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The Performing Female Body: The National Theatre Frankenstein as Performance Art

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The Performing Female Body: The National Theatre *Frankenstein* as Performance Art

Hannah Mahrii Gunson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Performing Female Body: The National Theatre *Frankenstein* as Performance Art

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Master of Arts

The National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* is not the first time Shelley’s novel has been adapted for the stage, but it is the first time a stage adaptation has returned the popular story to its source material’s feminist themes. Departing from the iterations that portrayed Victor Frankenstein as a Byronic hero, Nick Dear’s adaptation has re-designed Frankenstein to be misogynistic and callous. His new nature is best observed in the scene wherein Frankenstein presents the Woman-Creature he’s built for his first Creature. She is naked, silent, submissive, and viciously dismembered at the end of the scene. While such submissiveness might justifiably be criticized by a society that has become incredibly concerned for the representation of women in media, this scene has striking similarities to several performance art pieces of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Building on an understanding of how these pieces function, the Woman-Creature stops being problematic, and becomes poignant. This thesis compares the Woman-Creature’s scene to three particular pieces: Marina Abramovic’s “Rhythm 0,” Carolee Schneeman’s “Meat Joy,” and Suzanne Lacey’s “Three Weeks in May.” While not a performance art piece itself, this particular scene in *Frankenstein* has similar purposes, mainly to show the consequences of a social structure that places men as the dominant leader. By not shying away from the visceral nature of these consequences, this production of *Frankenstein* shocks the audience and reminds them of the harsh realities of the patriarchal structure still seen today.

Keywords: Frankenstein, performance art, patriarchy, National Theatre, feminism, Ellen Moers, Knoepflmacher, Anne K. Mellor, Jeanie Fort, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Marina Abramovic
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INTRODUCTION

It’s painful scene to watch— a pale, listless woman is led by a man to stand center-stage. She’s naked, completely bare to the audience and the intense gaze of the two men beside her. Unable to move for herself, she is supported by but bends to the hand of a man, sinking into the chest and underneath the arm of Victor Frankenstein, who cobbled her together from corpse remains found in and stolen from a dank graveyard. Though the conversation between Frankenstein and his Creature continues on around her, her emotionless face is more compelling than the dialogue. Does she have free thought? She certainly doesn’t have free speech. For that matter, she doesn’t have any speech at all. She’s entirely at the mercy of Victor Frankenstein and is incapable of preventing him from touching her, kissing her, exposing her. She seems to be little more than an object. The scene, set in a storm-stricken shack, is her journey of demoralization as she goes from being presented as a goddess to being brutally murdered by her creator. It’s hard to watch in more ways than one.

This scene comes from the National Theatre of London’s 2011 award winning and internationally acclaimed production of *Frankenstein*, adapted by Nick Dear and directed by Danny Boyle. Dear and Boyle, who had both worked for the National Theatre before, wanted to create a new *Frankenstein* that would focus more on the journey of the Creature, rather than Victor Frankenstein. This well-reviewed and well-received production featured Benedict Cumberbatch and Johnny Lee Miller who alternated playing the Creature and Frankenstein each night. Since its sold-out run in the National’s Olivier Theatre, it has been broadcasted internationally through the National Theatre Live movie series. Perhaps its popularity came from Cumberbatch’s rising fame (having come to this production shortly after the airing of BBC’s
Sherlock), but perhaps it came from the play’s return to the source text and an emotional, thematic depth unlike any recent adaptation.

In the specific scene described earlier, Frankenstein wrestles with the repercussions of creating life in an unnatural manner, specifically that the life he creates might develop a consciousness and agency of her own—as had his first creation. As the rain beats down on his laboratory-shack, he feverishly debates with the Creature about free will, moral education, and whether or not the woman he is building will be as peaceful and lovely as the Eve whose likeness she is being created to resemble. Frustrated by—maybe even fearful of—the concept of a woman existing outside the male-favoring social structure, Frankenstein viciously slashes the woman apart.

There is a notable difference in how this scene is told between the novel and the play, however. In Mary Shelley’s novel (published in 1818), this act of brutality is given a short paragraph, but in Dear’s adaptation it is a full-fledged scene. Shelley’s novel portrays Frankenstein as sympathetic because he is written as a young student who is in over his head and prone to immense feeling and anxiety. In Dear’s adaptation, Frankenstein is destructive and vindictive, caring little for the people around him. In the novel, Frankenstein sees the Creature “... [expressing] the utmost extent of malice and treachery” as he works to build the Woman-Creature and this is what causes Frankenstein to panic at the thought of creating another equally malicious creature and so, “... trembling with passion, [he tears] to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged.”¹ In the play, the Creature not only praises Frankenstein as a genius, but he promises to love his created bride, describing how it feels to love her. He says: “it feels like all

the life is bubbling up in me and spilling from my mouth, it feels like my lungs are on fire and my heart is a hammer…”2

The disparity between this scene as told in the novel and depicted— expanded upon— on stage is the spark of my inquiry. By changing the characteristics of Victor Frankenstein, the scene is reframed to focus audience sympathy on the defenseless Woman-Creature. In so doing, this adaptation brings the feminist themes of *Frankenstein* to the surface, in ways different than other previous dramatic iterations.

