

Beyond Bella Baxter

Comparing Female Man-Made Monsters

Lucy Elizabeth Allan

I. Bella

Citing his inspirations for *Poor Things*, his seminal Scottish *Frankenstein* reworking, Glaswegian writer and illustrator Alasdair Gray references Liz Lochhead's 1982 play, *Blood and Ice*, a retelling of Mary Shelley's famous stay at the Villa Diodati culminating in a speech by the fictionalised Mary Shelley, declaring »I am the monster, poor misunderstood creature feared and hated by all mankind. [...] it is worse, worse than that, I am the female monster, gross, gashed, ten times more hideous than my male counterpart, denied life, tied to the monster bed for ever.«¹

This idea of monstrosity being compounded by womanhood is mirrored in *Poor Things*' protagonist; a monstrously reanimated woman, a thing of duality and composites and implied grotesquery, whose femaleness is a constant and undeniable keystone of her unique monstrosity and singular experience of the world.

Significantly, both Gray and Lochhead were working within a late twentieth-century resurgence in the Scottish Gothic as a political force. Following the failed 1979 Scottish Devolution Referendum, in which Scotland failed to snatch elective freedom from Westminster, the Scottish literary scene began to see a »noticeable reengagement with the Gothic and myth«² as a reflection of and response to this disappointment. The Gothic form became a tool for political commentary; gothic tropes such as multiple narrators and puzzle-box story structures becoming increasingly postmodern and self aware in the service of political statement.

This is exemplified perfectly in the Russian-doll structure and contradictory narrative voices that make up *Poor Things*, a novel consisting of manuscripts within manuscripts, and postscripts refuting and recontextualising what has already been

1 Lochhead, Liz: *Blood and Ice*, London 1982, p. 34.

2 Davison, Carol Margaret/Germanà, Monica: »Borderlands of Identity and the Aesthetics of Disjuncture: An Introduction to Scottish Gothic«, in: Carol Margaret Davison/ Monica Germanà (eds.): *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 1–13; here p. 6.

read. The novel follows in the footsteps of many a great Gothic novel, using complex structure and conflicting voices to draw attention to the constructedness of both fictional and historical narratives, and therefore challenge political and social hegemonies by »challenging the definition – and existence – of a singular truth«. ³

Gray embraces this tradition not only in the structure of his novel, but also in the body of his central character; Bella Baxter, a literally constructed being, possesses a Scottish Gothic body that is amalgam of woman and child, composite and contradictory in nature, and challenging any singular reading or definition. This makes for a uniquely fertile ground for a character that is just as challenging and revolutionary as the structure of the Gothic novel – at least in theory.

Known to most these days as the ethereal and madcap protagonist of Yorgos Lanthimos' Oscar-winning 2023 *Poor Things* adaptation, Bella Baxter has become an icon of contentiously feminist speculative cinema. This essay, however, will be looking at Bella's original form, a Scottish monster-woman born from Alasdair Gray's pen, and in doing so will investigate the extent to which she is »gross, gashed, ten times more hideous than [her] male counterpart«, ⁴ by contextualising her in the dark and troubling history of the man-made woman, and by unpacking the potential of the monster both to enforce patriarchy, and to offer liberation from it.

In a famous illustration for *Poor Things*, Gray depicts his creation Bella Baxter in stark and striking white-on-black, naked in the mouth of a skull, gazing right back at the viewer gazing at her. I love this drawing. I have it on a tote bag. Especially, I find the positioning of Bella in relation to the skull interesting. The skull is monstrously oversized, the ridges of its brow making it seem like it is scowling or snarling aggressively. Bella on the other hand, is a nude woman at ease, her gaze placid, her breasts exaggerated. The skull she sits in is highly detailed like an anatomical drawing, while Bella is simplified, free of blemish; idealised. She's in the jaws of monstrosity but not quite touched by it, not quite monstrous herself. Her face is distinguished and strong-featured in Gray's distinctive style but there's no doubt that she is a beautiful woman, meeting the eye of the voyeur, but an object of voyeurism nonetheless. Bella, according to the narrator of her story, her eventual husband Archie McCandless, is a woman who was reconstructed and brought back to life from the component parts of a twenty-six-year-old woman's body and the brain of the fetus she was pregnant with when she died. The book purports to be a true story, told by McCandless, in a manuscript »discovered« by Alasdair Gray himself. In McCandless's version of events, Bella's brain develops extremely rapidly from the brain of a toddler to the brain of a highly intelligent, mature and politically aware woman throughout the course of the novel; however, at the beginning of the story, and in particular when McCandless first meets and becomes entranced by Bella, there's a sense that the juxtaposition of

