"In Just Seven Days, I Can Make You a Man": Queerness, Gender, and Heterosexuality in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Frankenstein* (1818)

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) is a queer cult film that has been neglected in Romantic scholarship as an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Originally a musical on London's West End, the film has subsequently become known for both Tim Curry's iconic performance and the fan led audience participation at local screenings. As an adaptation, it is most obviously echoes Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the character Frank-N-Furter, i.e. Dr. Frankenstein, who is a transexual alien scientist. The plot hinges on his creation of Rocky, the film's Monster, intended to serve as both a son, lover, and lab experiment that showcases Frank-N-Furter's scientific ingenuity. As an adaptation of *Frankenstein*, it is not unique in this sense; themes from the original novel such as science-fiction, medical innovation, the Gothic genre, and biblical allusions, have found recurring contemporary uses and interpretations amongst modern directors and writers. However, as this essay will show, *Rocky Horror* is worth closer analysis in its use of Shelley's thematic concerns to explore – and reimagine - queerness. This essay will argue that, although the film is in many ways a camp parody which revels in its own ridiculousness, it adapts and expands concerns with gender and sexuality that are genuinely present in the original nineteenth-century text. Olivia Moskot has argued that the film, rather than taking vague inspiration from *Frankenstein* and the creator-monster motif, is a direct adaptation of Shelley's novel that is deserving of 'serious' academic attention.[1] This essay will put Moskot's assertation in practice through analysis of three sex/gender categories in both *Frankenstein* and *Rocky Horror*: transsexuality, masculinity, and heterosexuality. It will argue that attention to *Rocky Horror* as a Shelley adaptation illuminates the author's concern with compulsory heterosexuality and the family, Victor Frankenstein's aspirational transsexuality, male violence against women, and the construction of nineteenth-century masculinities. In *Rocky Horror* these concerns from Shelley's text have trickled down into the popular imagination, highlighting both audiences and adapters continued fascination with the queer dimensions of *Frankenstein*.

In the 1831 preface to the novel, Shelley writes 'I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and

[1] Olivia Moskot, "Vulnerable Monsters: A Comparison of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2019): 12.

grief were but words, which found no true echo in my heart.'[2] Shelley considers the text as a child of her own, of which she is the asexual progenitor – both mother and father. Of course, Shelley's life was marred by unfortunate circumstances surrounding births. On the 6th March 1815, she writes in a letter to her close friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg: 'My dearest Hogg my baby is dead… from its appearance it evidently died of convulsions… I am no longer a mother now.'[3] A diary entry from the same year reads:

> Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day. Not in good spirits.[4]

Shelley's dream of bringing her child back to life by rubbing it by the fire mirrors in some ways the birth of Frankenstein's Monster, constructed from corpses and brought to life by electricity. Further still births and deaths in her family and close circle complicated Shelley's feelings toward motherhood, birth, and children. Her 1818 novel is full of language around pregnancy and Victor Frankenstein's quest to create life also places him as mother/father to his creation. Language from Chapter 4 mimics language surrounding pregnancy: Victor describes himself as having spent so much time in 'painful labour'[5], in which his 'cheek had grown pale with study, and [his] person had become emaciated with confinement.'[6] Mirroring the gestational period in female pregnancy, Victor's narrative highlights the passage of months and season as he creates his 'son': 'The summer months passed while I was thus engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit… Winter, spring, and summer passed away during my labours.'[7] Shelley's language highlights the connection between his scientific project and female pregnancy, and the physical toll the labour takes on his body. However, Victor latterly regards his creation with amazement and disgust – he asks, 'How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pain and care I had endeavoured to form?'[8] As suggested by Barbara Johnson, Victor's regret can be viewed as a study of 'postpartum depression… and maternal rejection of a newborn infant…. [relating] the entire novel to Mary Shelley's mixed feelings about motherhood.'[9] Ellen Moers similarly

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[2] Mary Shelley, "Author's Introduction," in *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 2003), 10.
[3] Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 10.
[4] Mary Shelley, *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 41.
[5] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 2003), 53.
[6] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 55.
[7] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 56-7.
[8] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 58.
[9] Barbara Johnson, "Review of *My Monster/My Self*," *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 6.

argues that *Frankenstein* is 'distinctly a *woman*'s mythmaking on the subject of birth' as reveals 'the trauma of the afterbirth.'[10] The Monster agrees, with his own description of himself as 'an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on.'[11] *Frankenstein* can therefore be viewed as Shelley's investigation into the psychological impact of birth and the complex relationship between mother and newborn. In this sense, Victor Frankenstein is a queer figure whose quest to create life blurs the distinctions, not just between human/monster, but male/female and mother/father.

