Neo-Victorian Contaminations: The Hybrid and Virulent Nature of Female Gothic in Penny Dreadful Women Characters

Alessandra Serra

Tuscia University
(alessandra.serra@unitus.it)

Abstract

Penny Dreadful is a popular horror television drama whose title clearly refers to a genre of nineteenth century popular fiction characterized by sensational and terrifying plots. The series stages an inventory of characters mainly drawn from Gothic and Victorian literature: Victor Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, Dracula, Dr Jekyll and the werewolf form a league against evil forces bent on infecting the world with a deathly plague.

Among them, the two leading female characters, Vanessa Ives, a sensual, devil-possessed young woman, and Lily, Frankenstein's female creature, epitomize the Gothic subversive heroine whose "monstrous" status and behaviour are perceived as a threat to the stability of traditional culture and society. They appear in a narration infested with images of contagion and in a "Female Gothic" literary mode which is adaptive, mutant and resistant to categorizations, thus in many ways resembling infective agents like viruses and bacteria. Significantly, the hybrid, virulent nature of these characters mirrors the traits of (Female) Gothic fiction and is analysed in the light of Discourse and Gender Studies.

An example of contemporary fiction disguised under the mask of Neo-Victorianism, *Penny Dreadful* interprets female transgression as a vehicle of infective disruption, portraying two "pestiferous" women whose nonconformist attitude is treated medically by isolation and sanitization in order to prevent the spread of infection in a fictional world that is a frightful metaphor of our present world.

1. *Penny Dreadful* and Female Gothic

Penny Dreadful (Showtime/Sky 2014-16) is a horror-drama television series set in late-Victorian gothicized London. It takes its title from the derogatory term given to lurid, sensational, and mostly pulp, nineteenth-century British serial fiction. This narrative niche was extremely popular when the rapid expansion of periodicals met the tastes of a large working-class readership, the one described by Wilkie Collins as the "Unknown Public; a public to be counted by millions; the mysterious, the unfathomable, the universal public of the penny-novel Journals" (Collins 1858: 221), also notoriously – and significantly – labelled as a "monster audience" (Collins 1858: 221). Patently unpretentious in terms of originality, the 'penny dreadfuls' were a mash of plagiarized storylines and narrative stereotypes of thrill and fright, mainly derived from traditional repertoires and popular characters, the Gothic genre being in this sense a source to draw on liberally.

Thus, with this choice John Logan, screenwriter and producer of *Penny Dreadful*, explicitly marks his contiguity with the complex interlocking of cheap popular culture and

'classic' Gothic inheritance which often permeates neo-Victorian fiction. Significantly, the series evokes numerous precursor texts from nineteenth-century Gothic, adapting its themes, characters and discourses, and displaying the same narrative hybridity strategy of its precursor *fin-de-siècle* serial novelettes. Indeed, the series features an inventory of characters taken mainly from Gothic and Victorian literature: Victor Frankenstein and his creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Dorian Gray from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Mina Harker and Count Dracula from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Dr. Jekyll from R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, as well as others based on cinematic adaptations of Gothic ascendency, such as Lily, inspired by James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and Ethan Chandler, the werewolf modelled on George Waggner's *The Wolf Man* (1941). This "motley crew" is completed by some original characters, all endowed with some sort of supernatural power, together forming a league engaged in a battle royal against uncanny evil forces and acting in the *demi-monde* of a dirty, foggy, nocturnal London.

In this discussion, the emphasis is on the two leading female characters: Vanessa Ives, the heroine of the story, a sensual devil-possessed brunette, burdened with a very dark past, and the aforementioned Lily, Frankenstein's creature – (nick)named after the mythological female demon Lilith and after Elizabeth in Mary Shelley's novel – who was created by Victor from the dead body of a young streetwalker. Previous scholarship has duly underlined how the women in *Penny Dreadful* portray "transformative female identity through a Gothic redefinition of the late Victorian New Woman" (Green 2017: 1) as their female 'monstrosity' attempts to disrupt the established social order. As de Bruin-Molé remarks:

> *Penny Dreadful* attempts to become a metaphor for the monstrous power of patriarchal society through its engagement with various historical images of the monstrous feminine. It is through the characters of Vanessa and Lily, and through the parallels to Dracula and Frankenstein they embody, that the show is most effectively able to illustrate how certain kinds of historical monstrosity have been co-opted by twenty-first-century popular culture (de Bruin-Molé 2020: 76).

