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Gendered Otherness Deviance and Female Agency in *Penny Dreadful's* Vanessa Ives

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Abstract

The article aims to trace the transmedia narrative of gendered otherness in John Logan's *Penny Dreadful*. After a brief introduction to the theoretical framework concerning the subversive constructions of neo-Victorian monstrosity, the article examines the character of Miss Vanessa Ives in *Penny Dreadful* as an example of the fortunate intersection between the concepts of abjection and female agency.

Keywords: Gender, Gothic, Otherness, *Penny Dreadful*, Transmedia

Introduction

In her groundbreaking *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir presents her relational theory of femininity which famously defines womanhood as otherness. This dismissive categorization, however, does not situate women in a binary antithesis to men. On the contrary, it is asymmetrical because it posits manhood not only as the positive gender but, most importantly, as an all encompassing neutral agent through which all of humanity can and must conceive itself. Half a century later, Monica Germaná would proclaim this assumption as “the phallogocentric foundations of patriarchal gender discourse” (2010, 67), where the “male gaze” constitutes the underlying ideology for any instance of normativization, especially for what concerns the feminine body and behavior. Moreover, when this masculine projection is incorporated with Freud's paradigm of “man's castrating other”,¹ it is easy to understand

¹ Sigmund Freud linked man's fear of women to the infantile assumption that the mother is castrating as he states that “probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital” (Freud 1978). Later on, Joseph Campbell would parallel the motif of “woman as castrator” in

how man's socio-political imagery can be threatened by the manifold narrative renditions of non-conformist females.

In fact, these two premises along with a vast repertoire of mad, hysterical, possessed, or overtly tyrannical female abjects,² offer the perfect mode for the Gothic genre to expose the social anxieties and collective traumas inherent the crises of masculinity. From Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) onward, the gothic imagery has prospered across three centuries of literary movements in light of its perpetual exorcism of the patriarchal demon of women's agency while challenging the ideological magnification of domesticity brought by the emerging bourgeois culture. In particular, Ellen Moers has analyzed the literary conventions at the core of the so-called Female Gothic "as the coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth" (Smith and Wallace 2004, 1). This is also the starting point of Michelle A. Massé's study *In the Name of Love* (1992) which surpasses the original contradictions inherent the masochistic etiology of the Gothic heroine and claims how certain texts "internalize and replicate the dynamics of oppression" (Massé 1992, 4) by playing out the trauma caused by the prohibition of female autonomy and, most crucially, identity. In this respect, gothic scholarship has reconfigured the role of women in the psychoanalytical framework of the Female Gothic channeling its typical tropes - i.e. domestic entrapment, false imprisonment, madness, and transgressive sexual desire - into a new imagery of deviance and abjection.³

This imagery has flourished in the generic as much as ontological kinship between the Gothic and the neo-Victorian semiosphere,⁴ whose polyphonic narratives present a powerful re-signification of female monstrosity in a postmodern perspective of traumatised and (self-) alienated subjectivity (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012, 2). Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is surely one of the first and most recognizable examples of neo-Victorian intertextuality. In it, *Jane Eyre's* (1847) mad-woman-in-the-attic sub-plot is re-written from Berta Mason's point of view. Similarly, novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) or Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) give depth and voice to liminal female characters from the Victorian social structure. As Gayatri Spivak envisaged, these texts enable subalterns to speak and act in a narrative space so as to counter-write "the dominant order's discourse" (D'Haen 1995, 292).⁵

the folklore myth of "the toothed vagina" – the vagina that castrates – or the so-called "phallic mother" embodied in the long fingers and nose of the witch (1976, 73).

² Abjection is the term envisaged by Julia Kristeva to define that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules", that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (1982, 4). As the abject threatens life, it must be "radically excluded" (2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. However, the subject who excludes the abject must also tolerate it for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define it.

³ In her reading of the Female Gothic's plot, Anne Williams re-interprets Gothic heroines as subjects responsible for their own fates. This assertion is rooted in the Enlightenment notion of equality that informed Gothic genre's original radicalism: "liberal or bourgeois feminism is founded on the so-called liberal self, the assumption that we are free to act independently according to our will and desires, free of any external determinants" (Williams 2007, 88-89).

⁴ In terms of general definition, neo-Victorianism (also known as *Victoriana*) is associated to a mode "self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4).

