

Chloe Wiitala

Professor Derdiger

Methods of Literary Study

6 December 2023

Reanimating Queer Perspectives through Camp: A Study of *Frankenstein* and Its Parodic Film Adaptations

Since the inception of narrative film in the early 1900s, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been adapted over eighty times. Of these adaptations, those which parody Shelley's work have historically been swept under the rug when it comes to academic discourse and serious literary studies. While parody is widely enjoyed by audiences, it is considered in some critical circles to be a mode of adaptation that lacks creativity and depth. However, I believe it is important to consider parody as a valid form of adaptation with just as much insight to offer regarding the source material as any other form. Parody is rooted in both exaggeration and subversion of expectations—what is a familiar aspect of the source material might be amplified or entirely excluded from a parody for comedic purposes. This draws attention to themes of the source while opening the door for audiences to become aware of the assumptions made in their consumption of the source. Because of this, parodies must be considered as a valid form of commentary that can be used to examine things like genre expectations, historical and cultural context, and societal norms.

There are few Frankensteinian parodies as notable as Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*. Brooks presents a comedic retelling of Shelley's 1818 novel as though it were a classic 1930s horror film. By utilizing exaggeratedly stylistic writing and directing as well as periodic overacting, *Young Frankenstein* toes the line of representing another sensibility, a cousin of

parody: camp. In the modern lexicon, camp is considered to be anything kitschy, flamboyant, theatrical, and playfully ironic.

Susan Sontag famously described camp as having a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (1). She also argued that camp is apolitical due to its emphasis on style, which she says means that it must inherently “slight content” (2). However, camp is understood by many other theorists to have been founded and perfected by queer creators. Media created by marginalized groups and consumed by mainstream culture should be considered deeply political, thus containing a high amount of meaningful content regardless of how stylized it may be. As Karen Pike puts it, camp “allow[s] the marginal and absent to emerge in dominant discourse.” Several of Sontag’s takes have been criticized by modern gender and queer theorists for removing camp from its roots in queer culture and underrepresenting this unique ability to serve as a platform for important political messages. Sontag herself wrote that “Camp is esoteric—something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques” (1). Does this not denote the fact that camp is, at its core, a queer and political art? Because of my own belief that camp is a necessarily and historically queer sensibility, I have chosen to explore the ways that the introduction of camp and parody reveal a nonheteronormative story at the core of *Frankenstein* through the lens of both *Young Frankenstein* and another legendary piece of camp, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

These adaptations have gone underrepresented in the academic world due to their “unserious” nature and—in the case of *Rocky Horror* in particular—significant deviation from the source material. I present these adaptations as seriously important contributors to the discourse around many hidden themes of *Frankenstein* that can only be uncovered through the use of such a subversive method as parody or camp. By providing a space in which marginalized

perspectives can attach themselves to a part of mainstream culture (i.e., a widely loved novel such as *Frankenstein*), camp allows a queer view to be introduced to the dominant discourse as a casual but confrontational, digestible but political, comedic but intellectual piece of art. It is the introduction of camp to the fantastic, supernatural setting of *Frankenstein* that allows for visualization of the repressed, unconventional themes hidden within the novel.

I. Cultural Context

It is essential to consider the cultural context of Shelley's novel and of these adaptations in order to avoid understating the sociopolitical implications of parody and camp. First, let us establish a historical background for the source material. The early nineteenth century in Europe saw the Industrial Revolution in full swing. Technological and intellectual advancements were being made at a rapid pace due in part to the prevalence of Enlightenment ideas emphasizing scientific inquiry. The unchecked speed of advancement contributed greatly to the attitudes of fear and uncertainty regarding science that are so pervasive throughout Shelley's novel.

This fear extended beyond the field of science. In general, there was a fear of the unknown when it came to the potential consequences of pushing cultural boundaries in any manner. Sexuality was one of these boundaries. During the Enlightenment, attitudes surrounding sex and sexuality had begun to become more repressive. Gender differences were emphasized around this time, leading to a view of sex as something only appropriate when the goal was procreation, and participating in extramarital or homosexual sex began to result in both social and legal repercussions all over Europe. However, Foucault argues in his *History of Sexuality* that this repression led to a paradoxical "discursive explosion" (17) around the topic. In fact,

Shelley's novel itself could be considered a commentary on sexual repression, as discussed in the next section.

