

## Gender Monsters Finally Speak Back:

From Radclyffe Hall's Stephen Gordon to Susan Stryker's Alliance with Victor Frankenstein's Creature

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Since at least the late 19th-century, non-normatively gendered identities and bodies have challenged the fantasy of the natural, biologically sexed body. Sexology and law worked to pathologize and to criminalize those who refused the regulation of their bodies and desires by a binary sex system, but early 20th-century gender inverts invented representations of possible and significant lives, such as Radclyffe Hall's fictional protagonist Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928); Hall's protagonist sacrifices her own desire with the aim of protecting her beloved from hatred and social ostracism, but she does so with the claim that nature made her whom she is, together with a supernatural, trans-historical (pun intended) vision of legions of gender inverts throughout human history for whom she will advocate.

Even though *The Well of Loneliness*, especially after its infamous obscenity trial when it was first published, has been read anachronistically as "A 1920's Classic of Lesbian Fiction," as my teaching edition from Anchor Books/Random House proclaims on its cover, the self understandings that the book's protagonist gradually comes to are those of gender inversion, a category that makes no distinctions between non-normative gender and non-normative desire. It's important to remember, of course, that in the late 19th-century and early 20th-century all sexual behavior that doesn't aim toward human reproduction is what Krafft-Ebing calls in his subtitle for *Psychopathia Sexualis* "contrary sexual instinct." When Stephen Gordon's mother describes her "unnatural cravings of [her] unbalanced mind and undisciplined body," she is

condemning both Stephen's masculine gender and her desire for women (201). As Stephen shops for a gift for the woman she loves, Hall's novel captures the common reduction of non-normatively gendered and desiring bodies as somehow less than fully human in the denial of human gendered pronouns, which are replaced by the objectifying "it": "People stared at the masculine-looking girl who seemed so intent upon feminine adornments. And someone, a man, laughed and nudged his companion: 'Look at **that!** What is **it?**'" (emphasis added, 165). In her book, *Transgender History* (2008), Susan Stryker with great clarity articulates this reduction of non-normatively gendered people to the category of "not-quite human":

Because most people have great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender, the gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness. That gut-level fear can manifest itself as hatred, outrage, panic, or disgust, which then may translate into physical or emotional violence directed against the person who is perceived as not-quite-human. (6)

Yet, Hall's consistent claim on Stephen's behavior as "in accordance with the dictates of her nature," is a radical resistance to the assumptions of binary sex/gender and heterosexual desire as givens of nature (146). As Lady Gaga puts it in our own century, for Hall, Stephen Gordon is 'born that way.'

The social world in Hall's novel responds with great cruelty to the 'monster' of non-normative gender and desire, the novel ends with Stephen's self-sacrifice, pretending to have an affair with another woman in order to send her beloved, Mary, away with Stephen's old friend and would-be suitor, Martin. Stephen is alone--the loneliness of the title--but she is with all the

other inverts, "the quick, the dead, and the yet unborn--all calling her, softly at first and then louder" (436). And they are calling to Stephen as their representative hero and to the God who made them--in Hall's understanding: "'Give us also the right to our existence!'"(437). It will take another six or seven decades and a major detour through the normalizing diagnosis of transsexuality for the calling that Hall's Stephen Gordon hears to be responded to directly.

With developments in endocrinology and surgical possibilities, mid-20th century transsexuals worked within what Sandy Stone, in her 1991 "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," calls "the dubious achievement of a diagnostic category"; in doing so they attempted to avoid the assault on them as unnatural by cooperating with an articulation of a normative transsexuality that reinforced both binary sex/gender and compulsory heterosexuality. Mid-20th century transsexuals, in other words, largely accepted the bargain that they could become 'normal,' fully human, not-monsters, while achieving their goals for body modifications, if they cooperated with hegemonic heterosexuality as a regulatory system for both gender and desire. There is, of course, much complexity in the articulations of mid-20th century transsexuals and in the elaboration of the diagnostic category; much of my current research attempts to explore such complexities and to understand these complexities and especially their frequent homophobic articulations as concurrent with emerging essentialisms of lesbian feminist and gay liberationist identities, which in their own ways participate in the separation of homosexual identity from the gender inversion/trouble with which it had been conflated in earlier decades. For now, however, I only gesture toward this intermediate space between early 20th-century gender inversion, including Hall's extraordinary claim on natural diversity of both gender and desire, and late 20th-century and early 21st-century assertions of the unnaturalness or constructed-ness of all of our embodied genders and desires.

Since the 1990s, transgender and gender queer articulations have explored and asserted an awareness of their own artificially constructed bodies, together with a claim on common human experience. This new doubled articulation, on the one hand, emphasizes the fabricated gendered body, and, on the other, asserts that such fabrication is our common human experience. In her 1994 *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, Kate Bornstein reviews the changing articulations of non-normatively gendered people:

Up until the last few years, all we'd be able to write and *get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women. Stories by and about brave people who'd lived their lives hiding deep within a false gender--and who, after much soul-searching, decided to change their gender, and spent the rest of their days hiding deep within *another* false gender. That's what we could get published about ourselves...And it always seemed that the people who would write *about* us had some as to grind or point to prove, or they'd been hurt and needed someone to blame it on...[such writers] perpetuated the myth that transgendered people are malevolent, mentally ill, or monsters. (emphasis in original, 12-13)

The 1990's witnessed a remarkable speaking-back from gender monsters who laid claim to their own choices and the social, medical and self-constructions of their differently gendered bodies and selves, while also insisting that all of us are constructed or fabricated within sex/gender in ways that we all share--as common human experience. Sometimes this insistence is more subtle as in *Read My Lips*, by Rikki Ann Wilchins who connects her own gender transition to the experience of all human bodies who are "seized by the cultural machine" (548) or in Loren Cameron's *Body Alchemy*, in which he describes puberty as that "slightly insane time in all our

lives" and in which he wonders if he--and by implication many other humans--will "ever feel safe in this body" (170, 177).

