

## Violence and the “Gothic New Woman” in *Penny Dreadful*

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### ABSTRACT

The television series *Penny Dreadful*, created by John Logan (2014–2016), uses famous supernatural characters from nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century popular fiction to evoke the idea of a haunted past as background for new stories of a world on the brink of change. In *Penny Dreadful*, the supernatural sufferings of Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), the shadowy predations of the witches and the revivification of Brona Croft as Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper) echo the ways in which popular culture reacted to the transformative figure of the New Woman at a time when the Victorian Gothic had more broadly become a “site of cultural proliferation” (Murphy 2017: 6). Its stories offer a dark reflection of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties that construed female desire for education, professional independence and political participation as spookily degenerate or monstrous (Pykett 1992; Nelson 2000). The “Gothic New Women” of *Penny Dreadful* are characters with supernatural capacity who seek new possibilities for themselves and their worlds. Viscerally “made” from their experiences, often at the hands of dominating or ruthless males, they wrestle with incursions into and limits on their autonomy and power, whether through enchantment or ideological or institutional oppression. The marks of violence are written on their bodies, yet they seek to survive through mental determination or by turning the tables of violence on their predators, even as their gestures of new selfhood are caught in a slippage against ideology, gender and power.

### Introduction: the idea of a haunted past

While the #MeToo movement foregrounded women’s repression, representation and resistance in contemporary transmedia culture (Gill & Orgad 2018; Howell 2019), narratives and images that reinforce structural inequalities by showing implicit or explicit violence against women remain commonplace, as feminist scholarship demonstrates (Buchwald *et al.* 2005; Belknap 2007; Pye & O’Sullivan 2012; Bonomi *et al.* 2013; Garland *et al.* 2018). The globally celebrated television fantasy drama series *Game of Thrones*, for example, attracted sharp criticism for its spectacular scenes of female exploitation and violation, but that did not deter millions of viewers worldwide from watching the series to its tragic end (Hynes 2018: 44).

Another key instance of debate around the positioning of female figures in screen narrative concerns the original 3-season television series *Penny Dreadful*, created by John Logan (2014-2016), which draws on the historical figure of the “New Woman” to engage with cultural complexities surrounding identity and turn-of-the-century social transformation (Ledger 1997; Richardson & Willis 2019).

Set around the time of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *Penny Dreadful* features the trope of the “Gothic New Woman” (Green 2017), a dark reflection of the *fin-de-siècle* anxiety that construed female desire for education, professional independence and political participation as spookily degenerate or monstrous (Pykett 1992; Nelson 2000; Murphy 2017). Viscerally “made” from their experiences, the Gothic New Women of *Penny Dreadful*, like others with supernatural capacity in the series, seek new possibilities for themselves and their worlds (Green 2017). They wrestle with incursions into and limits on their autonomy and power, whether through enchantment or ideological or institutional oppression. The marks of violence are written on their bodies, yet they seek to survive, whether through mental determination or by turning the tables of violence on their predators, even as their gestures of new selfhood are compromised by loneliness and constraint.

*Penny Dreadful*'s positioning as small screen fantasy narrative is important in a number of ways, testing the viewer stance in relation to gender politics and spectacular violence. The characters are refracted through the lens of monstrosity as a quality of selfhood – one that impacts in various ways on all of the characters in this multiplex interweaving of story adaptations, particularly through the embodied experiences of its female characters. Barbara Creed identifies the prevalence of the female figure as monster in screen horror narrative in her foundational study *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993: 1). She argues, with reference to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (1984), that a sense of revulsion and desire linked with gender, sexuality and embodiment is central to the sense of visceral monstrosity that surrounds female characters in horror stories, so that the boundaries of self and other are blurred, threatening subjectivity. The disruption to personhood through supernatural incursion which plagues the central characters of *Penny Dreadful*, including the permeability of the female body, is echoed here at the textual level. As Anita Nell Bech Albertsen suggests, with reference to Creed (1993), the narrative elements are “intertextually contaminated by different archetypal manifestations of female monstrosity” (2019: 253). That the stories of the female characters in *Penny Dreadful* promise liberation and power but end in repression or death arguably reflects the limits of their casting as inherently monstrous beings.