⁵ Both authors of *Alias Grace* and *The Crimson Petal and the White* imply a certain degree of involvement of their young protagonists into violent, revengeful deeds against their masters. In *Alias Grace*, for example, Atwood suspends judgement about the mysterious murder of Grace Marks's employer and his mistress providing a variety of possible motives which include post-traumatic-stress-disorder, violent coercion, or even a willing participation motivated by sexual jealousy and material greed. On a different level, *The Crimson Petal and the White* features scenes of imaginary violence perpetrated by prostitutes over their clients which sublimate women's fantasies of enfranchisement through an interesting reversal of the victim-perpetrator cycle.

Beyond the variety of novelistic experiments ascribable to the neo-Victorian mode, it is within the framework of television seriality that today's audiences can satisfy their crave for postmodern gothic metafiction. In fact, thanks to the rise of streaming platforms, neo-Victorian small screen adaptations have grown in number and popularity over the past decades with productions such as *Whitechapel* (2009-13), *Ripper Street* (2012-16), or the longer-running *Murdoch Mysteries* (2008-present). All the above have diligently deployed the gloomy atmospheres of urban-gothic underworlds as a backdrop for their detective-stories. Likewise, series such as *Taboo* (2017-present) and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-17) have explored the theme of social justice by describing the abominable network of conspiracies and inequalities which threatens the dissolution of the individual psyche as much as the collective wellbeing.

However, in this rich panorama of neo-Victorian gothic TV series, nothing better exemplifies the relationship between women's agency and the emergence of monstrosity as John Logan's *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky Atlantic, 2014-16), which has been the object of critical attention in terms of appropriation (Sanders 2006), intertextuality (Brooker 2007), transfiction (Pearson 2018), and metafictional uchronia (Bellavita 2020). In fact, John Logan reimagines four popular myths of nineteenth-century Gothic – *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde, and, most extensively, *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker – by merging their respective characters in order to create a new collective narrative project. While these four novels all relegated their female characters to the passive role of the protagonists' (in)significant other, in *Penny Dreadful's* pastiche-like syncretism, the narrative construction of female identity becomes central and is further heightened by its association with sexual deviance seen both as a curse and God-given mark of individuality. In particular, the main character of the series, Miss Vanessa Ives, is portrayed as a strong disobedient woman who, in order to assert her uniqueness over the patriarchal oppression of normalcy, redefines the locus of her identity within her abject body.

In what follows I will analyze how *Penny Dreadful* draws on Vanessa Ives as the embodiment of the dichotomic relationship between morality and monstrosity, normalcy and deviance. I will also illustrate how the series problematizes the notions of queerness and women's agency thus elevating trauma as the defining element of the monstrous feminine.

1. *Halfway to Hell: Penny Dreadful and Transmedia Syncretisms*

About twenty years after Franco Moretti published *The Dialectic of Fear* (1982), the totalizing monsters produced by the bourgeois's sleep of reason are pervasively alive and at large. In fact, Frankenstein's monster and Dracula have thrived in our cultural memory thanks to a variety of memetic leaps which have resulted in a multitude of transmedia adaptations, citations, and cross-references. Significantly, there were no fewer than 30 films or television shows from January 2010 to December 2015 that in one way or another included the character of Victor Frankenstein, while 56 portrayed Frankenstein's Creature. Dracula, on the other hand, ranks as a far more popular monster with 177 instances on TV or in films.⁶ Most recently, the release of the first season of *Penny Dreadful* presented audiences with a new interpretation of the gothic myths of the vampire and the resurrected Creature based on a less reverential treatment of canonical literature and a wider dimension of storytelling. In particular, *Penny Dreadful* utilizes the logic

⁶ Keywords *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* in the IMDb archive at <<https://www.imdb.com>> (10/2023).

of franchise cross-over inherited by graphic novels to introduce the simultaneous interaction of characters belonging to different fictional worlds (Monterrubbio Ibáñez 2020). The most relevant predecessor to this hypertextual convergence is probably Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999) to which *Penny Dreadful* is evidently inspired. In fact, along with some of the original characters already featured in *The League* (e.g. Mina Harker, Dr Jekyll, and Dorian Gray), *Penny Dreadful* also portrays other characters typical of the Victorian era in order to fight the satanic adversary known as the Master.

