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Foreword

When PD Dr. Margit Peterfy introduced the idea of a conference conceptualised, organised and chaired by students at M. A. level, her proposal received a tremendous response. In 2018, the M. A. students of the English Studies Programme held their first annual Graduate Student Conference at the English Department of Heidelberg University. The conference programme includes a long list of contributors whose talks cover a wide range of interests, subjects and texts, offering insightful approaches to current issues, such as questions of gender, technology and migration.

As the first instalment of the conference coincides with the revival of the department’s very own e-journal, it seems the perfect opportunity to commemorate this event by publishing the most distinguished contributions. Therefore, the editors of the e-journal chose four outstanding papers for this special issue: The first contribution by Kieran Sommer discusses the impact of artificial intelligence, presenting an analysis of how human-made synthetic entities threaten to disrupt societal structures by acting as the artificial ‘Other’. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909) serve as case studies for Kieran’s hypothesis. Katharina Böhm’s research focuses on another type of ‘Other’ when she investigates the female body as a contested ground in George R. R. Martin’s *A Feast for Crows* (2005). In her study, Katharina examines the (maybe surprising) ambiguity inherent in the text where stereotypical gender representations are juxtaposed with a deconstruction of clichéd notions of femininity. The third contribution, written by Max Riehm, examines the novel *The Speed Queen* (2003) and the movie *Monster* (2007) through the lens of the concept of ‘normality’. The article tries to find out in which way these stories subscribe to or undermine the strategies of normalism. The last contribution comes from the field of linguistics and argues against linguistic ‘othering’. In their study, Milica Rodić and Nevena Mićović examine data taken from the British National Corpus to obtain a first impression of hedging propensity with regard to age and gender. Their work lays the foundation for further studies to take into consideration other variables and to support the claim that hedging is not tied to gender, but that it is part of a much more complex system.

Both the conference and this issue of the e-journal would not have been possible without the effort and support of PD Dr. Margit Peterfy. A special thank you also goes to Bruce Gaston for his extremely valuable corrections as a native speaker. Lastly, we want to thank all the students who contributed to this issue and who stayed motivated and industrious throughout the whole editing process.

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Abir Al-Laham & Désirée Link
I. Literature
Perceived Threat to Humanity, Object of Projection and Mirror of Human Anxieties: The Artificial Other in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops”

Kieran Sommer

1. Introduction

The topic of otherness and the dichotomy between “self” and “other” is established as a concept in philosophy, psychoanalysis as well as in literary studies and has been used in feminist literary criticism or postcolonialism, among other areas (Beville n. p.; Sexton 620). The concept of self-other opposition postulates that a person constructs everything which he or she considers as not being part of his or her notion of “self” as “other” (n. p.; 620). Both are inextricably linked, as the idea of difference presupposes sameness and vice versa. When speaking of the “other” and what is attributed to it, one is also speaking, or at least implying, the “self” and its characteristics (Beville n. p.). Therefore, in literary studies, by examining what, why and how a subject is constructed as “other”, inferences can be drawn about the “self”. This has been done in theoretical discourses such as postcolonialism to analyse the relationship between, for instance, the coloniser and colonised (Sexton 620). Of course, every instance of othering can be considered artificial and human-made, as it is merely the result of lines being drawn between the self and the other on the basis of perceived social, cultural or ethnic differences. Yet, in this paper, the pre-modifier “artificial” is used to describe how these entities are not naturally born, but created by humans in their physical shape and as a mental concept. Due to them being regarded as non-human, they are seen by their creators and the majority of the humans they interact with as “others” that differ from humans in a number of ways. They range from the humanoid creature of flesh and blood, maligned as the “Monster”, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or: The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818, to more abstract entities with artificial intelligence, such as the eponymous “Machine” in E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” from 1909.

Both these texts will be analysed in this paper, as the narratives provide readers with different perspectives on the artificial others central to their plots. Both the Machine and Frankenstein’s Creature are perceived by the humans
around them as posing a profound threat to society and humanity itself. The psychologist and literary scholar Michael Szollosy states that monsters in novels and films are projections of fears about ourselves as humans and it is for this reason that they can be so terrifying (Szollosy 435). An artificial being as a product of the human mind, both in the sense of its imagined physical and conceptual form, can also serve as such a projection. Therefore, by examining these beings in the cultural context of their artistic conception, one can draw conclusions about more general human fears. Mary Shelley, writing in the late 1810s, can be considered to have established the archetype of the artificial being rebelling against, and even, one could argue, destroying its creator in her novel *Frankenstein*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, mass industrial production and mechanisation led to fears that humanity was being changed by the technologies it was inventing, even being dehumanised, because of its increasing dependency on them (437; Kibel 126). E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops”, in which the so-called Machine, a worldwide artificial entity, has taken control over much of humanity, can be seen as a vivid expression of these worries.

In order to gain a better understanding of the anxieties connected with the artificial other and the meaning underlying them, the following aspects will be examined in this paper: firstly, what the specific fears connected with these entities are and what these fears show about human nature or human thinking. Secondly, what facets of human nature are projected onto such a creation and how might they influence our perception of it? Because a large number of authors and filmmakers from the 20th and 21st century have shown how artificial entities outwit, overpower or infiltrate their human creators, such anxieties were and are widespread. Consequently, this paper may be able to provide new insights or encourage further research as far as the artificial entities in other works are concerned.

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1 Projection in psychoanalysis is a means by which humans split off negative parts of themselves into a container and so project them away from themselves to maintain the illusion that their own self is better or purer, thereby finding a way to deal with complexes about their own negative traits (436).

2 In addition, this is also the first time readers were faced with the existence of an intelligent artificial being, long before the debates on artificial intelligence in the 20th and 21st century. The latter time periods also saw the idea of the creation destroying its creator being taken up repeatedly in literature and films. It even led the US-American writer Isaac Asimov to coin the term “Frankenstein complex” for the human fear of technology (434) and, by extension, human-made beings.
2. The Creator-Creation Relationship and Human Loss of Control

In Shelley’s novel and Forster’s short story, the human-made entities at the centres of their narratives are initially created to aid humans or serve some advantageous purpose for them. The Genevan scientist Victor Frankenstein creates his “Monster” or Creature in order to gain new scientific insight, to discover the principle of life (Shelley 52f.) and to achieve the goal of “infusing life into an inanimate body” (58), thereby overcoming death by creating this new life form from the body parts of dead humans (55). Yet Frankenstein abandons his creation almost as soon as he has brought it to life because he is abhorred by its hideous appearance (59, 77). Furthermore, he constructs a division between himself and his creation by stating in conversation with the Creature that “there can be no community between you and me” (Shelley 103). Being feared and rejected by the humans the Creature interacts with due to the appearance his creator has given him, he sees himself excluded from human society and its pleasures (222). He takes revenge on Frankenstein by murdering innocent people who are closely connected to his creator, such as his younger brother William, his best friend Henry Clerval and his wife Elizabeth Lavenza (144, 181, 199). Because of his maker’s failings to make him more human-like in appearance, the Creature sees himself in personal conflict with Frankenstein as well as rebelling against his authority.

In contrast to Shelley’s novel, E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” represents more of a gradual and deceptive takeover by an artificial entity, due to human dependence on it, in the form of what is referred to as the Machine. Under its control, the majority of humans live in their own underground cells, sending out their thoughts to people they know through the Machine (Forster 145); their wishes and needs, including nourishment, entertainment, social contact and self-fulfilment, are provided for by the pressing of a button (149f.). The workings of the entity in Forster’s short story are even beyond human comprehension: though humans living at the time in which the story is set have been left with instructions by the creators of the machine, none of them have mastered the

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3 This is also demonstrated when the Creature exclaims, before murdering Victor’s younger brother: “Frankenstein! you belong then to my enemy- to him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge; you shall be my first victim.” (144).
entirety of the system (186). This implies that the humans in the story only understand what they have to do in order to work the Machine successfully. In an act of hubris not unlike that of Victor Frankenstein, humanity in “The Machine Stops”, driven by a need for efficiency, security and comfort, has overreached itself and is therefore unable or too comfortable to break the hold the Machine has on it (185).

Readers of Forster’s short story are never introduced to the Machine’s creators and, like the humans in the narrative, do not have any knowledge about the Machine’s inner workings or thinking. The only indication of what their motivations may have been for this creation is a comment by the protagonist Kuno, who is critical of the way of life under the Machine’s control (146, 149); he wishes to see his mother Vashti in person instead of through the Machine’s screens and escape the living space it provides (146, 165). He tells Vashti: “We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now.” (176). If one accepts this assessment as true, humans created this entity to serve them, but due to its development or a lack of control on the humans’ part, they are no longer able to make it serve the purpose it was designed for.

In Shelley’s novel, a similar loss of human control is first shown through the disparity in physical strength. As the Creature tells his maker: “Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints are more supple.” (Shelley 102). The reason for this is purely pragmatic on Frankenstein’s part, as fashioning his creation larger than the average human makes it easier and therefore quicker to create this being (54). Actually, Frankenstein never really controls his creation, nor is he physically able to. In addition to physical superiority, the Creature also inverts the hierarchy of power: his master-slave relationship with Frankenstein is reversed (Lanone 60). Like the humans in Forster’s short story, none of whom entirely know how to operate and thereby control the Machine, Victor not only loses control over his creation, but comes to be controlled by it. While the Creature refers to his maker as his “natural lord and king” (Shelley 103) at their first meeting, Victor becomes aware, due to the murder of his younger brother William, of the threat his creation poses to his family.

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4 In contrast, the readers have direct insight into the Creature’s thought processes through his narration mediated by Frankenstein to Robert Walton and can therefore sympathise with him (Randel 467). The Creature possesses the agency and intellect to act in full knowledge of the consequences of his actions and to question social hierarchy as well as his place in it.
and to others, which forces him to give in to the demands of the Creature to create a female companion. Frankenstein describes this obligation as his “slavery forever” (157). After Victor breaks his promise by destroying the female companion, the Creature addresses his maker: “Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power” (172). Because of his power, the Creature negotiates with his maker from what he sees as a superior position. His remarks show that the Creature feels superior to his maker in other non-physical, possibly moral, ways, as Frankenstein has neglected his duties to his creation. The “natural lord and king” (103) has become the slave of his creation, in his as well as his Creature's opinion. The occurrence of this loss of control and inversion of hierarchy in both narratives is indicative of more general human fears about their creations assuming control over them. As Franco Scalzone and Guglielmo Tamburrini point out, humans may be creators, but they are not omnipotent, cannot fully control their creations and therefore fear to lose that control or the illusion of it (Scalzone 305).

3. Human Degradation and the Questioning of the Ontological Divide Between Self and Other

As the previous chapter has shown, human incapacities are demonstrated through their connections with artificial entities and the acknowledgement of such deficiencies maybe also influence or revive a, possibly subconscious, longing for a parental or divine figure which can offer help or protection. In the short story, the needs and wishes of the humans are fulfilled, and the Machine enables a life without dangers, sickness or pain. However, they are also restricted in their thinking and their movement (Caporaletti 37), and so Silvana Caporaletti compares the Machine to a mother (35), from whose protection and care humans cannot emancipate themselves. This can be interpreted as a fear that humans could be thrown back into childhood and be patronized by and dependent on the artificial entity, thereby losing their maturity and being prevented from making choices for themselves. Alternatively, Caporaletti suggests, the Machine could be compared to an omnipresent and omnipotent deity (39), which, similarly to the mother-machine, is benevolent in many ways, but heavily restricts humanity. The people living under the control of the Machine even come to establish a kind of religion around it, in which they worship it as divine and praise it for the benefits
they believe themselves to be reaping from it (Forster 184f.). Furthermore, humans are kept like animals or pets in single rooms (158), with the Machine taking on the role of the owner, providing for their needs. This could reflect fears of a reverse domestication process, by which these artificial entities domesticate humans according to their needs and wishes, much like humans domesticate animals. Thereby, the Machine takes on a human role and humans themselves are reduced to a kind of animal status, reflecting their anxiety, or the unwillingness to accept, that they are not all that different from their fellow mammals.

Considering these three interpretations, the Machine can be seen as embodying human fears of losing the rights to freedom and self-determination and the underlying anxiety of not deserving these rights because of one’s own immaturity or weakness. This reliance and complete dependence on the Machine and the human decadence revealed through it also degrades humanity in the eyes of the reader. The privileged and unchallenged position we have in nature is taken as self-evident in human thinking (Scalzone 305) and by degrading, overpowering or even enslaving humanity, artificial entities challenge that belief, while also seriously undermining our sense of self-worth as humans. It is therefore justifiable to say these anxieties about the artificial other shed light on more general human fears about our power and status as humans.

In addition to challenging human dominance and belief in our superiority, machines or artificial systems also begin to challenge the ontological divide between humans and these entities as the latter reach a higher level of sophistication, which at the same time calls human uniqueness into question (Kim n. p.). In his article “The Fourth Discontinuity”, Mazlish claims that an absolute division between humans and their creations will no longer be tenable, which will be a blow to the human ego (Mazlish 3, 14). This Fourth Discontinuity, as Mazlish terms this division, is challenged by the depictions of artificial entities mentioned previously. However, one could also argue from the opposite perspective that if humans can be replicated artificially or in machine form, it raises the question whether humans themselves are just more complex kinds of machines (Kibel 132). Either way, when human or even super-human intelligence and consciousness is recreated in the form of artificial systems, this is another blow to humanity’s self-love (Scalzone 305).
There is no indication of the Machine in Forster’s short story displaying human traits and thereby calling into question the ontological divide referred to above. In Shelley’s novel, it is not clear from the initially terrified reactions of humans to the Creature whether they see him as a monstrous human being or as another being entirely. What is clear, however, is that the Creature’s capacities are clearly those of a human: he learns human language, is able to feel empathy, compassion and guilt (Shelley 110, 113, 123, 222, 224). In addition, De Lacey, a blind man the Creature introduces himself to, even explicitly addresses him as a fellow “‘human creature’” (136), making it clear that, apart from his appearance, there is nothing about Frankenstein’s creation to suggest that he is any different from a human being.

