

Frankenstein, Ontology, Sexual Difference

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ABSTRACT

The project of monstrosity depicted in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* brings a vital clue to resolving the ontological inquiry of sexual difference first brought up by Jacques Derrida. The novel, seeking to define the monster's parenthood, involves in it a father and a mother, and hence sexual difference. Yet it is parthenogenesis as dominated by the scientist-father conceit that actually holds sway, leaving the family romance of monstrosity devoid of the role of woman. When he is later demanded a female companion from his monster, Frankenstein must turn into a monster himself through his monstrous imagination of gender: he proceeds by reenacting the imago of the dead mother, without questioning the metaphysical binarism involved (such as form and matter, a derivative of *mater*, "mother"). We consider the difference in creating a he-monster and a she-monster—who alone is molded after the dead mother—as sexual difference. That Frankenstein chooses to abort his creation of a she-monster later may hint at the metaphysical failure to incarnate the dead mother's imago in his teratogeny. Such an abortion hastens the death of his Elizabeth however, creating an aporia for Frankenstein that hints at the monstrosity of metaphysics. When Derrida questions why the number of gender must stop at "two," at metaphysics, he may not be aware that two is a monstrous number, an insight which Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* alone can provide.

KEY WORDS

Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, *Frankenstein*, *Geschlecht*, gender, Martin Heidegger, metaphysics, ontology, Mary Shelley, sexual difference, teratogeny



Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* carries within itself the popular eighteenth-century trope of imagination and monstrosity, in spite of the book's "mad scientist" motif privileging science to be its major ideological conceit. Yet the conceit has eclipsed the book's imagination motif by consolidating the patrimonial tie that excludes the maternal imagination normally thought to play a role in any generative process of monstrosity before the nineteenth century (Huet 106–111). The birth of the monster, as we witness also in *Frankenstein*, is soon ascribed to the scientist who transforms himself into "the sole father of artificially developed progeny," and eventually, of monstrosities (Huet 107–108). Later when heredity, along with the nineteenth-century science of cellular system, is ushered in to rewrite the family romance of monstrosity, what becomes irrelevant is in turn the legacy of imagination and resemblance from the previous century (Huet 104). In a way, this indicates also a shift of emphasis *from images to words* in the generative studies—or again in Marie-Hélène Huet's words, to the cellular "system of transmission and communication of characters" as "a form of writing" (107). The asexual fantasy, due most likely to Victorianism, later dominates this form of "writing," as if children could be reproduced by parthenogenesis—by males on the most ingrained level of that fantasy, but not by females (Huet 107). If, ideologically speaking, today's genetic science should look so monstrous, it is because this science has been born the direct progeny to such a scientist-father conceit.

The shift from images to words affects the *nature* of monstrosity gravely. Within the context of monstrosity, nature is conceived, after the shift, to be having its own "internal teleology," as law and norms to

which monstrosity must now conform (Huet 108–109). The “mother nature” which breeds the monsters is gone, whose nature is in turn dictated by the Law of science. The tension of the shift, taking the form of a widening “gap between art [i.e., imagination] and medicine” (Huet 110), is in fact engendered by the ideological takeover of the role of Mother by Father. However, the picture of this paternal takeover begins to grow monstrous, when the resemblance of the monstrous offspring to its scientist-father cannot be sufficiently explained away. The resemblance is found, perhaps unexpectedly, originating from the inherent failure of teratogeny. It is a failure of the teratogenist who, wishing to originate life by experimenting on the raw (living as non-living) materials, has never succeeded in doing so, except in modifying life and deviating it from the norm (Huet 121). Struggling to come up with a life, his imagination turns out to be his greatest resources of all to conduct his teratogenetic show. Not surprisingly therefore, according to Huet, “it is to the scientist that the monster owes its form and appearance,” turning the scientist into its *mother*, thereby recuperating the eighteenth-century trope of maternal imagination and resemblance (121). Such a dramatic shift from images to words and back to images again, which may have taken the teratogenist himself by surprise, paints the background tonality we are to read out from *Frankenstein*.