In *Rocky Horror*, Victor Frankenstein is transfigured into the transexual alien scientist Doctor Frank-N-Furter, adapting this concern with pregnancy and the 'natural' distinction between male and female or mother and father. However, rather than the themes of shame, secrecy, and anxiety that plague Victor Frankenstein throughout Shelley's original text, his adaptative counterpart has become a symbol of unapologetic queerness in the LGBTQ+ community. Frank-N-Furter's iconic costume highlights the film's concern with gender transgression and blurs the lines between the male and female body; hairy legs and a crotch bulge contrast with fishnets, glitter, makeup, and high heels. Transvestitism and gender queerness is further celebrated through Curry's performance of the song 'Sweet Transvestite.' *Rocky Horror* also portrays the creator/monster relationship in similar terms of parent/child dynamics. 'Tonight is the night that my beautiful creature is to be born!'[12] declares Frank-N-Furter to the Transylvanian convention that has gathered in his lab to witness the birth. The costume choice in this scene highlights his maternal role, as Shaun Shoman notes that Frank wears a green apron, 'tied like a dress around his waist, which gives the dual impression of both a doctor prepared to deliver a child and a mother about to give birth.'[13] He also dons pink latex rubber gloves and a thick string of white pearls, reminding audiences of a 1950s housewife. Imagery tied to pregnancy and labour is also used in the scene, for example, Frank's monster is birthed from a tank of liquid, emulating a womb like space. Alyssa Pete suggests that Rocky's solo song 'The Sword of Damocles' and the line 'I've got the feeling someone's going to be cutting the thread,' 'evokes the image of cutting the umbilical cord after birth.'[14][15] Rocky's costume is reminiscent of childhood, as he has a bleach blonde bowl

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[10] Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic," in *Eighteenth-Century Gothic: Radcliffe, Reader, Writer, Romancer*, eds. Fred Botting and Dale Townshend (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 124.
[11] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* 224.
[12] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* dir. Jim Sharman (20th Century Fox: 1975), 33:14-33:23.
[13] Shaun Shoman, "Frank-N-Furter or the Modern Gothic: Adapted Subversion in The Rocky Horror Picture Show," *Film Matters* 7, no. 2 (2016): 23.
[14] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 36:43-36:47.
[15] Alyssa Pete, "" Swim the Warm Waters of Sins of the Flesh": Gender and Sexuality in Frankenstein and The Rocky Horror Picture Show," *Undergraduate Research Symposium*, University of Oregon (2019): 6.

cut and skimpy golden shorts which Moskot suggests 'are fashioned in such a way that viewers cannot help but connect their form to that of a diaper.'[16] At the end of the film, in a replication of *King Kong* (1933), Rocky scales the stage set with Frank-N-Furter on his back, before plunging to death back into the womblike space of the pool. The pool's floor tiles depict Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam,' utilising biblical imagery in the same way that Shelley does in the original text to visualise the main thematic concern of genesis. This echoes Shelley's frequent biblical allusions and intertextual play with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which the Monster reads in Volume II. The Monster himself says to Frankenstein, "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded."[17] *Rocky Horror* therefore adapts Victor Frankenstein's maternal desire to give birth and transgress gender boundaries through queering the character in the transexual character of Doctor Frank-N-Furter, expanding on themes of motherhood, pregnancy, and nature found in Shelley's text.

In Shelley's 1831 introduction to the novel, she answers the question of: 'How [she], *then a young girl*, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?'[18] Until 1831 it had been believed that her husband, Percy Shelley, was the author of *Frankenstein*. The gender of the author was therefore central - both in its creation and reception in the nineteenth century. Gender is also a main thematic concern of the novel: analysis of masculinity in the text reveals *Frankenstein* as a critique of nineteenth-century patriarchal attitudes and imperialist expansionist desires are tied to gendered language in the text. Male hubris is embedded into the structure of the text through Walton's imperialistic expedition across the Arctic, with the desire to 'tame' nature and conquest landscapes emblematic of nineteenth-century British masculinity. Frankenstein also conveys his scientific endeavours in gendered terms: Monsieur Waldman teaches him that ancient philosophers, 'penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding-places.'[19] In *Frankenstein*, nature is female, and Shelley explores how masculinist attitudes toward expansionism and science result in destruction of the female. When the Monster demands that Frankenstein create a female partner for him, Frankenstein imagines a female monster 'ten thousand times more malignant