Alongside this challenging of the ontological divide between the artificial other and human self by displaying clearly human traits, the reverse is also true that in both narratives humans are shown to have lost their humanity. It is not clear exactly how they have; in both texts, the reader is simply confronted with an existing state of affairs. Victor Frankenstein states that “[a] human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity” (Shelley 56). He believes in rationalism and the control of one’s passion, but is also driven by ambition, hubris and desire for progress (Szollosy 434f.). These character traits, especially his cold rationalism and striving for progress, can be considered to mirror worries about the thinking of Enlightenment scientists in Shelley’s time. In “The Machine Stops”, the artificial entity has seemingly had disturbing and, one could argue, dehumanising effects on the humans under its control. The Machine may reflect human fears about a loss of identity and subsequent absorption into a collective without individuality. In the story, places of human habitation on earth are all alike (Forster 155): humans are provided with cells to live in, which are compared to the chambers of a beehive, all the same shape and size and equipped with the same devices (144, 158). The humans in the cells are depersonalised (Caporaletti 40), as their ordinary mode of communication is through the screens of the Machine, which do not reproduce the nuances of human expression, but only a vague image of them (Forster 148). In this way, their individual expressions are not shown to the humans they communicate with and thereby part of their identity and individuality is lost. Moreover, the “custom”, as it is referred to in the short
story, of touching each other has become obsolete and therefore people, even when close to one another, refrain from doing so (161). The passengers travelling on the airship are even described as “avoiding one another with an almost physical repulsion” (163). Vashti is repelled by the physical presence of other people, preferring to view them through the screens of the Machine, and avoids the touch of her fellow human beings (194). She is irritated by her son wanting to speak to her, telling him that he is wasting her time (145) and states a number of times that she does not have any time to visit him, i.e. to interact with him socially outside of the Machine’s channels of communication (152, 161, 187). It may be what she really believes, as she is constantly interacting with other acquaintances through these channels, or an excuse not to have to break with habit and thereby transcend the norms established by the Machine. This also demonstrates that under the Machine, one of the strongest and most enduring kinds of love, the familial, between a mother and her son (41), is perverted. As Vashti states that the people in the living space of the Machine are all alike (Forster 161), it can also be assumed that her behaviour is typical of the majority of them.

The Machine has also stripped humans of emotion and passion, of what we may feel makes us human and unique (Caporaletti 41). Kuno, for instance, says to his mother: “[The Machine] has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills [...]” (Forster 176). Because the humans communicate through the screens of the Machine (148), their interactions lack physical closeness and their interlocutor’s emotions can only be guessed at. Through this loss of love and emotion as well as the repulsion from touch and physical proximity, human sociality and humanity itself is perverted. We as readers may fear to see these qualities in our own fellow human beings, because it means that they have lost what we believe to be essential human traits (Szollosy 435), such as having emotions or empathy. The artificial other mirrors such fears in two ways. Firstly, in Forster’s short story, the Machine provides the technology through which humans manifest their loss of humanity. To take but one of the

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5 Even when she reluctantly meets her son in person, she repeats in a mantra-like way that “[i]t is not worth it” and does not touch him or even look at him at first (164). There is no indication that this is out of dislike for her son, nor is it mentioned in the text that their relationship is strained or unusual in her view. In fact, she smiles when he first contacts her during the short story (145). Rather, she sees her avoidance of touching him as a sign of her good breeding (164).
examples in the above, without the communication screens, humans would be forced to interact more closely with one another, thereby their social relations could not be perverted as they are in the short story. Secondly, the artificial others’ negative and partly inhuman traits may also reflect on their makers, because, if we hold them responsible for their creations, we as readers may assume that in order to be capable of such a flawed creation, human creators must have lost part of their humanity. This may even be the case in “The Machine Stops”, in which the reader is not even introduced to the creators of the Machine. The underlying fears about the qualities which enable humans to create these entities greatly add to the anxieties we as readers and viewers have about the artificial others, especially if we perceive them as a threat (435), even subconsciously.

Furthermore, humans in Forster’s story seem to be losing, or may have already lost in many cases, the capacity for original thinking or observation. The lectures humans in “The Machine Stops” give each other exclusively contain the knowledge and conclusions of others before them, as they do not leave their rooms to observe themselves, with one lecturer warning his listeners: “Beware of first-hand ideas” (182). Music and literature are produced by the Machine (144, 149), thereby making humans insignificant or even superfluous in these areas (Caporaletti 38). As Kuno states, humanity “only exist[s] as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die” (Forster 176). Humanity is thereby reduced to a means to an end: to support the life and progress of the Machine and should it fail to serve that purpose, the Machine might no longer see any point in keeping it alive.

4. Expressions of Human Nature and the Creations’ Agency

Besides dehumanisation, what may also be frightening or frustrating for the reader is the demonstration of negative human traits in Forster’s short story: readiness to submit, self-deception and the human blindness to the fact that they are so completely under the control of a system of their own making. In the words of the short story’s narrator: “Quietly and complacently, it [i.e. humanity] was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine” (186). It is this complacency that can be so frustrating, that humans give in and do not question what may be obvious to the reader (Caporaletti 42). Interestingly, Forster published his story before the invention of television, computers,
smartphones or even broadcast radio, the interactive devices resembling the ones he describes in his short story (Kibel 130). For him these devices can only have been potential concepts, abstract means of exploring human thinking and behaviour. It can therefore be assumed that the human interaction under the control of the Machine is an expression of what Forster believed human communication was degenerating into in the age he was living in (Kibel 130). Is this what we or the people of the early twentieth century are and were afraid of in human nature: is there a tendency to accept unquestioningly when it is easier or more convenient to do so, to be egocentric, to choose comfort and security over what is perceived as morally acceptable?

The narrator in “The Machine Stops” implies that it is because of humanity overreaching itself in the name of progress and due to the desire for comfort, human hubris or errors of the past, that the Machine controls humanity and humans cannot wrest that control from it (Forster 186; Caporaletti 39). It is suggested that the Machine is simply a container for projections of negative human traits or a medium through which such traits can be demonstrated, rather than being their source. Moreover, the narrator refrains from blaming the human authorities for the developments in their world, attributing instead these developments to the force of “some invincible pressure” of unknown origins (Forster 185). However, he or she neither blames the Machine itself for these developments nor ascribes any evil or insidious intentions to it. Forster’s short story is therefore not so much an assault on machines as such, but rather on the hyperbole of the Machine, the excesses of technology and mechanisation. It can be viewed as an appeal not to reduce humanity to the synthetic environment it has created (Caporaletti 38).

Similarly, the Creature in Frankenstein is not solely to blame for the devastating consequences of his actions or the atrocities he commits, as one could argue that these are mainly due to the flaws of his creation and could have been prevented by his creator. Victor Frankenstein himself refers to those murdered by the Creature as “victims of [his own] unhallowed arts” (Shelley 90), before pointing out that he feels a profound hatred towards the being he has created because of his Creature’s “crimes” and malice (95, 102). He refers here to the “crimes” of his Creature, while before he named those murdered by his creation

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6 In his article “Chekhov’s Corner: ‘The Machine Stops’ by E. M. Forster” Woody Caan points out that the Machine is the Internet, Skype, Amazon, Netflix, Facebook, Twitter all in one (Caan 744).
not its, but his own “victims”. This makes it clear that Frankenstein assigns the responsibility for these actions to the Creature in the latter instance, while earlier in the narrative, he holds himself responsible for them.

Yet, in exchange for the chance of receiving a female companion from his maker, the Creature also offers Frankenstein: “I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me” (103). He gives Frankenstein the choice between addressing his grievances by creating a female companion or unleashing his destructiveness on humanity and Frankenstein’s family. The murders the Creature commits after this offer are due in large part to Frankenstein’s failings in his responsibility as the Creature’s maker: by refusing to cooperate with the Creature, Frankenstein removes his creation’s last restraint with regard to violence. Therefore, also in Frankenstein, the human creator can be held partly responsible for his creation’s actions.

Because artificial entities like the Machine or Frankenstein’s Creature are a product of the human mind, the conflict between humans and said entities can principally be seen as conflicts between humans and their inner world (Scalzone 305). Consequently, as the anthropologist Genevieve Bell argues, it is not so much a question whether human-made entities will destroy humanity, but whether humans will destroy themselves by enabling artificial entities to do so (Tucker n. p.). Frankenstein’s Creature demonstrates his knowledge of this when he remarks to his maker: “On you it rests, whether I [...] lead a harmless life, or become the scourge of your fellow creatures, and the author of your own speedy ruin” (Shelley 104).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has shown which human anxieties underlie the literary depictions of a takeover by artificial beings or their superiority over their human creators in Shelley’s Frankenstein and Forster’s “The Machine Stops”. We are, or can be, afraid of not only losing control over the entities we have created, but of being controlled by them, be it through their physical or intellectual superiority or our dependency on them. Because of their superiority these entities expose human weakness and thereby challenge or even rob us of our, supposedly self-evident, privileged position in nature. Thereby, they harm our love for ourselves or self-confidence as human beings and even show that we may be insignificant
in the larger context of the natural world. Moreover, if they are convincing imitations of humans, as Frankenstein’s Creature seems to be, artificial beings call into question the ontological divide between them and the human self as well as our uniqueness as human beings. The reverse is also true: because of the influence of an artificial entity like the Machine in Forster’s short story, humans are shown to relinquish what can be considered core human qualities and thereby their humanity for security or simply out of idleness. Similarly, fears about the human creators are expressed. The narratives reveal these creators to be flawed or their humanity degraded by showing what entities they create and, by displaying the creations’ negative traits, may cause the reader to make assumptions that it is the creators’ negative qualities which enable humans to create such artificial beings.

As the artificial others are products of the human mind, these entities can serve as a vehicle for projection, onto which we transfer negative traits of our own personalities or human nature in general. They demonstrate the anxieties we have about our inner world: through the reactions or adaptions to these artificial entities, certain human behaviour or negative facets of what may be human nature are revealed to the reader, such as apathy, self-deception or the tendency to do what is easier instead of what is moral. Though of course the powers, intentions or appearances of these artificial entities may cause anxieties themselves, it can also be claimed that fears about ourselves and our fellow humans as well as about our power, status, nature and humanity are expressed by the depiction of these artificial beings, who act as both a mirror and an object of comparison for humans in the respective narratives.

It would be interesting to conduct further research into the differences between cultures and the changes over time with regard to perceptions and fears about artificial entities. Moreover, the psychoanalytic aspects of these anxieties need to be examined in more detail to provide a fuller picture of these human fears, however, this would exceed the scope of this paper. Additional literary works on this subject matter could be analysed and thereby further insights gained, also with regard to the question why humans create entities which are superior to them in some respect, as there is not much textual evidence about this.

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7 It should be pointed out that my research and that of most of the scholars whose works I have examined, with the exception of Min-Sun Kim’s article (Kim 2018), are from a European or US-American cultural perspective and may not reflect the thinking in other cultures around the globe about human-made entities.
in Shelley’s and Forster’s narratives. Does this reflect anxieties about human flaws or a need to correct them? Furthermore, can anxieties about the human creators of the named entities be viewed as reflecting a deeper level of the human psyche, namely a mistrust of our fellow human beings and fears about their potential to harm us? In addition, more research into the extent to which human creators are responsible for the artificial entities they create could aid in addressing issues surrounding the threat these entities may pose for humankind.
Bibliography


Between Praise of Beauty and Rape Threats: The Female Body in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*

Katharina Böhm

1. Introduction

The *Game of Thrones* franchise is notorious for its explicit display of nudity, sex, and rape. Even though many of its female characters are used and abused in the archaic, patriarchal world of Westeros, most of them are actively trying to fight the sexism that confines them to strict gender roles. In contrast to older entries in the epic fantasy genre like *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series (1996–2011) displays a contemporary awareness of sexism and gender issues. Not only does Martin present the women of Westeros as well-rounded characters, but also gives insight into their thoughts and feelings by including point of view chapters told from their perspective. In doing so, the series advocates for gender equality and actively explores these issues in its narration by portraying the struggles of its female characters. In the male-dominated society of these novels, a strict concept of binary genders is prominent which merges biological sex, psychological gender and individual gender expression into one and establishes the physiological differences in male and female bodies as the foundation for its sexist rules of conduct. Therefore, women are excluded from public spaces such as the political sphere or the battlefield – as soon as women aspire to any position of power or profession that is traditionally male-coded, corrective mechanisms such as rape and forced marriage are employed as punishments for their transgressions.

In this essay, I will take a look at two distinct female characters who are situated at the end points of a spectrum of femininity: Cersei Lannister, Queen Regent of Westeros and known for her beauty, and Brienne of Tarth, a skillful knight. While Cersei adheres to female gender roles and incorporates the ideal of feminine grace, Brienne’s gender nonconformity and masculine appearance are perceived as reprehensible. Despite their different gender expressions, both Cersei and Brienne suffer from the confinements of the female gender and strive for an equal standing with their male acquaintances.

I will examine how the construct of the “weak” female body, whose main purposes are being pretty and bearing children, is reinforced on the one hand and
deconstructed on the other by the means of close reading passages of the forth volume *A Feast for Crows* (2005) which are narrated from either Cersei’s or Brienne’s point of view. My theoretical approach is mainly based on the works of Judith Butler, especially *Bodies That Matter* (1993), in which Butler discusses the role of the body within the larger frame of “gender as performative act”, and how the body receives gender as a discursive inscription based on Foucault’s theory about discourse as power. Further, I will analyze how sexual acts and rape are used to uphold the power hierarchy between men and women and why the premise of “strong male bodies” vs. “weak female bodies” is not rooted in biology but in a misogynistic interpretation thereof, and how this premise is utilized to oppress women. Moreover, I will take into consideration how an ambiguous, non-binary gender expression violates the code of conduct set for each gender. I will start with a short summary of Butler’s theory, continue with an analysis of Cersei Lannister, the queen who wishes to be king, and finally analyze Brienne, the “freakish” (Martin 84) lady knight.