In fact, *Frankenstein* is a book about surprise as caused by imagination, the surprise that teratogeny can be real owing to imagination. Victor Frankenstein is surprised by every bit of the happenings his monster unfolds to him, without realizing that it is his imagination incarnate that is speaking to him. The encounter with the imagination of one’s own in such a monstrous form is a fatal one in *Frankenstein*, as “the imagination expands the individual’s self-absorption to fill the entire universe, and, as it does so, it murders everyone in its path.” That is, “just as Frankenstein figuratively murdered his family, so the monster literally murders Frankenstein’s domestic relationships . . .” (Poovey 126). Yet Frankenstein must first turn himself into such a monster, before he can *imagine* his offspring as one to later kill his own family by proxy. His “scientific motherhood,”

so to speak, as nurtured by this imagination soon retrieves the eighteenth-century trope of the “unfaithful resemblances” effected by the maternal imagination during pregnancy.¹ The difference is that our paternal imagination here does not seek to be “unfaithful”; it even ignores the power of “faithful resemblances” it can unleash. The result is, to quote Huet from a different context, “the visible monstrosity of the deformed child, and the hidden monstrosity of the resembling offspring” (100) in Frankenstein’s teratogeny.² What is monstrous, however, is not so much the visible monstrosity than the hidden one in the form of existential anguish that binds the creator and created together, that perhaps surprises Frankenstein more than anything else: he finds himself sharing his monster’s anguish by being constrained to the master-slave dialectic imposed upon them, as well as its monstrous reversal.³ Eventually, each party must survive—or be doomed—on the other’s terms.

This anguish culminates in the monster’s demand for an Eve from Frankenstein (Shelley 98), shoving the latter into a more profound state of monstrosity by further implicating sexual difference in his paternal imagination. Now the scientist-father, stuck somewhere within the family romance of monstrosity, must answer the kids’ question of where he has hidden Mom after assuming her role by usurping, canceling out, and “sublating” her. The post-*Aufhebung* nuclear family of Science is a difficult one for kids to understand and live with, unless the primal scene of sexuality be re-enacted before them. This is exactly what Frankenstein’s monster is asking for. Frankenstein, however, cannot quite answer the demand, for he has come a long way to reside in monstrosity only to realize that the classical notion of sexual difference cannot hold true for reasons his monster can never understand. The monster’s knowledge of sexual difference is largely a naïve one: it is, after all, a purloined knowledge of his eavesdropping on Felix (Shelley 81), the knowledge he confirms later by learning about Eve (88) and by being attracted to the *imago* of a woman in the miniature little William carries, of Frankenstein’s late mother in her younger days (97). The monster seeks solace in this *imago*, pressing Frankenstein to literally revive it, which Frankenstein knows is nothing

but the image of death. Now the creation of sexual binarism, or more precisely the genesis of female gender, is performed by aligning his teratological operation with the imago of a dead mother. Consequentially Frankenstein, so far as gender is concerned, simply cannot *imagine* beyond death.

Frankenstein turns himself into a monster once again through his monstrous imagination of gender. Before that, he is already a monster—a “mad scientist”—who has created a clone out of himself without giving a thought to the genesis of gender, as if life could originate solely from parthenogenesis. Confronted by this creature asking for an Eve, Frankenstein is horrified by this monstrous imagination of gender that he has had no idea about, that lurks within the imago to which the monster clings so very fast, the imago of a dead mother. Frankenstein has to be ushered back into his laboratory (his womb, one would argue) to pin down this imagination by digging further into monstrosity. Technically speaking, Frankenstein does not seem to encounter any difficulty in creating just another creature, even a creature of the opposite sex, and indeed he is almost halfway through with his job (Shelley 114). The hardest part, however, has to do with his imagination as a reenactment of the imago of the dead mother. His anguish this time differs tremendously from the one he had in his first attempt to create a monster, for he must now evoke painstakingly, though perhaps unconsciously, a certain metaphysical binarism that was secretly at work in his earlier venture: the binarism which also underpins sexual difference, and which is, in essence, sexual in nature.

