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### **The Makings of a Monster: Gender Performance in a Toxic Patriarchal Society**

What differentiates a monstrous woman from a monstrous man? How does the violent creature in *Frankenstein*, written by Mary Shelley, differ from Ava, the vengeful female A.I. from *Ex Machina*, written by Alex Garland? Neither creation is completely human, yet both are forced to adapt to a gender binary society to gain what they desire. Their monstrosity is not only apparent in how they look nor their actions, but simply in their being and the ways in which they were created. Through their ability to blend into a gender binary society physically and performatively yet eerily unable to fully camouflage, they present the abject, solidifying their role as monsters in the eyes of other characters in the story. Their tactics to survive and the monstrous acts that are influenced by their chosen gender represent the fears that each sex has of the other. Specifically, Frankenstein's monster is a giant grotesque creature who inflicts harm at the first sign of rejection and Ava is a beautiful and intelligent woman capable of manipulating men and faking emotion to get what she wants. However, despite their gender being performative and their violent acts voluntary within their heteronormative roles, their true monstrosity is caused by the patriarchal society they are created in and the toxic masculine characters that surround them. Comparing monstrosity in *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* through a heteronormative lens reveals how villains created by men perform differently and prompt different emotional responses depending on their gender, within the horror genre and within our own patriarchal society.

In agreement with Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler's theories on gender, Frankenstein's creature's cognitive development is highly dependent on the society he was created in. In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman", illustrating that gender is a social and cultural construct whereas sex is a biological definition (Beauvoir 283). This also relates to Butler's idea of gender performativity that she defines in her book, *Gender Trouble*, in which gender is not a biologically determined behavior, but rather a performance, a tactic to integrate smoothly into society (Butler 278). Gender identity is therefore dependent on environmental factors such as how society interacts with us and how we interact with society, or even perform for it. Due to being created instead of born, the Creature's first interaction with the world occurs in an eight-foot tall masculine physique. Society responds unkindly to the Creature, and he has to determine in his early stages of cognitive development how to respond back. The Creature is inevitably forced to participate in a gender binary, whether that be consciously as a means of integrating into society based on his desire of human connection, or unconsciously as he is learning how to become human in a male dominated world.

Fionnuala Ni Aolain's study on endemic violence suggests that repeated violent interactions shaped the creature's understanding of masculinity. Her work titled *Gender, Masculinities and Transition in Conflicted Societies* highlights the discovery of how "in situations of conflict and endemic violence, hyper masculinity plays an enlarged and elevated role. Its social traction is intensified when violence is endemic, and other social strictures are slackened" (Ni Aolain 13). Aolain shows that an increase in regularly occurring violence is directly proportional to an increase of exaggerated male performance. The creature consistently endures verbal and physical violence from men throughout the novel including verbal assaults

from his creator such as “wicked” and “evil” (Shelly 129-130). In addition, he has countless physically violent encounters from civilians, such as a stranger who shot him for mistakenly thinking he was trying to kill his daughter, and Felix, a man he studied from afar during his isolation who violently drives the creature away from his cottage. The Creature is consistently finding himself at the receiving end of male violence and as per the pattern discovered by Aolian the inevitable increase in hyper-masculinity is eventually presented in the Creature’s monstrous acts at the end of the novel.

The books the Creature reads during his time in isolation, although helpful for his development of literacy, were imbued with toxic masculinity as defined in Hazel Gray’s journal, *The Age of Toxicity*. The study finds different behaviors in which toxic masculinity presents itself to be “the suppression of men’s emotions leading to mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety ... [and] fewer intimate relationships” (Gray 47). The protagonist in the novel, *The Sorrows of Werther* portrays these behaviors. In the novel, Werther is tortured by unrequited love and due to his inability to process these emotions, kills himself. Through the novel, the Creature, whose main source of human interaction is through these books, learns to equate overwhelming emotion with death. The Creature emotionally connects with Werther who is displaying toxic masculinity by suppressing his emotions, leading the Creature who is learning how to be human, to do the same. However, rather than killing himself like Werther, his inability to control his emotions is expressed through violence by killing Victor’s loved ones, driven by his deep psychological hurt from his creator’s abandonment and previous interactions with endemic male violence. The creature’s eventual violent behavior is due to his unconscious observational learning and mimicking of gender performance of the other men in society. His desire to

integrate smoothly into society, by studying humanity, only lead him to experience endemic violence and toxic masculinity, dooming him to mirror what he knows.

