Epistemic Fragmentation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"

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Abstract: Bodies are mediated through discourse, and the status of a body is always at the mercy of its context. When something unknown to its society—an epistemic fragment—is present in a body, the body forces revelation (challenging what is socially acceptable in its space). Deviation from a societal norm stretches the conception of bodies and reveals fragments (or gaps) in expectations in social norms. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Christina Rosetti's "Goblin Market," bodies force realizations of epistemic fragments, posing a split between what is expected and what is present. In *Frankenstein*, the creature's inherent nature is not fully clear, representing the confusing and the unknown, forcing a realization of an epistemic fragment. In "Goblin Market," the goblins' fruits are elusive: They pose a danger that enters through the body and leads to a change in societal well-being. Both works explore corporeal modes of challenging social consciousness.

Bodies work within the spaces they inhabit to either accept or challenge the social discourses of these spaces. When a body presents something previously unseen or misunderstood in a space, making it intelligible, it forces the realization of an epistemic fragment. The term 'epistemic fragment' means a discernible gap between common understandings of social discourses and tangible reality. In other words, epistemic fragments are inconsistencies in what is thought to be true and what is physically present. Bodies both expose and generate these fragments by externalizing that which is interior (or belonging to the

epistemic realm) by presenting it in a discernible, physical space, making the fragment visible, and by deviating from societal norms or discursively produced ideals to stretch the conception of how bodies exist in certain spaces. To expose epistemic fragments is to challenge common understandings in discourses. I argue that in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and "Goblin Market" by Christina Rosetti, bodies act as sites of epistemic fragmentation because they challenge societal norms by presenting previously unseen or misunderstood ideas in a physical and therefore discernible space. Bodies lead to fragmentation by forcing realizations of epistemic fragments within society and subsequently fragmenting social expectations with tangible reality. In Frankenstein, the creature's strange body transgresses social norms and expectations—which fragments them—while also conforming to and subsequently subverting these expectations. Ultimately, the creature catalyzes the exposition of epistemic fragmentation while also generating it. In "Goblin Market," the goblins' fruits act as physical renderings of epistemic fragments as their nature is mysterious and elusive. Further, they pose a danger that enters through the body and leads to a change in societal well-being (represented through physical ailments). The characters' bodies defy the expectations of what should happen after eating the fruit, fragmenting social discourses by challenging expectations with reality, and subsequently suggesting a change in these discourses in light of this revelation. Both works explore the relationships between bodies and knowledge, and how bodies act as agents in exploring and challenging social discourses.

Epistemic fragmentation leads to Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus. Dissensus relies on the revelation of epistemic fragments, or that which is unknown and unfamiliar, removed from the 'sensible,' and without prominence in social discourses. In Rancière's view, the "principal function of politics is the configuration of [. . .] proper space," or to build and maintain a proper homeostasis of society (8). Politics, which is the heart of society, is marked by dissensus, or "the manifestation of a

distance of the sensible from itself" (8). Dissensus "lodges one world into another," makes visible "that which had no reason to be seen," and frames society as "two worlds in one" (8), disrupting the notion of one mainstream worldview and way of being, as well as assumptions of static social norms. Thus, epistemic fragments create dissensus as they expose alternative ways of being in a certain space, allowing for this notion of two worlds in one. Bodies present this dissensus by rendering epistemic fragments physically and interacting with a physical social space where they can fragment social discourses by transgressing and challenging the expectations they assume.

In *Frankenstein*, the titular character exposes epistemic fragments by displaying the misunderstandings of his creature's existence. His creature's monstrous body further imposes epistemic fragments by simultaneously encompassing appearances of the same—by presenting features in bodies that are accepted as normal—and the other—by presenting said features in a state of decay and ugliness, disrupting assumptions of how a body is supposed to exist. Victor Frankenstein pursues studies in natural science and galvanism, resulting in the birth of a grotesque creature. Frankenstein contemplates, "did the principle of life proceed [after death]? It was . . . considered as a mystery." He begin to experiment to research this question and realizes that "[t]o examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death" (Shelley). However, he realizes that his tangible knowledge of anatomy is not enough to observe this question, and he "must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body," framing the human body as a site of the unknown, but also as a gateway to uncovering the unknown (Shelley). Frankenstein believes himself to be knowledgeable in regards to the human body as he is successful in his experiment. However, once his creature comes to life, he realizes that he has little knowledge regarding what he has done or what will happen because of his actions. Here, the creature's body subverts the knowledge that Frankenstein thought he had to reflect

the knowledge he does not and cannot have. The creature's body, in this way, becomes a site of confirming and creating epistemic fragmentation as it confirms the assumed mystery of physical death and makes clear Frankenstein's inability to resolve this mystery.