The National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* is not the first time Shelley’s novel has been adapted for the stage. It’s been an extremely popular story to produce since its publication, as evidenced by Steven Earl Forry’s catalogue of over a hundred adaptations from 1821-19863. The first adaptation was staged in 1823 at the English Opera House in London. This dramatic recreation portrays Frankenstein as a Byronic hero, flawed by hubris but still easy to sympathize with. It departed from the original source material by adding songs, subplots, and the now iconic scene of Frankenstein using the lightning from a raging storm to jolt his Creature to life. In this adaptation, Frankenstein takes joy in his creation, rather than abject horror at the unnaturalness of it all, by proudly proclaiming: “It lives! It lives!”4 In the iteration found on the Grand Guignol stage, under the title *The Horrible Experiment*, the story focuses on the resurrection of a beloved daughter, but features the horror of implied incest and a terrifying reversal of expectations when the daughter strangles the father that brought her back to life5. Both of these adaptations reflect

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4 Richard Brinsley Peake, *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*, 1823
the mindset of their audiences— the culture at the time sought sensationalism rather than celebreality. In the 1823 adaptation, adapter Richard Brinsley Peake used dialogue to embolden the performance of Frankenstein, while the Grand Guignol’s 1909 version relied on the viscerality of bodies to excite the audience.

More recently in 1981, a newer version Frankenstein became one of the most infamous flops in American theatre. Victor Gialanella created a musical adaptation from a mash-up of the novel and James Whale’s 1931 film version. As with the early stage versions, this play put emphasis on the spectacle of horror. Frank Rich, in the New York Times review argued, “We feel nothing except the disappointment that comes from witnessing an evening of misspent energy. ‘Frankenstein’ may be the last word in contemporary theatrical technology, but its modern inventions are nothing without the alchemy of plain, old-fashioned drama.”

This production, the most expensive show ever produced on Broadway to that point, closed after only one performance. Its failure to balance spectacle and the story serves as a cautionary tale of the difficulty of adapting Frankenstein for contemporary audiences.

These are three instances out of the hundreds of other adaptations that highlight the sort of trajectory these plays went in as they departed from the novel and its original depiction of Frankenstein. Like all adaptations, these plays were crafted to be more appealing to the contemporary audience by being “... rich in high melodrama, sensationalism, and sumptuously violent special effects…” as Michael Chemers put it in his book, The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness, where he specifically touches on Frankenstein’s theatrical history. With each new staged— and filmed— version of Frankenstein, the titular character progresses further and further into an irredeemable mad scientist. The productions also became

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more and more misogynistic, highlighting arrogance in Frankenstein, forgetting the intelligence of the Creature, and eliminating or sensualizing the Woman-Creature.

The National Theatre’s production is, with this context, especially unique because it attempts to reverse the trajectory of misogyny seen in prior iterations and points the text of *Frankenstein* back towards the novel’s original feminist themes and values. The character of Frankenstein falls from the status of Byronic hero and enters into the role more fitting of a villain. The protagonist of this adaptation is the Creature, who is restored to his emotional and intellectual depth. Additionally, Dear and Boyle have not left out the Woman-Creature or Frankenstein’s fiancée, Elizabeth. Instead, they capitalize on their scenes and include female motifs throughout the entirety of the play. What is most poignant about this production’s treatment of women is played out upon the body of the Woman-Creature. This play engages the twenty-first century by using the viscerality of the female body, not shying away from the graphic horror of dismemberment. There is nothing representative or abstract about the Woman-Creature’s murder; it happens in clarity on stage.

Because they use a biologically female body on stage, the story becomes undeniably woman-centric. The themes shift from tracing the tragic downfall of a mad scientist to revealing the terror of male abuse and domination—which is a topic deeply applicable to a society becoming more and more conscientious of violence towards women. Though the act of reanimating corpses into sentience is a little fantastical, the events of the Woman-Creature’s scene (in which she is destroyed) is not far from reality. This adaptation encourages the audience to think about the acts of violence against women that can be seen today by depicting them as realistically as possible. Though it is a layered production from which many themes and messages can be pulled, it calls specific attention to the plight of violence against women.
Frankenstein, as Shelley wrote it, is inherently entrenched in themes of women’s issues. Having been written by the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, a proto-feminist who advocated for women’s rights, this monstrous tale of birth can be read as an allegory of Shelley’s own trauma with birth as well as a critique of a social order that favored men. Academics Ellen Moers and U.C. Knoepflmacher read the novel as semi-autobiographical to Mary Shelley and returned the scholastic discourse to its feminist origins. While they both referred to Mary Shelley’s traumatic experiences with birth, Moers analyzed Frankenstein as Shelley retelling her own experiences with postnatal depression after losing her child, and Knoepflmacher focused on the “nurture denied to Mary herself when her mother died.” To both of them, the story of an eager student reanimating the dead only to retreat in horror at the sight was a clear hearkening to a monstrous birth that begat death instead of life. In her preface to the novel Shelley seems to indicate as much when she writes: “I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper,” and the words she uses certainly allude to a maternal bond between her and the story itself.

