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Critical Introduction

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Mutilation, Dismemberment, and Martyrdom: The Female Body Fragmented

Space for woman in literature has always been limited. Whether females are used for the development of other characters, progression of plot, or simply sexualized for pleasure, space for women in literature often has narrow dimensions. These restrictive roles for women are perhaps best illustrated through the use of fragmentation, mutilation, and dismemberment to further minimize the space of female characters. Literature's experimentation with the dismembered body has a long history rooted in religious devotion, violent punishment, and psychosomatic diseases. In this essay, I will trace the origins of mutilation in historical, religious, and literary texts in order to understand its primary purpose. I will then evaluate how violence against the female body still operates in contemporary literature as well as other visual mediums. By analyzing how gender differs in the representation and significance of dismemberment in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Last Days*, I will argue that fragmentation within literature as a metaphor aims to sexually exploit, minimize, and enforce patriarchal ownership over the female body.

To begin, in order to understand the portrayal of textual violence against the female body, it is necessary to examine how the representation of dismemberment in literature first began. The description of mutilation and fragmentation of the body has been examined and studied in historical and religious scriptures dating back to early Medieval martyrdom. The word martyrdom was

derived from the Greek word “witnessed” and used as a reference to persons who witnessed the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Phillips). The term martyr was then used to describe those pursued and killed for practicing Christianity. For example, the beheading of John the Baptist stands as a significant representation of martyrdom. This example also embodies how dismemberment was culturally valued dependent upon the limb removed. In Margret Owen’s *The Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, Owen specifies the hierarchy of the body’s religious sanctity when divided, stating, “Among the corporal holy relics, it was the head that is held the highest status; the fingers or hands, because of their sacred function of conferring blessing ranked second in degree to holiness” (11). Therefore, the beheading of John the Baptist highlights the body as being both sacred as well as sacrificial. This duality of the body as both honorable and expendable exists because the body is represented as a vessel of faith. The biblical New Testament examines the purpose of the body as a vessel posing the question, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (Corinthians 6:19-20). This passage focuses on the image of the body as an infrastructure of the church rather than individual flesh. The use of the word “temple” creates a sense of proprietorship where the vessel both belongs to God and is occupied by his spirit. Therefore, the body’s death during martyrdom acts as a symbol of sacrifice because it acknowledges the flesh as the property of God. Martyrdom is a symbol of repaying the “price” that was bought to inhabit a vessel of God, which makes the death of the individual body both sacred and sacrificial.

However, the act of martyrdom does not hold the same sanity and sacrifice according to gender. For most early female Christians, martyrdom rather served as sexually violent intrusions of the body that centered in torture. The difference between the treatment of male and female dismembered bodies can be found in the same rhetoric used to establish the flesh as a religious vessel. The New Testament first book of Peter states, “Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (Peter, 3:7). This passage reiterates a similar theme of valuing vessels as an embodiment of property with the use of the word “heirs” indicating that the female body is inferior as well as the assumption that women are simply cosigners to contain God’s grace. The honor enforced to women’s vessels is rather than exercise in preventing the hindering of prayer rather than true reverence. The contrast between the deaths of male and female martyrs provides further examples of how the female vessel is represented as an object to be violently disrespected rather than sacrificially honored. Some of the oldest known female martyrs include Felicitas, Maximilla, Blandina, Agnes of Rome, Perpetua and Thecla. Saint Agatha of Sicily is known for her death as a martyr for the preservation of her chastity. Agatha was imprisoned after refusing to marry a high-ranking judge. She was then sent to a brothel where she was repeatedly raped and her breasts were cut from her body. After surviving this dismemberment, Agatha was stripped naked and forced to roll over hot coals until her eventual death. It is crucial to compare Agatha’s martyrdom with figures such as John the Baptist in order to understand how religious text differs in its rhetoric towards the dismembered female body. While the head of John the Baptist was meant to signify a hierarchy of the body as a holy relic fragmented, Agatha’s dismembered breasts were rather meant to

indicate lowliness. By forcing Agatha to be sent to the brothel and raped, she was ultimately labeled as a whore by her community and therefore became a physical embodiment of shame. Her death was used as multiple efforts of torture aimed at sexual organs in order to emphasize her dishonor. While the value of men's fragmented bodies is indicative of those limbs' religious function, the aim towards women's sexual genitalia confirms society's value in those reproductive organs alone. Therefore, while religious texts originate dismemberment and martyrdom as a dual complexity of the sacrificial versus the sacred, violence towards the female body is rather a reflection of patriarchal authoritarianism and shame.