### 2. Beautiful Bodies Matter

Even though it seems that bodies are naturally classifiable into either the female or male category according to physical and biological traits, this binary division is regulated by a normative discourse and is therefore a construct. Butler remarks concerning seemingly irrefutable corporeal “facts” that

> if certain constructions appear constitutive, that is, have this character of being that ‘without which’ we could not think at all, we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas. (xi)

Therefore, the physicality of bodies becomes “unthinkable” without resorting to the gendered discourse surrounding it. “Sexual difference” might be considered the result of different biological functions; however, these are always “both marked and formed by discursive practices” (1). If these practices are consistently repeated and reinforced within a culture, they appear as “natural”, as pre-discursive and inevitable through restrictive norms of how subjects can act (34f.). Butler relies on Foucault’s concept of “regulatory power” (22) emerging from the discourse\(^8\) that “works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are

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\(^8\) The term “discourse” comprises “not only […] a concrete set of utterances […] but also […] the implicit (hidden) models for ordering and circulating knowledge in a certain context” (Berensmeyer 10ff.) according to Foucault’s theory of discourse analysis. The distribution of history and
formed” (22), which is, in this example, the attribution of a certain gender depending on a set of genitals and the expectation of following predefined gender roles.

These gender roles follow a binary structure within a matrix of heteronormativity, based on the female and male sex. Further, Butler notes that sex can only be “read” through the lens of heterosexuality:

the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the ‘materiality’ of sex, and that ‘materiality’ is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony. (15)

Therefore, gender as a social construct is not derived from biological sex; simply said, sex is already gender: “If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on” (5). Taking this into consideration, there is no sex without gender, and we cannot perceive “sex” without reverting to gender assumptions.

Making assumptions about someone’s gender becomes problematic in the case of gender nonconforming or nonbinary people. Their very humanity is intricately tied to their “intelligibility” (35), that is to say, how easily they can be gendered:

We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into question. Indeed, the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means. (8, emphasis in original)

Everyone who is not clearly identifiable as either woman or man is rendered inhuman: Note how the English language only has gendered pronouns for people in the third person singular; the third option “it” attributes a dehumanizing object status.⁹ Achieving and/or maintaining a clear intelligibility entails following a set of rules mostly concerning visible, physical attributes; for women these rules manifest in the form of ideals of beauty.

Femininity is in its foundations much more visually coded than masculinity. Throughout the ages, female characters in stories have been described in terms of their beauty – their slenderness, youthfulness and elegance. Especially in the

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⁹ In recent years the use of “they/them” pronouns for third person singular has become more prominent as a genderless alternative, but it has not reached a normative status outside the LGBTQ+ community yet.
Middle Ages, failing to adhere to these standards was considered akin to a moral failing because outer and inner beauty were (and are still) often equated (Lowe 25). Furthermore, these beauty standards serve a certain goal: upholding the gender hierarchy. Beauty ideals are by design unobtainable, and therefore a woman will always be seen as imperfect in her virtues (26). While mind, reason and culture are male-coded, the body, emotion and nature are female-coded; within these binaries, the female is always seen as lesser (24). Moreover, “[b]eauty is associated with the body, which as a material phenomenon should be controlled, manipulated and transcended” (Callaghan x) in a patriarchal society. In conclusion, “beauty is a socially constructed mechanism of patriarchal social control” (vii) to ensure that women strive to be frail, passive and physically weak, which makes them “nonthreatening” to the gender hierarchy (x); therefore, only beautiful female bodies matter.10 Outer beauty entails physical fragility, while inner beauty prescribes a passive, submissive state of mind – if either of these conditions is not met, punishment follows, as I will demonstrate in the next chapters.

3. Cersei: A Queen Who Wishes to Be King

Barely any woman in Westeros holds as much power as Cersei, who rules over the whole kingdom. Yet, she must constantly justify her position and has a deep fear of losing it. This is illustrated by a dream in which she is sitting on the Iron Throne and realizes that she is naked when people around her start laughing:

Horrified, she tried to cover herself with her hands. The barbs and blades of the Iron Throne bit into her flesh as she crouched to hide her shame. Blood ran red down her legs, as steel teeth gnawed at her buttocks. When she tried to stand, her foot slipped through a gap in the twisted metal. The more she struggled the more the throne engulfed her, tearing chunks of flesh from her breasts and belly, slicing at her arms and legs until they were slick and red, glistening. (Martin 65f.)

The Iron Throne is a symbol of the patriarchy, and here the female body is literally sliced open by the male domination within this society. The people whom she is supposed to rule over mock her, a woman, for aspiring to power; her body is exposed and leaves her vulnerable. The blood running down her legs is reminiscent of menstrual blood, and the cuts on her breasts and belly are wounds on the body parts connected to maternity. Butler notes that “[t]he classical association of femininity with materiality can be traced to a set of etymologies which link matter

10 “Matter” means in this context “be worthy of respect”, or even “be allowed to exist”. For a more thorough discussion of the semantics of “matter” see Butler 27-32.
with mater and matrix (or the womb) and, hence, with a problematic of reproduction” (31), which refers to the inherent connection of women to their material bodies due to their reproductive capabilities. Every woman is at least partially confronted with her body’s ability to procreate when she is having her period. Menstruation is usually seen as an “illness” (Ussher 42), and women are not accounted reliable for their actions as they suffer from “lunacy” (42), or in other words, not being capable of rational thought which, however, a ruler should be at any time (of the month). Overall, this dream displays in a graphic manner how the soft female body clashes with the iron grasp of a male-dominated world.

The context and placement of this dream within the plot is significant because it serves as introduction and exposition to Cersei’s point of view chapters. Right after she has woken up from her nightmare, Cersei is informed about the murder of her father Tywin Lannister, in the face of which she is “strangely calm” (Martin 68). Moreover, she is almost elated over her increase in power: “There will be no more talk of forcing me to wed again. Casterly Rock was hers now, and all the power of house Lannister” (69, emphasis in original). In her dream, Cersei sits high above her court while everyone is bowing before her, which indicates a position of power and authority. Only after her brother Tyrion\(^\text{11}\) has started laughing at her does she realize that she is naked and vulnerable. The blades of the Iron Throne cutting her flesh are phallic objects penetrating and hurting her body, which invokes connotations of rape and Cersei’s fear of men overpowering her – this is a psychological burden every woman resisting male domination has to carry. As I will further demonstrate in the section about Brienne, rape is a widely used strategy in Westeros to punish women who step out of line. Cersei assumes she can take on the role of her father as family patriarch and even goes as far as thinking “I am the only true son he ever had” (69). This statement hints at internalized misogyny as she distinguishes between the lesser role of a daughter, who is passive and needs to be married to a suitable husband, and a son, who is active and holds power as the heir of the family line. Therefore, she identifies with the

\(^{11}\) Cersei carries a deep hatred for Tyrion since their mother has died giving birth to him. Further, Cersei accuses Tyrion of murdering her son Joffrey and exhibits a deep paranoia ever since.
male gender in terms of efficiency and capabilities. Overall, Cersei greatly overestimates her agency and underestimates the punitive mechanisms of a vastly patriarchic society.

A queen in Westeros does not have the same position as a king; at most, she can merely be a temporary substitute. The very fact that Cersei is sitting on the Iron Throne in her dream is an offensive act because “[o]nly the king or his Hand could sit upon the throne itself. Cersei sat by its foot, in a seat of gilded wood piled with crimson cushions” (493). As befitting for a woman, Cersei sits in front of the throne, on a lower level; even when no king (of age) is present, the patriarchal rule looms over her and makes clear that she can never hold the same position as a male ruler. The only reason why Cersei has this amount of power is the fact that no man is currently able to rule (her husband, King Robert, is dead), but this situation is not intended to last. Christopher Roman states that “the basis of [Cersei’s] power is in another’s name (her son, her father, her husband) [so] she can never frame her decrees from within her own power” (64). This is why she brusquely refuses her son Tommen, the actual king, when he wants to sit on the throne: “The rule was hers; Cersei did not mean to give it up until Tommen came of age. I waited, so can he. I waited half my life. She had played the dutiful daughter, the blushing bride, the pliant wife” (Martin 491, emphasis in original). Important is the aspect of “playing” the roles a woman of her social position is expected to take on: Cersei’s strategy to attain power has been to fulfill societal expectations until she can rule by herself – even though only in the shadow of a male. Her dream shows that she is afraid of losing this authority due to how intensely the discourse of the female body and its perceived weaknesses clash with a position of power within a patriarchal society. This power imbalance of female and male bodies is put to the test when Cersei conducts a sexual experiment with her sleeping companion Taena Merryweather.

The mechanics of heteronormous intercourse are a significant argument for the perceived inferiority of female corporeality: During sex, it is the male body that penetrates the female body (more or less forcefully) and thus plays an active,

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12 Between her two brothers Jamie and Tyrion, Cersei sees herself as the most suitable to be the heir of house Lannister. Jamie as member of the Kingsguard must live a life of celibacy and therefore cannot produce an heir, while Tyrion is physically deformed and the youngest sibling.

13 This relates to Butler’s theory of gender performance: Cersei assumes her womanhood by performing acts which are defined within the socio-cultural discourse as “feminine”. By seeking power, she breaks the role and her performance becomes inadequate.
leading part as opposed to the passive, receiving part of the woman. Cersei muses about the habits of her late husband Robert in the bedroom and his way of “dominating” her (i.e. raping her). She concludes that this feeling of power and domination might be attainable for herself if she adapts the male role while sleeping with Taena: “I am the queen. I mean to claim my rights” (692). In a patriarchal society, being a man includes the right to have control over the female body – the wife’s respectively – and her sexuality to eventually ensure pregnancy with an heir. Cersei as the current leader of such a society interprets this right as unrestricted access to her bed companion’s body. Thus, Cersei starts to penetrate Taena with her fingers as a gesture of domination but feels no satisfaction: “But it was no good. She could not feel it, whatever Robert felt on the nights he took her. There was no pleasure in it, not for her” (692). In this case, Cersei’s disappointment does not stem from the lack of sexual gratification but the lack of a confirmation for the power distribution in a patriarchal society.

Her mistake is to conflate physical, sexual acts and socially attributed power hierarchies: Men are not naturally superior to women because they can penetrate and physically overpower them, but because society arbitrarily decided to set male superiority (in physical, social and political regards) as the standard. If a woman assumes the role of the penetrator, she exercises power that is not hers to wield within the logic of the heterosexual matrix and therefore confuses the categories of gender (Butler 50f.). Butler states that masculine (sexual) dominance is founded on its margins – the prohibition of female penetration – and that masculine penetration “is not an origin, but only the effect of that very prohibition, fundamentally dependent on that which it must exclude” (51). Penetration is linked to the symbol of the phallus, and the one in possession of the phallus is in possession of (symbolic) power. Therefore, male (sexual) domination is founded on the prohibition of female penetration or domination, which means that women are potentially *able* to exercise this power, they are just not *allowed* to. However, all of these principles are not tangible in the sense that a woman can simply penetrate another woman and “feel” the power. In this case, Robert did not feel powerful because he was able to rape Cersei but because he was inherently attributed a higher position within the gender hierarchy. Changing the discourse and its power dynamics can only be achieved through iterative acts over an elongated period of time, not through a singular experiment.
In the text examples above, Cersei repeatedly tries to assume a masculine-coded position of power, either politically (sitting on the throne) or sexually (penetrating another woman), which should not be obtainable to her according to the patriarchic discourse. This concept of male superiority which is based on seemingly natural, biological facts – the assumed strength of male and assumed fragility of the female body – starts to fall apart when 1) physical strength is not a decisive factor, such as in political affairs, and 2) when taking into account the existence of physically strong women like Brienne.

4. Brienne: A “Freakish” Lady Knight

While Cersei generally fulfills the social expectations for a noblewoman concerning looks and conduct, Brienne’s occupation as a knight and lack of feminine features result in a very masculine appearance:

Had Brienne been a man, she would have been called big; for a woman, she was huge. *Freakish* was the word she had heard all her life. She was broad in the shoulder and broader in the hips. Her legs were long, her arms thick. Her chest was more muscle than bosom. Her hands were big, her feet enormous. And she was ugly besides, with a freckled, horsey face and teeth that seemed almost too big for her mouth. (Martin 84, emphasis in original)

Throughout the story, Brienne feels ashamed of her body, even though her build is ideal for a fighter and gives her advantages: She is strong, quick and has good stamina. Even though she proves her skills as a sword fighter several times, her opponents disregard her and dismiss her successes due to her gender. Her master-at-arms advises her to use this fact to her convenience, which she does: “Men will always underestimate you [...] and their pride will make them want to vanquish you quickly, lest it be said that a woman tried them sorely” (203). Brienne’s relation to her body is ambiguous: Even though it provides her with physical strength, it causes her to be perceived as inferior because of her sex and the beauty standards attached to it. Further, her androgyny opens the gates for constant harassment.

In the patriarchal world of Westeros, bodies or identities which do not fit the binary gender cluster are frowned upon and despised. Brienne’s gender-non-conforming lifestyle and non-binary appearance cause confusion for the people around her as they are uncertain how to treat her, even if they do not wish her any harm. One example is the squire Podrick Paine and his insecurity about how to address her: “My lady? Ser?” Podrick never seemed certain what to call her”
(283). The narrator never explicitly states whether Brienne tries to pass as a man or possibly identifies as a male; rather, Brienne is forced to pass as a man because her identity as a knight is considered unnatural for a woman. Further, her body does not adhere to normative standards of femininity, such as physical fragility and beauty, which provides an incentive to other and to dehumanize her. Butler notes that “it is not only a question of how discourse injures bodies, but how certain injuries establish certain bodies at the limits of available ontologies, available schemes of intelligibility” (224). Characters like Brienne demonstrate the inherent weakness of the patriarchal gender hierarchy: Everyone who cannot be clearly classified in terms of gender (and therefore controlled) appears as a danger for the established system – and the system becomes a danger for them in return.