How we should read the portrayal of monstrous female desire and its violent containment in *Penny Dreadful* has been debated by several scholars. Marie-Luise Kohlke, for instance, has criticised the underlying “message encoded in the way that the series endorses spectacular sexualised violence” (2018: 10), while Chloé Germaine Buckley has examined the “ambivalent grotesquerie” of the series, suggesting that its post-feminist Gothic stance resists but also reproduces gendered embodiment (2020). Although, undoubtedly, powerful female characters are compromised, or even destroyed, by figures of male authority in this series, *Penny Dreadful* uses violent spectacle as part of an attempt to assert a new subjectivity, through new expressive gestures of selfhood. Does *Penny Dreadful* offer promise in its use of the fantastic as a medium for new story telling? Or does it reproduce brutalist spectacle and gendered inequality within a seemingly progressive frame?

## Re-producing Grand Guignol

The creation of writer John Logan, producer Sam Mendes and their production teams, *Penny Dreadful* takes up a repertoire of famous fantasy characters from nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular fiction and spins new stories for them, woven together around a key invented character, Vanessa Ives (Eva Green). The fantasy world of the series is richly wrought from a host of literary, artistic and architectural sources. The series is set in a re-imagined London at the Victorian *fin de siècle*, filmed in Dublin and Spain. Its urban streetscapes invoke the experimentalism of the 1890s, with its neo-classical stylistics and literary flair, its suffrage debates, nationalist politics, industrialisation, neo-Gothic fashion, and fear of scientific experimentation. Character roles are adapted from popular novels, including nineteenth-century classics such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (2018 [1818]), Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (2013 [1872]), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2006 [1886]), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2006 [1890]) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (2003 [1897]), and theatrical sources such as James Malcolm Rymer's and Thomas Peckett Prest's *Varney the Vampire* (1972 [1847]). It also draws on a host of penny bloods, novelettes and cinema sources.

Logan has acknowledged the influence of twentieth-century westerns (Connolly 2016) and horror movies such as *Frankenstein* (Whale 1931) and *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Fisher 1957), in media interviews (Huver 2015). While the series makes a host of historical references, many sources are taken from modern popular culture, producing a visual and literary ethos that is already familiar to both readers and viewers (Louttit 2016). The richness of this referentiality evokes the impression of a complex world populated by human and non-human beings, who are as familiar to us as the heroes and villains of the fairy tales we were told as children. In reworking these fragments of influence, the series interrogates tyrannies of personal obsession and social fear to produce a new kind of story invention.

The archetypal personae of *Penny Dreadful* are brought together to form a loosely constituted team of investigators in pursuit of the dark creatures of the "demimonde". As Albertsen remarks, the characters can be conceived of as new fictional identities that are "contaminated" both by their original source characters and their various adaptations in fiction and film (2017). This provides for a more complex reading of the characters and their narrative possibilities, filtered through the grotesquerie of horror spectacle and sideshow carnivalesque, intensifying the threat of physical disarray. Amongst its multiple narrative devices, the series uses visual performativity and gestural expression to convey a Grand Guignol metropolis shadowed by dark portents and supernatural beings, in which the very idea of humanity struggles to survive.

As its stories unfold, the two central female figures, Vanessa Ives and Lily Frankenstein, struggle in their own different and dangerous ways against repressive and exploitative forces, expressed as supernatural and scientific incursions and predations of body and self. The backdrop against which the stories of these two women unfold is strongly coloured by allusions to what is perhaps still the most famous horror story of violence against women – the historical "Jack the Ripper" scares in London. Widespread newspaper reportage of the 1890s events helped to popularise murder-mystery stories in English-speaking cultures (Curtis 2008). The Ripper scares are mentioned at the outset of Season 1's first episode, with the mysterious killing of a young woman and her daughter. It is the first of several visceral attacks on women in London's Spitalfields area that allude to the Ripper's return.

As the season advances, our hunters of the demimonde, Vanessa and Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), pursue the unseen perpetrator to a lair of vampires, which they destroy. Yet, the threat is far from contained. At least one vampire escapes. More troublingly, they carry with them their own shadows and demons who are struggling to break free and infect the modern world with eternal darkness. We do not meet the demon himself until Season 3, in the persona of Count Dracula, using the pseudonym Dr Alexander Sweet (Christian Camargo). The obscurity of the demon is a directorial strategy of anticipation that raises the level of emotional intensity and sets the stage for an ambiguous pathway to the conclusion. Logan remarked in an interview “I think there’s a reason the Greeks left the violence offstage ... because you imagine it so much more horrific and blood-chilling than it could be dramatized” (Connolly 2017).