While dismemberment, mutilation, and violence towards the female body originate from religious texts and the Medieval era, Owens believes the larger cultural fascination with the fragmentation of the body can be majorly attributed to literature's period of Romanticism. Owens brings attention to Mary Shelley's 19th century novel *Frankenstein* as a pivotal representation of the exploration of the body. Victor Frankenstein's monster serves as a mascot to the exploration of the dissected body through his representation of a body fragmented, yet whole. Owens believes that this interest in the deformed and dismembered was then accelerated in the 20th century through the use of visual mediums such as the experimental art of the avant garde such as Rodin, the Cubists, and the Surrealist (12). Owens states it is these radical movements which "gave impetus to an exploration of the motifs of fractures, fissures, and sutures" (12). The explorations of these fractures and fissures are a direct dissection of the body's relationship to society's culture. Owen believes art and literature serve as a promising mediums to explore this fractured relationship because,

As an artistic motif and theme, corporeal fragmentation varies in prominence insofar as it exceeds the personal, and extends into the social. It then provides a highly malleable visual vocabulary not only for expressing fears about personal security, but also for exploring ruptures and upheavals in the social sphere. (12)

This use of both literature and visual vocabulary to represent and understand the fractures of society is imperative because the literary canon is ultimately able to examine these complexities in a palpable and physical sense through the human anatomy. In Lori Hope Lefkowitz's introduction to her collection of essays, *Textual Bodies: Changing Boundaries of Literary Representation*, Lefkowitz's states, "In our culture, the body alternatively insists on its own duty, or violation (for example, in forms of sex acts, pregnancy, self-sacrifice, or various expressions of asceticism); the body is alternatively inviolate, vulnerable, and violated, a construct never fully itself" (1). The dual nature of body that Lefkowitz mentions suggests that the body itself is too complex to simply be represented as one whole being. Rather she believes that the body's representation must be fractured to portray the true multifaceted existence. This conceptualization of the body as a mixture of different elements rather than a unified whole can be further examined by the psychoanalytic theory published by Dr. Jacques Lacan called the mirror stage. The mirror stage was a theory developed by Lacan as a psychological stage of infant growth. Lacan argued that when infants from the ages of 6 to 18 months first see their reflections, they create an exterior and mental representation for themselves known as "I" (Heidegger). This development begins when, "The infant identifies with the image...but because the image of a unified body does not correspond with the underdeveloped infant's physical vulnerability and weakness, this image is established as an Ideal-I toward which the subject will

perpetually strive throughout his or her life” (Heidegger). This Ideal-I that is subconsciously present at this developmental age also creates a fracture in mind’s identity by making the children’s self perception dependent upon exterior objects such as its reflection. Therefore, Lacan argues the self is fragmented from the earliest stages of life. The mind then subconsciously pulls itself further apart as the subject’s identity continues to rely upon external objects to reach the Ideal-I. This understanding of the external intruding upon the internal identity also assists in understanding Owens and Lefkowitz’s correlation between corporeal fragmentation and the social environment expressed through literary and visual mediums.

With a better understanding of how fragmentation is used as a reflection of the cracks in the social environment and personal identity, we can now examine how fragmentation and dismemberment in literature differs according to the gender of its subjects. Owen’s reference to *Frankenstein* serves as a pivotal example of the textual body as both dismembered and whole. However, *Frankenstein* also serves as a prime example of how the representation of dismemberment differs according to gender. When Victor Frankenstein first brings his monster to life, he describes his creation as a fragmented nightmare stating,

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful... 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 shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley, 123)

Despite his efforts to use beautiful individual features, such as teeth and hair, Victor realizes the collection of these body parts only creates an unsettling representation of the human body. Despite Victor's triumph in creating life, he rejects his creation completely. The monster addresses Victor's abandonment by drawing a parallel to God's creation of man. The monster states, "I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel..." (Shelley, 43). Here, the monster recognizes his desire to be seen as Adam in the eyes of Victor as his creator as a plea to be conjoined with mankind. The monster is also expressing his desire to similarly be endowed with his own female companion as his Eve. The connection the monster draws between the creation of his companion and Eve similarly reinforces that the ideology of the production of female partners for the purpose of male character's progression. These women are formed with the dismembered limbs, such as the rib, of their male counterparts and are therefore bound to their companions forever. Therefore, *Frankenstein* similarly reflects on the biblical imposition of ownership of the body, in which the female body is not only a vessel gifted by a creator, but also in-part belonging to men for their own purposes.

Shelley's exploration of fragmentation in *Frankenstein* is also a larger reflection of the difference in the portrayal of creation according to gender. Shelley represents Victor as a male figure who pursues the ability to independently create life only to ultimately abandon his creature when he is repulsed by its ugliness. In Cynthia Pon's essay "'Passages' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Toward a Feminist Figure of Humanity" she evaluates Victor's refusal to accept his creation by referencing his masculinity. Pons states, "From the beginning of Mary Shelley's novel, masculine humanity only recognizes its own image on the basis of gender, class and race. The female, the socially inferior, and the non-European—these are excluded from the ideal and