As I mentioned earlier, dominating a woman means to dominate her body, which is why Brienne receives rape threats from foes and allies alike: “She had never slept easily in the presence of men. Even in Lord Renly’s camps, the risk of rape was always there” (Martin 88). At one point several knights start to court Brienne, which confuses but also flatters her. Later she finds out about the bet that the one claiming her virginity will receive a great amount of gold. Upset and indignant over this treatment, she defeats each of her “suitors” in a sword fight afterwards. Still, she is given the blame:

Your being here encouraged them. If a woman will behave like a camp follower, she cannot object to being treated like one. A war host is no place for a maiden. [...] The gods made men to fight, and women to bear children [...] A woman’s war is in the birthing bed. (301)

This is a classic case of victim blaming: Brienne is held responsible for the harassment because she “provokes” it by simply existing as a woman. The knight lists three categories of women: prostitutes, virgins, and mothers. Only the first (and morally degraded) is allowed on camp grounds as her purpose is to sexually gratify the men. This quotation is a case in point of the misogynist mindset of the Westerosi society. Ussher explains that “women are objectified and dehumanized, represented as sexual: their sole function being to serve man's pleasure” (22) – and/or reproduction. Brienne currently belongs to the category “maiden”, and the knights are not able (or unwilling) to refrain from sexualizing her and respect her as a fellow knight. Even though they are not sexually attracted to her, they feel entitled to her body and treat her accordingly. Therefore, any attempt at harassment or rape is seen as justified.
While the knights still show some conduct and manners, the threats and insults become more drastic when Brienne is cornered by some outlaws whom she has fought before. She is greeted with: “She wants me, lads, the big horse missed her merry Shags! I’m going to fuck her up the arse and pump her full of motley seed, until she whelps a little me” (Martin 417f.). The outlaws deny Brienne’s identity as a knight and do not see her as a (worthy) opponent; instead, she is reduced to her identity as a woman and her body to its reproductive function. Thus, rape is utilized to reinforce the gendered power dynamics: Note how the purpose is to make her pregnant and force her into motherhood (“until she whelps a little me”). Her justified anger over this treatment is discredited with the remark “[s]he’s mad with moon blood” (420), which refers to menstruation and the alleged lack of rationality it entails. Even when Brienne has managed to kill all three outlaws by herself, Randyll Tarly (the landlord in charge) wants to send her home so that she might lead a life befitting for a woman. When she declines, someone tells her that “Randyll is of the view that you might benefit from a good hard raping” (524). Concerning Brienne’s disregard for gender roles, Lisa Bro summarizes that “Brienne has disrupted the gender binary; therefore, she must be punished once the men realize that she cannot be forced into a feminine role” (71).

Despite Brienne’s profession, looks, and demeanor, she still has some feminine-coded qualities, such as empathy. When she was still in training, her master-at-arms Sir Goodwin attempted to “toughen” her heart, which “is as soft as any maid’s” (Martin 411). He advised her to butcher small, defenseless animals, which she did despite her aversion to doing so: “By the time the butchering was done Brienne had been blind with tears, her clothes so bloody that she had given them to her maid to burn. But Ser Goodwin still had doubts” (411). Women adopting masculine professions such as knighthood are always held to a much higher standard than men, and they have to disprove their seemingly weak, emotional nature to earn respect (Bro 62). Ironically, a key virtue of knighthood is protecting the weak and upholding justice, and Brienne’s task of slaughtering harmless animals is a gruesome perversion of these virtues. During the fight with the outlaws, Brienne remembers this part of her training: “I did not flinch, she thought, as
blood\textsuperscript{14} ran red down her cheek. Did you see, Sir Goodwin? She hardly felt the cut” (Martin 420, emphasis in original). This scene showcases how Brienne tries to shed her “feminine” compassion to avoid the weakness connected to female emotionality (Bro 67). Thus, she has internalized the sexism against femininity and tries to counteract the stigma by appearing ruthless and merciless; however, an aggressive female knight is female nonetheless and therefore she cannot escape the sexist discrimination against her body and gender.

No matter what Brienne does and what her accomplishments are, her female body overshadows all of her achievements in her unorthodox lifestyle. In the end, she is always judged by what Nirañjana calls the “matrix of sexualization” (69), which constitutes norms about proper behavior and conduct for women, especially with regard to their bodies and biology in relation to the community. A woman who fights and provides for herself, who does not get married and has no children is so outrageous for a patriarchal society that the immediate reaction is the desire to rape her into submission. Brienne cannot come to terms with her female identity as it carries such a negative stigma, and her female body will ensure that others will perceive her as a woman first and foremost – never as a dutiful knight loyal to her lord.

5. Conclusion

Not only does A Song of Ice and Fire portray a misogynistic world which is rooted in our own cultural history, but it also gives accounts of women living in this world and how they deal with the consequences of having a female body. As the main task of women within this society is procreation, sex (or rape respectively) is often used to control them and sanction misconduct to reestablish the gender hierarchy. While Cersei strives for political power and only deals with mild repercussions for operating in the “wrong” sphere, Brienne constantly has to deal with abuse and rape threats due to her masculine profession. Both women could potentially thrive in their respective fields as their female bodies do not interfere with their required skill sets. It is only the men around them who cannot refrain from sexualizing them and reducing them to their reproductive organs.

\textsuperscript{14} Blood is a multifaceted symbol in these scenes: There is the accusation of “madness” due to menstruation on the one hand (which is clearly female-coded), and the blood spilt in battle (which is male-coded). A deeper analysis, which would exceed the scope of this short paper, might yield fruitful results for the gendered metaphors of blood and its diverse implications.
In this essay I mainly focused on the corporeality of women and how certain preconceptions about the female gender inhibit the agency of the two characters I analyzed. In conclusion, the further the body strays from the ideal of feminine beauty, the larger the repercussions. While Cersei is generally respected by those around her on account of her convincing performance, she is conspiring to obtain more power than she has any right to hold within the Westerosi society (and she is at least subconsciously aware of her overstepping as her dream showcases). Brienne on the other hand has to deal with direct and harsher punishments because she visibly does not fit female gender roles. Therefore, beauty has a direct influence on whether a woman enjoys certain privileges – or in other words: whether her body matters.

Another important aspect that I could only briefly mention in this analysis (due to my focus on corporeality) is Butler’s theory of gender as performance. Further research could show how the differences in Cersei’s and Brienne’s conduct concerning female gender roles impact their agency and life choices in more detail: How is a “masculine” performance employed to advance their goals? What feminine-coded behavior do they utilize? Another interesting topic would be the similarities and differences between Brienne’s nonconforming gender performance and drag, and the question of an inherent psychological gender identity in contrast to learned gendered behavior. Overall, the world of Westeros offers many incentives to analyze the relationships between politics, society, and gender.
Bibliography


Murderous Marjorie and Monstrous Lee: (De)Constructing Normality in Stewart O’Nan’s *The Speed Queen* and Patty Jenkin’s *Monster*

Max Riehm

**1. Introduction**

According to German literary scholar Jürgen Link, the infatuation with normality has become one of the defining characteristics of modern Western societies (*Versuch* 17). Link further believes that one of the main functions of art and literature within these normalist societies is to provide templates for human lifestyles. In conjunction with statistical data, literature provides members of a society with normalist narratives from which they can derive the necessary knowledge to define the limits of normality and abnormality (Link, *Versuch* 41). These narratives can either take the form of successful explorations beyond the boundaries of normality, which enable their audience to enjoy deviant behavior without having to act it out, or the form of *Exempelgeschichten*, which serve as a deterrent, urging the individual not to step too far outside of the normal range (Link, *Versuch* 46; Thiele 111f.).

Two representative cases of these *Exempelgeschichten* are Patty Jenkin’s *Monster*, the 2007 movie adaption of the life of Aileen Wuornos, whom the media dubbed the “first female American serial killer” (Foley 88), and Stewart O’Nan’s 2003 novel *The Speed Queen*. Yet, *Monster* and *The Speed Queen* are not only emblematic *Exempelgeschichten* but can also be read as commentaries on normalism itself. While the two stories are seemingly similar, I argue that Marjorie Standiford’s violent trajectory is a manifestation of the wish to become “normal”, whereas Lee’s trajectory is almost mechanistically predetermined by her violent background. Thus, *The Speed Queen* reaffirms strategies of normalization, while simultaneously criticizing the monomaniacal pursuit of normality. In contrast, *Monster* constantly undermines audience expectations towards normalist narratives, thereby criticizing the underlying assumptions of normalism.

Relying on Jürgen Link’s theory of normalism, I will firstly explore how *The Speed Queen*’s protagonist relies on strategies of denormalization and renormalization to construct a normal identity; secondly, I will assess how her wish to be perceived as normal drives her into irreversible denormalization; and thirdly, I will

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15 To avoid confusion, Aileen will henceforth be referred to as Lee in accordance with her nickname in the film.
show how she tries to reintegrate her forthcoming demise into a normalist narrative. As a recurring counterpoint, the analysis of *The Speed Queen* will be interspersed with an exploration of the subversive notions of *Monster*. In the context of these counterpoints, I will firstly focus on how *Monster* undermines normalist narratives in a juxtaposition between visual representation and voice-over narration; secondly, I will highlight how the film stages Lee as a monstrous woman, threatening the dichotomy between male and female; thirdly, I will analyze how Lee threatens the misguided normalist assumption that there could only be one acceptable normal range. Finally, I will conclude by focusing on the monstrous crisis inherent in normalism.

2. The Road towards Normality: A Theoretical Approach

Normalism and normality, as defined by Jürgen Link, are historical, culturally specific phenomena (*Versuch* 39). According to Link, the emergence of normalism coincided with the “take-off” of Western societies during the industrial revolution. This take-off gave rise to the two most important characteristics of modern societies: “the ‘atomization’ of individuals”—that is, the dissolution or disintegration of traditional “as-sociations” or “communities”—and the nearly exponential growth of populations, knowledge, capital and productive capacities (“Contribution” 37). Although these characteristics are widely embraced by society, they nevertheless instill a certain fear within the individual. Normalism can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the major issues of modernity:

[N]ormalization and normalism are the response to the challenge of modernity—in the view of symbolically exponential dynamics, they are, so to speak, the ‘braking insurances’ (bremsende Ver-Sicherungen) that stop the fear [...]. (Link, “Contribution” 38)

Normalism achieves this “braking” and “in-suring” effect by relying on statistical discourses, in particular the Gaussian—or normal—distribution (Link, “Contribution” 40).

Under the paradigm of the Gaussian distribution, normalist societies constantly gather data to define normal ranges. These ranges encompass the majority of individuals in a given population and are marked by upper and lower boundaries, beyond which abnormal outliers exist. By orienting him- or herself towards the middle of the normal range, the individual can rest assured that he or she is behaving in a way similar to the other individuals and is therefore not completely
isolated. This “mass-orientation” towards the center of the statistical distribution then collectively slows the aforementioned exponential growth by reincorporating most statistical outliers. Unlike normativity, normalism does not necessarily precede human interaction (Link, “Power of the Norm” 17f.). Instead, an assessment of normality can only occur after human interactions. Whereas the norms and rules of normativity directly govern human behavior and divide it into the binary categories of “right” and “wrong”, normalism operates on a continuum, classifying actions according to their statistic frequency (Link, “Power of the Norm” 18).

Normalism only alleviates the fear of social isolation and exponential growth as long as the individual is able to situate him- or herself somewhere in the middle of the normal distribution. It therefore evokes a fear of the second order: the fear of denormalization. Link calls this fear “die Grundangst der Moderne” (Versuch 352). This fear gave rise to two secondary coping mechanisms: proto-normalism and flexible normalism. Proto-normalism assesses the normal range once and defines strict boundaries between normality and abnormality. Abnormal behavior is usually sanctioned harshly in a proto-normalist society. This constitutes a trade-off, wherein the individual trades personal freedom for normalist reassurance. Under flexible normalism, on the other hand, the normal range is constantly reassessed and the threshold of denormalization is adjusted as necessary, which leads to a widening of the normal range, whereas the range of abnormality decreases (Link, Versuch 358f.). This reduces the fear of sudden denormalization, as formerly deviant behaviors become reintegrated into the normal. Nevertheless, a lingering fear of creeping denormalization remains.

While flexible normalism is highly indebted to scientific quantification, its underlying statistical knowledge needs to be translated from specialized into elementary discourses via interdiscursive structures (Link, Versuch 42f.). Christina Bartz believes the role of interdiscursive structures is fulfilled by mass media: “In the context of developing normalist knowledge, mass media serve as distributors of statistical data and the normal ranges associated with them” (92; my translation; see also Ellrich 25–51). The dissemination of statistical knowledge can also occur via art and literature in general, as in the case of novels like The Speed Queen or films like Monster.

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16 For a concise definition of all three discursive structures, see Jürgen Link’s Versuch über den Normalismus (41–3).
3. Murderous Marjorie, Monstrous Lee: A Normalist Reading

*The Speed Queen* tells the story of Marjorie Standiford, an inmate on death row in a New Mexico prison. Prior to her incarceration, Marjorie “cruises the malls and travels the desolate beauty of America’s southwestern interstates” (Ziegler 5). At least, she does until Marjorie, her husband Lamont, and their bisexual lover Natalie, mess up a drug deal and find themselves on the run. Their escape ends in a bloodbath and leaves Lamont dead, Natalie severely wounded, and Marjorie awaiting execution. The narrative then opens on the night before Marjorie’s execution. Confined to her cell, she records her story on two tapes, answering the written questions of an unnamed author. Even though he is never explicitly named, multiple references imply that the recipient of these tapes is Steven King, whom Marjorie wishes to turn her story into a novel (Mayer 37; Ziegler 5).

Marjorie’s narrative mirrors the common media depiction of spectacular murders, which she, as a media-savvy individual, has internalized. Knowing that her life is now at a point of irreversible denormalization, she reproduces traditional depictions of normality and abnormality. She does so in the form of the “normal biography”, which, according to a study by Bartz, usually precedes mass media depictions of “exceptional individual cases” (98; my translation).

You think you’d start at the beginning — not with me as a little girl but maybe when I hooked up with Lamont. Because we had a year or so there, before Natalie came along. Good times. We were both working and Lamont bought that Hemi Roadrunner […]. You could start there and show how much we were in love and how normal we were and then how everything went wrong. (O’Nan 9)

When confronted with her crimes, Marjorie again relies on the script of the normal biography and quickly shifts the focus towards her childhood, attempting to construct herself as a neat and unremarkable all-American girl: “It was normal. I had friends. I liked school, especially geography. […] In gym I was the best at the softball throw. […] It wasn’t like Carrie at all. The only strange thing about my childhood is that we didn’t go to church. Not once.” (O’Nan 15) In fact, Marjorie describes herself in such broad terms that she appears like the unremarkable, empty middle of the normal distribution. As such, she needs the abnormal to render herself visible (Otto and Stauff 79). In this case, she relies on the marked abnormal in the form of the protagonist of Steven King’s horror novel *Carrie* and its movie adaption by Brian da Palma. The monstrous, in the form of the telepathic protagonist Carrie, is thus neither an ambivalent source of anxieties, nor a means of self-
reflection. Instead, Carrie serves as a signifier for extreme abnormality in light of which Marjorie becomes intelligible.