### ***Fin-de-siècle* mashup**

The mashup approach adopted by *Penny Dreadful*, also known as “recursive” fiction, was also a characteristic of the original “penny dreadful” book genre (Vaninskaya 2011). The term refers to pulp or trash fiction sold in weekly instalments for one penny each, a form of cheap entertainment that exploded with the expansion of the print publishing industry in the nineteenth century. Penny dreadfuls became associated with moral panic and were “accused of provoking the commission of juvenile crimes” (Springhall 1999: 75). From the 1860s they were seen as “the inheritors of more adult-orientated ‘penny bloods’, convoluted serial novels about Gothic villains, pirates, highwaymen, thieves and murderers” (Springhall 1999: 43). Logan’s characters include reworkings of Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Frankenstein’s monster, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, but he also draws on literary works from the Romantic period, such as poems by John Clare and William Wordsworth, inflected with the personal experience of heartbreak and despair (Ulaby 2014), to imbue the series with the timbre of dark apprehension and mourning. The result is a fresh yet familiar storyworld, haunted by the ghosts and monsters of the *fin de siècle*, that seems to be hurtling towards a threatening spectacle of horrific change.

As a story franchise, *Penny Dreadful* has not only adapted popular literary classics such as those by Wilde, Stevenson and Stoker. It has since spawned a sequence of graphic narratives and a new television iteration set in Los Angeles which offer ongoing possibilities for new characters and story transformation. As Howell and Baker point out:

Self-reflexive and historically-conscious in the way it uses its recursive fictions and remediative aesthetic to replay and reframe the enduring pleasures of nineteenth century popular culture and fictions, *Penny Dreadful* extends the scope of its interwoven narrative worlds through both the character network of its ensemble cast and through its imaginative challenges to its audience (2017: n.p.).

For the characters of the original television series, however, as Anna De Biasio remarks, the acts of “interpretation and re-creation” by which it is composed entail “both gains and losses” (2017: n.p.). Story elements taken from classic popular fiction texts offer rich sources for invention, inquiry and critique. At the same time, uncertainty and power bring both liberation and constraint. Here, as elsewhere, conventions of male heroism are reinscribed, and the figure of the female destroyer remains taboo.

Rikke Schubart argues, however, that the contemporary female fantasy hero must be understood as complex and conflicted (2017). As exemplified by the movie *Wonder Woman*

(Jenkins 2017) where Gal Gadot in the title role faces uncertainty and loss, for Schubart, after feminism, female characters in screen drama seek power and express desire with a sense of possibility, while refusing to sacrifice a sense of purpose for romance (2019: 170).

As is characteristic of its nominal genre, the stories in *Penny Dreadful* lead not to ideological liberation for oppressed female characters, but to new stories that can be carried forward and to fresh character adaptations that will fight familiar and unfamiliar antagonists in new ways. Although many of the key characters possess magical powers or transformative abilities, not all of them start out as supernatural beings. The key female personae, in particular, are “made” from their experiences, often at the hands of ruthless, ambitious males. In the context of the Gothic, where the presence of an all-powerful figure, whether real or supernatural, is a commonplace source of loathing or fear, gender and horror are frequently linked. As Janine Little remarks in a close examination of media representations of gendered violence,

Gothic narratives, especially those on screen, do not normally end well. Most often the screen gothic features a monstrous male character and a compromised female character walking that liminal space between life and death, and between representation and invisibility (2015: 403-404).

*Penny Dreadful* engages with this cultural narrative through several of its narrative strands, at first calling into question the ways in which women are constrained by social, cultural and sexual expectation. Brona Croft (Billie Piper), for instance, is a consumption-riddled prostitute who is “literally” reborn when her body is used by Victor Frankenstein to create what he hopes will be the perfect female. Elizabeth Grosz offers the term “corporeal feminism”, in her foundational study, to identify the female body as the site of power struggle in representational terms (1994: 3). In *Penny Dreadful* the gestures of the feminine are called into question. Lily stains the pretty garb of bland Victorian girlhood with her own blood and that of her male enemies who are no match for her physical prowess. Vanessa speaks with the authority of her supernatural experience and openly pursues her desires. The nightcomers (witches) are revealed as predatory spirits, untrammelled by gender, who wear the costumes of women only to pass as human. Taking on board Giorgio Agamben’s notion of an ethical life which refuses to be reduced to the clichés and rehearsed gestures of cinematic representation (as cited in Harbord 2015), it may be argued that the Gothic New Women of *Penny Dreadful* attempt to assert a transformative subjectivity by refusing the gestures of feminine victimhood. Yet their stories appear to lead to a restitution of patriarchal violence, as the representational gestures of the suffering female body hold our gaze. Lily is captured and chained. Vanessa is imprisoned and tortured with barbaric “psychological” treatments, viscerally possessed by the demon, and finally destroyed by her human lover.