Several years after Knoepflmacher and Moers, Anne K. Mellor added to the feminist discourse surrounding Frankenstein with her book, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters. In it, she not only examines the life of Shelley and how it influenced Frankenstein (as Moers and Knoepflmacher had done), but she also compared the novel to modern feminist critiques. In one of her many critiques of the novel, Mellor analyzed the character of Frankenstein as a symbol of the patriarchal structure in which Mary Shelley grew up, rather than a representation of Mary herself. Under that lens, the creation of the Creature “... support[ed] a

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patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality.”10 All of these theories are continually referred to in today’s feminist discourse of *Frankenstein*. The National Theatre production can provide new insight to this discourse because, being a staged adaptation, it is able to use biological female bodies to express feminist themes, rather than reading into male characters to find the female expression or thought. The female body being presented on stage can, in several ways, speak for herself. In this production, the feminist themes of the play—which align with Mellor’s theories—are held by a female character rather than being parsed through the titular but male character.

In a time where the lack of complex female representation in media and entertainment remains an ongoing issue, the female characters in this production might be seen as problematic due to their lack of agency and lack of a full character development. Despite their passivity, I argue that the absence of complex female characters in the National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* symbolizes the destructiveness that follows an abuse of patriarchal power. The use of bodies and the theatrical context surrounding those bodies, poignantly elevates the performance of the female characters. These women are not weak because they are passive, they are strong because of the message their bodies—rather than their words—carry.

The scene between Frankenstein, the Creature, and the Woman-Creature in particular is reminiscent of how silence and nudity were used in performance art. Whether or not it was intentionally directed by Boyle to be such, this scene nonetheless has strong similarities to feminist performance art pieces done in the 1960’s and 1970’s, which equally and in as visceral of ways force audiences to reflect on the ongoing treatment of women. Examining the scene of

the Woman-Creature on stage through the lens of performance art explains how a passive woman can being used to express themes of patriarchal abuse.

Through her physical presence on stage, the Woman-Creature has more dramatic substance than she does in the script and novel. For one, she is a powerful image to be seen rather than dreamt of. Her presence—despite her being silent and submissive—also denotes a kind of sentience not seen in the book and not described in the script. This scene and the Woman-Creature’s inaction can be read as poetic or symbolic rather than exploitive or passive. Thus, her performance no longer relies on words to express thought or theme. In fact, she is vital to the thematic expression of the entire play, which— because of this scene—seeks to draw attention to the oppression of women seen in the world today.

By highlighting Frankenstein’s misogyny towards the Woman-Creature, the story of an overzealous student reanimating the dead isn’t a tale about monstrous birth or of a greedy scientific culture, but of the ruthless nature inherent to the patriarchal structure. His misogyny is highlighted by having a physical, biologically female body on stage with which he can (and does) interact in a violent manner. Frankenstein might have been read as a sign of the feminine, but in this stage adaptation, his aggressive actions towards the biologically feminine make him an enemy to women. Due to the viscerality of the Woman-Creature on stage, the audience is confronted by the brutal imagery of abuse and can therefore not ignore it. The presence of a biologically female body makes this story—once again—about the female.

**THE WOMAN’S BODY**

Because this analysis is concerned with bodies, it is important to define the difference between the literal and performing bodies as they are two separate but mutually impacting things. Simply put, the literal body is the body that belongs to the actress playing the Woman-
Creature, Andreea Paduraru. Paduraru’s body exists outside of the play of *Frankenstein*. Her body is capable of free movement, as evidenced by a scene earlier in the play wherein the Creature dreams of a companion. In it, she dances with the Creature in a trance, touching him of her own accord, and flitting about the stage in spasmodic movements. Additionally, Paduraru has worked in several other productions and has there displayed her literal body’s ability to move and speak. This literal body is “on loan” to the Woman-Creature.

The literal body is the foundation for the performative body as it provides clues that are necessary for the performance, and is also then built upon. Perhaps one of the most important clues is the biological sex of the literal body, as the gendering of the body has the power to change how the performance is read and received. In other productions, gender might not have as great an impact on the story, but as this play’s themes are concerned with gender relationships and tensions, the biological sex of the literal body is paramount.

The performative body is “built” on top of the literal body. A performative body is an extension of the literal body, meaning that what the literal body does on stage, the performative body will mirror and expound. Whereas the literal body has more to do with the physicality of a scene (meaning acting out the directed blocking), the performative body is more concerned with the story of the scene and how to effectively tell it. Therefore, the performative body will use elements outside of its own shape and form such as costumes, props, and context to tell that story. The performative body also has a lot of freedom in terms of what can happen to it without actually causing damage. For example, the performative body can be slashed open night after night and the actor or actress can walk away at the end of the production unharmed; the literal body can really only be slashed open once. The performative body allows for gruesome horror to be enacted for the sake of the production, should the story call for it—and *Frankenstein* certainly
does. As was mentioned, the viscerality of this scene is part of what makes it impactful to the audience and is a necessary part of the story. The performative body is also able to be “put on” and “taken off.” By using costumes and mannerisms, the literal body temporarily becomes someone or something else, again for the purpose of the story. Paduraru entered the National Theatre and put on the body of the Woman-Creature because the story dictated the Woman-Creature and not Paduraru.

There are four key elements that make up the performing body—the literal body, the costume, the dialogue, and the blocking. In order to interpret the story of the body, these elements must be identified, and for Frankenstein are thus: one, the Woman-Creature has no costume, or her nakedness is the costume. Two, the Woman-Creature is mute. Third, she cannot move without the guidance of Frankenstein and is powerless against him making her entirely submissive.