The narration of Monster likewise conforms to this standard of the medial depictions of sensationalist events and thus also “start[s] at the beginning” (O’Nan 9). Monster fictionalizes the murders committed by Aileen Wuornos, compressing them from a matter of 12 months into a much tighter timeframe. According to Megan Foley, the film “presents a biographical portrait”, which “vacillates between, on the one hand, portraying Wuornos as a victim of child abuse, prostitution, and rape, and on the other, portraying her as a monstrous, inhuman murderess” (87). After the title card, proclaiming the film to be “based on a true story”, the movie opens with a montage of Lee growing up. Yet, in contrast to Marjorie’s story, Lee’s childhood is already interspersed with indicators of her impending denormalization. The voice-over, in which Lee recounts how she “always wanted to be in the movies” and dreamed of how “one day [she] could be a big, big star – or maybe just beautiful [...] and rich”, stands in harsh contrast to the abusive treatment at the hands of her grandfather, the rejection she experiences from her female peers, and the sexual objectification she is subjected to by her male acquaintances. The longer the montage continues, the more desperate she grows for recognition and affection — ultimately turning to prostitution as a source of sustenance and a substitute for love — and the more apparent becomes the discrepancy between her self-narration and the onscreen events (Monster 00:00:20–00:02:44). Ironically, in the form of Monster, Lee’s childhood dream — whether real or not — has become a reality. Where Marjorie in The Speed Queen scrambles to embellish her story with details to make it discernible from the archetypical life of the “All-American girl”, Lee relies on her normalist voice-over narration to gloss over her ongoing denormalization.

This contradiction between the nostalgic voice-over musings about her childhood dream and her miserable upbringing slowly undermines the normal biography. This subversive tendency continues during a sequence in which Aileen applies for various jobs in an attempt to avoid the dangers of prostitution as well as to set her life on a new, normal trajectory. Again, the film relies on the juxtaposition between excruciatingly humiliating rejections on screen and the matter-of-fact voiceover: “I once heard this saying that always stuck with me. I must have been around 13 years old, because I remember I just had put the baby up for adoption
All you need in life is love and to believe in yourself and then there is nothing you can’t do” (00:40:33–00:41:33; my emphasis). The discrepancy between the idea that personal success is merely a matter of a positive mindset and Lee’s harsh reality becomes especially apparent when she is interviewed for a position at a lawyer’s office. During the scene the lawyer berates her for her lack of education and work history and confronts her with what he deems the appropriate normal biography for his employees: “[Y]ou have no experience, no college degree, no resume, no work history [...] you need to learn how to type, you’ll need computer skills, most of our secretaries have college degrees” (00:41:34–00:42:48). The lawyer’s contempt is fueled by his inability to realize that the absence of a normal biography could be founded on something other than a lack of ambition or motivation. This belief mirrors the principles of the “Leistungs- und Kontrollgesellschaft”, which posit that each member of said society is individually responsible for ensuring their existence and success, regardless of their ability to take on said responsibility (Cuntz 149). This disregard for the individuals’ circumstances surfaces in the cynicism apparent in the lawyer’s assumptions regarding Lee’s lack of effort. While he does not care for Lee’s socio-economic background and or personal and familial history, the audience is aware that Lee’s trajectory is the result of a horrifying combination of neglect, abuse and sexualized violence, which led to her pregnancy at the age of 12 or 13.

In a last-ditch attempt to return into the normal range, Lee tries her best to avoid being rejected due to the absence of a normal biography and comes clean with a female clerk at the employment office: “Look, can I just give it to you straight? See, the truth is: I’m a hooker. And I’m trying to clean my life up here, you know. Go straight and Christian and all. So, if there’s anything that you could help me with” (Monster 00:44:45–00:45:20). Yet neither Lee’s honesty regarding her biography nor her explicit will to change can move the clerk: “So you’ve been convicted of a felony? [...] That’s not even gonna matter, because the best you are gonna get is factory work” (00:44:45–00:45:20). This encounter runs counter to the normalist narratives of renormalization, which posit that the marginalized individual is allowed and encouraged to change his or her life for the better and ultimately return into the midst of the normal range (Thiele 108). However, no matter how hard Lee tries to make her way across the border between her marginalized position and the normal range, those within the normal range are mostly hostile
towards her endeavors and bar her from reentering society. Thus, at the end of the day, she ultimately has to concede: “I’ve been hooking since I was 13, man. Who the fuck am I kidding? I’m a hooker” (*Monster* 00:51:05–00:51:13).

Lee’s precarious situation withholds from her the “braking in-surance” of mainstream normality and, at the same time, immunizes her against the dreaded feeling of boredom associated with the middle of the normal distribution. However, in Marjorie’s case, the strict adherence to this supposed ‘normal life script’ (Link, *Versuch* 392) comes at the price of boredom. According to Rolf Parr, situating oneself in the middle of the normal distribution has the strongest reassuring effect but provides the lowest level of possible individualization (77). This state is therefore “bearable but unattractive”, whereas the boundaries of the normal range promise a state of “unbearable but attractive” individualist thrills (Parr 77; see also Link, *Versuch* 43f.; Otto and Stauff 83, 87). This constitutes one of the central dilemmas of normalism, as the fear of and the desire for denormalization apparently co-exist and constantly pull the individual in opposing directions.

This dilemma is partly resolved by maintaining a balance between abnormality and conformity. According to Link, this can be achieved by engaging in one deviant behavior — e.g. recreational use of drugs — while simultaneously relying on “normal practices” — e.g. employment, marriage, etc. — to reassure oneself of one’s normality (*Versuch* 354). In this light, Marjorie’s homosexual affair, petty crimes, and recreational drug use appear as a means to alleviate the boredom of her life as a stay-at-home-mom. Yet, she carefully tries to offset her excursions beyond the limits of normality by anchoring herself in seemingly normal practices. With the help of the institutions of marriage and parenthood, Marjorie maintains a façade of heterosexuality, whereas her employment as a part-time waitress serves as a counterweight to her aspirations as a small-scale drug dealer. These depictions of fun and thrill-seeking behavior do not necessarily mark Marjorie as the other but serve two different purposes: Firstly, they enable the reader to passively experience these thrills without the need to personally cross the borders of normality. The reader can join Marjorie and Lamont on their amphetamine-fueled joy rides without running the risk of physically crashing themselves. Secondly, they provide the reader with an example with which they can compare their own explorations of the abnormal. In this regard, the narrative serves to highlight the normality of fun-and-
thrill-seeking behavior, reminding the reader that probing the boundaries of normality is, in and of itself, “perfectly normal”.

Thus, it is not Marjorie’s desire for denormalization that drives her into a killing frenzy. Instead, Marjorie’s irreversible denormalization sets in when her husband borrows money from a loan shark to fund a large-scale drug deal. Soon after the deal the couples’ apartment is robbed. Confronted with the horrible consequences of now having to deal with a violent mobster intent on collecting his debt, Marjorie falls back on her role as supportive wife and mother to maintain her sense of normality. In an almost absurdist turn, Marjorie mimics the stereotype of the “good housewife” during their desperate, violent escape and prepares a meal for one of their kidnapping victims (O’Nan 160). This reliance on habituated normal behavior also resurfaces during the armed robbery at the Mach 6 dinner, where she falls back into her habits as a former waitress (O’Nan 168).

In the face of these disturbing and increasingly violent crimes, the discrepancy between Marjorie’s supposedly realist narrative and the wish to include horror and thriller tropes into her narration begins to make sense. Although Marjorie stresses that she is telling her story as accurately and truthfully as she can remember, she continuously intersperses her narrative with suggestions of supernatural elements (O’Nan 12). These suggestions serve as an extension of Marjorie’s strategy of mediatization, which manifested itself as the need to tell a normal biography. Even if her attempts to present herself as a normal individual fail, she can at least move her story from the realm of the real to the realm of the fictional. By having chosen Steven King as the future author of her story, she makes sure that her story can easily be mistaken for a mere work of fiction. She therefore constructs an “ongoing sequence of events that externalizes and reconstitutes uncertainties so that they might be denied by means of fictive achievement” (Edward Jayne qtd. in Ziegler 5). This is reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard’s belief that “[t]he role of the images is highly ambiguous. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization [...] . The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption.” (27)

Marjorie’s normality is thus hypernormal\(^1\) in two ways. Her normalist strategies of reassurance are strong enough to render her completely ignorant of her

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\(^1\) According to Michael Cuntz “hypernormal” describes a state wherein individuals are either concerned with “being normal” to such an extent that they try to completely conform to a standard
progressing denormalization, leaving her in a state wherein the normal surpasses
the abnormal. Yet, Marjorie cannot maintain this hypernormal ignorance indefi-
nitely. At this point, she tries to turn her story into fiction. In fictionalized form, the
violent turns of her story no longer mark the irreversible denormalization of a real
life but instead turn into the normal plot-beats of a thriller. In the same way that
the hyperreal image swallows the real event, the hypernormal plot swallows the
memories of a real life. In this regard, the monstrous has again regressed into a
state of being a mere signifier. It no longer carries with it the progressive tensions
of current social contradictions. Instead, supernatural elements solely serve to
mask the protagonist’s own transgressions.

The same is the case with the crimes committed by her fellow inmates. These
anecdotes, which Marjorie intersperses between her answers to Steven King’s
questions, provide the reader with different abnormal trajectories among which
they can then situate the journey of Marjorie. Especially in the case of Darcy’s in-
fanticide and Lucinda’s mutilation of her husband, the backstories provided by
Marjorie resemble some of the most prototypical “Exempelgeschichten”, the sto-
ries of monstrosities and dangerous individuals. According to Thiele, these narra-
tives typically focus on infrareal murders, as these combine irreconcilable an-
tagonisms: “familialistische Geschichten und Bluttaten” (111f.). For Marjorie,
these cases do not call into question the fabric of society, gender or family relations,
or her own conflicted situation as loving mother and ferocious killer. Instead, they
serve as signifiers for statistical outliers whose actions are, in her eyes, even more
outlandish and gruesome than hers. In Bartz’s terms, these images normalistically
reintegrate the extreme (93). The operating principle behind the monstrous other
for Marjorie is the same principle identified by Michel Foucault: “[T]his principle
of intelligibility is strictly tautological, since the characteristic feature of the mon-
ster is to express itself as, precisely, monstrous, to be the explanation of every little
deviation that may derive from it, but to be unintelligible itself” (57). In following
this line of Foucauldian thought, The Speed Queen’s protagonist herself becomes
monstrous, not unlike Lee:
The frame of reference of the human monster is, of course, law. The notion of the monster is essentially a legal notion, in a broad sense, of course, since what defines the monster is the fact that its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature. (Foucault 56)

The superficial monstrosity in both cases thus lies in the actual violation of normative law — in the form of multiple murders — and a violation of the natural order — in the transgression of preconceptions of female docility — as Foley highlights in her exploration of monstrosity in *Monster*. The public perception of Lee’s actions as monstrous is heightened by the belief that her crimes were essentially “male violence” committed by a woman (Foley 89).

Although Lee’s first murder is narratively staged as a matter of self-defense, the film comes closest to staging her as an actual monster in this particular instance. Her face bloodied and her features turned into a grotesque grimace, Lee is turned into a murderous fury. This is indicative of Jeffrey Cohen’s third thesis on monsters:

> The difficult project of constructing and maintaining gender identities elicits an array of anxious responses throughout culture, producing another impetus to teratogenesis. The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith […] or Gorgon. (9)

Having overstepped this boundary, Aileen emerges from the killing virtually transformed into a male-female chimera. Donning the clothes of her victim, which are overtly coded as masculine, she becomes one of Cohen’s “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration[,] a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). This threatening hybridity is constantly reproduced and reaffirmed during the subsequent murders. Although Lee engages her “johns” as a female prostitute and relies on a made-up story of being a stranded mother, her clothing once again stands in stark contrast to her supposed female origin story (*Monster* 00:22:14–00:23:16, 1:25:30–1:29:17).

There is, however, a second monster on the prowl within *Monster*. What had previously seemed like a rather mild criticism of the excessive reliance on the normal biography in a normalist society now turns into a terrifying critique of the general assumptions of normalist narratives. In a normalist narrative, Lee’s sexual assault and her self-defense would have constituted the unexpected catalyst which ultimately catapults Lee out of the normal range. In the context of *Monster*, how-
ever, her rape marks the repulsive zenith of a series of continuous, abnormal transgressions and violations. These continuous, creeping denormalizations stand in harsh contrast to Bartz’ view on the normalist narratives of the “haarsträubende Einzelfälle”, which are usually marked by an “enormous distance” to the normalist continuum (93). This “enormous distance” in turn serves as a fictitious failsafe strategy which propagates a decisive rupture between normality and abnormality. In Lee’s reality, however, there is no “enormous distance” between her rape experiences as an adult and the rape she had to endure as a child. In the constant transgressions of her psychological and physical boundaries, abnormality instead has turned into normality.

As opposed to Marjorie’s violence, Lee’s violence is thus not a means to a normalist end. In contrast to Marjorie, who heavily relies on strategies of renormalization to come to terms with her denormalizing brutality, Lee has to embrace violence as a normalized means of survival in an inherently violent normal range. In a world that constantly mistreats its outcasts — especially if they are both vulnerable and female — violence has become a mere necessity. This sentiment culminates in a dialog between Lee and Thomas, shortly after he notices her and Selby’s mug-shot on TV. Comparing her outsider position to his and his fellow veterans’ dire situation, he reassures her: “I know what you do for a living. It doesn’t bother me at all. I know you didn’t dial it up on the goddamn telephone. That’s where you landed. That’s what you had to do. [...] You never [had a choice]. But you’ve got to live. You’ve got to live.” (Monster 1:23:18–12:24:45).