The Creature's monstrosity is explained by Julia Kristeva's term "the abject" which is not only represented in his appearance but also in the emotional and physical reaction to what he represents. The Creature is physically unappealing and even grotesque, which is a common trope for many horror movies especially in the classics like Hannibal Lecter in *Hannibal*, Michael Myers in *Halloween*, and Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Victor describes his creation as:

"His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun – white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 44)

In this passage, Victor and *Frankenstein's* readers are faced with the contradictions of beauty and disgust, as there are parts of the creature that should be considered beautiful and yet they are combined with physical attributes that display otherness, creating an uncanny feeling. This particular type of physical horror of appearing human-like but still visually unsettling due to slight abnormalities is represented in Barbara Creed's *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine*. Creed states, "In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast" (Creed 66). This idea of an entity who exists in-between borders is what the abject embodies as explained in Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Abjection "does not 'respect borders, positions, rules', what which 'disturbs identity, system, order'" (Creed 64). Meaning that the self is threatened by something that is not a part of us in terms of identity and non-identity, human and non-human. Kristeva expresses this point when stating "the abject has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I" (Kristeva 1). The corpse is an example of the abject, as its appearance forces the

acknowledgement of the inevitable corruption of human bodies. The creature, who is an accumulation of dead body parts, is forcibly causing others to acknowledge this and experience the abject, solely due to his appearance that borders between human and non-human, life and death. His abjectness is also in his consistent desire to cross into the realm of human, because, despite his ability to understand and perform as a human, his appearance belongs on the border.

Victor, as his creator, experiences the Creature's abjectness at its full capacity, as Cynthia Pon argues in her work *'Passages' in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein'*. She states that "in the case of the creature, difference from 'universal shape' is rejected finally because it violates the ideal, self-reflecting image of Frankenstein" (Pon 38). Victor's actions of creating the Creature was an attempt to go beyond symbolic order of life and death causing his descent into the abject. His simultaneous repulsion and attraction to the monster is due to how Victor himself is now both inside and outside the boundaries set by 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolic order.

The abject is not only being formed in the disruption of biological nature by the revival of the dead but also by the creation of life without a feminine presence. Victor, as the creator, is the father of his creation, yet there is no mother present who can influence the formation of the monster, causing him to be produced and awoken in a male dominated environment. Life created without both male and female disrupts the natural order and disrespects biological rules, which definitionally causes the abjection. The reason the Creature is physically grotesque representing the abjection correlates back to not only the lack of feminine presence, but the purposeful exclusion of women, leading to permanent ramifications due to the disturbance of gender order. It is due to the exclusively male environment in which the monster was created that made him into the abject, where he was integrated into patriarchal society that responded to his abjectness

with violence, consequently influencing his own gender performance and eventual monstrous acts fueled by toxic masculinity.

Exposed to unhealthy male response mechanisms, the Creature's learned destructive and violent male behavior is caused, at least in part, by his ritualistic response to rejection, as seen in a study on mass shootings that analyzes the motives for large scale violence. Tristan Bridges and Tara Tober from the Department of Sociology at the University of California conducted a study on the connection between masculinity and mass shootings in the United States. Through their research they found that the analysis of "publicly available mass shooter manifestos from the United States ... discovered that masculine overcompensation, ritualistic responses to exclusion ... were patterned motives." (Bridges and Tober 30). In *Frankenstein*, the Creature is also a perpetrator of multiple violent acts. Earlier in the novel when he first meets his creator's abandonment, the Creature kills Frankenstein's younger brother William. Subsequently, the monster is repeatedly rejected by society, causing him to acquire a deep desire for companionship. When Victor refuses to create a female mate, the Creature is again met with rejection and responds by killing Victor's best friend Henry Clerval and his bride Elizabeth Lavenza. Every time the Creature was rejected by society and forced into exile, his ritualistic behavior was seen as an increasing desire for human companionship and need to understand the workings of humanity so that he could replicate it. This repetitive behavior and eventual violent response to exclusion is consistent with the patterns the study detected in the perpetrators of mass shootings.