### **Embodying horror**

In Season 1, Victor Frankenstein’s first successful experiment is a work of visceral bricolage: the assemblage and reanimation of human male body parts to form the scarred Creature (Rory Kinnear) – a bitter, pitiable figure who struggles to find a place in the world, like his progenitor from Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (2018 [1818]). Victor’s female creation is, however, produced from the body of a whole woman, Brona Croft. Her reanimation takes place in a dusty dungeon crammed with ghastly, looming machines that invoke the brutalities of Victorian industrial exploitation (Season 2, Episode 1). She rises from the bed of mechanical production in perfect form, beautiful, seemingly innocent and born anew, without memories of her past as

Brona. A product of scientific invention, she becomes a figure of recursive adaptation in both literary and embodied terms. Victor renames his “new woman” Lily, for the flower – a symbol of rebirth and the restitution of innocence after death. Lily’s beauty and initial confusion render her biddable and available to Victor’s tutelage, seemingly the child/woman he hopes to shape to his feminine ideal (Season 2, Episodes 1 and 2).

Lily has been manufactured with the intention to supply Victor’s first created progeny, the Creature, who now calls himself John Clare, with a mate to mitigate the burden of his loneliness: a classic allusion to Mary Shelley’s original story. However, Lily recoils from her promised husband. In a departure from the original story, where the “bride” made for the Creature is destroyed, this Lily inspires her maker with adoration. Rather than killing his new creation, or giving her to John Clare, Victor tries to possess her himself. At first, she relies on Victor, copying the behaviour of her maker, adopting his gestures, accent and manners, and wearing feminine clothes that please conventional taste, in an effort to appear as an acceptable female creature. The being that now inhabits Brona’s body is not the passive feminine creature her suitors imagine her to be, however. Gradually, she remembers the brutality and suffering of her past life, the men who abused her and the tiny child she lost to starvation and neglect. She becomes filled with anguish and fury. At the same time, she also discovers that she now possesses a supreme strength and power (Season 2, Episode 7).

Lily is transformed as a Gothic New Woman, knowing, angry and vengeful, with a superhuman strength and ambitions of her own. Through the electro-mechanical process of reanimation, she has acquired an entirely new subjectivity, and becomes other, in the fullest sense, repudiating the false gestures of feminine compliance and reasserting herself as “superhuman”, a warrior of the corporeal. Lily vows to take her revenge on all the men who have exploited her and to establish a new breed of creatures, stronger and better than the weak humans who exploited them. She tells John Clare, “[W]e were created to rule, my love. And the blood of mankind will water our garden” (Season 2, Episode 8). To achieve this she becomes a self-determined killer, driven by vengeance and purpose to reclaim the London night as her domain, relishing in the blood of her victims. At a key moment, she asserts “Never again will I kneel to any man. Now they will kneel to me” (Season 3, Episode 2). As I have argued previously, Lily is important in *Penny Dreadful* as an attempt to portray a transformative identity, a Gothic redefinition of the late-Victorian feminine (Green 2017: 2) that is compromised, however, by a pact between the male characters to contain her.

Lily gathers a band of like-minded female warriors, all women who have suffered under the weight of male violence. At a banquet table in Dorian Gray’s mansion, she urges them to “rise up” against their male oppressors (Season 3, Episode 7), sending them out into the night to wreak violent havoc. Lily’s stylised rage invokes Salome’s thirsty demand for the head of John the Baptist – another allusion to Wilde, whose play *Salome* (2015 [1894]) captured the dark ethos of a dying century. After the women’s rampage, the table is piled high with the bloodied hands of the men from whose bodies they have been torn, trophies taken by Lily’s new army, the women of the night. The fierce physicality of the image is intensified by the glamour and elegance of its setting. It is a scene of excess which compels and repulses in equal measure. Created by men, Lily rejects her maker, Victor, and the romantic submission that her suitor, the Creature, proffers. Instead, she is bent on achieving both destruction and power.