3 Ibid., p. 5.

4 L. Lochhead: *Blood and Ice*, p. 34.

her adult body and child's mind is part of what gives her such otherworldly beauty. McCandless remarks on the fact that although »[Bella's] tall, beautiful, full-bodied figure seemed between twenty and thirty years, her facial expression looked far, far less«. ⁵ In this way, at the beginning of the book at least, Bella could be read as an uncomfortably infantilised woman. She is also implicitly desired by her creator, Godwin Baxter, known affectionately as »God«; however, she scorns him immediately for McCandless, a man of her own choosing. According to Bella, »I can't do it with God and that's what's making him miserable«. ⁶ The implication here is, that in creating Bella, Godwin had the explicit intention of creating a sexual partner – hence his »misery«. However, as Christie March argues, Bella »can't« ⁷ conceive of the man who brought her into the world as a potential lover, aware of the incestuous undertones of a sexual relationship between herself and Godwin (March, 340) and possessing the agency to deny it. ⁸ Bella's agency over her own sexuality is given a great deal of focus in the novel. Interestingly, and unlike other examples I will be looking at in this essay, Bella is not shamed or derided for her libido. In fact, *Poor Things* takes a kind of wild hedonistic pleasure in cataloguing her exploits, giving sections of the book a tone of joyful, madcap comedy. However, the contrast between her newness to the world – i.e., her childishness – and her hypersexuality is prominent and often used for comic effect, something that occasionally leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth. Describing a night of passion with her first lover Duncan Wedderburn – a man she eventually exhausts sexually to the point where he ends up in a mental institution – she describes how she »wed wed wed wed him, wedding and wedding and wedding until he begged me no to, said he could give no more but he could and did«. ⁹ She childishly refers to sex as »wedding«, evidencing her undeveloped brain in a very adult context. Bella is a woman unashamedly taking tremendous pleasure in her own sexuality, but her innocence and childish unworldliness are clearly linked to her sexual desirability. Innocence and girlishness are too often sexualised qualities in women, and Bella's monstrosity acts as a vehicle for an absurd degree of uncomfortable infantilisation. It is her monstrosity itself – a woman with an implanted foetus brain – that allows for this level of queasily sexist characterisation.

The plot of the book, however, actively follows Bella's political awakening – she travels, learns, and sees the world, and becomes an active socialist – and this is closely mirrored by her sexual awakening. Hers is a journey towards freedom of mind and body; the two are inherently interlinked. The unique nature of her being

5 Gray, Alasdair: *Poor Things*, London 1992, p. 29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Cf. March, Christie: »Bella and the beast (and a few dragons, too): Alasdair Gray and the social resistance of the grotesque«, in: *Critique* 43 (2002), pp. 323–346.

9 A. Gray: *Poor Things*, p. 154 (italics in the original).

– the fact that she hasn't spent a lifetime boiling in the same soup of misogyny and conservatism as the rest of the world, seems to enable this liberated position, as well as this ability to see the world for what it is. She is not beholden to norms of gender, sex, and culture, because her unique monstrosity enables her to be a blank slate.¹⁰ Her position so far outside the norm is what liberates her from societal limitations that might oppress other women – *because* she is monstrous, she gets to be a woman on her own terms. In this respect, she seems to counter the idea that womanhood would compound her monstrosity – it is her monstrosity that allows her such a liberated experience of being a woman.

However, the interaction between femaleness and monstrosity in *Poor Things* is an uneasy, and strangely reluctant one. When Bella is allowed to tell her own version of her story in a postscript, she refutes her husband's version of her, right down to the very idea of her being a reanimated twenty-six-year-old with the body of an unborn baby. She focuses far more on her character, her politics, her professional achievements – and not, like her husband's version of events, on her body. Bella claims this version is the truth. However, in another postscript, a fictionalised Alasdair Gray fact-checks the information both McCandless and Bella have provided. One of the facts that he clarifies is that when Bella died, her body was found to be twenty-six years older than her brain. It was Bella, and not McCandless, who was lying. Bella therefore does not quite have control over the narrative of her body, and is not in fact as liberated from shame as her sexuality suggests. In fact, the relinquishing of agency that these postscripts betray goes even further. We can deduce from her postscript that Bella made the choice to denounce the factual reality of her monstrous embodiment and wild sexuality, and instead portrays herself as someone more measured, more domestic; someone professionally successful, yes, and in a way that challenges Victorian norms, but also a respectable mother and wife. This points to a strange tragedy buried within *Poor Things*: that Bella would rather assimilate into society than accept herself as something grotesque.¹¹