Not only through Bridges and Tober's work was a connection found to exile and violence, but also a connection to violence as a response to feeling emasculated. The study goes on to find that "men whose masculinity had been threatened were more supportive of violence

and war as a solution to problems” and “that violence remains an important resource that men turn to in order to demonstrate masculinity when they perceive a challenge to this identity” (Bridges and Tober 29, 32). The Creature is not only emasculated, but dehumanized for his lack of money and companionship, and is at constant battle with understanding his identity both physically and emotionally as seen when he states:

“Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?” (Shelley 105)

Despite the Creature’s study of humanity and even eventual understanding of society, he still never learned how to process emotions in a healthy way. Fueled by hurt due to societies rejection and dehumanization of him and instability at his lack of identity the Creature turns to violence as a way to feel in control. His inner turmoil combined with his consistent encounters of men expressing emotions through violence, and even the influence of Werther, turns him into a monster. The psychological breakthroughs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, like Bridges and Tober’s discovery, has enabled society to better understand the mental reasoning for specific actions. Yet, it also can be used to provide better psychological insight for occurrences, whether they be fictional or non-fictional, that occurred centuries ago. This highlights that the repercussions of toxic masculinity isn’t only a today issue, which can be seen in *Ex Machina*, but one that’s been manifesting for years.

In *A cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway provides a hopeful theory of cyborgs becoming the tool for breaking gender norms, which is in contrast with the oversexualized A.I in *Ex Machina*. Haraway uses the cyborg as metaphor, representing the breaking of the boundaries between “mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine” (Haraway 150). A cyborg

would then be a “creature in a post-gender world” that challenges gender disparities and exists outside the confines of a patriarchal society (Haraway 151). However, in *Ex Machina*, the cyborg Ava is created by Nathan, a misogynistic programmer, who thrives in the privileges he is afforded as a wealthy man. Isolated in his mountain-enclosed mansion, Nathan selects another programmer, Caleb to take part in a Turing test that will decipher if Ava can pass as human and display consciousness. Where Haraway’s cyborg exist beyond gender, Nathan creates Ava as a woman, believing that consciousness cannot exist outside of a sexual dimension. Already early into the film, Nathan is seen to be completely imbued in heteronormative thinking, and that combined with his misogynistic ideology is the reasoning for his eventual downfall at the hands of his creation.

Nathan’s oversexualization of his A.I.’s not only reflects his blatant sexist beliefs but indicate a mindset imbued in rape culture as examined in Ariella Ruby’s *Gendering the Posthuman*. Ruby references a research paper *Mechanical Genders: How do Humans Gender Robots* that mentions “the insertion of recognizable gender-specific characteristics and sexual organs ... [that] serves the function of pleasure, as is the case with ‘sex bots’” (Ruby 24-25). Despite telling Caleb that he is creating A.I.’s for scientific advancement, Nathan has other motives for his creations as his own personal sex bots. He creates them to look female with breast like protrusions, but even programmed them with the ability to sexually perform as one. After explaining his choice for gendering Ava, Nathan goes as far as to say, “you bet she can fuck” and follows with, “In between her legs, there’s an opening, with a concentration of sensors, you engage them in the right way, creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could. And she’d enjoy it” (Garland, *Ex Machina*). By examining this scene with the knowledge that Ava eventually proves consciousness, Nathan

saying that Ava will be sexually satisfied in intercourse without mentioning any form of needed consent reeks with rape culture. Nathan consistently describing her as an object combined with his hope of her possible ability to have consciousness is contradictory, and it displays his deep-rooted misogyny. The creation of these A.I.'s is not only his way to feel intellectually powerful, but to fortify his masculinity by means of possessively controlling women.

Kristeva's theory on the abject refers to the human reaction of an entity disrespecting borders which both the Creature and Ava portray, yet due to their gender and the physical differences, they receive different reactions from others. The Creature is male and grotesque. Because of this he is treated differently than Ava a beautiful woman, despite both representing the abject. In the beginning of the film, Ava is displayed with the body of a robot, but the face and voice of a woman. Similar to the cyborg in *A cyborg Manifesto* which represents the rejection of rigid boundaries, Ava is a physically displaying the abject through human and non-human attributes. However, it is also her physical beauty that emphasizes her abjectness, as the audience is inclined to desire her human attributes but is then repelled by those desires in remembering she isn't human. The Creature, however, has no physically desirable qualities creating reactions of only horror and disgust at being faced with the border of life and death. It is also Ava's abjectness that Nathan exploits as a way to control her. In *Gender in Frankenstein: Revisiting Otherness and Identity in The Handmaid's Tale and Ex Machina*, Judith Méndez determines that "cyborgs become a threat for cultural intelligibility and Ava's abjectness thrusts her in a marginal position in which the category of human and non-human remain clearly distinct and stresses her otherness. This enables Nathan to exert control over these robots" (Méndez 19). Nathan is not only controlling Ava by creating her to fit in a gender binary, but also uses her otherness as a cyborg to isolate and imprison her. Contrarily, the Creature is isolated and rejected,

while Ava has an allurements through beauty, the Creature's abjectness invokes horror. It is also the different reactions of their abjectness that forms them into monstrous beings. Ava's monstrous acts were based on her desire for freedom, while the Creature's violent behavior was in response to rejection and abandonment.