Nevertheless, in her further elaboration of the assumption, de Bruin-Molé, along with several other (female) scholars in the field of neo-Victorian and Gothic Studies, has shifted the attention to what she considers a poor valorization of gender and gender roles in favour of a clichéd and simulated pseudo-feminism in *Penny Dreadful*. Marie Louise Kohlke argues that "rather than deconstructing [...] pejorative stereotypes, the series disingenuously sets out to 'brand' the women as monsters through what I take to be a parodic re-enactment of present-day feminist activism" (Kohlke 2018: 8), a phenomenon not limited to this series and recurrent in mass-market neo-Victorian and Gothic-inspired film and TV series (Louttit-Louttit 2018). In the same light, in consideration of the neo-Victorian series *Ripper Street* (2012-16), *Copper* (2012-13) and *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present), Claire Meldrum argues that these fictions are undermined by a general ideology which is "far from progressive", lacking respect in dealing with women's bodies and betraying "overt and troubling misogyny", albeit hidden behind a screen of female "otherness". Women's alterity, rather than marking emancipation and/or empowerment, is a substantial *pinkwashing* exercise, while

> feminine agency and influence are marginalized and consistent disparities between the presentation of gender-male and gender-female bodies occur. This othering oscillates between a scopophilic and fetishistic presentation of the inert female body as an object of sexual display and/or sexual violence or a paternalistic chivalry that seeks to "protect" the female (Meldrum 2015: 202).

Here I do not intend to dispute these outcomes or focus primarily on the issue of marginality *and* empowerment. Although according to contemporary feminist standards, the narrative arc of Vanessa and Lily fails to achieve true liberated status, the two characters still function as metaphors of female monstrosity in connection with relevant issues of political and cultural discomfort. They may not be epitomes of successful weaponized social monstrosity, and yet their storyline is perhaps *more realistic* in being perceived as a threat to the stability of traditional culture and society, because of their monstrosity, and is then punished or annihilated. Their significance lies in their being epitomes of deviant disruption, destabilizing figures perceived as a menace to be stopped and marginalized. My point of view is that a positive result of their struggle would not adequately represent their condition of fin-de-siècle 'new women' – often judged as 'improper women', dangerous vehicles of social deconstruction – a timeless stigma that contemporary women still experience, and that in this sense represents a bond between past and present generations.

Vanessa Ives and Lily "Frankenstein" are the protagonists of *Penny Dreadful*, and yet their leading parts, and – definitely illusory – positions of influence in the storyline do not shield them from being sharply condemned for their disturbing femininity, represented by their sexual independence and appetite, their resistance to patriarchal subjugation and at least in the case of Vanessa, even their linguistic power. As is often the case with neo-Gothic heroines on screen, portraits of strong, creative women recurrently foreshadow a punishment pattern, consisting of seclusion, exclusion, rejection and eventually an unfulfilled life plan. Heteronormativity permeates contemporary Gothic tv-series and films and "even when marriage or the relationship between a woman and a man is absent […] the heroines can still be seen to be subject to specifically male power and control" (Jeffers McDonald-Kamm 2019: 5).

Nor do I wish to disqualify crucial works on the "ideological import of a male and white privilege that continues to dominate the film and TV industry" (Jeffers McDonald-Kamm 2019: 5). Rather, I attempt to explore how the Gothic mode reflects a complicated and articulated image of women not relegated to the classical Gothic pattern of domestic incarceration, sexual violence, haunted mansions and uncanny presences. As stressed by several critics (e.g. Smith-Wallace 2004, D. Fitzgerald 2009, Murphy 2016, Wallace 2017, Ledoux 2017), the richness of contemporary (neo) Female Gothic characters and narrations lies, as in the cases here examined, in conflicting women who live through times of transition and evolution, often succumbing to the united and opposing forces of change and conservatism they fall prey to. Not surprisingly, the two characters from *Penny Dreadful* appear in a narration infested with images of contagion, significantly parallel to the Female Gothic literary mode where heroines are constantly polarized "through patterns of antithesis such as good/bad, saint/sinner and virgin/whore; a continued use of stereotypes; and the pathologization of women who fail to conform to traditional expectations" (Horner and Zlosnik 2016: 1).