This is one of two key problematic instances in *Penny Dreadful*, where seemingly strong female leads are compromised in their attempts to assert new identities for themselves. As Kohlke (2018) points out, for example, while the series seems to support feminist ideals

and actions, in fact it offers a “parodic skewing” of female perspectives, misrepresenting history and gendered experience. Both Vanessa and Lily become “socially vilified and victimised as fallen women and monstrous madwomen on account of their gender and sexuality” (2018: 2). The emergence of a “fallen woman” attitude within the narrative point of view demonstrates the ambiguity of how female empowerment is portrayed: “their unexpected show of agency and their rebellion against (sexual) servitude” facilitates a “transformation from victims into violent (anti)-heroines” (Primorac 2018: 169). The extremity of the reaction is, however, antagonistic to conventional empathy. Lily’s patron, the beautiful, wealthy reprobate Dorian Gray, turns against her, delivering her to the monsters of medical transformation, Frankenstein and Jekyll, for containment (Season 3, Episode 7). At the end of Season 3, chained by the ankle in Jekyll’s laboratory, she faces the prospect of destruction of selfhood by chemical control.

Lily has resisted male exploitation by refusing the story her maker imposed upon her and embarking on a campaign to avenge the women of the night, but she has largely failed (Season 2, Episode 9). At the end of the series, Victor takes pity on his beloved creation and allows her to slip the chains of capture into an obscure future (Season 3, Episode 8). Colebrook argues, with reference to Grosz, Gatens and other feminist thinkers, that the human body “is an intensely political site” that cannot be regarded simply “as some ultimate foundation” (2000: 76-77). While ultimately, the human body needs to be understood beyond the dichotomy of sameness and difference, the corporeal, eroticised, character of gender representation points to the politics of its investment (Colebrook 2000: 90). If the embodied narrative of patriarchal dominance is unsettled, then, by Lily’s bloodthirsty revenge project, it is fatally reinscribed with the embodied destruction of Vanessa Ives’s desire by a forceful archdemon who seeks to redouble his control over the dark forces of the universe by joining her mysterious powers to his own.

Through Seasons 1 and 2, Vanessa performs the role of an upper-middle-class gentlewoman, as a cover for her investigations into the demimonde. She goes about in polite London society with Sir Malcolm (Timothy Dalton), attending soirées and concerts dressed in silk and lace. Yet, she struggles bodily throughout the series with the harsh incursions of an invisible demon, and with an increasing sense of despair (Season 3, Episode 1). Positioned from the outset as the central character in the series, Vanessa is a mysterious character, one who fights to hold a vast destructive power at bay within herself (Season 1, Episode 7; Season 2, Episode 7). She ultimately prevents an apocalypse on Earth, refusing the demon’s grip by choosing her own destruction (Season 3, Episode 9). This appears to be a compromised choice, in which her fate can only be sealed in patriarchal terms; however, it is at the same time a choice that asserts the vestiges of her originary sense of self and her attachment to humanity and community.

Misery opens the demon’s first chink into Vanessa’s psyche in Season 1 when she acts on her desire for her friend Mina’s fiancé and is then burdened with guilt at her betrayal (Season 1, Episode 5). At first, Vanessa’s magic abilities protect her from being possessed by the demon; they have been honed by long months of training with the “daywalker”, or “good” witch, Joan Clayton (Patti LuPone). Her spells against his invasive incursions are uttered in *verbis diablo* (Season 2, Episode 10), a linguistic pastiche constructed for the series by David J. Peterson from Latin, Arabic, Akkadian, Middle Egyptian, Farsi and Turkish to convey an impression of “the Devil’s corruption of language” (Wakim 2015). But, although Vanessa keeps the demon at bay through Seasons 1 and 2, her white face and body are figured as a

spectacle of physical and psychic suffering. Her gestures of repudiation and refusal are the signs of a tormented sacrifice to which she will eventually succumb.

As Vanessa is pressured to allow the demon to break from the obscure world of dark spirits into the plane of being, her thin, pale body is wrenched into air, her brow and hair drenched with fever, her flesh bruised, even supernaturally inscribed. Her mind is tormented by voices. She speaks words no one can understand. Seemingly mad, she is forcibly subjected to shock treatments and ice baths, bound to a bed and imprisoned in a padded cell by doctors who cannot understand her condition (Season 1, Episode 5; Season 3, Episode 3). In Season 1 she overcomes the possession with the help of werewolf gunslinger Ethan Chandler, who “exorcises” the demon, but this is only a temporary reprieve. At the end of the series it falls to Ethan to seal the window to darkness that Vanessa’s powers represent. In a highly disturbing and troublingly romanticised moment, she begs him to end her life and he accedes, rehearsing an all too familiar story of gendered sacrifice and violence (Season 3, Episode 9).