As I briefly mentioned before, one of the things that makes this production unique to the feminist discourse is its ability to have a female body onstage—and not just literal, but performative. Up to this point, analyses of Frankenstein have either looked to Victor or his Creature to find the female. It’s important to differentiate between the textual bodies of the novel and the performing bodies on the stage because in this instance, the literal female body is imperative to the scene and there can be no other replacements. Nor can the same analytical arguments be made about the Woman-Creature outside of this specific production—because in no other production is the physical body of the Woman-Creature so prominent.

Additionally, bodies have become so tied to their connotations that it would be extremely difficult for an audience to recognize a performatively feminine body in literally male bodies. Jeanie Forte wrote extensively about the inherent politics of the female body in feminist
performance art during the 1960’s and 1970’s in her paper, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism.” In it, she discusses the many reasons why a female body is necessary for a performance art piece expressing feminist dissent. Her points explain why the literal feminine body must be used in order to express a feminist message, and why we cannot read Frankenstein or the Creature via feminine semiotics.

First, Forte argues that “women’s performance art has particular disruptive potential because it poses an actual woman as a speaking subject.”\(^{11}\) meaning that, similar to this production of *Frankenstein*, a woman is present, in her piece, and sharing her own experiences. The literal female body calls attention to the female nature of the piece or project, drawing an audience member towards thinking about women’s issues. Additionally, Forte also says that a woman in her piece “…is the basis of representation without which discourse could not exist,” meaning that without a feminine body, a discussion cannot be opened and examined. Because the Woman-Creature comes onstage in an undeniably female body (her lack of costume exposing biologically female sex characteristics), she gives immediately clear context to the scene: this will be a story about the woman and is a reflection of her own experiences. Forte also uses the terms “category” and “sign” to describe the female body in performance art, arguing for the importance of using the literal body as a signifier because a woman, acting for and as herself, is an undiluted presence. If the literal body is female, then the performative body and the story being told is inherently female.

The performance of the Woman-Creature’s body is incomplete in just examining the literal and performative bodies onstage; it is not enough for them to stand; they must stand in context. As important as it is to focus on the female body in a performance art scene, it is

perhaps of equal import to examine what is surrounding her body, namely the other bodies in the scene, the set pieces or props, the dialogue that carries on around her, and even how the scenes prior and following frame the Woman-Creature scene. Without the Woman-Creature’s scene partners as well as the scenes before and after, it would be hard to grasp the significance of the performance of her body.

In her own scene, the Woman-Creature stands in the middle of the stage, with Frankenstein on one side and the male Creature on the other. Throughout the scene, the men keep this formation, circling the female and providing the context of the feminine experience. The two men act around her in differing and dynamic ways, yet the female creature is isolated by her contrasting stillness. In this way, her body is contextualized by blocking. Literally and figuratively, the female is surrounded by a patriarchal structure that keeps her actions and speech limited.

Not only is she contextualized in her scene, but also by the bracketing scenes in the beginning and ending of the production. Starting at the beginning of the play, the audience is given clearly feminine images. On stage is what appears to be an amniotic sac in which the Creature lays, curled into the fetus position. In addition to this visual is the audio that plays as the audience files in; the pulsating and muddled sounds mingled with a heartbeat are incredibly similar to that of prenatal ultrasounds. The Creature then exits from the sac and comes into the world covered in slime and naked (save for a loincloth). Further on in the scene, he explores the world outside Frankenstein’s laboratory, taking childish joy in nature—eating grass with relish, chirping along with birds, reaching for pouring rain. The audience sees the Creature as a child, innocent and harmless and though he is male, he revels in this representation of the female. However, the moment is broken when two men enter the same pastoral scene (making lewd
comments about the women in different cities), see the Creature and his hideousness and attack him. This can be read as an invasion of a space previously inhabited by the soft feminine by the violent male. It is a precedent for the coming scenes, and the first time the motif of male oppression is played out onstage with bodies.

*Frankenstein* ends with the final and most demoralizing act of violence against the feminine as the Creature invades the feminine space of Elizabeth’s (Frankenstein’s bride’s) room to rape and murder her. As he talks to Elizabeth before his acts of violence, he tells her that he has learned how to act and respond from the examples of men; the latest thing he’s learned, “how to lie,” was taught to him by Frankenstein himself (read as the embodiment of the patriarchal structure). Thus, regardless of how warped the Creature’s moral compass is, he is the product of male aggression, and we watch it play out horrifically against the feminine. He feels the only course of action is to return in full the betrayal of Frankenstein, and in the final scene he even expresses his remorse but maintains that he had to hurt Elizabeth. Not only does this scene use the motif of male invasion and violence, it’s also the final manifestation of oppression of the female. At each of these three scenes, the level of violence has been raised, going from a beating, to a murder, to a rape-and-murder. By the final scene, the themes of widespread violence towards women have become inescapable because the consequences are so jarring.

Unfortunately, I cannot deny the existence of what is, woefully termed, “torture-porn” wherein a female subject is brutalized for the sake of male fantasy. Nor can I claim that every audience member who, over the course of the run of this production and the frequent broadcasting of it, had the same horrified reaction to the monstrous acts committed against both the Woman-Creature and Elizabeth. It could be viewed by many, commercially and critically, as sensationalism that meets these fantasies. While I cannot account for the thousands of audience
members nor speak for Boyle himself, an argument can be made against the viewing of these scenes as “torture porn.”