In light of this normalized denormalization, the blind spots of the theory of normalism become even more apparent. Although Otto and Stauff acknowledge that the ongoing individualization in modern societies entails a multiplication of normalities, each of which defines its own normal ranges and thresholds of denormalization, they do not seem to account for normalities that are more than just a variation on a theme (87; see also Thiele 108–111). Flexible normalism — and the study thereof — seems to be only concerned with supposed statistical outliers, like voluntary misfits or involuntarily marginalized people, inasmuch as they serve a normalist end or represent the successful reintegration of abnormality into normality. As a means to an end, the marginalized other or outsider is either a deterrent, a self-improvement project, or a substitute for the desire of denormalization of the audience (Thiele 113f). As a representation of normalist reintegration, for
example in the form of successful surgery or therapy, the individual serves as a reminder that the normal range supposedly tries to accommodate everyone (Thiele 109–11, 116). Normalism, both as an ideology as well as a theoretical approach, thereby seems to neglect that the aforementioned individuals might themselves constitute the middle of a different normal distribution.

Considering this gross neglect, especially in conjunction with the reluctance of normalist society to reintegrate Lee into its folds, Lee apparently must find another strategy to make sense of the world. In this regard, Lee’s murders mark an attempt to construct some sort of physically “in-suring” normality for herself. Although only the first murder is framed as a factual matter of self-defense, the latter murders nonetheless conform to a similar logic (Monster 00:51:23–00:54:00, 01:19:06–01:21:31). Following this logic, Aileen imposes a normative framework upon herself and others, killing only those who she believes to be a threat to children and women. This becomes especially apparent between the second and third murder, where she intends to kill another man, but, realizing that he does not violate her rules, cannot bring herself to kill him (Monster 1:01:30–1:03:42). In this respect, Lee’s behavior mirrors the behavior of a proto-normalist society. Based on her personal experiences of child abuse and sexual violence, Lee constructs her own rules and range of normality. While her normal range incorporates justified killings as normal behavior, the violations she had to endure at the hands of men clearly mark the boundaries of said normal range. In line with the draconian punishments in proto-normalist societies, her killings thus turn into a normalizing sanction of abnormal behavior.

Ultimately, even a flexible normalist society cannot endure transgressions of a magnitude of the murders committed by Lee and Marjorie, especially if these transgressions threaten the concept of normality itself. In an almost proto-normalist turn, the denormalization of both women thus has to be marked as final and irreversible by the harshest means possible: the death sentence.

4. Conclusion

From a Foucauldian perspective, the acts of violence in The Speed Queen and Monster are monstrous insofar as in both cases they constitute a violation of the “laws of society” in the form of homicide, as well as a violation of the “laws of nature” in
the form of female violence (Foucault 56). Yet, while both stories appear quite similar from this perspective, they begin to drift apart from the a critically normalist perspective. Where The Speed Queen highlights the pathological flaws inherent to the pursuit of normality, Monster instead serves as a terrifying commentary, questioning the underlying assumptions of normalism and highlighting the blind spots of normalist theories.

Lee’s violence is thus monstrous in two ways: First, Lee’s violent biography itself highlights the plethora of co-existing normalities beyond the realm of a mainstream-normality, some of which have normalistically reintegrated practices that appear as pathological, criminal, amoral or threatening. Second, her killings mark a regression into a proto-normalist state, in which she clearly defines the boundaries of what she deems acceptable. Like a proto-normalist society, Lee punishes those characters whose actions violate her own values and beliefs.

Marjorie’s violence, however, is unsettling in a different way. While her means of violence are coded just as overtly as male, the superficial ends of her violence fit into the preconception that female violence is usually of a defensive nature. Her defensive mechanism is not geared towards her motherly duties; the driving force behind Marjorie’s actions remains a deep-rooted fear of denormalization. This highlights the latently pathological nature of flexible normalism, which serves to repress the fear of denormalization. As such, the wish to be normal is not free from the risk of becoming a monomaniacal pursuit.

To the reader, the true horror thus lies in the realization that normality and abnormality are inextricably intertwined and co-dependent. The crisis at the heart of The Speed Queen is therefore a crisis of representation. In a society whose normal range has expanded to encompass everything from “vamps, national heroes, beatniks, neurotic housewives, gangsters, stars, charismatic tycoons”, as Herbert Marcuse had pointed out in foresight, the monstrous other becomes a precondition to form a cohesive normal range (78–79; my translation).
Bibliography


II. Linguistics
Pragmatic Hedges Used by Male and Female Speakers in the British National Corpus

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1. Introduction

No human being lives their life without everyday interaction with other people in their vicinity. This is also reflected in George Yule’s (59) claim that “much of what we say, and a great deal of what we communicate, is determined by our social relationships. A linguistic interaction is necessarily a social interaction.” Knowledge of these social relationships affects our linguistic choices when interacting with other people. We convey not only information when we talk, but also other interpersonal messages (Riekkinen 1). What is common for the speaker and the interlocutor, or the addressee, is the notion of “face” or “public self-image of a person” (Yule 60), divided into positive and negative face. The negative face is “our wish not to be imposed on by others and to be allowed to go about our business unimpeded with our rights to free and self-determined action intact” (Grundy 156).

Consciously or unconsciously, each address or request made by the speaker may be an imposition or a threat to the interlocutor’s face. This is why speakers usually use “redressive language designed to compensate the threat to face” (Grundy 156), that is to say, they are being polite. As Wilamova (85) states, “[b]eing polite means to be a considerate conversational partner”, and the speaker and the addressee “cooperate in maintaining each other’s face in interaction” (Brown and Levinson, qtd. in Riekkinen 14), employing “strategies for minimizing the threat to face that lurks behind every act of communication” (Salager-Meyer 2). The “central strategy in maintaining interpersonal relations” (Riekkinen 2) is the notion of hedging — “the way people express their uncertainty about something or state something uncertain” (Nugroho 17). Politeness may be the “main motivating factor for hedging” (Al-Rashady 31).

Hedging is one of the negative politeness strategies, i.e. face-saving acts related to the negative face of the speaker (Grundy 161), and entails choosing “the right words to express a communicative goal, which might be felt as face-threatening for the addressee” (Wilamova 85). This kind of expression may be indirect,
not as clear, or longer, which all suggest that “the speaker is making a greater effort, in terms of concern for face (i.e. politeness)” (Yule 65), so there is a “trade-off” between the economy of the expression and politeness (Grundy 146).

Different patterns of language use by boys and girls may be explained by their “different patterns of socialization into different cultures” (Tannen, qtd. in Kouletaki 245). Aylanda Nugroho (19) summarizes several previous studies which deal with the quantitative use of hedges by male and female speakers: Buikema and Roeters’ study shows that “women tend to use politeness strategies (including hedges) more often than men with a purpose to minimize the face threatening strategies”, Coates’ study shows that women use hedges when talking among themselves “to respect the face needs of all participants”, and Lakoff concludes that hedging is a feminine trait of language. Holmes found that men and women hedge equally but “women use hedging as a positive politeness strategy to soften statements [...] while men use hedges to indicate hesitancy and uncertainty” (qtd. in Al-Rashady 34f.).

The aim of this paper is to determine whether there is a difference in hedging in everyday communication with regard to men or women aged 35–44 and 45–59 within the British National Corpus (BNC), as well as to look at the context of the use of several specific hedges. Similarly to previous research on this topic, the initial hypothesis is that female speakers within the BNC hedge more than male speakers. The focus of this paper is solely on the different use of hedges between the said sexes and age groups within the corpus, without additional restrictions. The authors of this paper chose to focus on these specific gender and age groups within the BNC, while bearing in mind that these differences in speech patterns are not solely age- and gender-based, and that a more comprehensive analysis requires the examination of more variables. Thus, this paper will present a qualitative and quantitative exploration of hedging within the BNC, with the purpose of determining what BNC data might contribute to the discourse on hedging between men and women and to provide a basis for further studies in which different variables are considered as well.

Firstly, in the theoretical part of the paper, a definition and an overview of the concept of hedging will be presented. Secondly, the methods for the collection and the analysis of data will be shown, followed by the empirical part of the paper, a qualitative interpretation of the results, both for male and female speakers. The
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final section of the paper will focus on the discussion of the collected material, as well as on the conclusion based on said material, which the authors acknowledge may be influenced by the lack of extralinguistic knowledge surrounding the examples.

2. Hedging

The term “hedge” was introduced by George Lakoff in the article “Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts” in 1972, as “words or phrases whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy” (qtd. in Salager-Meyer 2), and was connected with the concepts of “tentativeness, politeness, lack of full commitment, indirectness, possibility, approximation, indeterminacy and vagueness” (Rabab’ah and Abu Rumman 157). The term has since been adopted by pragmaticists, who saw hedges as “modifiers of the speaker’s commitment to the truth-value of the whole proposition” (Vázquez and Giner 174), thus “contributing to pragmatic strategies, such as politeness or mitigation” (Riekkinen 5) and becoming an important part of interpersonal communication. Hedging plays a crucial role in social interaction, as “people hedge very frequently in their ordinary, everyday talk” (Nugroho 17).

Hedges are linguistic devices — lexical items, syntactic structures, prosodic features, and multiple syntactic forms — words, phrases, even sentences may function as hedges (Fraser, “Hedging in Political Discourse” 202f), as they “are drawn from every syntactic category”, and have no fixed grammatical category (Fraser, “Pragmatic Competence” 23). “[A]ll linguistic items or expressions can be interpreted as a hedge [...] no linguistic items are inherently hedges but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text.” (Clemen, qtd. in Fraser, “Hedging in Political Discourse” 203) Despite dealing with political discourse, Fraser’s classification of hedges is relevant for this paper, as he states that “hedging is used (1) to mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer, thereby rendering the message (more) polite; and (2) to avoid providing the information which is expected or required in the speaker’s contribution, thereby creating vagueness and/or evasion” (“Hedging in Political Discourse” 206).

What motivates the use of hedges can be the wish for vagueness, either because there is a “lack of complete commitment to the truth value of a proposition,
or a desire not to express that commitment categorically” (Martín-Martín 135). Lakoff (qtd. in Rabab’ah and Abu Rumman 158) gives two main functions of hedges: showing some kind of uncertainty and showing politeness. Likewise, Fraser (“Hedging in Political Discourse” 201) suggests that hedges signal “a lack of full commitment either to the full category membership of a term or expression in the utterance (content mitigation), or to the intended illocutionary force of the utterance (force mitigation)” of the speaker. In terms of this paper, force mitigation devices would be the expressions of procedural meaning, whereas the expressions of epistemic stance signal a “lack of commitment [as a reflection of] speaker’s knowledge” (“Hedging in Political Discourse” 202).

3. Expressions of Epistemic Stance

Modality “deals with the relativity of a particular truth or knowledge”, which means that there is an overlap between the concepts of hedging and modality. Their greatest connection is in the modal verbs with epistemic meaning (may, could, might), and the two concepts related to them are evidentiality and vagueness (Vázquez and Giner 175). In this paper, the modal auxiliary verb ‘may’ is taken as a modification of the “commitment to the truth-value of propositions” (Vázquez and Giner 172), thus functioning as both a hedge and an epistemic modal verb.

“[S]ubjectivity markers”, as they are termed by Wilamova (88), are used by the speaker to convey his subjective opinion. They add a degree of subjectivity to the utterance, and transform an assertion into an attitude, thus indicating to the interlocutor that the utterance is not a universal truth, but the speaker’s “personal opinion, judgment or belief” (Wilamova 88). These can also indicate “the speaker’s uncertainty and indecision about the utterance he makes” (Wilamova 88f) and can be a “manifestation of politeness” (89). To conclude, the expressions of epistemic stance can be used to suggest “that what we’re saying may not be totally accurate” (Yule 38). By using them, the speakers affect the accuracy of the statement they are uttering.

4. Expressions of Procedural Meaning

Watts (169) points out that expressions of procedural meaning are not perceived as inherently polite but, when omitted, they give an impression of “brash” behaviour by the speaker. The procedural meaning that Watts relates to the expressions
of politeness (172) is a set of procedures “through which propositional meaning can be derived” (174). The propositional meaning which can be true or false can be related to “the meaning conveyed conventionally by the structures of the utterance” (Halliday, qtd. in Watts 173). The expressions of procedural meaning (EPMs) are linguistic expressions which are pragmatized, i.e. “they no longer function as expressions contributing to the truth value of a proposition but begin to function as markers indicating procedural meaning in verbal interaction” (Watts 176f).

The semi-formulaic EPMs contain “linguistic expressions that carry out indirect speech acts” (Watts 169), and these can be different hedges, “linguistic expressions which weaken the illocutionary force of a statement” (Watts 169). Interlocutors may perceive the effort that the speakers put into the indirectness as a sign of politeness. As Brown and Levinson perceive politeness as “the mitigation or avoidance of face-threatening acts, we might expect that indirect speech acts that would represent an imposition on the addressee if expressed directly constitute polite utterances” (Watts 190).

5. Methodology

The sources for the materials of this study and the way they were collected will be presented in this section, followed by the quantitative analysis i.e. the frequency of the expressions in question, as found in the British National Corpus (BNC). The British National Corpus contains 100 million words of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources and is designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written. The corpus is monolingual, as it deals with modern British English, synchronic, as it covers British English of the late twentieth century, and general, as it includes many different styles and varieties and is not limited to any particular subject field, genre or register. The spoken part, which constitutes ten per cent of the corpus, consists of orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations (recorded by volunteers selected from different age groups, regions and social classes in a demographically balanced way) and spoken language collected in different contexts, ranging from formal business or government meetings to radio shows and phone-ins.¹⁸

¹⁸ For more information, please consult <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>.
Working with the samples from the BNC enabled the authors to analyse naturally occurring speech. The material was thus not influenced by the researcher. Since this is a contrastive, quantitative study of male and female speech, the query was restricted accordingly, focusing on expressions of procedural meaning and epistemic stance.

The research process started with identifying the expressions of procedural meaning, as found in Richard Watts’ book *Politeness – Key Topics in Sociolinguistics*, as well as expressions of epistemic stance, as found in Pedro Martín-Martín’s article “The Mitigation of Scientific Claims in Research Papers: A Comparative Study”. These were then analysed quantitatively so that the frequency of all the expressions in the BNC was identified. The focus was on the spoken part of the corpus, without any further limitations as to the gender or the age of the speakers.

