The creature can be said to have had a "biological birth, but not a human one" (Docka 11). He is, however, created in the "the realm of the perverse" (Hoeveler 58), because Victor created him outside the binary of male/female, essentially dooming him from the start within the matrix of heterosexuality.

In Butler's analysis of author Willa Cather, she notes that Cather negotiates "conventions of anonymity (…) with the conventions of traditional masculine authorship" (*Bodies That Matter* 146). This analysis of Cather, who has been described as "a male-identified writer, one whose stories presume a masculine narrator or foreground a masculine protagonist" (143), can be linked to a similar analysis of Shelley and Winterson, who both write from the perspective of male characters (Victor Frankenstein and Captain Walton in Shelley's case, and on occasion the creature, who is male; Ry, who identifies as a trans man, shares the main narrative voice with Mary Shelley and, for a few pages, the male guard in Bedlam in Winterson's case). Writing of *Frankenstein*, Sandra M. Gilbert notes in her article that "despite its male protagonist and its underpinning of 'masculine' philosophy, [it] is somehow a 'woman's book,' if only because its author was caught up in such a maelstrom of sexuality at the time she wrote the novel" (49).

Frankenstein's titular character is male, as are all other significant active roles in the story. Mary Shelley's awakening sexuality, teen-age motherhood, and tragedy after the death of her child (all analyzed as her 'female' experiences and all having occurred around the time she came up with her story) are contrasted by "a number of writers" to her male-focused story. Observing the same aspect, Devon Hodges builds a bridge with the ideas of speech acts and performativity and considers that

> if speech is associated with masculinity, then a woman must lose her identity in order to make self- expression possible. But perhaps in adopting a male voice, the woman writer is given the opportunity to intervene from within, to become an alien presence that undermines the stability of the male voice. (157)

Discussing *Frankenstein* within this paradigm must be done while keeping in mind the period from which the text originates, and using it in discussions within gender studies conscientiously takes into account its time (the early 19th century). There have been a number of readings of the text that focus on the creature and his constitution within the context of gender, as well as queer studies. In "The Trans Legacy of *Frankenstein*", Jolene Zigarovich asks "[h]ow can we discuss the Gothic as a genre that crosses over boundaries constructed by culture to define and contain gender and sexuality?" (264). Judith Butler herself has commented on the gender of the creature in the afterword to *A Life with Mary Shelley*, stating that "the 'monster' functions as a liminal zone of gender, not merely the disavowed dimensions of manhood, but the unspeakable limits of femininity as well" (48). In the opening lines of her work "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage", Susan Stryeker states

> The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment (…) (238)

Jolene Zigarovich points out that "trans theory has always been rhetorically haunted" (260). In the discussion of bodies becoming "sexed" (*Bodies That Matter* 95), meaning marked by and as 'masculine' and 'feminine', we also come to an impasse when faced with bodies which 'refuse' (one way or another) to be marked within this binary. As Butler notes, "[i]f this last implication [that there is no body prior to its marking] is accepted, we can never tell a story about how it is that a body comes to be marked by the category of sex (…)., any story we might tell about such a body making its way toward the marker of sex will be a fictional one" (98). In reference to the creature, Steve Vine writes that

> the monster's bodiliness is ambivalently – perhaps undecidably – positioned (…). For, even though the monster's body is the site of his abjection and exclusion, that body at the same time imposes itself as the site of a certain resistance, a certain refusal – a refusal of the entire symbolic order that so viciously repudiates and abjects the monster as body. (144)

The creature's experience of exclusion is primarily external, and through it becomes more severely internalized. Its body is inextricably tied to this experience, as Vine notes at the beginning of his explanation. The creature's inability to adhere to the regulations of the system and what is expected retreats to the fact that it cannot exist within the confines of the gender binary. It is therefore necessary for it (or rather him) to either create a space and bring in to it the necessary components of a 'normal' life (such as a wife), conscious that it will be a deformed version of such a life, or choose to end it because of the inability to attain it. As the story goes, Frankenstein and his creature meet the same end, and ultimately do find some form of resolution – in death.

In *Frankissstein*, Elena Sheppard notes in her review, Victor Stein, "who repeatedly asserts that he is not gay, couches his attraction to Ry as something as philosophical as it is physical". Paralleling Ry with the creature is done within the confines of what has been presented above; the trans experience and identification with the 'monstrous' or 'fabricated' body are based on the experiences of trans authors and their identification with certain aspects of the creature's condition. In addition, as Butler notes in her reference to Freud, "only from a self-consciously denaturalized position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted" (*Gender Trouble* 140). It is through the lens of Ry, and the creature, that gender performativity can be observed, and their storylines can be used to underline the instability of strict binary identities within the heteronormativity of fiction and reality.