Interestingly enough, Mary Shelley’s remark on invention in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* turns out to be a convenient exponent of the binarism in question. She writes:

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the *materials* must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give *form* to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. . . . Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it. (Shelley

171; my emphasis)

This passage sounds so banal, however, and what defines its banality is phallogocentrism that has long molded Western metaphysics. Invention or creation, according to Mary Shelley or metaphysics, cannot be achieved by the *substances* alone, substances which are mere materials, matter, the Latin word *mater* for “mother,” and hence the dead mother as chaos. Instead, *form* must be brought in as the *seminal* idea, which functions as the *semen*, to be *disseminated* over the inert matter (Goux 49–58), the dead mother, the female corpse. The fundamental metaphysical assumption of binarism, *crudely speaking*, has to do with phallic, heterosexual fucking. Not surprisingly, the woman Frankenstein lovingly kisses in his dream (Elizabeth Lavenza) must then turn into a corpse, the dead mother (Caroline Beaufort) he embraces so incestuously (Shelley 34). He too builds up with strong sexual investments his own imago about woman, who is a corpse. Woefully goaded by his monster, who is equally obsessed by that imago, Frankenstein must now engage himself in his metaphysical fucking among the corpses, in chaos, within death. If he should lack any imagination to create a she-monster or should refuse to do so, his monster will hurl back upon him his beloved Elizabeth—who will then be a corpse—as a hint (Shelley 116).

I would regard the *difference* between the creation of a he-monster and the later aborted attempt at a she-monster in *Frankenstein*, as *sexual difference*. As the scenario goes, in the beginning was the phallic logos, when Frankenstein created a creature in the phallic shape as an embodiment of his imagination—as *Aufhebung*.⁴ Metaphysics worked just well there. Later he is forced to take a horrible glance into the matter and mother, so to realize that *dark, shapeless substances* can in fact bring themselves into being—into a danse macabre. How can one understand such a crumbling of metaphysics without being forced into monstrosity, half-living and half-dead? Living among the dead and would-be-dead, Frankenstein evokes the best of his imagination to create a bride out of the dead—to utilize the imago of his dead mother as a makeshift metaphysical idea

(“form”) to revoke the decree of death. In a sense, this demonstrates how a monster comes into being in Frankenstein’s teratogeny by positing a new temporality in relation to death, in that the time flow is reverted to continuation from stoppage, again flowing through reversion. Yet it is the imago, arising from the realm of death, that is now called upon to revert that flow, to guarantee that uncanny temporality from running out. Such temporality is needed by Frankenstein to save his Elizabeth from becoming a dead bride, who is already declared dead in his dream (Shelley 34) and in his monster’s “promise” to retaliate on his wedding night (116–17). Now the dialectic of saving Elizabeth and creating a bride for the monster, moving along and within the reverse temporality guaranteed by the imago of a dead mother, must reach the sublated point where a new kind of monstrosity gets realized, hopefully in the form of a monster as well. What must be noted, however, is that earlier the birth of the he-monster in Frankenstein names only the monstrosity of science; the whole thing never falls out of the design of metaphysics. The monstrosity engendered now speaks the logic of metaphysics instead, when the imago of a dead mother is curiously allowed into its logic to raise the face of death to the level of idea. We wonder what sort of dialectical solution would be fitting here, unless it is the monstrosity no longer dictated by metaphysics: the monstrosity of women’s corpses that gape and glare like monsters, defying the metaphysical appropriation of the imago, but not the other way round. This “dialectical solution” (if we may still call it so) deconstructs metaphysics on the one hand,⁵ and renames sexuality on the other by showing that metaphysics cum phallogocentrism, as in the context of *Frankenstein*, must retreat when the creation of a she-monster, but not a he-monster, is in question. Yet metaphysics, being itself as such, can never retreat;⁶ instead, its dialectical solution must evolve into (take the form of) *Aufhebung*, which is no longer a he-monster or she-monster, but sexual monstrosity as paraded by the danse macabre.