Thus, the metaphor of contamination and contagion appears particularly appropriate in this narrative category – and in fact episodes of infection are disseminated throughout the series: the cholera epidemic in the underground city, vampire contagion, and above all the fact that the protagonist Vanessa Ives is responsible for unleashing a pandemic which could annihilate mankind. Pursued throughout her life by a powerful evil ancient being, she resists, aware that acceptance of her true nature as "Queen of Hell" would mean no less than an Armageddon, triggered by the fatal contagion that her union with a daemonic "Master" entails.

On her part, Lily is a creature generated from the reanimated corpse of Brona Croft, an Irish prostitute who was dying of consumption and whose passing is accelerated by Victor Frankenstein, who wants to create a companion for his enraged male creature. She had a gloomy sordid past of sexual and emotional abuse, even suffering the death of her baby daughter as a

consequence of the violent life endured. As a diseased, contagious social outcast, in her first life she is granted but a short-lived romance, which is as intense as it is brief, and has no continuation in her second life.

The trope of contagion/contamination goes hand in hand with that of monstrosity (not limited to female characters) as a rhetoric disguise for dysfunctional aspects of society and its members. This conceptual framework finds its natural narrative harbour in Gothic realms whose scenarios and inhabitants "mould themselves to, and are moulded by, cultural fears, anxieties and priorities" (Punter 2016: 3): ghosts, vampires, demons, werewolves and all the assorted monster population of Gothic landscapes are the actors of a "traditional" narrative pattern where a dark, powerful, spreading evil, meant to disrupt physical and social integrity, comes from an unfathomable outside. Predictably, plagues and infections are often represented *per se* or disguised as rampant vampirism or zombie invasions, outbreaks of which are always fought to preserve the symbolic integrity of the social group. The role of female characters is undoubtedly crucial: from Ellen Moers' *Female Gothic* "Radcliffean" plot, with heroines pursued, threatened and imprisoned in dark houses or castles by despotic men (Moers 1976), to the *Male* Gothic plot, where women undergo every kind of ordeal due to male transgression – rape, taboo infractions, murders and bloodshed – their function has become more and more complex in contemporary Gothic fiction.

As is often the case with Neo-Gothic and Neo-Victorian fiction, the apparently unpretentious setting of a dirty, foggy, nocturnal London, haunted by supernatural forces, hides a complex mixture of social, cultural, political and economic issues, as well as a sophisticated inventory of psychologically multifaceted characters. A microcosm, witness to the end of an old world and already tainted by the future, in many respects a reflection of our brutal contemporaneity – a contemporaneity affected by dread for an impending apocalypse, as was that at the turn of the nineteenth century. The hyper-gothicized London of *Penny Dreadful,* with its virulent women, is the perfect scenario for a *mise en abyme* of a past and present world that has lost its centre and is experiencing fearful and cogent issues of war, calamities, health and environmental disasters[1].

Besides, the Gothic pattern is in itself pervasive and ductile; it dodges definitions and borders and is a category characteristically transcending traditional genres and extending beyond literature, so that it can only be classified as a mode[2]. Oddly enough, and despite its antiquity, it is a lively wide-ranging fictional area that continues to inspire contemporary authors for its capacity to reveal unconscious links with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed, and all that provokes situations of terror[3]. Employment of the omnipresent supernatural element is an enduring form of reaction/relation to specific traumatic historical transitions: a path of continuity can be traced through the late eighteenth-century writers, those of the Gothic Revival

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[1] "Logan uses the monstrous acts of his characters as manifestations not only of the horror accompanying Victorians' transition to the Modern Age but as signs and symbols that the contemporary world is in the process of a similarly frightening transition" (Logsdon 2018: 26).