Frankenstein's creature not only exposes epistemic fragmentation by virtue of his strange and alien existence but also transgresses ideas about how a body is supposed to appear in his anthropocentric space. The creature's appearance is that of something almost human, but not quite human, combining aspects of the 'same' and the 'other.' As a result of his experiments, Frankenstein creates a being who is composed of several body parts of those already deceased. As the creature is composed of human body parts, he is anthropomorphic. Some of his features are from individuals who comply with the social expectations of appearances, such as "lustrous" hair and his teeth being of a "pearly whiteness" (Shelley). However, he is also incredibly 'other'-looking due to his "shrivelled complexion," "watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set . . . straight black lips," and "yellow skin scarcely cover[ing] the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (Shelley). His appearance stretches expectations of how one should exist in their space by subverting that which is beautiful with that which is grotesque. Further, his anthropomorphic form exposes the gross inner workings of the human body and what is underneath, which should render his body a site of learning and discovery. However, the workings of his body still largely remain a mystery. Even if the material functions of the creature's body were discernible to Frankenstein when the creature was initially animated, he still could not control or understand the logic behind the creature's continued being. The exploration of the creature's body instead renders the body as a reflection of what cannot be known, acting as an embodiment of epistemic fragmentation. Even more off-putting than the horrid contrast between the 'same' and the 'other' is the unfamiliarity of the 'same.' Not only does the

creature mimic the human in his appearance, but he also mimics the human in his mannerisms. The creature displays an array of emotions and speaks eloquently as an educated, well-adjusted person would. Ben Dawson notes how "Frankenstein's monster is both incompletely and overtly human; 'sub'-human in his physical ugliness and self-sufficiency and almost 'excessively' human in his spiritual dependence, acute injurability, emotional needfulness" (Dawson 155). In this way, he embodies the dissensus that Rancière speaks of by presenting "two worlds in one," disrupting social assumptions of how something should act or be (Rancière 8). Due to this, the creature's body fragments social assumptions, expectations, and norms with his physically 'othered' body existing in a normal physical space. The creature transforms the known into the unknown, which not only reflects society's epistemic fragmentation—gaps in knowledge—but also generates new epistemic fragmentation, questioning what already is known and adding gaps into previously concrete knowledge. These gaps call for a reworking of discourse to account for these fragments.

While *Frankenstein* explores the tension between epistemic fragments and absolute knowledge, "Goblin Market" focuses on the impact of epistemic fragments on social networks. "Goblin Market" posits a dichotomy between the pure and 'good' main social realm, which the protagonists—Lizzie and Laura—inhabit, and the 'other,' unknown and 'bad' social realm from which the goblins derive. This dichotomy, though concerning morality, is explored through both the physical spaces of the characters' bodies and the space their bodies inhabit. The characters interact with the goblins and their fruit physically, and subsequently challenge social expectations and norms by defying social expectations that regard the body and its proper actions. Ultimately, the characters' bodies act as a bridge by allowing both sides of the dichotomy to interact and challenge each other, exploring the relationships between the (good) main social realm and the (bad) 'other' realm.

In "Goblin Market," the girls' reaction to the goblins' fruits establishes the existence of epistemic fragments. The fruits themselves are elusive, as when they are introduced to the two girls, they are described as "[f]ruits which that unknown orchard bore" following the declaration that the girls "never tasted such [fruits] before," using the term 'unknown' to acknowledge the speakers'—and presumably, the characters'—lack of understanding about them (Rosetti 132-135). The poem relies on the mysteriousness of the fruits and subsequently, assumes their danger by equating the unknown to the dangerous. However, even though fruits were scarce at the time of the poem's composition, they were still recognized as a source of sustenance and prosperity (Hawkes). By subverting the expectations of the fruits' nature, Rosetti removes the 'sensible' from itself, presenting notions of dissensus and fragmenting the monolithic worldview of how things are supposed to be. Further, some of the fruits are described as "Wild free-born," illuminating their opposition to domestication or presence in a cultivated and regulated society (Rosetti 11). There is also mention of "Pomegranates full and fine," alluding to the myth of Persephone, who, by eating a pomegranate in the underworld, became confined to the 'other' physical space, one that is opposite to the prosperity and goodness of the space where she is originally from (21). This allusion augments the fruits' perceived dangerous properties, especially regarding the dichotomy of proper (good) and improper (bad) spaces.