First, I refer again to a point made previously: that the characteristics of Frankenstein have been changed to make him toxically masculine. His violence towards the Woman-Creature is no longer motivated out of self-defense or fear for the future of humanity, but is now rooted in spite against his Creature, denying him the love he seeks. After murdering the Woman-Creature, Frankenstein spits at his Creature: “You are the only one of your species-- and that is how you will stay!”

Secondly, I consider the timing of the acts, specifically how quick or slow they were. I would argue that, if these acts of violence were played to appease a fetish, audience exposure would be gratuitous and drawn-out. Both the murder of the Woman-Creature and the rape-murder of Elizabeth take literal seconds. They are flashes of horrific imagery, meant to injure the audience upon impact and perhaps linger as a memory. They are also the culmination of the scene, being a product of the scene action and ending the discourse with a powerful punctuation mark.

Lastly, I refer to the Creature’s dialogue surrounding his rape and murder of Elizabeth. Leading up to Elizabeth’s demise, the Creature apologizes for what he’s about to do, saying “[Frankenstein] broke his promise; so, I break mine. I am truly sorry, Elizabeth.” This points to his motivation in committing this crime-- he will not be acting against Elizabeth, but rather against Frankenstein. Again, in the following scene, the Creature expresses heart-rendering guilt over what he did to Elizabeth but again tells Frankenstein that he responded to the murder of his bride to be and not necessarily out of senseless violence. How the Creature himself views his

own acts is important to not only dismantling the sensationalism of a graphic scene, but to extolling the themes of this production. These scenes cannot pander to fantasy and indict simultaneously.

Despite all this, there will still be those who criticize showing violence against women directly onstage no matter the purpose. Even to reveal that it is horrible, it is nonetheless a staging of violence that could sensationalize a production or normalize abuse. These acts are abominable and to use them as prompts to criticize male aggression is fraught with debate and perhaps no amount of context could absolve a production from that controversy.

Nonetheless, the singular female body is, by itself, powerful to observe regardless of how much a viewer knows about performance art. Viewing the Woman-Creature’s existence on the stage as performance art is necessary to the reading of the play because, with a female presence to speak for herself now, she speaks directly to the audience. Upon reflection, the Woman-Creature’s scene echoes three pieces of performance art: “Meat Joy,” “Three Weeks in May,” and “Rhythm 0.” Returning back to the three components of what makes a performative body (costume, dialogue, blocking), each of these performance art pieces highlights a specific component of the performative body.

THE WOMAN-CREATURE AS PERFORMANCE ART

When the female creature is guided onstage by Frankenstein’s hand, the first thing the audience sees is her naked body. There is no scrap of fabric to lend her modesty and she is bare to the two men standing on either side of her. There is also nothing to hide her from the audience, and nothing with which the audience can hide themselves. Catherine Elwes, in her article “Floating Femininity: A Look at Performance Art by Women,” addresses the literal distance between the audience and performer, usually aided by costuming (or lack thereof).
Elwes calls this proximity as “[a] cloak of invisibility has been stripped away and [the]
spectatorship becomes an issue within the work.” So begins the “direct address” of the female creature’s performance. Forte cites the artist Hannah Wilke and her works as “hav[ing] always used her own nude body as her primary material…”

By seeing the naked Woman-Creature on stage, audiences are met with the biological female which declares the following plot-action to be female-centric. Additionally, because the Woman-Creature’s body is naked it is also unobstructed by other signifiers, allowing the audience to focus on what will happen to the body, and will retain the image in better clarity. For instance, when her blood is spilled all over her paper-white body, the gruesomeness of her murder is stark and unforgettable.

However, in some Western cultures where the naked body has sexual connotations and stigmas attached to it, there arises a concern that this scene might be pornographic due to its nudity and will cloud the sharing of the message. Jill Dolan in her article “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance” criticizes nudity in performance, saying that “… the female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation,” and questions whether or not the naked female could ever get away from implications of pornography. Indeed, Frankenstein’s dialogue gives her body pornographic context, reveling in the beauty he has created and specifically referencing her breasts and lips. He even kisses her in front of the Creature—to tease him and to frame her as an object of male desire.

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I argue that the depiction of the female body as an object of sexual desire only makes the Woman-Creature’s murder more poignant because it depicts a misogynistic attitude: that women might be praiseworthy, but they are still under the dominion of man. Idolizing the “perfect woman” does not make her immune to the destructiveness of patriarchal oppression, instead, it makes her physically valuable. Nevertheless, her body—no matter how valuable it is—is owned by Frankenstein, the representation of uncontrolled masculinity. This is, as Elwes says, “… an act of feminism within a hostile environment,” and I argue that the Woman-Creature’s “irrefutable presence” only serves to reflect the bloody history of abuse. What could be pleasurable is suddenly violent; her naked body becomes an indictment of the misogynistic teachings and actions of which Frankenstein is a participant. Many performing artists accepted the connotations a naked body carried, and in many cases that is precisely why a performance art piece is able to carry the message it does.