The question of Bella's monstrosity in womanhood is a fraught one. *Poor Things* is a very, very on-the-nose *Frankenstein* pastiche, right down to Godwin Baxter being named for Mary Shelley's maiden name, but in Bella, the visible monstrosity of Frankenstein's Creature seems absent. Where the Creature is constantly described as hideous, we are constantly reminded of Bella's beauty. In fact, there is a kind of coyness to the book's presentation of Bella as anything monstrous at all. It's as if the reader is discouraged from thinking of her unnatural beginnings as being synonymous with bodily monstrosity. Indeed, the part of her that might be considered monstrous – her composite body, her resurrection from the dead – are what give her the wide-eyed innocence, lack of regard for societal norms and unusual carnal

10 Cf. C. March: Bella and the beast, p. 339.

11 Ibid., p. 341.

appetites: the things that she is sexualised for. Her unnatural creation is a means for her to be a fetishised other: a sexualised character, not a monsterised one, as if we cannot accept her as something sexual unless we deny the reality of her embodied otherness. It feels like there is a reticence to let a woman be monstrous, as if those two things would somehow contradict. Bella is a character who tries to deny her own bodily reality to fit better into her oppressive society; the sanitization of her monster body reflects this sentiment. In denying the monstrosity of her body, there is a little bodily autonomy that is denied to her, too. On one level, Bella's monstrosity allows her to be a radical and liberated woman; but on another, her sexualized womanhood prevents her from being a radical and liberated monster.

There is tremendous potential for the monster as a feminist image. In her essay *King Kong Theory* (2022), Virginie Despentes explores the idea of an affinity between the female and the monstrous, arguing that a monster is a thing that exists outside of patriarchy, outside of oppressive societal structures. The essay examines the emotional affinity experienced between the heroine of *King Kong* and the giant ape-monster itself, and compares this affinity to the freedom one feels in shrugging off patriarchal ideas of womanhood. Despentes argues that the monstrous Kong offers the heroine a kind of asexual, nonthreatening companionship in a shared space of »chaos that precedes gender«. ¹² To be accepted back into society, Despentes observes, the heroine must rip herself away from the part of her that empathises with the monster, the part of her that could be powerful and untethered like this creature. ¹³ It seems like this is what Bella Baxter – or rather, Victoria McCandless, to use her chosen married name – is doing when she rewrites her story to fit snugly into Victorian normative society. I can't help but wonder what *Poor Things* would have been like if Bella's liberation didn't come from the denial of her monstrosity, but instead from a celebration of it – if there were a similar affinity between her womanhood and her monsterhood.

II. Xanthippe the Golem

I want to compare Bella first of all with another relatively modern woman monster, one born from a similarly absurd and postmodern text, and one whose voracious sexuality closely mirrors Bella's – but one whose monstrosity complicates the feminism of her text even further. This female creature is Xanthippe the golem from Cynthia Ozick's *The Puttermesser Papers*, a strange episodic novel originally published as a series of short stories, concerning the misadventures of Jewish New Yorker Ruth Puttermesser, as she dabbles in the Kabbalah, rises to become mayor of New York,

12 Despentes, Virginie: *King Kong Theory*, London 2022, p. 101.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

loses everything and eventually dies. Crucially, she also half-accidentally creates a female golem along the way. Xanthippe is significant for being the only monster woman I'll be looking at in this essay to have been created by another woman, as well as for being, by her own estimation, the world's first ever female golem – although she accepts that some scholars may disagree – created from the earth in Ruth's houseplants in her New York City apartment, thus creating a unique site for the monstrous and feminine to interact.¹⁴

Although she comes to life child-sized and eager to serve her creator-mother, Xanthippe soon begins to grow larger and larger, and develop into an uneasy adulthood. Antonija Primorac identifies a trope of female man-made women, and argues that »any hint of agency is treated as an aberration and as indicative of monstrosity«,¹⁵ and in *The Puttermessenger Papers*, this monstrous agency manifests as sexual agency. Soon, Xanthippe's defining character trait is her comical hypersexuality. Her appetites are not there to position her as an object of sexual desire, unlike the voyeuristic undertones in *Poor Things*, or indeed as a subject whose sexual desires we are meant to empathise with. Instead, she occupies the uneasy ground of being monsterised because of her sexuality. A key element of Golem folklore is that Golems keep growing and growing for as long as they live, and Xanthippe is no exception – her mother-creator is »periodically alarmed at what a large girl Xanthippe is growing into«,¹⁶ suggesting that even removed from the context of monstrosity, her largeness itself is troubling to Ruth's ideas of what a woman should be. After all, an oversized body is one that actively pushes against social norms for women, carrying with it an abject implication in that by being »oversized« it also, according to Marsh, »overconsumes and overexcretes«. ¹⁷ Hence this largeness, described as »frightening«,¹⁸ provokes repulsion twofold, first by its abject implications, and second by – like the largeness and strength of Frankenstein's Creature – its implied masculinity and implied gender deviance.