The dangers that the fruits pose are social as well as physical. The fruits are described as "Sweet to tongue and sound to eye," presenting them as alluring to physical senses (30). Any interaction with the fruit requires physical bodies to consume and experience them. Due to the fruits' elusiveness and subsequently assumed danger, interactions with them threaten one's well-being. The already assumed danger of the fruits is confirmed through the tale of Jeanie, who is "in her grave" as she "Fell sick and died / In her gay prime" as a result of eating the goblins' fruits (312-316). However, the speaker notes how Jeanie "should have been a

bride," which is a position regulated and maintained through society (313). The fruits inhibited Jeanie from fulfilling the social role that she was assumed to fulfil, rendering them a danger to her social network. However, these expectations of danger are not always met. Laura, even though she ate the goblins' fruits and suffered, still survived, with both girls becoming "wives / With children of their own," prospering both physically and socially (544–545). This result is only possible due to the help of Lizzie braving an encounter with the goblin men. Even though there are warnings, such as "'We must not look at goblin men [. . .] You should not peep at goblin men'," Lizzie does so to ensure her sister's well-being (42-49). Albert Pionke notes how even though Lizzie knew there were perils to be feared in encountering the goblins and their fruits, to refrain from braving them would be "an insufficient moral choice in the face of another's suffering" (Pionke 902). As the poem is a moral tale, this note of proper moral action emphasizes the role that the body plays not only in challenging social discourses but in maintaining proper space. Lizzie's close physical proximity to the goblins, though it is expected to be fatal, is successful in ensuring the girls' well-being, once again fragmenting social expectations and questioning the certainty of past knowledge. The girls' final result, becoming wives and prospering, is a social reality that does not comply with the expectation that encountering the goblins and their fruits will lead to suffering and death, fragmenting said social expectations and imposing a new set of social expectations: people can encounter the goblins and their fruits, yet not meet a doomed fate. By remaining healthy and prosperous in the mainstream (good) society after consuming the fruits, things that are 'other,' Laura's body works as a site of fragmentation and encompasses "two worlds in one" (Rancière 8). Ultimately, in this poem, bodies act as sites of fragmentation by physically rendering the tension between social expectations and reality and bringing epistemic fragments into a physical space where they can engage with society and challenge it.

As explored, bodies are entwined with the

configuration and development of discourses. Both *Frankenstein* and "Goblin Market" explore how bodies act as sites of fragmentation to challenge societal norms and expectations by rendering ideas of 'otherness,' or the unknown, in a physical and intelligible space. In *Frankenstein*, the science and logic behind the creature's existence and inherent nature are not fully clear. As a result, the creature becomes a representation of the confusing and the unknown, forcing the realization of an epistemic fragment. This fragment, or epistemic gap, constitutes his existence as an 'other,' which then constitutes his deviation from normality and stretches expectations through his continued existence. Further, he embodies Rancière's concept of dissensus, not only acting as an 'other,' but subverting notions of the 'same' through physical appearance and social actions. While *Frankenstein* focuses more on the relationship between epistemic fragmentation and concrete knowledge, "Goblin Market" focuses on the relationships between epistemic fragmentation and social reality. The nature of the fruits is elusive, and this unknowability reveals the existence of epistemic fragments. The fruits' capability of fragmentation manifests socially, though it is experienced physically, as they enter through the body and lead to a change in societal well-being. The indulgence in the fruits is shown to be socially deviant, and the characters' continued existence despite engaging with both the fruits and the goblins challenges the expectation of how bodies act, further fragmenting expectations and reality. Once epistemic fragments are revealed, discourses can shift to accommodate these fragments, and these works expose how these fragments are essential to the configuration and development of discourses and space.

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