[2] "The diffusion of Gothic forms and figures over more than two centuries makes the definition of a homogeneous generic category exceptionally difficult. Changing features, emphases and meanings disclose Gothic writing as a mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period. The diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions in relation to newer modes of writing" (Gotting 1996:9).

[3] "A particular attitude towards the recapture of history; a particular kind of literary style; a version of self-conscious un-realism; mode of revealing the unconscious; connections with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed – all of these meanings have attached themselves in one way or another to the idea of Gothic fiction, and our present apprehension of the term is usually an uneasy concatenation of them, in which there is a complicated interplay of direct historical connections and ever variable metaphor" (Punter 1996: 4).

at the end of the nineteenth century and contemporary neo-Gothic authors. They all share disquiet at being between old and new systems: worried about the present and increasingly anxious about the future. The overreaching representation of fear and terror as an artistic diversion from the real to the weird and eerie is employed to elicit a catharsis from psychological distress – this means handling the dangerous and poisonous, focusing and dealing resiliently with the edges of the human. As David Punter argues: "[In the Gothic mode] we are allowed – even encouraged – to see things we might prefer not to have seen […] to examine death and the possible transgressions of death" (Punter 2016: 8). In many respects, the diffusive attitude of the Gothic mode strongly resembles the adaptivity and mutability of viruses: to quote Francis Ford Coppola's well-known film *Dracula*, having "crossed oceans of time", from the late Georgian era to present time, it certainly shows remarkable persistence and contagiousness.

Female Gothic has endured a similar destiny, nowadays being a much broader term than the one coined by Ellen Moers, which was limited to female authorship and readership in literary fiction. Like its superordinate classifier, Female Gothic is intended as a fluid category that encompasses a multitude of authors, themes, characters and ideologies in an effort to render the complexity and difficulty of female experience in the male power structure. Since Gothic is an extensive category that navigates time and space to contaminate the present, the slippery notion of Female Gothic "offers opportunities for reflecting and/or resisting 'women's lot' across a diverse range of media and sociocultural contexts" (Quigley 2019: 185). In this sense, my point here is that in the Gothic mode, female authors and/or characters find a host organism to inhabit, where their function is again as diffusive, adaptive and mutant as that of a virus.

Especially in screen narratives, as in the case here examined, conventional characters and Gothic themes have been largely *reused* and *reinvented* in every possible variation: there is lively, wide-ranging research and debate on the issue, but much regarding the shifting role of women remains to be investigated in this fictional context. It seems generally agreed that no single theoretical basis or common trait is distinctive of the contemporary Gothic heroine in films or TV series, and apart from a general cluster of areas in which Female Gothic scholars are particularly interested, such as national identity, sexuality, language, race and history, the question remains elusive and characterized by multiple contaminations (Wallace-Smith 2009).

Whether interpreted in conservative or subversive frameworks, the role of women in Gothic fiction epitomizes virulent disruption. It is no coincidence, then, that the series researched here hosts an "infective" female protagonist whose function is multifaceted, since she is both victim and offender, in continuous oxymoronic hybridization between the two roles. The discursive core of these female portraits thus pivots on the exclusion imposed on the leading female figures featured in the series, rather than on their possible liberation. As I endeavour to demonstrate, their marginalization, resulting from their intentional defiance of a reassuring conformist feminine model, is enacted at several levels.

1. Contaminating the Feminine Code: Vanessa and Lily

Vanessa and Lily are two non-standard women expelled from regular domestic and urban spaces, and relegated to out-groups to safeguard the "sanity" of the social realm. In sociological terms, an *out-group* is a group with which most individuals do not identify. It differs from the *in-group,* the one with which most people identify and to which they want to belong. Specific cognitive mechanisms – like symbolic representations – lead individuals to manifest positive feelings and grant privileged treatment to members of the *in-group,* and conversely to manifest negative feelings and deal out unfair treatment to members of the *out-group*. The concept of *othering* or branding of the unconventional is linked to the concepts of in- and out-groups and

defines a phenomenon by which certain individuals or groups are branded as not fitting the norms of a social group. *Othering* influences the way those considered to belong to the *in-group* or the *out-group* are perceived and treated. The term was originally coined by Gayatri Spivak in post-colonial studies to describe "the process by which imperialism creates its 'others' [and] the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects" and by which it enacts its policies of exclusion and marginalization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2000: 156).