Ava is not only in a consistent state of physical imprisonment but also emotional as she is subjugated to the male gaze which is defined by Laura Mulvey in her book *Visual and other Pleasures*. According to Mulvey, the male gaze is performed by the active male towards the passive female, where they project a fantasy of the female body. Through the male gaze, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strange visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey 64). From first creation, Ava is subjugated to the masculine desires of her creator, as she is coded to be female through her hardware and her mechanical genitals and is locked in a glass box. The male gaze is also literal as Ava is constantly under surveillance of Caleb and Nathan, making her not only sexually imprisoned by men but physically as well. The surveillance is a way for both programmers to deploy hyper-masculinity as they get off on the power of constantly watching Ava and knowing she is under their control.

Ava learns to use the male gaze against them by establishing trust through gender performance, reversing the power dynamic by the same constructs that were once held over her. In her book, *I Figured You Were Probably Watching us*, Kayla Myers perceives surveillance as "a force of patriarchal domination" and uncovers that Ava's "manipulation of surveillance depends on [her] performance of hyper-sexual, but unthreatening femininity" (Myers 119).

Ava needs to hide her abjectness as it still reminds viewers, and specifically Caleb who she needs to manipulate to gain freedom, of her inhumanness. She begins gender performing as a tool to do so, by conforming to the male gaze and establishing trust via seduction. Ava initially presents herself as a semi-androgynous juvenile who is submissive and even childlike with timid responses. This combined with her abjectness and imprisonment compels Caleb to feel more powerful. Slowly Ava becomes more feminine through clothing and wigs, yet her continued demure and timid behavior only increases Caleb's fascination. Ava eventually even uses the surveillance for her own gain. When she first wears a wig and a dress for the first in the third session, she asks Caleb if he finds her attractive and says, "Sometimes at night, I wonder if you are watching me through the cameras and I hope you are." (Garland, *Ex Machina*). In the following scene not only do we see Caleb watching Ava, but Ava acknowledging his gaze and seizing control over it. The first time Ava hides her abjectness and performs femininity, she secures sexual yearning from Caleb. Clouded by desire Caleb imparts on a mission to freeing Ava, making her manipulation through gender performance successful. Rather than rejecting the patriarchal structures she was created in, she conforms to them by hiding her abjectness in gender performing femininity and the allure of female vulnerability that the male gaze desires, enabling her eventual freedom.

In coining the term "gender performance" Judith Butler also warns that the performance is bound to fail, as it did with Ava when she became viewed as a monstrous A.I. through the killing of Nathan and leaving Caleb to die, escaping the confines a patriarchal society. In her final act of freedom, Ava no longer performing as she kills Nathan in her fully cyborg form. By doing so, she even exhibits Donna Haraway's theory on cyborgs to be true. Haraway believed that the cyborg, which represents a rejection of rigid social boundaries, has the ability to emerge

outside the structures of a patriarchal society, which Ava eventually does (Haraway 150).

Through gender performance and using the societal norms that restricted her against the enforcers of those norms, Ava escaped both literally and figuratively the confines of a male dominated environment. In her final acts, she is viewed by Nathan and Caleb to be monstrous, not only because of her violent actions, but because she is no longer performing a gender and embraces her abjectness as a cyborg.

The Creature and Ava are not monsters at their core but victims to the toxic, violent, and sexist male behavior within the patriarchal structures they were created in and forced to adapt to. Their differing paths to monstrosity via gender performance is due to the opposite experiences a man has in a toxic male environment versus a woman. Where the creature, as a man, is inevitably bound to mirror the violent male behavior he's surrounded by, Ava, as a woman is forced to use manipulation through gender performativity to escape the sexist environment she was trapped in. Also, although both the Creature and Ava are seen as monsters through their representation of the abject, their actual monstrosity manifested in how others responded to their Abjectness in different ways based on their gender. The Creature as an ugly man was rejected and abandoned by society, leading him to take violent actions that he learned through the toxic male behavior of other men. Ava, however, as a beautiful female A.I. was imprisoned physically and mentally in a sexist patriarchal environment, leading her to conform to the male gaze as a manipulation tactic to escape. Through analyzing theories on gender performativity, *Frankenstein* and *Ex Machina* reveal that monstrosity manifests when a man performs the norms of a patriarchal society and when a woman rejects them.

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