Vanessa and Lily engage our sympathies perhaps because of their suffering and their attempts to care for others. There are other leading women in the series who also perform unconventional roles, as Vanessa’s friends or foe, and are often compromised by violence against women. Patti LuPone performs a somewhat intriguing double role. In Season 2 she appears as Joan Clayton, “daywalker” and Vanessa’s highly skilled, but ruthless, instructor on the making of healing brews and the wielding of magic powers. Joan prepares her student to withstand a supremely powerful dark force, but she is herself a figure of suspicion. For her work as an abortionist as much as for her potent spells, Joan is killed, burnt on a cross by angry, fearful villagers at the direction of a local aristocrat (Season 2, Episode 7) in a reference to historical witchcraft trials and stake-burnings – a classic trope of extreme male violence against women (Barry & Davies 2007). In Season 3, LuPone reappears in another supportive role as psychological mentor for Vanessa. Again, however, she is prey to the evil wishes of others. In both incarnations, her death invokes the social harm done to women in patriarchal cultures who attempt to use experience, insight and knowledge to care for others.

Another key female persona in *Penny Dreadful* is Evelyn Poole (Helen McCrory), who enters the series combatively, masked as a gentlewoman of elegant taste to attract Sir Malcolm’s affections. Of course, Evelyn is not what she seems, as she too is compromised by the archdemon’s appetite for Vanessa. Her beauty, secret longevity and powerful witchcraft are the rewards of a fateful sacrifice, an ancient bargain with the demon that has turned her into a “nightcomer” – “a witch that has traded her soul to the devil for greater magical power” (Hobson 2018: 55-56). The demon uses Evelyn to attack Vanessa with frightening occult images and whispered promises (Season 2, Episode 6). Evelyn is, in turn, frightened, jealous of her master’s need for Vanessa and aware that she is losing her control over Sir Malcolm’s attention. She is forced by the demon to persist in pursuit of Vanessa by kidnapping Sir Malcolm and imprisoning him in a room with the tomb of his dead son (Season 2, Episode 8). Vanessa withstands these attacks by using *verbis diablo* and with the help of her friends, who destroy the nightcomer but in the process lose their comrade Sembene (Danny Sapani) (Season 2, Episode 10). Success in overcoming the monster is never without sacrifice in this shadowy, passionate account of the demimonde and its contenders.

## Creating worlds

The impulse to create a sense of wonder, indeed horror, in viewers is central to fantasy as a genre. The politics of representation that goes with the portrayal of violence remains



problematic, however. As Primorac observes, in relation to adaptive works, such as *Penny Dreadful*,

the violated female body as the heroine template does not appear merely uncanny; it also calls for further analyses of the widespread use of rape and violence against women as the narrative foundations on which heroines' self-awareness is built in popular culture, be they adaptations or appropriations of literary classics, of films or television shows about superheroes (2018: 169).

*Penny Dreadful* is a fantasy entertainment that recruits a plethora of pulp fiction figures, tropes and genres to create a seductive mashup of story lines featuring familiar characters in new situations. Certainly, the series exploits clichés and anachronistic ideas and manipulates the discourses of its settings as a mass-media mirror for the contradictions and anxieties of our own time. Its contribution to public cultural debate, however, is about the disrespect shown to those who do not conform to simple stereotypes, pointing out the hypocrisy of our greed for the horror entertainment that we condemn. Anyiwo (2018) observes that, on the surface, “the core female characters – Vanessa Ives and Brona Croft – reflect a liberated version of the Victorian female” (120). Like some of the minor women characters in the show, they are shown to lead unconventional lives unconstrained by convention, yet they also remind us how “independent womanhood must always be repressed and punished” (120) in narratives that conform to the values of mainstream consumer culture.

While the leading women of *Penny Dreadful* are empowered, interesting, independent women, they are still caught in the slippage of ideology and power. Vanessa and Lily wrestle with incursions on their bodies and their autonomy, whether through enchantment or ideological or institutional oppression. They fight back as they are subjected to brutality, transformation and rupture. Their stories offer the promise of liberation, in ways that suggest that meanings of gender and narrative can evolve even beyond the bounds of the series, as the transmedia adaptability of their characters holds ongoing possibilities for heroic transformation. Yet, their gestures of new selfhood are limited by their status as monsters, conditioned by Gothic uncertainty. Their capacity for power at once brings liberation and constraint as their resistance remains inexact and unresolved. At the end of the third season of the original series, our leading women characters are dead or cast out. That Lily escapes like the archetypal Frankenstein's monster is a final reminder, however, of the shadowy promise that underlies all horror stories: the possibility of rebirth and return.

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