Exploiting the past to elaborate on the present, Neo-Victorian Gothic fiction sets its stories in nineteenth-century landscapes to disguise our preoccupation with contemporaneity: as already mentioned, there are striking analogies between the Victorians and ourselves in our perception of living in a transition period where things are precarious and uncertain, and where we are threatened by obscure agents and rampant forces from inside and outside society. There is the sensation of a social world on the verge of disintegration and collapse of its most consolidated and venerated principles, where one certitude concerned women's roles: significantly, our two female figures display a rebellious spirit and outstanding intellectual and discursive capacity.

2.1 Vanessa Ives

Penny Dreadful is set in London in the last years of the 1800s, where Vanessa Ives, a sensuous young brunette, lives with Sir Malcolm Murray, the father of her best friend Mina, who was kidnapped years earlier by a gang of unidentified ogres. To save the girl, the two assemble a crew of "good guys" with extraordinary abilities, helped by Sembene, a mysterious African servant (perhaps a sorcerer), and are later joined by an American sharpshooter, Ethan Chandler, who is a werewolf. Together, the team defeats waves of dark heralds holding Mina hostage, but who are in fact on the hunt for Vanessa, who it turns out is a reincarnation of the primordial Egyptian goddess Amunet – i.e. "the hidden one". She has been separated for millennia from her evil spouse, Amun, who now resurfaces in the robes of Dracula, reclaiming her. Their match must be attained by Vanessa's voluntary reunion with this infernal consort, an act that entails the inception of eternal darkness and the end of the world. She has lived her life haunted by maleficent presences that strive to win her back, thus making the story mainly about her quest to (re)acknowledge her dark side, take control and eventually destroy it. After the initial focus on Mina, the whole plot revolves around Vanessa, her mysterious (even to herself) past, her spiritualistic talents, the mixing of her religious faith with morbid eroticism, and above all her pseudo-hysteria intertwined with supernatural manifestations.

The series depicts Vanessa as being in the balance between a true unearthly monster and a woman having a severe mental breakdown (one should remember that in the Victorian age, cases of "possession by the devil" began to be considered and treated as psychic phenomena derived from sexual dysfunction). Some of the most impressive episodes are those of her confinement in an asylum where she is subjected to the violent treatments of the period for mental and behavioural deviance, especially female deviance.

Like her contemporaries, victim of a dying world, filled with more things between heaven and earth than modern philosophy can dream of, Vanessa is a hybrid, unidentifiable, unstable being *and* the carrier of potentially catastrophic pandemics. The materialistic interpretation of her derangement and her witchlike depiction makes her the perfect representative of a society entering a frightening transition that presages disorder and cataclysm. The author of the series describes this malaise of cultural disintegration as a bond linking the late Victorian world and our present culture. In the words of John Logan: "There's something in the Victorian Era that reminds me of right now. They were on the cusp of a modern world […] I think we are on the cusp of the same thing now, and it's frightening and there's dissonance and there's excitement about uncharted waters" (Radish 2014). Significantly,

Vanessa's tremendous "spellcraft" is enacted via the *"Verbis Diablo"* (approximately, "Words of the Devil" in Latin), defined in the series as a corrupted version of the language spoken in the Garden of Eden before mankind was banished. She learned its secrets from Joan Clayton, her mentor witch who had the task of transmitting the language that confers mastery to female outcasts. There is a manifest association with the archetypical pattern of transgression, punishment and exclusion: linguistic expression is the forbidden fruit stolen from the tree of knowledge, causing the fall of humankind through a woman.

The mark of the original sin is innate in Vanessa, who could speak the daemonic idiom even before she was taught by the old witch. Asked about the incomprehensible expressions she used during a battle against evil forces, Vanessa replies: "I don't remember much. The words came to me blindly, like an animal instinct. I don't even know what I said" (PD, S2, E1, "Fresh Hell").[4] She will be warned later by Joan Clayton, in a significant act of feminine sharing of exclusion practices, that use of *Verbis Diablo* entails irreversible de-humanization and a fall from grace, a symbolic process of capital sin and rebellion that leads to repudiation and isolation.