In this light, the reason for Frankenstein to abort his creation of a female monster can no longer be taken literally. He seems to foresee his metaphysical failure to incarnate the dead mother’s imago in his

creation, when fearing that the newly created female monster may cause havoc among those alive (Shelley 114). To abort in the name of that imago simply hastens the death of his Elizabeth. Frankenstein's error, as would be committed by any scientist-father, is that he thinks he could choose between two alternatives (to create or not to create); in reality, there are no choices for him to make. He thinks that, by aborting, he could save his second creation attempt from going awry and away from metaphysics, in order for him to evade altogether the question of femaleness implicated in the sexual monstrosity that is to come, that nevertheless will take the form of *Aufhebung* when metaphysics must retreat but can never so. Without aborting, on the other hand, he would have been forced into facing the sexual monstrosity he has tried to avoid, the monstrosity caused by the dead mother's imago that is incorporated into metaphysics but soon deconstructs it. The birth of a female monster, if it had taken place, would not therefore mean the "realization" of the imago and so solve his dilemma.⁷ And Frankenstein is right: he knows that what is in question is the imago; what he does not realize, however, is that choosing to abort is no difference from choosing to create, as both are equally distant from that imago. The closer he thinks that he can approach "femaleness" through the imago (by aborting, for example), the closer sexual monstrosity will encroach upon him, the monstrosity of the dead mother's imago coming to life. He soon sees that, as he has once foreseen, the imago of his Elizabeth gets realized as a corpse (Shelley 34, 135). What is happening here goes beyond the thesis that, portrayed as monstrosity, "femaleness is a deformity."⁸ What is more pertinent is Barbara Johnson's suggestion that the ideal image (imago) about women in *Frankenstein*, being a masculine fantasy, is a failure, and that Mary Shelley, on the other hand, simply cannot come up with the idea of femaleness or "female ideal" (154). Yet the woman imago in *Frankenstein*, though originating from a fantasy, is precisely what marks the departure of Frankenstein's second venture from his first. The difference is a sexual one, when "femaleness," attempted and promised by phallogocentrism, reveals itself as the dead mother's imago, which in turn ruins Frankenstein's teratology as a metaphysical project grounding itself on sexual

binarism. With the ruin, "femaleness" gets realized in a monstrous manner, more appalling than the birth of any monster. Ultimately defining this monstrous moment of sexuality, the *dark, shapeless substances* are what survive the ruin.

The aftermath is that sexual difference turns into sexual monstrosity, affirming nothing but the fact that woman is impossible within the project of metaphysics. Which is not to say that woman as such is impossible, but that metaphysics is monstrous. It is from here that we can bring to the ontological level our inquiry of sexual difference after Jacques Derrida. Without debasing his otherwise perceptive and cautious analysis of Heideggerian "asexuality" (*Geschlechtslosigkeit*) in his "*Geschlecht*" essay, I want to begin by questioning his hasty metaphysical assumption of sexual difference, which under such an assumption, must nevertheless lead to *duality* of some kind and stop right there. Throughout Derrida's "*Geschlecht*" essay, sexual difference is a relatively stable working concept, extracted from the ontic level (i.e., biology, anthropology, metaphysics, and the like), to be explained ontologically. Such a seemingly *a posteriori* move governs the whole passage in an *a priori* manner to eventually, so it seems, fit sexual difference into the ontological structure of *Dasein*. Nevertheless, given the "being-thrown-ness" (*Geworfenheit*), which defines the *Da* of *Dasein* and underlies *Dasein*'s very mode of ontological dispersion or multiplication, the "difference" in sexual difference is understood by Derrida as such a mode ("*Geschlecht*" 78–79), while sexuality as *Geschlecht*, genus, genre, "characteristic," is taken to be the *negativity* needed to manifest the "original positivity" or the "asexual neutrality of *Dasein*" (72). At first glance, the ontological analysis here seems to be a flawless one, until Derrida is stuck halfway, asking bafflingly why sexual difference as ontological "multiplication" must cease at two ("*Geschlecht*" 83). We may want to rush a response by saying that Derrida is here asking a metaphysical question which cannot be answered ontologically. Being aware of this problem in his seminar on "Women in the Beehive," where he also refers to his "*Geschlecht*" essay, Derrida discreetly distinguishes sexual difference from sexual opposition, asserting that