Critically, Xanthippe's continuous, obscene growth, and the inhuman size that she eventually grows to, are tied thematically to her sexuality. As she grows, her li-

14 Ruth Bienstock Anolik argues the traditional figure of the Golem in Jewish culture could be read as »a veiled code for the woman in Jewish culture«. An unformed substance in the same way as women who are not married or who are not yet mothers. They are also, speechless and not fully able to participate in religious life. Anolik theorizes the fear of the unchecked golem comes from the fear of unchecked female sexuality. Cf. Anolik, Ruth Bienstock: »Reviving the Golem: Cultural Negotiations in Ozick's *The Puttermessenger Papers* and Piercy's *He, She and It*«, in: *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 19 (2000), pp. 37–48; here p. 38.

15 Primorac, Antonija: »Gender, violence and contemporary adaptations of Frankenstein«, in: *Science Fiction and Television*, 11 (2018), p. 169f.; here p. 169.

16 Ozick, Cynthia: *The Puttermessenger Papers*, London 1997, p. 88.

17 C. March: *Bella and the beast*, p. 329.

18 C. Ozick: *The Puttermessenger Papers*, p. 98.

bido grows with her. Xanthippe's monstrosity comes primarily from her exaggerated size and inhuman appetites; this plays into ideas of bigness, fatness, and gluttony being synonymous with ugliness or unfemininity in women, and it is this exaggerated size, juxtaposed with descriptions of Xanthippe's exploits in the bedroom, that is designed to turn the reader's stomach. One of Xanthippe's conquests describes »how he had endured her size and force and the horror of her immodesty and the awful sea of her sweat«. ¹⁹ This positions her clearly as a sexual threat: a repulsive, consuming being against whose desires no one can stand a chance. Interestingly, the man who »endures« her in this way becomes a key player in Xanthippe's eventual execution. The implication is that because this woman is disgusting and eroticised at the same time, the violence is against her is justified.

Out of any example I've included in this essay, Ruth and Xanthippe's creator-created dynamic most closely resembles a parent-child dynamic, although not necessarily one rooted in love and nurture. Xanthippe ultimately becomes responsible for her mother-creator's political downfall – Ruth's brief tenure as mayor of New York falls apart because of Xanthippe's actions; her daughter-creature »destroy[s] her utterly«. ²⁰ If Xanthippe is to be read as Ruth's daughter, we could interpret this as a representation of women having to sacrifice ambition and success to be effective parents, a sacrifice that men are less often required to make. In this respect, this is an interesting way to use the golem to make a feminist commentary on motherhood. However, any reading of the novel as a feminist text is »problematized« ²¹ by its treatment of Xanthippe. The narrative presents her as actively responsible for Ruth's downfall – specifically, this downfall is a consequence of Xanthippe's exaggerated sexuality, recalling Eve ruining Paradise with her own, very different »appetites«. ²² Her lust and her promiscuity become more and more powerful until they spiral out of control, leading to a knock-on series of events that affect infrastructure and politics, until the city »is diseased with the Golem's urge«. ²³ Her sexuality isn't just grotesque; it poses a real, tangible threat to society. This is the rigid conservatism at the root of the text; Xanthippe's negative impact on her mother's life, and wider culture, reads as a warning of the threat posed to society by deviant sexuality, and the shame of being a parent of a deviant child. Here, a monster has been created to reinforce the boundaries of acceptable womanhood. Ruth, and the text by extension, appears on some level to share the highly traditional religious views on female sexuality that the concept of a female Golem initially seemed like a subversion of. ²⁴