One of those pieces is Carolee Schneemann’s piece, “Meat Joy,” which featured almost naked performers representing a free and joyful expression of female sexuality. In the piece, ten dancers both male and female dance and writhe on a transparent, plastic tarp. They throw raw meat, sausages, fish, and wet paint onto each other and spread it across their bodies. Such writhing was described by Schneemann herself as “an erotic rite,” and “a celebration of flesh as material.” Schneemann’s goal for the piece was to break down and defy several taboos about female sexuality, but in one instance in Paris, her performance turned nearly deadly. During the piece, a man from the audience stripped and jumped into the piece and attacked Schneemann. In an interview with Bust.com, she said:

16 Carolee Schneemann, “Meat Joy” 1964
He dragged me off to a corner and was strangling me and I couldn't even scream. I understood, instantly, that this was the kind of reaction that dammed up, frustrated, distorted men could have—that all the exuberance and sensuality could make them crazed and violent. I was saved by two middle-aged women in fur coats. Everyone else thought it was part of the performance, and these two bourgeois ladies registered, "This is wrong. She is getting hurt." They ran over and started hitting him and dragged him off. I went back into my work in the group and never got to thank the women or see them again.18

“Meat Joy,” was not originally meant to incite audience integration or encourage violent reactions, yet the event was a consequence of performing. While no one can have an exact answer as to why the man did what he did, his performative reaction displayed his intolerance of the sexual yet grotesque performance going on before him. Rather than simply walking away or attempting a verbal argument, he went straight to violence, with the intent to seriously injure. He didn’t slap or punch her in a one-time instance—hestrangledher and would have continued to do so had others in the space not stepped in. Unintentionally, this man proved an argument that “Meat Joy” did not originally set out to make: misogyny cannot condone the freedom of female sexuality.

While the Woman-Creature herself makes no sexually explicit movement or comment during this scene, Frankenstein is worried about the implications of his “horrid progeny” procreating. In the scene before this one, and in the novel, Frankenstein is wracked with fear over the prospect that this female creature, built as strong as her male counterpart, would be able to overpower any opposition and do her will.

Although “Meat Joy” was disconcerting to watch, there was nothing about Schneemann’s piece that would insinuate rape; the Woman-Creature never got the chance to express herself sexually. In both cases, a man watching a woman supposed her sexuality and freedom to be infringing upon his and was filled with enough fervor to respond to that supposed threat with violence.

The second element to be considered about the Woman-Creature’s performance is her silence. There is no dialogue written for her—nor was there dialogue written for her by Shelley in the novel. However, her body is loud enough. According to Forte, “women’s language [is] a language rooted in the female body…” and if this theory is applied to the body of the Woman-Creature, then even though she has no dialogue of her own, her body is able to speak for itself. In fact, her silence amplifies this indictment of misogyny. Returning to Michael Chemers’ book, his chapter on Frankenstein begins with an analysis of the Greek play, Prometheus Bound, the mythological figure that features in the complete title of Shelley’s novel. Chemers describes and analyses a specific scene, wherein Prometheus—having been found worthy of punishment for giving fire to the humans he helped create—is taken and bound by two titans called Power and Force. During this scene, Prometheus remains mute of his own choice. Chemers calls his silence “carefully calculated,” “eloquent,” and “… a sign of his noble character.” Prometheus’s refusal to speak turns the crime from himself onto those complicit in his immoral punishment. Chemers continues to describe, not only Prometheus’ silence, but his willingness to comply physically; “… his submission to that punishment is itself an act of defiance which makes visible the moral contradictions necessary to a tyrannical reign.”

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While Chemers considers the muteness of Prometheus his literary descents the monster and the creature, he doesn’t consider the silence of the female creature. Nevertheless, the analysis he makes for the importance of silence of the male creature is perfectly applicable to the character so definable by her silence. Though she cannot move or speak simply because Frankenstein hasn’t finished her to completion, her silence is still just as “eloquent” as Prometheus’s.

While many performance art pieces utilize silence and specifically, the artist’s refraining from speaking, the Woman-Creature’s silence in *Frankenstein* has particular resonance with Suzanne Lacy’s and Leslie Labowitz’s piece, “Three Weeks in May.”20 Forte describes it:

>[In] a dimly lit gallery…Four nude women, painted red, crouched quietly on a ledge. On the floor below was a graphic depiction of sexual assault scrawled in chalk on asphalt. Tape-recorded voices spoke haltingly of rape and assault experiences… [the gallery] included giant maps pinpointing the locations of rapes, the final gallery portion of the event invoked the stark physical reality of the dots on the maps, suggesting the brutalizing effects of the sexual objectification of women. The women mutely perched on the ledge bore striking resemblance to the countless nude women hung on the walls of Western museums.21

In a piece that perhaps should have included its performers speaking up and out against rape, their silence was symbolic and harrowing because it alluded to the silencing of the victims. The intent of this piece was to raise awareness and provide clarity on a problem whose solution was not gaining enough traction. Therefore, it became necessary to remind the community and those

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who attended the piece how serious an issue this was, and the impact of that reminder was in the imagery and disconcerting stillness of the gallery.

Similarly, it is equally important that Frankenstein’s audience be reminded that most abuse victims cannot speak up for themselves, for one reason or another. That the Woman-Creature stays silent is important— not just because her silence acts as an indictment to Frankenstein— but because it makes the audience uncomfortable to see so passive a woman submit to her abuser in word and in deed.