opposition “is two, opposition is man/woman. Difference on the other hand, can be an indefinite number of sexes . . .” (“Women” 198). There he is speaking in terms of his notion of the real “gift,”⁹ which leads to his understanding of sexual difference as *undecidability* (“Women” 199). This seems to conform to what he finds in his analysis of *Dasein*’s sexual neutralization,¹⁰ that undecidability will sooner or later be “relegated” to ontic decidability—to “opposition,” for instance. What has not been sufficiently explained is why this neutralization, said to “neutralize the sexual opposition” (“Women” 199), has allowed sexual multiplication as originating from neutralization to stop short at sexual opposition. It is as if sexual opposition as duality does not get “neutralized” at all, throwing altogether the nature of this “undecidability,” which guarantees sexual difference, in doubt.

Derrida seems to suggest that we must look into *Dasein*’s body for the answer. In Heidegger, says Derrida, “it is its own body itself, the flesh, the *Leiblichkeit*, that draws *Dasein* originally into the dispersion and *in due course* [*par suite*] into sexual difference” (“*Geschlecht*” 75). However, if sexual difference should stop at two, this body of *Dasein*’s must have been the metaphysical one, which has conveniently been marked as male or female. If such a body must still belong to *Dasein*, then “two” must be a monstrous number. Which is to say, Derrida is right in that he finds it uncanny for the *Da* of *Dasein* as dispersion to stop short so early. Yet he has not made it to spell out that the possibility of woman is precisely the impossibility of woman in metaphysics (therefore “two” cannot hold),¹¹ and that *Dasein*’s body, being conformed to the structure of ontology, does not guarantee such a metaphysical (im)possibility—that is, it does not stop at the metaphysical “two.” Such is to say that *Dasein*’s body attains the undecidability of not stopping—by not stopping—at “two,” but gets “dispersed” into sexual difference as sexual monstrosity: sexual difference as a monstrous project where men become monsters, women turn into corpses, and where monsters are obsessively horrified by corpses of the *danse macabre*. This looks like a metaphysical nightmare—and indeed metaphysics, because it never retreats, is a monstrous nightmare according to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Ontology, thanks to the monstrosity here, must from now on attend to the body of *Dasein*, who in the process of being thrown into this world without meanwhile bypassing metaphysics, shall become a monster, a corpse, or both, or something else.

NOTES

¹ “Unfaithful resemblances” refer to a popular misogynistic belief of the time that “an unfaithful wife can produce a non-monstrous child, perfectly resembling the husband who did not engender it, solely through the power of her imagination” (Huet 80). Integral to *Frankenstein’s* parthenogenesis is precisely such an imaginative power of the scientist, only that the resembled object is unknowingly the scientist himself.

² “The genesis of Victor’s monster,” Huet also points out later, “offers no radically new vision either of imagination or progeny but the *question of resemblance* assumes new urgency as the novel demonstrates that similarities, rather than differences, disclose the greatest monstrosity” (130; emphasis mine).

³ The reversal is demonstrated by the monster railing at Frankenstein, who breaks his promise to create him a female monster. The monster remarks, “You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey!” (Shelley 116)

⁴ According to Jean-Joseph Goux, “*Anastasis* [“the reestablishment, the raising, the erection”] is the secret core of the Hegelian dialectic” (56–57). Pertinent to our discussion here is the phallic metaphor, as *reestablished* by Goux, that depicts the climax any dialectical movement will arrive at, such as “creation,” especially the one in *Frankenstein*.