Furthermore, after reviewing the whole material, the hedges for further analysis were identified, so as to have a sample that is large enough. The identification process relied on the frequency of the above expressions, which were then considered in relation to the gender and the age of the speakers. The focus of the analysis were male and female speakers, aged 35–44 and 45–59, according to the BNC. After applying these filters, the expressions obtained were analysed in more detail and the most representative ones were taken from the corpus in order to be presented in this paper. After the analysis of the hedges, their total number used by male and female speakers was calculated and their speaking habits were compared in the chapter Final Discussion. Thus, the study of hedges and their functions in this paper is descriptive-quantitative in nature, as they are treated both quantitatively and qualitatively.19

6. Research Findings and Discussion

- **Male Speakers**

The focus of this section is on male speakers and their speaking habits. As indicated in the methodology section, the data relevant for the study was found in the BNC spoken corpus, concerning male speakers aged between 35 and 59 years.

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19 Note: All the examples in this paper are taken from different speakers on the BNCWeb.
The query included two categories of hedges which showed up as the most frequently used ones among speakers in general — the first category involving three expressions of epistemic stance (it might be, in my opinion, all I know), and the second one, three expressions of procedural meaning (could you, I wonder if, do you mind).

Expressions of Epistemic Stance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions of Epistemic Stance</th>
<th>Number of Hits</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It might be</td>
<td>170 hits by 98 different speakers</td>
<td>103.37 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All I know</td>
<td>3 hits by 3 different speakers</td>
<td>1.82 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion</td>
<td>12 hits by 11 different speakers</td>
<td>7.3 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>185 hits</strong></td>
<td><strong>112.49 instances per million words</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* It might be

The query *it might be* returned 170 hits by 98 different speakers with a frequency of 103.37 per million words. It is the most frequently used expression of epistemic stance out of the three. Two rather distinct categories of examples were observed, if the context in which the speakers used the expression is taken into account.

In the first group of examples, the expression is followed by an adjective or an adjective phrase as shown in:

a) Erm just before we break, erm *it might be* worthwhile just having a look at a few examples.

b) Erm [pause] perhaps if, *it might be* useful if [pause] er members took it away?

c) But *it might be* more appropriate to wait until [pause] nearer the time to send a memo, I don't know.

d) That erm [pause] *it might be* wise or advisable, I'd be interested to hear your views Colin and others perhaps even council [pause] procedures, you know on, on how far you can go in checking out [pause] er [pause] because I mean, you know [pause] you get something which tells you what was happening three weeks ago.

In these examples, the speaker is using an adjective after this expression to give some kind of advice. By using the phrase of epistemic stance followed by an adjective (i.e. It might be useful) instead of the verb *to be* plus adjective (i.e. It is
useful), he suggests a certain idea, but indicates that he himself is not one hundred per cent sure if that piece of advice will help. The phrase is used to either propose something new (e.g. it might be worthwhile just having a look) or to agree with something someone has previously suggested (e.g. That erm [pause] it might be wise or advisable).

In the second category of examples this expression is followed by a noun or a noun phrase as in:

e) **It might be** a lady driver with a couple of children in the car, again doing her incompetent best.

f) At that one at the Big Shops, the guy that ru-- okay **it might be** the guy that runs it not the one that owns it.

g) I mean now, the erm [pause] the social workers erm are care managers in a lot of cases, in other words it may be contracted out to somebody else to do the actual caring and you look at the package which the client is getting, you know **it might be** I dunno some old dear who needs [pause] meals on wheels and visits every [pause] week or something.

Here, the speaker is using the phrase to make guesses and express his doubts. He is making predictions based on the facts that he knows or can see and witness. He is using the noun to point to a person/thing he is thinking of, but he is not completely sure in his decision and thus his choice of expressions preceding the noun reflects his insecurity.

According to Martín-Martín (138), the strategy of indetermination was employed in both groups of the examples presented above. It is reflected in the use of the modal verb **might** and its main goal is to give propositions vagueness, fuzziness and uncertainty.

❖ **All I know**

The query **all I know** with sex and age restrictions returned only three hits, with a frequency of 1.82 per million words and thus is the least frequently used expression of epistemic stance among male speakers. All the examples are presented below:

a) That’s **all I know** about.

b) Wi-- Willie [gap:name], that’s **all I know**.

c) Oh erm [pause] The king is in the altogether, and altogether and a-- , that’s **all I know** the words.
In all three examples the speaker is using the phrase to compensate for his lack of knowledge. By uttering this expression, he indicates that he cannot contribute to the conversation any more. He may be missing that particular piece of information. However, it is also possible that he is intentionally hiding it and thus is using the phrase of epistemic modality to deceive the interlocutor. Be that as it may, the analysis of these examples suggests that the purpose of using the phrase all I know is clear. The speaker is unsure and lacks certain information.

If taking into account the fact that certain degree of fuzziness and uncertainty is present in the phrase all I know, we can claim that the strategy of indeterminacy is used in this phrase as well. Not only does it reflect vagueness and fuzziness, but it also comprises the personal pronoun I, by which it employs the strategy of subjectivisation (Martín-Martín 138).

**In my opinion**

In my opinion is the expression of epistemic modality which returned twelve hits by eleven different male speakers aged between 35 and 59 with a frequency of 7.3 per million words. In all the sentences the speaker is using the phrase to state his opinion. However, there are minor differences among examples.

In the following two utterances, the speaker chooses this expression of epistemic stance to state his opinion and to make his disagreement with the previous statement sound more polite. In the first part of the example he partly agrees with the previous statement but by introducing in my opinion, it is clear that he thinks differently. He respects his interlocutor’s point of view but disagrees with it.

a) I think what you say is quite true Chairman, but I still [pause] I think the bottom line to it is, at the end of the day, to do away with a strategic authority, such as the County Council, in my opinion, if you look at what's happened in the metropolitan areas, er in the country, Tyneside, Manchester, the West Midlands, areas like that, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and er London itself, the er the doing away with a strategic authority.

b) That's that's right, I mean I I I would suggest that we've arrived at that point now, and we're increasingly likely to do so, because as we've already heard York is very constrained, it's it's it's a relatively small, compact, historic city, the greenbelt boundaries are drawn fairly tightly, correctly in so in my opinion, and there's
really not much room for manoeuvre within existing settlements within the greenbelt.

For the next three examples, we are not given the broader context, but it can be seen that the speaker is using the phrase to express his own point of view and attitude towards a certain topic without previously agreeing or disagreeing with someone else’s statement, even though it is clear that the examples are taken from the middle of a conversation. By choosing this structure, the speaker implies that he represents a solely personal opinion and refrains from making any generalizations.

c) All three people in my opinion are like that.

d) In my opinion the A nineteen south in particular should be dismissed for highway reasons.

e) Erm er [pause] in my opinion they are a very good tenant and a very good person to work with and they certainly are very cooperative with the cinema.

According to Martín-Martín, the speakers employed the strategy of subjectivisation in all the examples, reflected in the use of the possessive adjective in the first person singular my. In this way, the speakers show respect for their interlocutor’s alternative opinion and invite the interlocutor to become involved in the communicative situation (Martín-Martín 138).

**Expressions of Procedural Meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions of Procedural Meaning</th>
<th>Number of Hits</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could you</td>
<td>219 hits by 87 different speakers</td>
<td>133.16 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wonder if</td>
<td>49 hits by 34 different speakers</td>
<td>29.79 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you mind</td>
<td>11 hits by 10 different speakers</td>
<td>6.69 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>279 hits</td>
<td>169.64 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Could you**

The query could you returned 219 hits by 87 different speakers with a frequency of 133.16 per million words. In 90 per cent of the examples the speaker used the expression as a hedge. He did so on purpose to make his request sound more polite. It is an indirect speech act in which the speaker is asking the hearer to
fulfill his order. It only appears to be a question, but it is clearly an order and the speaker wants an act done. It leaves space for the interlocutor to give a negative answer, even though the positive answer is almost always expected.

a) **Could you** take your coats off please and come into the blue room?
b) Andrew **could you** come and hold this door?
c) **Could you** keep your voice up please Mrs [gap:name]?
d) Could **could you** just say it again, Mr [gap:name]?

In the remaining ten per cent, **could you** was used as the past simple form of the modal verb **can** (e.g. How many ten Ps could you get out of it?; So what could you find out from that?). The speaker is questioning someone’s ability to do or find out something. This time, he is really asking the question. He is not giving an order in the form of a question but rather using a direct speech act.

**I wonder if**

The expression **I wonder if** returned 49 hits by 34 different speakers with a frequency of 29.79 per million words in the BNC with restrictions for age and sex. As with the aforementioned expression of procedural meaning, it was observed that the speakers used the expression **I wonder if** for two different purposes. In the first group of examples, the speaker used the expression as a hedge, as shown in:

a) **I wonder if** I could have it back please?
b) Hello [pause] All right **I wonder if** you could ask him if he’d like a coffee or tea and either just wait for me.
c) Hello [pause] **I wonder if** you’d mind asking him to wait and I’ll either be with him in about ten minutes.

In these examples, the speaker is using the construction **I wonder if** plus a modal verb (could, would) to make a request. The construction marks the beginning of the request and is used so that the speaker’s request seems more polite and sophisticated. The person who is asking for a favour from his interlocutor is not really wondering whether the hearer will carry out his orders. He is not questioning someone’s will or ability to respond to his request but instead, he is giving an order. Thus, the expression **I wonder if** used as a hedge helps the speaker to request more politely.
In the second group of examples, the phrase was not used as a hedge, but to indicate that the speaker is really wondering about something (e.g. I wonder if it makes your brain go doolally though; I wonder if they charge the same prices for their take away as for sitting at the table). This time his speech act is direct and no request is issued. He is making guesses or expressing his doubts but he is not giving any orders.

However, in all the examples the speaker is using the strategy of subjectivisation, as the personal pronoun in the first person is the part of the expression (Martín-Martín 138). This linguistic device expresses personal doubt and direct involvement.

**Do you mind**

The expression *do you mind* was used with a frequency of 6.69 per million words in the BNC. The number of hits is rather small, only eleven, and no distinction in the purpose could be noted in the analysed examples.

a) I’ve just got to get something *do you mind*?
b) I’m gonna have another cup of coffee *do you mind*?
c) Now *do you mind* if I read this or not?

The speaker is politely asking for some kind of permission. In most cases the speaker is somehow interrupting the conversation so he is using the phrase to indicate this to the interlocutor. The speaker has already made up his mind that he is going to leave or get a cup of coffee but he is adding *do you mind* so that his intention would not appear rude (leaving without saying anything). This expression of procedural meaning in the corpus is used solely as a hedge and has no other purposes.

**Female Speakers**

Female speakers and their speaking habits will be presented in this section. As indicated in the methodology section, the data for the study was extracted from the BNC, restricted to female speakers aged between 35 and 59. The query included two categories of hedges, which were proved to be the most frequent after the quantitative study – expressions of epistemic stance (it might be, in my opinion, all I know) and expressions of procedural meaning (could you, I wonder if, do you mind).
Conley, O’Barr and Lind (qtd. in Tannen 32) believed that “women’s tendency to be indirect is taken as evidence that women don’t feel entitled to make demands”. However, in accordance with the hypothesis of this research, it may be that women simply choose other linguistic means to make their demands, as “the ability to get one’s demands met without expressing them directly can be a sign of power rather than the lack of it” (Tannen 32) while also seeking rapport. They can be signs of affiliation and solidarity, rather than subordination and uncertainty (Tannen 31; Holmes, qtd. in Markkanen and Schröder 9), although there is a fine line between power and solidarity (Tannen 23f).

**Expressions of Epistemic Stance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions of Epistemic Stance</th>
<th>Number of Hits</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It might be</td>
<td>60 hits by 36 different speakers</td>
<td>56.19 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All I know</td>
<td>5 hits by 3 different speakers</td>
<td>4.68 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion</td>
<td>2 hits by 2 different speakers</td>
<td>1.87 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>67 hits</strong></td>
<td><strong>62.74 instances per million words</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**▼ It might be**

The modal auxiliary verb might was the most frequently used one. The query it might be, restricted to female speakers aged between 35–44 and 45–59, returned 60 hits by 36 speakers with a frequency of 56.19 instances per million words, thus making it the most frequently used expression of epistemic stance by female speakers, as was the case with male speakers. It was observed that there were three distinct categories of examples, based on the expression that preceded or followed this expression.

In the first group of examples, it might be was preceded by another expression of epistemic stance (e.g. I think, I thought) and followed by an adjective, as shown below:

a) I think **it might be** helpful Mr Girt if you could be a little more explicit about what in particular

b) I thought **it might be** easier to get you what you've got in already [pause] you've still got tea round your mouth and have you cleaned your teeth cause they weren't very clean um [pause] you could take Tom's midnight garden with
you [pause] but I just thought it might be nice to to give him a break away from home and he won't go on his

c) No I didn’t expect you that you would have the answer to those questions at the level of villages, however I think it might be reasonable to expect that in reaching your view, primarily on environmental grounds, which is the major flank of your argument for suppressing past migration trends.

According to Martín-Martín (138), two strategies were employed in these examples. The strategy of indetermination, intended to give the propositions vagueness, is reflected in the use of the modal auxiliary verb might, which expresses possibility. The strategy of subjectivisation is reflected in the use of the personal pronoun I, suggesting that it is the speaker’s personal opinion, followed by the cognitive verb think, aimed to “[highlight] the subjectivity of a proposition, [reduce] the sense of commitment and [add] a certain sense of politeness to the discourse” (Vázquez and Giner 186f). The verb think also reinforces the hedge in the modal verb might. These examples are instances of multiple hedging, as the two initial hedges are followed by the if-clause and the adverb a little (a), and the distal form could (c), which are all in the function of a face-saving act, with the aim of showing politeness and tentativeness.

In the second group, the expression it might be is only followed by an adjective:

d) Have you [pause] do you think it [pause] it might be better for some of the brighter ones to stretch them, to go through the whole [pause] lot [pause] do you know what I mean?

e) Anyway, look [pause] I’ll find out from Bob about this restaurant and [pause] see if there’s a possibility that it might be worth booking before I go.

f) I mean eventually eventually, sooner or later and it might be later if somebody else will still [unclear] it has to come out of the profit margin.

g) It might be worth asking mightn’t it?