The 1970s parallel the 1810s in more ways than one might expect. The presence of televisions in many homes brought humanity to new awareness of current events and advancements such as the moon landing in 1969. The decade of the '70s began with excitement as people watched the future evolve from their living rooms. At its core, excitement involves a certain amount of uncertainty. This uncertainty grew as the decade progressed and awareness continued to heighten around the dangers of space exploration, environmental issues, and the unresolved nature of various rights movements. By the end of the decade, global citizens everywhere were alerted to the duality of progress as their counterparts had been at the time of *Frankenstein's* original publication.

The activism of the '60s and '70s was coupled with a countercultural revolution that heavily involved sexual liberation. Attitudes surrounding sexuality rapidly evolved during this era of "free love." The tradition of placing extreme value on marriage and purity was being challenged by a generation of people aiming to replace current values with a celebration of exploration and single life. So began the disconnection of sexual pleasure from the goal of procreation. June of 1970 also saw the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall riots, and the first ever Pride marches were held as a demonstration for equal rights all across the country. In 1973, the American Psychological Association finally removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. These small steps and ideology alterations were the beginning of a major cultural shift, and that shift is clearly exemplified in both *Young Frankenstein* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

II. *Young Frankenstein*

As the machine of counterculture began to turn, audiences sought something new and different from Hollywood as well. *Young Frankenstein* in particular toys very directly with the conventions of “old” or “classic” Hollywood. It was the ongoing reevaluation of traditional norms that demanded a comedic retelling of the original material. Brooks did this not only through the parodying of old Hollywood tropes but also through the generally sexual tone of the film. Throughout Brooks’s adaptation there are persistent innuendos and a plethora of sexual situations, all of which are viewed through a comedic lens. When we use this parodic amplification of sex and sexuality as a mirror through which to view the source material, we can find significant themes of sexual repression hidden throughout.

In *Frankenstein*, the only character to express a sexual urge at any point is the creature itself. In chapter 17, the creature begs Victor for a mate: “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being” (Shelley 128). The creature shares this craving and emphasizes that the existence of another being with which it can share love, and presumably sexual experience, is the only thing that can make it feel truly at peace in a world of so much hatred. This request for a mate seems out of place in the grand scheme of the book, especially when compared to Victor, whose sexuality could be simply described as “avoidant.” He neglects his relationships with everyone in his life, including his fiancée, Elizabeth. Victor’s inattentiveness culminates in the creature’s murder of Elizabeth. Wolf Eichler characterizes this event as an example of the “fusion of desire and death” that is represented in *Frankenstein*. This fusion is also exemplified early in the novel when Victor dreams of Elizabeth turning into his dead mother in his arms. An association of sexual desire

with certain death is telling of the attitudes of Shelley's time. By contrastingly joking about sexuality, *Young Frankenstein* (also a product of its time) insists that sex is something worthy of discussion and expression while drawing attention to the repressive themes of *Frankenstein*.

The concept of doubling (or the creature as a counterpart to its creator's psyche) is also interestingly reflected through Brooks's adaptation. At the conclusion of *Young Frankenstein*, Frederick sacrifices part of his own mind in order to save his creature from a lifetime of being misunderstood. Both Frederick and his creature live on, albeit forever changed by the pieces of each other that they inherited. I cannot imagine a more direct method of showcasing the synthesis of creator and creature (Brennan). When we use this perspective to interpret the original text, it becomes clear that Victor's innate feelings of repulsion toward his creation are based on the parts of it that remind him of himself. In this way, the creature serves as a double of the repressed parts of Victor's psyche. These shared and feared facets include motherlessness, of course, but also subversion of gender norms.

The creature is described as having androgynous features, such as long dark hair, as well as other "luxuriances" (Shelley 60), and is quite literally an amalgam of human body parts that are never identified as entirely male. It is brought into this world fully grown but with no awareness of social conventions or gender norms and therefore no knowledge of how to perform gender. This leads to a lack of conformity that can be seen in its eloquence, its willing expression of feeling, and its choice to explore literature. When we keep doubling in mind and turn to face Victor, his discomfort with gender expectations becomes clearer. His pursuance of alchemy (a traditionally feminine field at the time of *Frankenstein's* publication) and avoidance of marriage and expressions of intimacy may be read as evidence of his nonconforming nature. Perhaps his greatest act of digression from traditional masculinity is his insistence on creating life without

the involvement of a feminine figure. This idea will be expanded upon in section III, as it is suggested even more heavily in *Rocky Horror*.

III. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Partially due to its roots as a stage musical, *Rocky Horror* is highly performative in the literal sense of the word. Main events and key story details are revealed through elaborate musical numbers, usually being directly observed by another character in the film. These performances are exaggeratedly stylized—traits of each character (physical or otherwise) are emphasized through extravagant costumes and a flamboyant writing style. The film famously uses this flamboyance to explore themes of gender and sexuality while blurring the lines of traditional boundaries. Bear in mind that this adaptation is paired with the same historical context and cultural attitudes as *Young Frankenstein*. Both were created during an era of gradual reform through the challenging of established binaries.

Dr. Frank-N-Furter (Victor's parallel) is particularly at odds with the gender binary. Frank's performance of gender is very androgynous, having some features of traditional masculinity and other features of hyperfemininity, particularly when it comes to makeup and costuming. This hyperfemininity is an element of the art of drag. For the majority of the film, Frank exercises nearly absolute control over the actions and reactions of anyone in his presence. He continually demonstrates that he's maintained power over the environment around him in spite of the femininity he performs through his drag. As Betty Robbins and Roger Myrick put it, "There is a denaturalization of gender at work in the drag performance, but it is one that allows the male to experience his version of the feminine while continuing to make visible the power of

male authority” (7). Frank’s gender performance, though subversive of norms, can be interpreted as an attempt to satisfy the fantasy of maintaining masculine power while representing certain feminine stereotypes. In the case of the novel, it is the very action of constructing his creature that represents Victor’s own “drag.”

As stated in section II, Victor exhibits failed conformity by several means, but it is his resolution to create life in the absence of heterosexual reproduction that solidifies him as a potentially queer character. By turning the process of generating life into something that involves neither sex nor a woman, Victor shows fundamental antipathy toward heterosexuality—and potentially toward sex altogether. As a means of balancing this internalized disunity, he continually attempts to gain authority over his creation. This grim pursuit is what isolates Victor from those around him, leading him to “shun [his] fellow creatures as if [he] had been guilty of a crime” (Shelley 59). Just as Frank’s cohort of Transylvanians eventually denies his power and destroys him, it is Victor’s craving to maintain masculine power over his creature that undoes him in the end.

As it is present in *Young Frankenstein*, doubling is again exhibited in *Rocky Horror*. To explore it we must examine the complex relationship between Frank and his creation, Rocky. Firstly, Rocky is quite literally an expression of his creator’s homosexual lust. Their relationship is initially one-sided, with Frank doggedly pursuing Rocky, who is afraid and uncertain. In spite of his projected confidence, this could be interpreted as a manifestation of Frank’s own insecurities surrounding his sexual identity. Let us then seriously consider the potential of the creature as an embodiment of Victor’s sexuality.

Victor is betrothed to Elizabeth yet neglects their romantic relationship—in fact, he neglects his relationships with every character in the novel. Arguably least neglected, though, is

his friend Henry Clerval. Clerval is the only person who Victor maintains a connection with and even expresses admiration for. Victor states: "I loved him with a mixture of affection and reverence that knew no bounds" (Shelley 68). If death is truly equated with desire in *Frankenstein*, it is no wonder that the creature murders Clerval before Elizabeth. Given that it is pushed to violence as a result of Victor's refusal to provide it with a mate, it may be that the creature chooses to get revenge by destroying the closest thing Victor himself has to a partner. Victor's internalized rejection of his homosexual desire is paralleled in his vehement rejection of his creation.

IV. The Role of Camp

Young Frankenstein and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* skillfully use the techniques of parody and camp to comically exaggerate or entirely subvert the expectations of their time. Both adaptations exemplify extravagance, theatricality, and the necessary playfulness to be considered deliberate camp. In spite of their perceived flippancy, these adaptations provide profound revelations about many understated themes of *Frankenstein* as well as the cultural climate during their time of production. It is camp that "prevents dominant discourse from burying what it would prefer to remain hidden" (Pike). In this case, camp allows *Young Frankenstein* and *Rocky Horror* to unbury the notions of sexual repression and gender conformity hidden in the original material. By existing as campy adaptations of a source that stands so firmly in the literary canon, they are able to introduce these nonheteronormative perspectives to mainstream society.

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