⁵ Which does not mean metaphysics gets “torn down,” or that would be to misconceive metaphysics. Derrida, having metaphysics in mind, has suggested on one occasion that “deconstruction cannot be transgression of the Law. Deconstruction *is* the Law. It’s an affirmation, and affirmation is on the side of the Law” (“Women” 197). Such a strong way of describing deconstruction, however, does not contradict his more radical assertion that deconstruction simply “takes place, it is an event that does not await deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed. [Ça se déconstruit.]*” (“Letter”

4). If it is justified for us to ask what condition it is that allows just any “thing” to be deconstructed every moment anywhere, the convenient answer will perhaps be “metaphysics as the Law”—not to be confused with the Law in Foucault, Lacan or any others—in Western thinking. Such an answer means at least three things together: that metaphysics, as the Law, allows deconstruction; that the “omnipresence” of deconstruction manifests also the omni-presence of metaphysics as the Law; and that, by *manifesting* itself as the imposing Law, metaphysics cannot but be deconstructed. More specifically, deconstruction posits for us, however transiently, “a new relation to the Law,” without having the illusion of destroying it (Derrida, “Women” 192): a new relation for us to see the *truth* about metaphysics. The fact is that we normally do not get to see this truth, which is the *work* of the Law or of metaphysics, for “we” are already within that work, so close to it that we do not even see metaphysics get deconstructed by itself—reveal its own ruse, so to speak, that functions defectively at every passing moment.

⁶ See Note 5 above.

⁷ That is, the creation of a she-monster follows the same phallogocentric path his earlier creation has taken. Metaphysics is business as usual there. The question of “realizing” the imago, on the other hand, that arises from the realm of death, in turn holds metaphysics in the balance.

⁸ “In Western Culture,” according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “the notion that femaleness is a deformity or obscenity can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle . . .” (673n). This is one of the major lines of argument their long essay “Horror’s Twin: Mary Shelley’s Monstrous Eve” follows.

⁹ To Derrida, a gift is not an exchange between the sender and receiver, but an event that determines its own giver, receiver, and destination (“Women” 198–99). Furthermore, being “a gesture, an enunciation, [the gift] speaks of indetermination but produces determination” (200). Such an “experience of the gift itself” correlates to “sexual indeterminacy” (199). Sexual opposition, on the other hand, is “a ready determination” (201). Given that the enunciation of a gift also “arises with a burst of force” (200), with an eruption and disruption, a certain sense of ontological *dispersion* seems to be suggested here, linking itself to the sexual difference that is in question.

¹⁰ Interestingly enough, in the same seminar on “Women in the Beehive,” Derrida distinguishes two kinds of neutralization and undecidability. One

neutralization, as different from the one within the ontological structure, “is a classical ruse of man to neutralize sexual mark . . . ; when we say that the ego, the ‘I think,’ is neither man nor woman, we can in fact verify that it’s already a man, and not a woman” (194). In the same vein, the undecidability that is not indeterminacy as defined by the gift, “is linked to a given situation in which opposition is strong,” and discarded once the opposition is deconstructed (195). That is, the “neutralization” and “undecidability” we single out here are in fact sexualization and decidability respectively, clearly distinct from their ontological “counterparts.” The remaining problem is how we should formulate the “dispersion” from the ontological to the ontic in both neutralization and undecidability.

¹¹ This proposition can be interpreted in two ways, both in line with deconstruction. The first is that the possibility of woman in metaphysics serves only to confirm metaphysics and discloses therefore that woman is impossible in it. The other interpretation goes that only by recognizing the impossibility of woman in metaphysics can we see the possibility of woman “beyond” it. This latter possibility, however, must be understood ontologically, without simply falling back into sexual binarism of any sort, including that of metaphysics.

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