19 Ibid., p. 122.

20 Ibid., p. 110.

21 R.B. Anolik: *Reviving the Golem*, p. 39.

22 C. Ozick: *The Puttermesser Papers*, p. 40.

23 Ibid., p. 109

24 R.B. Anolik: *Reviving the Golem*, p. 40.

Ruth's means of getting rid of this threat is to return Xanthippe to the dirt from whence she came. Heaven, or at least an afterlife of some sort, exist in the world of the text – Ruth eventually goes there – but Xanthippe is afforded no afterlife. She is turned back to dirt, reduced to inhuman filth. As Ruth performs the ritual to destroy her, Xanthippe begs: »O my mother! Do not send me to the elements!«²⁵ mimicking Christ on the cross pleading to the father-god that has forsaken him, and making plain the dreadful paradox of her existence; she has all the humanity of a child begging her parent to let her live, but she is made of gross, earthy materials. She is inhuman and abject in her very material essence. In her death, Xanthippe is reduced completely to this gross dehumanised material. In contrast to Bella Baxter never being able to truly embrace her base monstrosity, Xanthippe is unable to be free of it.

Like Bella, Xanthippe achieves a degree of agency over her body and her sexuality in her life of obscene growth and debauchery, but we as readers aren't supposed to cheer her on. For all that sexual liberation, she still ends up sexually shamed by the narrative, and the problems she creates are solved by reducing her to dirt. There's a sense of freedom afforded to her by her monstrosity, but unlike *Poor Things*, the text reads almost as a warning against this freedom. Xanthippe's plight captures something profound in its depiction of the way in which women's sexual desire is shamed; in creating a monster, Ozick creates an exaggerated non-conforming woman, and uses this monstrosity to punish and shame this woman to a cruelly exaggerated extent.

III. The Bride

Perhaps the first image that comes to mind when we conjure the idea of a man-made woman is Elsa Lanchester's iconic performance as the titular Bride in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). But something becomes jarringly obvious when we compare her with her male counterpart, something that I think was put best by one of my undergraduate students when I showed my class a clip of the Bride coming to life for the first time. The comment was along the lines of, *so he's an actual monster and she's just like a hot girl*. There's an implicit explanation for this if one reads into the text; she's Frankenstein's second creation, he's already had one crack at it by now, and he's better at making his creatures more refined, more human-looking. But I think when it's examined in the context of our wider media landscape, it's abundantly clear that the female monster had to be a »hot girl«. Even when monstrous, even when uncanny and unhuman, the woman has to be desirable. Bella Baxter, a man-made, reanimated abomination, has to be sexy at the expense of her monstrosity – Xanthippe's sexuality is monstrous, but she is still hypersexualised. Even something like

25 C. Ozick: *The Puttermesser Papers*, p. 122.

the Xenomorph from *Alien*, about as inhuman a creature as you could conjure in your mind, has a gruesome sexuality; she has a mouth that is an amalgam of the male and female genitals: a penetrating vulva.²⁶ She is shiny, black and rubbery like fetish gear.

Lanchester's Bride is an indelible image from the first moments she's on screen, with her bridal hospital gown, her surgical stitch scars perfectly highlighting her jaw, and the most impressive beehive ever committed to any visual medium. Her movements are jerky, animalistic; there is something savage and frightened about her, something inherently inhuman that comes across in the wildness of her eyes and the intensity of her presence. The Bride is brought to life towards the end of the film, as beautiful and refined as her male counterpart is ugly and monstrous; she shuffles, entranced, almost longingly towards Frankenstein himself. The Creature presents himself to her, seemingly as a friend but implicitly as a lover. She rejects his amorous advances with a scream – and that's pretty much it. That's the extent of her screen time. She's there, primarily, as an object of beauty – wild-eyed, otherworldly beauty, but beauty nonetheless – to be looked at with love and desire by the Creature, by Frankenstein himself, and by us, the audience. She speaks no lines and dies off-screen in the same inferno as the Creature. He commits both himself and his would-be Bride to the fire, refusing to save her or himself, while letting Frankenstein and Elizabeth escape. His last words are to tell Frankenstein, on behalf of himself and the mute Bride, »we belong dead.«²⁷

In Mary Shelley's novel, the Bride is even less of a presence. In fact, she is never brought to life at all, existing as an unfulfilled dream of the Creature's, as an existential threat that hangs over the novel, and the point of no return that Victor Frankenstein has the choice to turn back from. Victor is charged by his Creature with creating for him a female mate, but in an instant of clarity, the thought of completing his work and bringing her to life strikes him suddenly as so repulsive and evil that Victor destroys his work – her body – before it is completed. The impulse to destroy his half-finished creation is spurred by the fear that »a race of devils might be propagated on the earth«²⁸ – that she, with her reproductive capabilities, poses a threat that the male creature on his own does not pose. This is a violent act of policing a woman's reproductive capabilities, like a gory parody of abortion restriction. Frankenstein also voices the fear that she »might turn with disgust from [the creature] to the superior beauty of man.«²⁹ Implicitly, if she rejects the creature because of his hideous appearance, she might pose a sexual threat to human men, maybe even Frankenstein

26 Cf. Creed, Barbara: *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London 1993, p. 116.

27 *Bride of Frankenstein*, 01:13:05.