[16] Moskot, "Vulnerable Monsters: A Comparison of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Richard O'Brien's Rocky Horror," 93.
[17] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 103.
[18] Shelley, "Author's Introduction," 5. [emphasis added]
[19] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 49.

than her mate.'[20] Victor fears the idea of the female creature's uncontrolled sexual urges, believing that 'one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth.'[21] Male anxiety around female sexuality results in Frankenstein's destruction of the female creature whilst he 'trembles in passion': 'The remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being.'[2223] Anne K. Mellor has suggested that the language around this mutilation denotes a violent rape.[24] Jonathan Padley argues that the female creature would be a 'man-woman' 'whose very existence would emasculate, effeminise, and beautify men… and for this reason – to protect the potency of egotistical sublime masculinity – Frankenstein savagely recommits the female's body to the grave.' [25] Fear of female sexuality and anxiety surrounding the gender of the creature therefore leads to Frankenstein's brutal protection of his own masculinity, a scene mirrored by the Monster's retributory murder of Victor's fiancée Elizabeth a few chapters later.

In *Rocky Horror*, various forms of masculinity are parodied in the male characters. Brad Majors, the all American male protagonist, is constantly humiliated by Frank-N-Furter. Frank-N-Furter says ironically, 'How forceful you are, Brad. Such a perfect specimen of manhood. So ... dominant.'[26] Brad lapses into a high pitched soprano at various points during the film during his solos, to comic effect. This, paired with Frank-N-Furter 'cuckholding him by having sex with his fiancée, Janet, shows that, although he is a transexual alien, he is more of a dominant 'man' than Brad. Frank-N-Furter's gender identity is complex, embodying male/female gender roles at different points in the film. The 'marriage' between the scientist and his Monster highlights this queer masculinity, as Frank plays the role of both bride and groom during the ceremony. Frank-N-Furter displays his own perfect image of masculinity in his song 'I Can Make You a Man'. The lyrics to the song parody the Charles Atlas 'Dynamic Tension' exercise method that was popularised in the 1920s, and foregrounds physical strength as the marker of the ideal man:

> And soon in the gym/
> With a determined chin/

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[20] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 170.
[21] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 170.
[22] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 171.
[23] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 175.
[24] Anne K. Mellor, "Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*," in *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 224.
[25] Jonathan Padley, "Frankenstein and (Sublime) Creation," *Romanticism* 9, no. 2 (2003): NP.
[26] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 31:01-31:08.

> The sweat from his pores/
> As he works for his cause/
> […] He'll be a strong man.[27]

As Frank-N-Furter's creation, Rocky is essentially a sex toy for the doctor, and the campy, over the top exploration of heightened masculinity in this performance draws attention to the constructed nature of gender roles. Therefore, the characterisation of both Rocky and Frank-N-Furter parodies contemporary understandings of masculinity, and also echoes Shelley's interrogation of nineteenth-century modes of masculinity from the original novel.

Percy Shelley's 1818 preface to *Frankenstein* declares that his wife's 'chief concern' is to exhibit 'the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue.'[28] In the novel, Shelley portrays marriage purely as an economic decision. It is what motivates Frankenstein's father to marry the two cousins, as 'A small possession on the shores of Como belonged to [Elizabeth.]' Elizabeth writes to her fiancée, 'You well know… that our union had been the favourite plan of your parents ever since our infancy. We were told this when young, and taught to look forward to it as an event that would certainly take place.'[29] Victor's anxiety surrounding his impending marriage to his cousin is manifested through the presence of the Monster, who vows – '*I will be with you on your wedding-night*!'[30] The phrase haunts Frankenstein and Shelley uses homoerotic language to convey the Monster's queer presence on the wedding night, as 'he had determined to *consummate* his crimes by [Victor's] death.'[31] Shelley highlights how Victor puts on a performance that he is looking forward to the wedding:

> I concealed my feelings by an appearance of hilarity that brought smiles and joy to the countenance of my father[...] I shut up, as well as I could, in my own heart the anxiety that preyed there and entered with seeming earnestness into the plans of my father, although they might only serve as the decorations of my tragedy.[32]

Shelley's understanding of marriage as an economic tool, the anxiety Frankenstein feels around the queer figure of the Monster on his wedding night, and his description of marriage as 'the seal to his fate,'[33] showcases a complex subtext of compulsory heterosexuality and homoeroticism. Jaqueline M. Labbe argues that Elizabeth's murder 'makes real what the story and the law have all along subtly acknowledged as the figurative result of wedlock – the

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[27] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 40:09-40:52.
[28] P.B Shelley, "1818 Preface," in *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 2003), 12.
[29] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 191.
[30] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 192.
[31] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 192-3. [emphasis added].
[32] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 195.
[33] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 195.

death of the woman.'[34] Both queer and feminist analysis of *Frankenstein*, prompted by *Rocky Horror*, illuminate Shelley's depiction of the ultimate failure and destruction of heteronormative society and marriage.