practice of generic humanity” (35). Pons theorizes that Shelley’s portrayal of masculinity assumes that men are unable to identify or accept those who are not of similar gender, race, or class because they simply do not see these creatures as human. Pons pushes this ideology, asking “What constitutes humanity? By unraveling heroic discourses, [Shelley’s] text causes us to look at the underside of progress, to reintegrate the voices of those who have been dismembered or displaced” (36). The displacement of persons identified as “inhuman” by the patriarchal values in this novel can be witnessed through Victor’s repulsed response to certain features in his creation, such as his yellow skin and black lips. The creature’s entire persona is foreign in appearance and therefore isolates his existence further from any acceptance by Victor or society. Therefore, Pons argues that the monster in *Frankenstein* is larger than a reflection of a fractured society, but rather an amalgamation of different marginalized groups embodied in one creature. However, Shelley also undercovers this displacement through the creature’s aborted wife. When Victor first decides to create a female companion for the monster he worries, “I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged” (Shelley, 179). In this passage, Victor’s destruction of the female creation is vivid and violent. The description of the unfinished female monster as being torn to “pieces” creates a dismembered and torn image of the female body that brings Victor more peace than the thought of the female’s body whole. Victor clarifies his fear of the female monster, stating “She, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with the pact made before her creation” (Shelley, 178). Therefore Victor fears to give life to another creation not because she is a monster but rather because she is female. Masculinity represented in *Frankenstein’s* patriarchy already suggests the inhuman

nature of marginalized groups that do not reflect the majority race, social class, and gender of society. Victor chooses to violently dismember and abort the female companion because he fears to give life to a creature he already deems inhuman.

While Frankenstein embodied the mutilation and creation of both the male and female body in the 19th century, Brian Evenson's novel, *Last Days* serves as a contemporary example of the textual representation of male and female dismemberment. *Last Days* follows Kline, a former detective, who after amputating and cauterizing his own hand is recruited by a religious community of mutilites. When immersed in this cult, Kline learns that the community ties religious devotion to the repeated act of dismemberment. Similar to Owen's study in the religious hierarchy of limbs removed, this cult also believes a higher accumulated number of dismembered limbs equates to a higher position in the eyes of God. Kline is highly regarded for his ability to cauterize his own wound and is even hailed as a prophet. While the novel alludes deeply to the roots of religious devotion at the core of dismemberment, the absence of female characters within this community is unavoidable. The first evidence of women mentioned within the community is found within the pages of a porn magazine found by Kline. Kline describes the women in these images stating,

He looked at the first picture for some time before realizing the girl was missing one of her thumbs. With each month, the losses became more obvious and more numerous, March losing a breast, July missing both breasts, a hand, and a forearm. The December girl was a little more than a torso, her breasts shaved off, wearing nothing but a thin, white cloth banner from one shoulder to the opposite hip, reading 'Miss Less Is More.' (Evenson, 17)

This passage introduces a theme of sexualized, violent, corporeal images associated with the presence of women in the community. While the male characters of the novel boast of their growing number of mutilations, none mention the removal of a sexual organ. Fingers, hands, toes, and feet are instead repeatedly used as examples of celebrated and ceremonial dismemberment. This passage is also the first connection made between mutilation and sex. The use of the phrase “Miss Less Is More” capitalizes upon the fragmented quality of the woman in the magazine and creates the suggestion that to be less whole is to be more sexually appealing. The erotic nature of this slogan is notable because it deviates from the intense religious devotion of the community and rather represents women as a distraction or guilty pleasure. This correlation between women as distractions from the sacrificial and religious core of the community is seen again in form of strip clubs. When Kline visits one of these dance houses, he vividly describes the movement of the female dancer stating, “She made her way toward one side of the stage, spinning slightly, and then snapped the stump of her arm against her remaining hand and Kline saw three fingers wobble loose and slough away. The crowd roared” (Evenson, 45). This description not only reinforces the female characters as devices for distraction and pleasure, but also provides a violent and aggressive rhetoric towards the female body. The verbs used in this passage such as “snapped” “wobble” and “slough” create a visual image akin to the act of amputation. The dancing becomes both a reenactment of the women’s mutilation and a performance to arouse to the male audience. The crowd’s excitement towards these strippers serves as a confirmation that they are both entertained and excited by these violent and sexual visuals of dismemberment. However, the difference between the portrayal of dismemberment according to gender is not only sexual, it is also a reflection in power. While this religious

community sees the act of mutilation as a ceremonial sacrament. The absence of women during scenes of ceremonial dismemberment is large enough to be noted by Kline himself. As he attends a mutilation party to witness a man who will be mutilated in order to be promoted to a higher-ranking member of the community, Kline observes, “There were no women, he quickly realized, nothing but men, everyone in their thirties and forties, nobody either very young or very old” (Evenson, 40). Kline’s attention to the lack of women and diversity in attendance at this religious ceremony is significant because it not only confirms the detachment of women from the religious function of the community, but also separates them from association with power. Both authority and confidential knowledge are accessible only to community members with larger accumulated numbers of dismemberments. Therefore, by keeping women in the community in spaces such as strip clubs, the cult is able to both sexualize the female body and normalize violent, erotic behavior as a distraction while also keeping positions of power inaccessible.

In conclusion, dismemberment and violence towards the female body has long existed in the literary canon. Whether this metaphor is used to shame women’s sexuality, enforce patriarchal bodily ownership, or represent a fractured identity or environment, these brutal images continue to shift and shrink the female corporeal experience. It is crucial to evaluate the history of dismemberment and its literary evolution in order to better understand the use of contemporary fragmentation towards the female body and identify whether these renditions are minimizing or rather represent a larger complexity towards the female embodiment.

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