And, sometimes as with Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," we can begin to see a confident and, yes, angry assertion that all humans "achieve the similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process" (240); in this multigeneric tour-de-force--at once manifesto/performance, literary criticism of Mary Shelley's famous novel, gender theory, and personal journal in prose and verse, Stryker embraces monstrosity and challenges all those who claim the privilege of their own supposedly naturally gendered bodies: "I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself."

Stryker returns to the scene in the novel where Victor Frankenstein's creature speaks back to his scientist creator, just as Stryker speaks back both to the normalizing work of medicine and psychiatry under the diagnostic category, "transsexual," and to the assumptions of those who take their sexed/gendered embodied-ness for granted as if it were merely nature:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In those circumstances, 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; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (238)

But, of course, Stryker doesn't stop here with the claim on the unnaturalness of the transsexual body; she asserts with a gorgeous echo of Shelley's early 19th-century diction and syntax:

Hearken unto me, fellow creatures. I who have dwelt in a form unmatched with my desire, I whose flesh has become an assemblage of incongruous anatomical parts...I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie...it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. You are as constructed as me...(240-241)

I digress for a moment to my own teaching of the novel where I am struck by own my students' imaginations of the creature have been shaped by the James Whale films and the image of Boris Karloff, even if they haven't seen them, and by how they consistently refer to the creature as the 'monster,' even though the novel--through its multiple narrators--renders problematic this attribution. Even though the creature does eventually take the term for himself, as self-representation, the novel's play with point of view should alert us to possible questions of who's really monstrous: Victor Frankenstein's behavior is reprehensible and inhumane, especially in this rejection of the newly birthed creature; the creature's response, while cruel, is in reaction to his creator's refusal of responsibility for his creation, the abandonment of the child, and, as Shelly explores, also some Miltonic responsibility of the creator for his creation. Through a connection to the creature's challenge to his creator "above the village of Chamounix," Stryker's brilliant articulation of 'transgender rage' articulates a claim on our common construction within a tyrannical binary gender system. Annd it speaks back to those who imagine themselves as natural, as unfabricated, and to the doctors who have maintained the rules and boundaries of transsexuality.

Part of the power of Stryker's extraordinary text, which I admit I love, is that she continues to explore her own remarkable vulnerability taking us to a moment in the delivery room as her partner gives birth to their child. Even from within her queer family that has gathered around the birth, Stryker hears the always taken-for-granted assignment of sex/gender, "It's a girl," a comment that produces an extreme response of sorrow and rage, and then later analysis of what she calls "complicity in the non-consensual gendering of another. A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable" (250).

The challenge and the opportunity for those of us who are listening to contemporary challenges from non-normatively gendered people is to become aware of our own unexamined assumptions that to be a person is to have a gender that can be understood within the binaries of man/woman and to stop our own complicity in such "non-consensual gendering of another." Upon news of a birth, it can be both fun and perhaps a small revolutionary challenge on an interpersonal level to invent a lot of questions about birth weight, length of labor, the health of the mother and the newly born human person, all the while avoiding the question of gender. An indifference to the assigned gender of a new born is a sign of a new version of cognizable personhood--human and embraced as such, without the tyranny of non-consensual gender.

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Victor Frankenstein is the main protagonist of the novel. He is obsessed with scientific achievement and glory, which drives him to discover the secret of manifesting life. He devotes all his time his studies, sacrificing his health and his relationships for his ambition. After spending his adolescence reading outdated theories on alchemy and the philosopher's stone, Frankenstein goes to university, where he succeeds in germinating life. Referred to as "the creature," Frankenstein's unnamed monster yearns for human connection and a sense of belonging. His terrifying facade frightens everyone and he is chased out of villages and homes, leaving him alienated. Despite the creature's grotesque exterior, however, he is largely a compassionate character. Viktor Frankenstein meets the Creature at last. Will they be friends or have a fight? Creature Yes. I'll leave everybody in peace if you do one thing for me; but if you refuse, I'll kill your friends and family. Viktor Frankenstein Horrible monster! I will kill you first! Frankenstein tries to attack the creature. Viktor Frankenstein Running from me, you coward? Come here. I'm gonna catch you! Gordon has come up with a new recipe for ostrich lasagne. He just needs someone to taste-test it. When the team offer to give it a try they soon wish they hadn't! Susan O'Neal Stryker (born 1961) is an American professor, author, filmmaker, and theorist whose work focuses on gender and human sexuality. She is Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, former director of the Institute for LGBT Studies, and founder of the Transgender Studies Initiative at the University of Arizona, and is currently on leave while holding an appointment as Visiting Professor of Women's Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University (2019–20). Stryker also serves on the Advisory