28 Shelley, Mary: *Frankenstein: The Lynd Ward Illustrated Edition*, New York 1934, p. 189.

29 *Ibid.*

himself, like Xanthippe and the threat she poses with her terrible monstrous size to the men of New York. There is no sense of the Bride's physicality in the novel, no description of the unfinished woman's appearance, or size, but the subtext here is that she will have the same proportions and monstrous strength as the male creature, and Frankenstein would not be able to fight her off. The threat she poses is one of sexual violence, just like Xanthippe's.

When Victor destroys the Bride's unfinished body, it's extremely violent; »trembling with passion«, he »[tears] her to pieces.«³⁰ This destruction of a woman's body, described by Jack Halberstam as »bloody mess of dismemberment, a deconstruction of woman into her messiest and most slippery parts«³¹ constitutes the ultimate act of misogynistic violence; her promised personhood denied to her, her body reduced to so much meat, like Xanthippe being turned to dirt. Halberstam argues there is a subtext of rape to this attack, a »radical indifference« to the sanctity of the Bride's body.³² Eric Robertson takes this idea of a symbolic rape even further, imagining the sound of the half-finished body being ripped apart and positing: »[t]he sound of Victor tearing apart the flesh of the female companion is the sound of a passionate kiss; of parted, penetrated lips, and tongues lubricated by saliva – all fleshy protrusions penetrating open body cavities.«³³ (70). There is sexual pleasure to be found in this brutalisation. Her body is reduced to its most base and abject reality, with an aftertaste of violent sexuality.

There is a strange contradiction to the female body's place in abjection. On one hand, the incongruity between the objectified, idealised female body and the gory reality of the abject inside is a jarring one. In *Women and Other Monsters*, Jess Zimmerman writes that »[c]ontemplating how this object of desire is also full of farts, sweat, germs, and pee is like picking up a Faberge egg and realizing it's been packed with rotting meat [...]«. ³⁴ This reminds me of Bella and the reticence to embrace her grotesquery. And yet at the same time, the female body as viewed through a misogynist lens is often portrayed as inherently abject. Cultural critics have argued that the very fact of female sexuality having the power to bring out base impulses in men leads to desire and hatred being projected onto the female body simultaneously,³⁵

30 Ibid., p. 189f.

31 Halberstam, Judith: *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, London 1995, p. 47.

32 Ibid., p. 48.

33 Robertson, Eric: »Volcanoes, guts and cosmic collisions: the queer sublime in Frankenstein and Melancholia«, in: *Green Letters* 18 (2014), pp. 63–77; here p. 70.

34 Zimmerman, Jess: *Women and Other Monsters: Building a New Mythology*, Boston 2022, p. 51.

35 Cf. Lawless, Elaine J.: »Woman as Abject: Resisting Cultural and Religious Myths That Condone Violence against Women«, in: *Western Folklore* 62 (2003), pp. 237–269; here p. 245.

embodying an abject, repulsive sexuality – Xanthippe, eroticised and shamed at the same time.

The Bride of Frankenstein seems to embody this contradiction. She is made of the same stuff as Frankenstein's first Creature, and carries the same connotation of death, decay and base corporeality; however, while we get the gory details of the Creature's genesis, like the stealing of body parts from graves, her creation lacks the same filthy, gory description – in fact, her body is barely described at all. This seems to imply that the fact of her being a female contradicts the gory monstrosity of her bodily reality, like the coyness surrounding Bella Baxter's grotesquery. However, the horror Victor experiences at the thought of creating her, as well as the violent misogynistic verve of her destruction, colours her as something inherently disgusting and threatening. The Bride's femaleness seems to oppose abjection, and yet she is inherently abject by virtue of being female. In many ways, the Bride is the misogynistic abjection of the female body taken to its most extreme conclusion. What's more, the lowliness of her female being compounds the gore of her; however terrible the Creature is, her own horror is compounded by having been built as an accessory to him, as Eve was to Adam. Here we see the strongest echoes of Liz Lochhead's Mary Shelley, »ten times more hideous than [her] male counterpart«. ³⁶ »For if«, as Steven Vine observes, »the monster is a deformed figure of man, the monsteress is the figure of a deformed figure, the disfiguration of a disfiguration«. ³⁷