The Woman-Creature’s submissiveness is mainly seen in her inability to move. It is impossible to see whether the performing body is animated by agency and can choose to submit or not. However, throughout the scene, the Woman-Creature is entirely dependent on Frankenstein. She can stand by herself, but just barely. She can’t walk by herself, only moving when Frankenstein guides her whichever way he chooses. This includes a moment where Frankenstein bends the Woman-Creature to him to show how compliant and perfect she is. He takes her by the waist and hand and guides her body to sink into his, and she momentarily drapes over his arm before being brought back to standing. As Frankenstein and the Creature talk, she stays still and silent in the middle of the stage, the other two men circling her and talking around her. She doesn’t even look up and out towards the audience—she stares blankly towards the ground.

We can assume that Andreea Paduraru literal body is capable of movement, and that she has full control over her muscles, yet the performative body is entirely at the mercy of Frankenstein. She is hidden behind a curtain, brought out only when Frankenstein comes to get her. He handles her with great care and gentility, treating her body as fragile. In doing so, he invites an air of reverence for her. He then betrays that reverence with the way he talks about her,
the way he touches her, and ultimately the way he kills her. The entire time, she does not argue, defend, or even walk away. In fact, she cannot move—that is the exact point. That a man has not given a woman the ability to speak or move (without his help) is exactly the sort of repression that Mellor’s analysis of the novel—and Boyle’s direction—pointedly highlights. Perhaps the ultimate act of domination is murder. Of course, the literal body has not been fatally injured, but the performative body has been ripped to shreds. Bright red blood splotches of fake blood let the audience know that the Woman-Creature wasn’t lifeless, despite her silence and submission.

Many performance artists in general have played into physical harm or brutality for the sake of a piece, but perhaps none so more than Marina Abramovic, who wanted to push the physical boundaries of her body and challenge how much it could handle. In particular, “Rhythm 0” is a stunning combination of her willingness to submit and the others around her reacting violently. Abramovic’s “Rhythm 0” perfectly highlights the potential destructive tendencies of men once they are allowed control over a woman and an opportunity to harm. For this performance, Abramovic placed 72 objects on a table and invited the audience to use them on her however they wanted. Abramovic specifically created this piece to see what her audience would do if they were presented with such options. In the course of six hours, many of the attendees chose “weaponry”—rose thorns, a (loaded) gun, scissors and knives—to cut and to debase her. Art critic Thomas McEvilley wrote:

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22 Marina Abramovic, “Rhythm 0” 1974.
23 These objects were, as recorded by the Tate Museum of Modern Art (London, England): gun, bullet, blue paint, comb, bell, whip, lipstick, pocket knife, fork, perfume, spoon, cotton, flowers, matches, rose, candle, mirror, drinking glass, polaroid camera, feather, chains, nails, needle, safety pin, hairpin, brush, bandage, red paint, white paint, scissors, pen, book, sheet of white paper, kitchen knife, hammer, saw, piece of wood, axe, stick, bone of lamb, newspaper, bread, wine, honey, salt, sugar, soap, cake, metal spear, box of razor blades, dish, flute, band Aid, alcohol, medal, coat, shoes, chair, leather strings, yarn, wire, sulphur, grapes, olive oil, water, hat, metal pipe, rosemary branch, scarf, handkerchief, scalpel, apple.
It began tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arms into the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up. In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina's head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions.24

Abramovic said of her performance: “if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you.” She also describes what happened once the six hours were over and she could leave:

“After 6 hours, which was like 2 in the morning, the gallerists came and announced that the performance was over. I started moving and start being myself, because until then I was there like a puppet just for them, and at that moment everybody ran away. People could not confront me as a person.”25

All she did was walk away from the space, yet those who had been in the act of harming her jumped back as if they themselves were about to be attacked. No one tried to force her stay and continue enduring torture— as if to say that the only reason they were enacting violence upon her body was because they could.

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25 Zec, Milica. Interview with Marina Abramovic. Marina Abramovic on Rhythm 0. From the Marina Abramovic Institute https://vimeo.com/71952791
Again, though the audience might not know extensively about performance art, the Woman-Creature’s scene follows patterns set by these performance art pieces and so can create in the audience similar reactions of shock or disconcertment. The visual of a harmless woman being brutally dismembered on stage is comparable to watching Abramovic’s body being pierced with thorns, or seeing just how many recorded accounts of rape there are in one’s own county. These similarities between the Woman-Creature and the mentioned performance art pieces help the audience to “read” into the character of Frankenstein and, hopefully, allow the audience to draw comparisons to their own society.

**READING THE PIECE**

The implications of “Rhythm 0,” “Meat Joy,” “Three Weeks in May” and the Woman-Creature’s scene in *Frankenstein* are thus: women that are exposed will be treated violently. “Rhythm 0” sought to show that, “Meat Joy” incidentally showed that, “Three Weeks in May” called direct attention to it, and *Frankenstein* displayed it. Most importantly, this scene and these pieces show that cruelty was brought about without the victim inciting it or antagonizing the assailant. Frankenstein is entirely to blame for the Woman-Creature’s death, for the only threat she posed to him was concocted in his mind and was never acted out by her performative body.

The Woman-Creature’s scene acts out the rampant abuse seen throughout history towards innocent women. It is possible to examine Victor Frankenstein as a monster because, by considering him as a monster, he can then be read as an interpretation of society. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his chapter “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” considers what the monstrous body is to the community around it, how it is read by, and what it says about the community. For the

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26 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” (*Monster Theory*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota, 1996), 1—24
sake of my argument, I will not be examining all seven of them, but will focus on Theses IV and VII (the monster dwells at the gates of difference, and the monster stands at the threshold of becoming, respectively).