By queering the story of *Frankenstein*, *Rocky Horror* similarly critiques heterosexual marriage and the sexual norms of contemporary culture. The respective hero and heroine Brad and Janet are presented as a strait-laced, 'square' couple who are queered through their experience in Frank-N-Furter's castle and the sexual debauchery that occurs there. In the opening scene of the film, in which Brad and Janet attend their friend's wedding, the filmmakers parody the church rituals: the guests throw rice at the bride and groom, Janet catches the bride's bouquet and screams hysterically, the honeymoon car reads 'WAIT TILL TONITE SHE GOT HERS NOW HE'LL GET HIS.'[35] The scene sets up the expected roles of each gender in marriage, for example, Brad labels the marriage a success because, "Everyone knows that Betty's a wonderful little cook. Why, Ralph himself he'll be in line for a promotion in a year or two."[36] The following musical number 'Damnit Janet,' in which Brad proposes, parodies heterosexuality most obviously in its setting – the graveyard of the church. As the performance moves inside, a coffin is brought out to prepare for a funeral. This symbolism juxtaposes conventional treatment of heterosexual love in Hollywood culture as eternal, instead showcasing anxieties around the confining nature of marriage. Vera Dika argues:

> Seen from the perspective of the 1970s, this highly coded sequence takes us back to the style of the 1950s in mildy parodistic form…. We are meant to think of that past and its clearly well defined gender roles… as well as its uncomplicated acceptance of monogamous heterosexuality, as conventions of a bygone era.[37]

Whilst the film pokes fun at how 'straight' Brad and Janet are, the presentation of heterosexual marriage, with its threat of sexual violence ('HE'LL GET HIS'), is a strong critique of gendernormativity, religion, and marriage in American society. Furthermore, the events of the film 'queer' Brad and Janet by the end of the film. The couple taste 'forbidden fruit'[38] when they have sex with Frank-N-Furter – for Brad, because he is engaging in homosexuality, and for Janet, because she is engaging in pre-marital sex. The adaptation ends

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[34] Jaqueline M. Labbe, "A monstrous fiction: Frankenstein and the wifely ideal," *Women's Writing* 6, no. 3 (1999): 353.
[35] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 06:37.
[36] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 07:16-07:29.
[37] Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: the Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110-11.
[38] *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* 1:15:44.

with Brad and Janet no longer sexually repressed and 'straight'-laced. This queering evokes a critique of the nature of compulsory heterosexuality in 1970s America and mirrors Shelley's interest in heterosexual marriage, domesticity, and familial relationships. Adapters have utilised *Frankenstein* as a tool with which to interrogate sexual repression and queer subcultures in contemporary context, prompting scholars to reflect more deeply on Shelley's own treatment of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural anxieties around marriage in the source text.

In conclusion, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a cult classic because it adapts a classic text to show it in a new, queer light, by using Shelley's *Frankenstein* to comment on contemporary issues surrounding gender and sexuality in 1970s American society. Through use of pastiche, camp, parody, and musicality, the film visualises and exaggerates queerness in the original text to craft a comedic adaptation which also makes interesting critiques surrounding heterosexuality and masculinity in modern American. Just like Shelley's novel and its interest in marriage, domesticity, family relationships and heterosexuality, the film explores 'straight' America through the couple Brad and Janet. By queering the character Victor Frankenstein through his transexual counterpart Frank-N-Furter, the film plays with Frankenstein's desire to give birth to his creation by employing cross dressing and gender bending – ultimately celebrating queer masculinities via Frankenstein and the Monster's adaptative counterparts. The film ultimately allows for reflection on queer subtexts in Shelley's novel, and the adaptation's more obvious interrogations of contemporary cultural norms can prompt a reinvestigation of Shelley's implicit critiques or explorations of nineteenth-century British masculinity, heterosexual marriage, and gender. If, as Pamela Demory suggests, '[b]oth adaptation and queerness suffer from the stereotype of being secondary, somehow less authentic,' then this essay has shown that affording serious attention to queer adaptations of canonical texts can illuminate new areas of study in Romantic scholarship.[39]

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