Another troubling image of the Bride appears in Nick Dear's stage adaptation of *Frankenstein*, most famously staged in 2011 by Danny Boyle and starring Johnny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch, swapping nightly between playing the Creature and the Doctor. »The Female«, as she is described in the playscript, is presented by Frankenstein to the Creature before she's quite brought to life, like a robot that hasn't been booted up yet; she can move, but there's no capacity for speech or interaction with what's going on. Implicitly she is an ambulating body without interiority. What follows is a scene where Frankenstein and the Creature give their appraisals of the woman's body, Frankenstein commenting on his own sexy workmanship: »Look! Exquisitely constructed, don't you agree? Look at her cheeks, her lips, her breasts! Who would not desire those breasts?« ³⁸ The language here deliberately presents her as an object, in the most literal sense: Frankenstein admires the »construction«, as if he were talking about a table he had built, proceeding to comment on the most sexualised parts of her body, particularly drawing the monster's attention to »those breasts« – *those* breasts, not *her* breasts – reducing her to component parts, an object made of other objects. In the Danny Boyle staging, the Female is naked for most of

36 Lochhead: *Blood and Ice*, p. 34.

37 Vine, Steven: »Filthy types: *Frankenstein*, figuration, femininity«, in: *Critical Survey* 8 (1996), pp. 246–258; here p. 256.

38 *Frankenstein* (adapted by Nick Dear, Royal National Theatre, London 2011) 01:24.55.

this exchange. It comes across as two men commenting on the sexual desirability of an inanimate, vacant woman's body. Frankenstein begins to voice aloud his trepidations at the thought of creating a mate for his monster, suggesting »[s]he might say that she prefers to live with a man, not a monster«,³⁹ teasing the Creature that he should take the Female for himself, touching her flirtatiously and even kissing her unresponsive, non-consenting lips; using this woman's body as a means to infuriate the Creature. During this exchange, Frankenstein realises the Creature feels more passion towards this woman than he himself has ever been capable of, and so, motivated by jealousy and by fear, he proceeds to violently destroy the woman's body that he's just paraded as a sexual object, with the Creature watching. I understand this scene is self-aware and sexist on purpose to characterise Frankenstein as the unfeeling villain of the piece, but it nonetheless feels uncritical and lazy, and unforgivably sexually violent.

The Bride, in her many abject iterations, manages to embody the reality of being a woman in a fleshly body – her monstrosity serves to illuminate the ways in which the female body is objectified, dehumanised and at risk of violence. Unlike Bella, she is a creature that can never be separated from her grotesque corporeality, despite her beauty, and like Xanthippe being returned to dirt, can never escape the base nature of her physical being.

IV. The Creature

I was a teenager when I saw Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* in a Glasgow cinema, broadcast by National Theatre Live. I was truly obsessed with the Shelley novel, in the way that only a teenager can be obsessed with something, and I remember leaving the cinema with a feeling of crushing disappointment for reasons I couldn't place at the time. I understand now that it was the gender politics of the play that made me feel like this. Oddly enough, when I think back on what it was about this play that made me feel so disheartened and disappointed, it is not the treatment of the Bride – the ›Female‹ – that comes to mind first. The aspect of this play that felt like such an insult was its treatment of the male Creature.

When the Creature kills Elizabeth, he rapes her first, to compound the vengeance he is taking on Victor. He rapes something that is Victor's property as an insult to Victor; implicitly, he penetrates her before Victor gets a chance to. After committing the extremely gendered act of violence, the Creature exclaims, »now I am a man!«⁴⁰ Now I am a man. I remember watching the Creature participating in misogynistic violence with a sinking feeling that I never felt when reading about

39 Ibid., 01:24:49.

40 Ibid., 01:42:50.

his murderous acts of revenge. The Creature had become something I had never considered him to be before. Now, he was a man.

I became obsessed with *Frankenstein* because I identified with the Creature. I empathised with him. This is one thing that is missing in Bella Baxter, in Xanthippe the Golem, and in the scant presence of the Bride herself; none of them speak to the alienation, shame and othering that are the byproducts of growing up female in a patriarchal world – particularly if, like me, growing up female also meant growing up queer. Bella feels too infantilised and objectified for female readers to see themselves in; Xanthippe is an object of ridicule and sexual shaming, and the Bride is a cypher, a frightening nonentity hanging over the text. The Creature is passionate, poetic, righteously angry, and screaming into the abyss of the world that has rejected, belittled, and shamed him. He feels, in short, a bit like a teenage girl.