In these examples, the speaker again uses the strategy of indetermination, via the modal auxiliary verb might, but this time, the strategy of depersonalisation is employed as well (Martín-Martín 139), as the speaker wishes to distance himself from the utterance. This expression is used by the speakers to give a suggestion or express doubt. The modal verb is used to help the speaker express her attitude indirectly. By being fuzzier, they do not offend the interlocutor when the speaker
makes her suggestion. The speaker expresses her doubt and degree of confidence in the claim. The use of the if-clause may show uncertainty, as it is a precondition. The final example (g) expresses a tentative suggestion, using the corresponding tag question (mightn’t it?), which allows the interlocutor to evaluate the truth value of the assertion, whereas the speaker expresses her doubt that it is worth asking. The use of tag questions could be a form of a hedge in spoken discourse (Riekkinen 8).

In the final group of examples, the expression **it might be** is followed by a noun, a noun phrase, or a clause:

h) But the other thing is, Judith’s husband plays [pause] in a band [pause] now [pause] I’d, I th-- **it might be** a pipe band, I’m not sure

i) And er[pause] I say, I dunno, he might have got a solicitor, **it might be** all going on, who knows?

j) **It might be** that it was just a little bit open and they think that somebody’s tampered with it so then they, they open [unclear]

Many authors state that “the sole function of modals is [...] to indicate that the speaker/writer is uncertain or tentative and is not committed to the truth value of the proposition” (qtd. in Vázquez and Giner 173). In the above examples, the speaker avoids imposing her own thoughts on others and making categorical assertions, which is enhanced by other expressions (e.g. I’m not sure, er, I dunno, might have got). These expressions of epistemic stance were used to signify the speaker’s stance, display uncertainty and reservation and protect the speaker from making a false statement.

**All I know**

The query **all I know** was the second most frequently used expression of epistemic stance by female speakers, unlike male speakers, with a frequency of 4.68 instances per million words.

a) **All I know** there's a mucky end and another end.

b) **All I know** is <pause> Cyril’s got his bird that’s **all I know**!

c) erm set of numbers, erm any way he was coming round and I just kept saying well I’m stuck a minute, he says why, I says it doesn't look right <pause> he says well why doesn't it look right?, he said well why doesn't it look right?, I said look if I say it doesn't look right that's **all I know**, it just doesn't look right
According to Fraser, the expression **all I know** signifies that “the speaker is saying that the proposition following is true only as far as [s]he can judge, not in any absolute sense” (“Pragmatic Competence” 25). This type of hedging can be perceived as negative, “because it shows uncertainty that is perceived as indicator of unreliability” (Nugroho 17). The verb **know** is a lexical verb, but it is used with epistemic meaning in this context to indicate the speaker’s assessment of the situation. It indicates the speaker’s strong stance on the matter and her belief in the veracity of the utterance, as there is a high degree of certainty and commitment, but it suggests that it is no more than the speaker’s personal opinion, thus expressing that the utterance is probably true. This expression employs the strategy of indetermination, and through the use of the personal pronoun **I**, also the strategy of subjectivisation (Martín-Martín 138).

**In my opinion**

The query **in my opinion** returned only two hits, with a frequency of 1.87 instances per million words, thus making it the least frequently used expression of epistemic stance by female speakers. All the examples are presented below.

a) I think basically what I’d like to say today is that I personally agree with what Ida's saying that it is an attack on the Health Service, and it is the greatest achievement that the Labour Party has done in history **in my opinion**.

The effect of a hedge in the initial/medial/final position may also influence the interpretation of the utterance (Fetzer; Schneider, qtd. in Fraser, “Pragmatic Competence” 25). The speaker goes on record with expressing her opinion, which may be seen as face-threatening or impolite, so she adds the expression of epistemic stance at the very end to soften it, or to indicate that she wants to avoid responsibility. **Opinion** may be seen as a noun used with modal meaning, to express the epistemic stance of the speaker. The expressions of personalisation (e.g. I think basically, I personally agree) suggest great tentativeness and politeness on behalf of the speaker, as well as agreement with the interlocutor.

b) er, we have in the East end of the village, including the pub, the farm, and various other properties, a certain type of properties that <unclear> elevation, a certain sympathetic er amenity, and these buildings, I I heard the word mentioned earlier, I live in the country, I could live in the town, it doesn’t matter where I live, but these are not the sort of properties, **in my opinion**, that should be put on
this particular site, er and they're they're totally, all our own elevations and plans of height, and they are totally and utterly out of proportion and out of scale with the present day entrance to the village, and whilst we're not talking totally and utterly about looks, if you come down into the village they are going to be totally overpowering, particularly in the, in the actual, in this situation of no hedges and that kind of thing,

In the initial part of the utterance in the example above, we are given a broader context, as the speaker is talking about the life in the village, followed by her opinion (these are not the sort of properties) and the expression in my opinion that indicates taking responsibility for the truth of her statement. The use of hesitation markers (er) is also quite evident, as these are also the kinds of hedges that may be found in spoken discourse (Riekkinen 8).

In both examples, the possessive adjective my indicates that it is the speaker’s opinion on the matter, thus they both employ the strategy of personalisation. The strategy of personalisation is enhanced by the use of quality-emphasising adverbial expressions (e.g. totally and utterly), which are emotionally-charged, and as such serve to convince the interlocutors of the veracity of the speaker’s proposition (Martín-Martín 139).

**Expressions of Procedural Meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions of Procedural Meaning</th>
<th>Number of Hits</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could you</td>
<td>86 hits by 45 different speakers</td>
<td>80.53 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wonder if</td>
<td>59 hits by 33 different speakers</td>
<td>55.25 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you mind</td>
<td>10 hits by 4 different speakers</td>
<td>9.36 instances per million words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>155 hits</td>
<td><strong>145.14 instances per million words</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

▷ **Could you**

The query could you returned 86 hits by 45 different speakers with a frequency of 80.53 instances per million words, making it the most frequently used expression of procedural meaning by female speakers. There is a distinction between the modal verb signalizing ability and the modal verb used as a hedge, signifying politeness. In approximately 25 per cent of the examples, the modal auxiliary could was used to mark the ability (e.g. You could read it could you?; Couldn’t taste the cider could you?). This is not a request, but a question by the speaker.
In the remaining 75 per cent of the examples, this expression with the modal auxiliary verb could was used as a hedge, as shown in the examples below:

a) **Could you**, could you maybe gather Linda's and Alex's and anybody else's that they've got

b) **Could, could you**, thanks, thanks Robert, **could you** fax it?

c) **could you** possibly give Ian, Zain and me the authority to work that one out.

d) Sorry **could you** repeat the figure for through traffic?

The distal form could refers to the “hearer’s assumed ability” (Yule 56), but the goal of the utterance is to get the hearer to do something. Thus, this can constitute an indirect speech act, and these are “associated with greater politeness [...] than direct speech acts” (Yule 56). House and Kasper term it a “consultative device”, aimed to “involve the addressee and bid for his/her cooperation” (qtd. in Watts 183). The expressions that follow or precede the expression could you (e.g. maybe, possibly, thanks, sorry) are all oriented to the speaker’s negative face and compensate for the imposition that the requests entail, thus being examples of negative politeness (Grundy 157). They are all aimed to reduce the chances that the speaker will decline the request.

e) **Could you** put it down [pause] **please**?

f) Charlotte will you leave the money alone **please** [pause] **honey could you** put it out of reach **please, love**.

h) **Could you** pass your plate **please**?

g) Can you, **could you** pass the milk **please**?

i) **Could you** give me your full postcode **please**?

j) **Please could you** get some crossing lights, a zebra crossing, or some traffic lights put in.

In these examples, the imperative sentences are followed by the pragmatic idiom please, aimed to “signal the speaker’s intention that the sentence is to be taken only as a request or a suggestion” (Wilamova 91), thus increasing the degree of politeness. The terms of endearment honey and love are aimed to make the request which is borderline an order more acceptable to the interlocutor.

**I wonder if**

The query I wonder if returned 59 hits by 33 different speakers with a frequency of 55.25 instances per million words, making it the second most frequently used
expression of procedural meaning among female speakers. It can be seen that the speakers use the expression for two purposes. The first purpose indicates general wondering and is reflected in approximately 65 per cent of the examples (e.g. *I wonder if* Mr Saunders has a view; *I wonder if* all the dogs are in there?). The examples when the expression *I wonder if* are used as a hedge are shown below:

a) Listen Doctor, *I wonder if* you could <pause> I'm eating seven boxes of chocolate a week.

b) *I wonder* if there's any way you can actually check, you know, where he is, is there any way that <unclear>

In both examples, the speaker is not wondering about the will or the ability of the interlocutor to carry out what is requested. This expression is a “performative hedge”, which may function as an introduction to face-threatening acts such as requests, suggestions, and apologies (Wilamova 90). They signal the illocutionary goal of the utterance and soften it. The expression precedes a request in both cases and it aims to create politeness and avoid imposition or confrontation. Whereas there is no actual request in the first example, only what the interlocutor may imply from the explanation (I’m eating seven boxes of chocolate a week), in the second example, this expression is enhanced by the use of *is there any way*, which signals tentativeness and avoidance of imposition by downtoning it. It can be said that there is a strategy of subjectivisation, in the personal pronoun *I*, which suggests the involvement of the speaker, or that it is the speaker’s request that needs to be fulfilled (Martín-Martín 138).

Do you mind

The query *do you mind* had a frequency of 9.36 instances per million words. Two distinct structures can be seen in the examples. The first group of examples consisted of the expression and a noun or an adjectival phrase (e.g. *Do you mind mugs?*; *Do you mind a red?*). Watts (180) stated that the lexical verb *mind* is a synonym of the expressions *have something against* or *object to*, and in these examples, this is the literal meaning of the expression, as the speaker is asking the interlocutor whether he objects to mugs and red (possibly wine). However, in the examples below, this expression is used as a hedge:

a) *Do you mind* if I watch Eastenders at two cos I ain’t seen it.

b) I wanna watch Eastenders now, *do you mind*?
c) **Do you mind** eating a bit later on?

Keeping in mind the meaning of the verb *mind*, we can conclude that the expression **do you mind** is not inherently polite. However, by asking the interlocutor whether he/she minds what the speaker is about to propose or suggest, this expression can be seen as a politeness marker. This expression of procedural meaning, in the majority of the sentences, precedes the speech act that can be felt as face-threatening. In example (b), there is a feeling that the strength of the utterance, which is a demand, needs to be attenuated by adding a softener at the end. However, based on the vague context surrounding the utterance, this word order could also indicate the speaker’s irritation.

**7. Final Discussion**

When it comes to the expressions of epistemic stance, the most frequent one was **it might be** by both male and female speakers, with a frequency of 103.37 ppm and 56.19 ppm respectively. However, male speakers used the expression **in my opinion** more frequently than female speakers, as the frequency was 7.3 ppm to 1.87 ppm.

When it comes to the expressions of procedural meaning, the most frequent one was **could you** by both male and female speakers, with a frequency of 133.16 ppm and 80.53 ppm respectively, followed by the expression **I wonder if**, with a frequency of 29.79 ppm and 55.25 ppm respectively. The third most frequent expression, **do you mind**, has a frequency of 6.69 ppm and 9.36 ppm respectively. Lastly, the expression **I wonder if** was used more by female than male speakers, the male speakers used the expression **could you** more frequently. The analyses show that, despite the initial hypothesis, the hedges selected for this paper (both the expressions of procedural meaning and the expressions of epistemic stance) are used more frequently by male speakers than by female speakers in the BNC.

The number of hits for the expressions of epistemic meaning was 185, with a frequency of 112.49 ppm when it comes to male speakers, in comparison to 67 hits with a frequency of 62.74 ppm for female speakers. The number of hits for the expressions of procedural meaning was also higher for male speakers, as there were 279 hits with a frequency of 169.64 ppm, in comparison to 155 hits with a frequency of 145.14 ppm for female speakers. This totalled to 464 hits and the
frequency of 282.13 ppm for the selected expressions i.e. hedges used by the male speakers, in contrast with 222 hits and the frequency of 207.88 ppm for the hedges used by female speakers. The results are summarised in the tabular form below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressions</th>
<th>Male Speakers</th>
<th>Female Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Hits</td>
<td>Frequency [ppm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It might be</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>103.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All I know</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my opinion</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>112.49</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>133.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wonder if</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you mind</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>279</strong></td>
<td><strong>169.64</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on this, we can conclude that, at least when it comes to hedges selected for this paper in the BNC, male speakers use hedges more than women.

**8. Conclusion**

This study is based on material from the British National Corpus, and its purpose was to examine whether men or women use more hedges within the selected conversations. Based on the analyses above, it is possible to state that, at least when it comes to the expressions selected for this paper, the expressions of epistemic stance (it might be, all I know, in my opinion), as well as the expressions of procedural meaning (could you, I wonder if, do you mind) are used more frequently by male than by female speakers in the BNC.

Based on the analyses above, it is possible to state that, at least when it comes to the expressions selected for this paper, the expressions of epistemic stance (it might be, all I know, in my opinion), as well as the expressions of procedural meaning (could you, I wonder if, do you mind) are used more frequently by male than by female speakers.

While politeness may still remain the main motivating factor for hedging, tentativeness comes into play, but also “playing it safe” in the face of possible
contradiction, as a way of protecting one’s face. The results of the analysis were not in agreement with the initial hypothesis, as it was expected the complete opposite would be found. However, the results are in agreement with those of Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (qtd. in Markkanen and Schröder 9) that found that Finnish men hedged more frequently than women.

Given the results of this analysis, it can be concluded that this issue is far more complex than initially assumed. To determine the different use of hedges, variables other than gender and age must be considered. One should, for instance, also look at the context of the respective situation as well as information on the individual speakers. While this research focused solely on hedging between men and women of a specific age range, it is the hope of the authors that this exploration of hedging with regard to the BNC could lead to further, more comprehensive and precise qualitative studies that include other variables to representatively challenge the idea that hedging is a female way of speaking.
9. Bibliography