> Verbis Diablo ... But you must remember such incantations are dangerous and you must never speak the Devil's language idly. And such things as this I teach you are only for your protection. Let this language not become easy in your mouth or soon it will no longer be your mouth, but his. And it will tell only lies […] If you believe in God, better you pray with all you got in you. Only if all else fails, you speak the Devil's tongue. But mark, girl: it's a seduction and before you blink twice it's all you can speak. (PD, S2, E3, "The Nightcomers")

A perfect interpreter of the natural Gothic propensity for transgression, Vanessa embodies all the subversive roles that violate long-standing social codes. She is alternately a clairvoyant, a witch, an assistant to a cut-wife, a murderer, an (incestuous) adulteress, but first and foremost she carries the burden of destroying a glorious age, which succumbed to its own inner anxieties and contradictions, as did the Victorian age.

Vanessa is eventually deserted by the God she invoked all her life, and loses all hope of regaining the status of a legitimate member of society. She then embraces her monstrosity, surrendering to its male counterpart, Dracula. The price of this reunion is the release of her evil power, which casts a spell of everlasting darkness and pestilence on the world.

> And then all light will end and the world will live in darkness. The very air will be pestilence to mankind. And our brethren, the Night Creatures, will emerge and feed. Such is our power, such is our kingdom, such is my kiss. (PD, S3, E8, "Perpetual Night")

The fatal disease of darkness is the metaphoric outcome of her marriage: the monstrous infective delivery of an oxymoronic cadaverous newborn, by which she finally meets Barbara Creed's criteria for the monstrous feminine:[5] the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire, the possessed woman. She is now fully and literally "pestiferous", an adjective derived from the Latin "pestifer" and composed of "pestis" (i.e. pestilence) and "fer"

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[4] Quotations from Penny Dreadful are followed by reference to the series (PD), season (S) number, episode (E) number and title of the episode in quotation marks.

[5] In relation to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and the maternal, Barbara Creed elaborates a series of "faces" of women represented as monsters: "These faces are: the archaic mother, the monstrous womb, the witch, the vampire and the possessed woman" (Creed 1993: 7).

(from the verb "ferre" i.e. to bring), while the images of contagion are reinforced by the rampant vampirism engulfing the city, with legions of bloodsuckers, rats and toads issuing in waves from the sewers.

She is destined to lose the final battle of inner conflict and to surrender to her fate, asking to be killed by the only man she has truly loved, Ethan Chandler, her companion of misfortune cursed with lycanthropy. Since a love fully consummated as an act of physical intimacy would have ghastly consequences, with a gesture of extreme self-sacrifice, Vanessa pushes him away. In so doing she seals her exclusion from womanhood by renouncing physical pleasure in connection with love. She warns him: "We are dangerous" (PD, S2, E7, "Little Scorpion"). In this culmination of the art of disruption, Vanessa seems to identify with a virus clinging to a dying body – a metaphor for the departing "old" world. She knows she is doomed to the life cycle of any lethal infective agent and that she will die with her host organism. This realisation comes from an unexpected act of redemption and awareness: in giving up the fight and asking Ethan to sacrifice her, Vanessa realizes that her end will mean regeneration and re-birth:

> They will hunt me 'til the end of days […] This is what I am and this is what I've done, brought this terrible darkness into the world […] My battle must end. You know that or there will never be peace on Earth. Let it end […] Please Ethan, let it end (PD, S3, E9, "The Blessed Dark").

The new age arises from the completion of this process. The infective woman dies in her second tragic labour and delivery, this time giving birth to an orphaned creature, deprived, troubled, displaced and full of fear, as befits one born from an act of violence.