This connection between womanhood and the Creature has been argued before. Two years after Alasdair Gray first published *Poor Things*, a then little-known poet and academic named Susan Stryker published her magnum opus *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix* in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Part memoir, part poem, part academic essay, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein* takes the radical stance of claiming an affinity between Stryker's own identity as a trans woman and the identity of Frankenstein's Monster. She writes: »I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment.«⁴¹ Stryker's empathy with the Creature perhaps implicitly suggests a trans femininity to Frankenstein's Creature him/herself; an idea that might seem wildly radical, but in fact follows a fascinating trend of reassessing how the Creature has, as Judith Butler notes, an »excess of gender that fails to fit properly into ›man‹ and ›woman‹ as conventionally defined.«⁴² One of the most significant texts in Shelley's novel is *Paradise Lost*, an addition to the novel that seems to imply the Creature is a new Adam. But one of my favourite readings of the Creature by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar reads into the book's symbolism to suggest otherwise:

[It] is Eve in whom the Satanically bitter gall of envy rises, causing her to eat the apple [...] it is Eve whose body, like her mind, is said by Milton to resemble »less/ His Image who made both, [...] In fact, to a sexually anxious reader, Eve's body might, like Sin's, seem [an] obscene version of the human form divine.«⁴³

41 Stryker, Susan: »My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix«, in: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1 (1994), pp. 37–254.

42 Butler, Judith: »Afterword. Animating Autobiography: Barbara Johnson and Mary Shelley's Monster«, in: Barbara Johnson: *A Life with Mary Shelley*, Stanford 2014, pp. 37–52; here p. 48.

43 Gilbert, Sandra/Gubar, Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic*, London 1979, p. 240.

Here, Gilbert & Gubar posit that Frankenstein's Creature is an Eve figure, to the extent that »Victor Frankenstein's male monster may really be a female in disguise«. ⁴⁴ The Creature can be read as a stand-in for the rejection and oppression of women's bodies by religious doctrine – the Creature, like Eve, finds himself made not in his creator's image, but instead in a body that is second-class, disgusting and monsterised. Looking at his own reflection for the first time, the Creature sees himself as »women have seen themselves (because they have been seen) as monstrous, vile, degraded creatures, second comers, and emblems of filthy materiality«. ⁴⁵

Frankenstein's Creature, this monstrous Eve, might represent the overlapping of femaleness and monstrosity better than any other of these monster-women. After all, the more a woman deviates from conventional ideas of femaleness, the more she is monsterised. The fact that we can identify with the monsterised femaleness even in this creature literally designed to have a male body goes to show there's something transgressive and transformative in this monstrous femininity, that can transcend bodily boundaries, and that will always, always refuse its creator's dominion. In this way, in compounding gender and monstrosity, Frankenstein's Creature achieves something that Bella Baxter never quite manages; he/she expands our notions of what it is to be a woman.

V. Conclusion

I want to return to Virginie Despentès' idea of the »chaos that precedes gender«, and the way that monstrosity seems to promise a tantalising escape to this glorious chaos of a world before patriarchy. I have a great deal of affection for *Poor Things* as a novel, but Bella Baxter is not a creature of pre-gender chaos. She is a woman whose monstrosity is limited by her femaleness, and thus her agency, her depth and scope as a feminist character is limited in turn. Bella, despite the tremendous fun of her journey through a genuinely imaginative and boundary-pushing story, will always feel like a bit of a cop-out.

Bella, Xanthippe and the Bride have something significant in common in their monstrosity. They are constructed bodies, constructed to be perceived as female, and living under a patriarchal society which is itself a construct – a set of boundaries dreamt up and enforced by repetition. ⁴⁶ The constructed female monster acts therefore as the perfect microcosm of what it is to be a woman under the constructed power of patriarchy. It's fascinating that so many woman monsters reinforce the boundaries of sexism and gender conformity that exist in real life, especially when

44 Ibid., p. 237.

45 Ibid., p. 240.

46 Cf. Butler, Judith: *Bodies That Matter*, London 1993.

the real strength in a monster is to push at those boundaries, to scratch and bite at the shackles that hold women and gender non-conforming people down. At their best and most transgressive, these monsters, perhaps including Frankenstein's Creature himself (or herself) inspire us by embracing their monstrosity, and pushing against the boundaries of what we understand women to be – beckoning us to join them in the void.

Movies

Bride of Frankenstein (USA 1935, D.: James Whale)

Poor Things (GB 2023, D.: Yorgos Lanthimos)

Frankenstein (GB 2011, D. Danny Boyle)