First, one can view the Woman-Creature through Frankenstein’s eyes—who ironically sees her as the monster, simply because she is “other” to him. The Woman-Creature’s “otherness” is rooted in her biological functions and what she might do with them, but it extends further as her potential actions represent more than just one monster on the loose in the world—the Woman-Creature also represents an upheaval of the patriarchal social construct. Cohen says in Thesis IV, “the difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities elicits an array of anxious responses throughout culture… The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith, Bertha Mason, or Gorgon.” It is no coincidence that all the female monsters or literary figures Cohen uses to describe the overstepping woman is a female that has threatened a man’s life. Mellor also states that “… Frankenstein’s scientific project—to become the sole creator of a human being—supports a patriarchal denial of the value of women and of female sexuality.” Yet one woman not raised in the construct and having a mind of her own would threaten the entire “project.”

Laura Mulvey discusses castration anxiety in her article “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” wherein she analyzes how women have been directed on screen and why. As part of

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28 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” (Monster Theory, Minnesota, University of Minnesota, 1996), 1—24

her analysis, Mulvey considers that men feel the threat of emasculation when confronted by a strong female character simply because she lacks a penis. Because of that fear, men as directors and writers have sought to make women objects for viewing pleasure. This concept can be seen clearly in the Woman-Creature’s scene as she is presented as an object, meant to be praised for her beauty—and Frankenstein to be praised for creating such feminine perfection. However, the Woman-Creature poses a great castrative threat to Frankenstein. In both play and novel, Frankenstein contemplates the repercussions of creating a female in a fever dream. He’s horrified by the Woman-Creature’s potentiality, meaning her ability to choose and act for herself, and enacting her will upon society potentially through violent means; there are subtle tones that would imply Frankenstein fears this female creature would rape and kill30. Perhaps what concerns him the most is her ability to create life. Whereas he must sift through graveyards, women are able to gestate, carrying and birthing life naturally. These fears are made manifest in his gory disposal of the Woman-Creature.

Referring back to her article, Mulvey writes that there are two ways men escape from these castrating anxieties: the first, “… investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery…” and second, “substitut[ing] a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.”31 Frankenstein traverses both of these avenues, investigating woman by creating a female body, (saying, as he does, “I followed nature into her lair, and stripped her of her secrets!”)32 and objectifying her as the epitome of male desire. However, he also takes it a violent step further and his murderous actions exemplify

30 “I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness.”


32 Nick Dear, Frankenstein, 2011.
Cohen’s Thesis V: the monster polices the borders of the possible. Frankenstein polices the borders of the feminine possible, making himself to be the creator-figure (really, the God-figure) that decides what is acceptable behavior for women. Ironically enough, in his policing, Frankenstein enacts upon the female precisely what he feared she would do.

Additionally, the way Dear has written a twenty-first century Victor Frankenstein has moved the misguided scientist from Romantic sympathy to unholy arrogance. Completely lacking in empathy for his Creature, his bride, and his father, he is the picture of the patriarchal system Mary Shelley was stuck in, and the patriarchal system modern feminists are still fighting against. Chemers, having charted the differences between the dramatic adaptations since the publication of the novel (though there is no mention of the National’s 2011 *Frankenstein*, as his book predates the production) and taken note of how “pulpy” the manifestations of Frankenstein and his Creature became, says: “Shelley’s masterpiece serves as an indictment of a social matrix she found abusive and uncaring.”\(^{33}\) This is true today, in this production.

The goal of performance art has frequently been to display the consequences of abuse-domination. In this way, it becomes more important to see the monstrous man rather than the fighting woman— the fighting woman would show an ideal that is not yet a universal reality. It is, unfortunately and cynically, a fantasy. However, the monstrous man and accompanying helpless woman is quite real. What has been done to the Woman-Creature’s performative body has been done to countless literal bodies.

When he confesses that he created life by reanimating the dead, Frankenstein expects adulation from his fiancée, Elizabeth. Instead, she chastises him, telling him directly that he’s acted out of pride. As a closing remark, she exclaims that Frankenstein “could have just “given

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[her] a child… that is “the usual way!” She forces Frankenstein to come to terms with his actions—that they are not to be glorified, and not to be done alone. Yet he is still unable to realize the full weight of his deeds until his own wife has been taken from him the same way he took the Creature’s intended wife. Through tragedy and dire consequence, wrought upon a body, Frankenstein finally sees himself.

Noted performance artist Zhang Huan said “the body is the only direct way through which I come to know society and society comes to know me. The body is the proof of identity. The body is language.” The body is a language that can be purely communicated. Rather than words which can be garbled and warped, a visceral body has instant context, evocative impact brought on by strong imagery, and tells a story or statement. Like a monster, a community can be read through the performance of a body by the way it interacts with it. On stage and in life, resistance—done peacefully, even—has led to reactions of violence and acts of domination. Presenting the female body the way Boyle has directed was a strong method of communication between an artist and their audience. Because he chose to highlight a female body by baring her completely and contextualizing her with males enacting oppression upon her, he turns a potentially weak female character into a powerful performing body.

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34 Nick Dear, Frankenstein, 2011.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