One section of *Gender Trouble* is reserved for the analysis of Monique Wittig's philosophy, with a focus on Simone de Beauvoir's writing and what it means to 'become' a woman. Butler notes at one point that one of the ideas presented by Witting is also that "one can, if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man" (1990: 144). This can be applied to Ry Shelley, who consciously and purposefully chooses an existence outside the gender binary. It is a specifically crafted space that they are forced to create. It is important to note that the continuation of this explanation by Butler refers to "the lesbian [as] a third gender", and Wittig's philosophy presented is focused on "lesbian-feminism"; Butler has pointed out that her own writing is non-binary/trans-inclusionary.

The idea presented by Witting is that "it is possible to become a being whom neither *man* nor *woman* truly describes" (162), which Butler explains as referring to "an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense" (162). Ry walks along

the lines of the gender binary when they refer to their own body as both male and female, mostly to simplify it for others who are struggling to understand it. Their own understanding and perception of it, however, are clear, even though complex. As a transgender man, Ry is forced to exist within the confines of what Butler presents as a general opinion, and that is that "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair" (*Gender Trouble* 30), as well as compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Ry's 'self-made' body correlates to what Witting describes as "disunity", when she states

> [i]ndeed, the "unity" imposed upon the body by the category of sex is a "disunity," a fragmentation and compartmentalization, and a reduction of erotogeneity. (…) the "integrity" and "unity" of the body, often thought to be positive ideals, serve the purposes of fragmentation, restriction, and domination. (146)

Witting writes of the 'disunity' imposed by the naming of sexual organs as erogenous zones, which results in the restriction and fragmentation of the body. An imposed "artificial unity" (146) of the body is the consequence of the categorization of "sex" itself as something biologically and naturally given.

Another important notion in the two novels is the theory of phallogocentrism. The general notion has been developed by many, notably Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. In the analysis, the 'phallus' is used to present the crucial distinction between 'male' and 'female', and it is a term which exists in the Symbolic. The two states of the phallus are 'having' and 'being', where 'having' is a 'male' characteristic, as the action or act of penetration, and 'being' is a 'female' characteristic, as the place which the 'phallus' penetrates. The 'being' also corelates to the key idea of 'lack' in Lacanian philosophy, tied to 'castration' in Freud; 'being' is the 'lack', a "hole within the self" (Hoeveler 50), since it is that which is 'female, and therefore not 'male'. Butler mentions Lacan in great detail, both in her analysis of phallogocentrism and other notions more or less tied to it; however, an interesting digression is made in *Bodies That Matter,* where she suggests that a refusal or failure to "accede to punishment" (102) that is castration results in an operation that is "much more destructive [as] feminine (…) [than] masculine" (103). For a 'woman' to then 'have' the phallus can be seen as even more severe than for a man to 'be' one. Here, Butler explicitly mentions identities that exist outside the gender binary and whose existence helps in negating it:

> these figures of abjection [the inverted versions of the heterosexualized masculinity and femininity], which are inarticulate yet organizing figures within the Lacanian symbolic, foreclose precisely the kind of complex crossings of identification and desire which might exceed and contest the binary frame itself. (102)

The contestation of "the binary frame itself" is then made possible through the existence of identities and bodies who actively break out of the mold, or try to

do so. Breaking out of or away from this frame brings with it an uncertainty that is the opposite of the definite and often secure confines of the gender binary. In *Frankissstein*, Ry's reality of existing in this liminal space is underlined in their own words; there is no clear-cut solution for them to be one or the 'Other', nor are they trying to find one:

> I am a woman. And I am a man. That's how it is for me. I am the body that I prefer. But the past, my past, isn't subject to surgery. I didn't do it to distance myself from myself. I did it to get nearer to myself. (*Frankissstein* 122)

It also constitutes a construction of such an identity, a deliberate and mindful mission. Unlike the creature's tragic fate and choice in the face of an impossibility of integration, Ry's decision is based on the knowledge that forced assimilation is neither possible nor necessary. It is neither a "descent into feminine castration" nor a "monstrous ascent into phallicism" (*Bodies That Matter* 103); rather, it can be seen as a manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari note as "individual" sex (*Gender Trouble* 157), an active choice, and a way to find peace.

The notions of gender performativity, gender identity, the body, naming, and phallogocentrism taken from the works of Judith Butler find their parallels in *Frankenstein* and *Frankissstein* in both closely tied and distinctly separate ways. The novels, linked by characters, storylines, and ideas, provide ample space for interpretation, and Butler's works, in turn, serve as a well of inspiration in the analysis of not only contemporary, but also classic literature.

End Notes

1 Butler identifies as non-binary and uses she/they pronouns. https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times (accessed on 20 February 2021)

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