2.2 Lily 'Frankenstein'

The second character I examine is Lily, the creature generated from the reanimated corpse of Brona Croft, an Irish prostitute who died of consumption and whose passing was accelerated by Victor Frankenstein to provide a mate for his enraged male creature. Unlike her precursors, this Frankenstein 'bride' is not the living result of stitched body parts, but is made from the whole body of a woman and is the scientist's most advanced product. In this perspective she is "portrayed as a new product of industrial manufacture" (Green 2017: 3) and re-framed as an instance of industrial Gothic, reflecting "the theme of unnatural disorder produced by mechanical technology", as suggested by Martin Parker who recognizes in nineteenth-century Gothic texts the "massive tension they produce between their 'realism', being credible stories about modern people, and the eruption of horrific fantasy into the everyday. Of particular relevance here is the scientist or professional as a modern type who produces (Frankenstein)" (Parker 2005: 156).

Lily is initially portrayed as a shy, sweet, insecure woman who fits the role of the ideal Victorian woman, polite and gracious, soon to reveal a dark, manipulative and fiercely violent character. Born with no memory of her past, she is taught good manners and appropriate dress (corsets and high heels) by her maker, in order to be matched with Victor's roughly assembled human male creature. However, Lily gradually becomes conscious of the violence and brutality of her past life, growing resentful about how society and especially men mistreat and disregard women. Eventually rejecting the creature and her manufacturer as sexual partners, she becomes aware of her extraordinary strength and immortality. She releases her fury and gives rein to her monstrous new powers. With her incredible sexual appetite and reckless desire to dominate men, she overpowers and kills them by the dozen, going so far as to enlist an army of female outcasts to retaliate against the men who have abused them.

She is definitely a terrifying embodiment of the *overpowering feminine* often associated with Female Gothic. She and her monstrous party of women are a rampant pack, intent on destabilizing, subverting and infecting society with the same violence they endured. Her seeking to bring in a new age led by immortals is strikingly similar to that of the vampire invasion affecting the foggy, nocturnal London portrayed in the series. In a horrific city and society on the verge of losing its most consolidated principles, women's traditional roles were a precarious certainty. This "new woman" is assertive, demanding and independent. She breaks onto the social scene and dismantles the "angel or monster" duality, reconfiguring "the fin-de-siècle persona of the proto-modern New Women to embody the far more forceful Gothic New Woman and become the harbinger of a world without men" (Green 2017: 4).

Lily does not want equality, she is not looking for redemption: she wants mastery and destruction. Her feminism is disruptive and monstrous in its ferocity:

> We are not women who crawl. We are not women who kneel. And for this we will be branded radicals. Revolutionists. Women who are strong, and refuse to be degraded, and choose to protect themselves, are called monsters. That is the world's crime, not ours. (PD S3, E6, "No Beast So Fierce.")

Acknowledging her empowerment, she despises any association of her battle against society with the Victorian feminist movement. Seeing a group of suffragists being arrested by the police she comments scornfully on their vain efforts:

> They are all so awfully clamorous. All this marching around in public and waving placards. That's not it. How do you accomplish anything in this life? By craft. By stealth. By poison. By the throat quietly slit in the dead of the night. By the careful and silent accumulation of power." (PD, S3, E3, "Good and Evil Braided Be")

Significantly, she is soon re-captured and interned in an asylum to be neutralised by Victor Frankenstein and Henry Jekyll and treated with a serum intended to transform social deviants into model citizens. She eventually escapes but her plan is aborted and her narrative arc ends in defeat.

Vanessa Ives, a solitary misfit, an oxymoronic upper-class outcast, and Lily Frankenstein, the rejected white trash reborn as a posh socialite, are therefore both hybrid transitional subversives, whose role is interpreted as monstrous because of their non-conformity with traditional female roles. They are both victims and offenders, and this double nature grants them a legitimate space in the realm of Gothic fiction, a place they somehow inhabit as infective carriers of contamination. Unfit for their present, they are in-between figures who frustrate any clear definition of women's identity by their defiance of the social conventions and cultural system they were born into.

An example of contemporary screen fiction disguised by the mask of Neo-Victorianism, *Penny Dreadful* portrays two "pestiferous" women whose nonconformist attitudes are disinfected medically and eliminated to prevent the risk of an epidemic in a fictional world which is a frightful metaphor for our present world.

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