The assortment of troubled guardian heroes recruited to prevent the end of mankind include Sir Malcolm Murray, a representative of British imperialism and the engine of the collective quest for his lost daughter; Ethan Chandler, Dracula's lycanthropic nemesis and veritable precursor of the American Werewolf in London;⁷ Dr Victor Frankenstein and three of his creatures; as well as a number of peripheral but fundamental figures such as Ferdinand Lyle, Catriona Hartdegen, and Dr Seward. Quite interestingly, most of these minor characters are scholars whose expertise combines ancient and modern disciplines related to the *Demimonde* which is defined in S01E01 as "a half world between what we know and what we fear [...]. A place in the shadows, rarely seen, but deeply felt". Both Lyle and Catriona, for example, are field specialists in the study of ancient civilizations and occult rituals of the dead, being the former an egyptologist and the latter a thanatologist. Dr Van Helsing, Dr Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll, and Dr Seward are, instead, the main representatives of modern medical sciences deployed to disclose the physiological mysteries of the body and the mind. Knowledge is thus personified in the narratological function of the "helper" to sustain the main characters in their battle against eternal darkness. Darkness is also what each character encounters in the solitude of their own soul in a clear reference to the fortunate trope of the gothic double which defines their entire narrative arc.

The gothic double is also the key to understanding the series's complex theological framework which conflates in the character of the Master, the Egyptian myth of Amun-Ra with the Christian dogma of the Fall of Lucifer. In fact, as the original and inscrutable creator Amun merged with the ancient sun god Ra, the new deity Amun-Ra became both a visible and invisible spirit. Conversely, Lucifer and Dracula are initially presented as a single entity before being split by God after the War in Heaven (Rev. 12,7-10). The first half, Lucifer, was cast to hell and bound to feast on human souls, while the second half, Dracula, was cast to earth and bound to feast on human blood. The only way Lucifer and Dracula can take revenge on God is for them to unite with the legendary Mother of Evil, Amunet, who is incarnated in Vanessa Ives. In this perspective, Vanessa's monstrous personality provides a neo-Victorian reading of female subjectivity in light of the duality inherent the Jungian archetype of the Great and Devouring Mother.⁸ If either demon

⁷ In season two, *Penny Dreadful* reveals that Ethan's real name is Ethan Lawrence Talbot: a subtle reference to Lawrence Steward "Larry" Talbot, the 1941 *Wolf Man* of the Universal monsters Cinematic story-world. More specifically, Chandler's subplot as *Lupus Dei* is another reference to the fortunate crossover between werewolves and vampires. Both these monsters have indeed crossed their respective diegetic paths in three Universal monster films: *The House of Frankenstein* (1944), *The House of Dracula* (1945), and *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). In this latter, Larry Talbot, the werewolf, comes to the rescue of the heroes and attacks Dracula thus anticipating a variety of franchise movies portraying an actual war between the supernatural clans of vampires and lycanthropes. A new mythology of this ancestral enmity finds its cinematic climax in the early 2000s with movies such as *Underworld* (2003), *Van Helsing* (2004), and *The Twilight Saga* (2008-12).

⁸ In Jungian psychology, the Great Mother personifies women's power of creation by evoking a paradigm of nurturing femininity; while its complementary shadow, the Devouring Mother, enacts the most negative traits associated to motherhood such as aggression, possessiveness, or selfishness, thus configuring as a monster who destroys her children and men in general (Craciun 2003).

succeeds in subjugating her, the apocalypse will be unleashed on London and the entire world of the living. The patterns of characterization adopted in the construction of Vanessa's embodied otherness will be the focus of the next paragraph.

2. "Things Within Us That Should Never be Unleashed": Saints and Demons in *Vanessa Ives*

Differently from most characters of the series, Vanessa is John Logan's original creation and is arguably inspired by a conflation of fictional heroines of Victorian literature along with a nineteenth-century fascination for occultism and seances (Rocha 2016, 30-31). Saverio Tomaiuolo reinforces this reading by identifying her "as another figuration of the voluptuous Lucy Westenra" (2018, 146) from Stoker's *Dracula* who, just like Vanessa, is a victim of the vampire's seductive powers and is eventually killed by her love interest. Stacy Abbot (2017) goes one step further and describes Vanessa as a hybrid fusion between both of Stoker's heroines, not just Lucy Westenra, but also Mina Harker. On the other hand, Dragos Manea considers Vanessa as a much more independent, assertive, and sensual woman "strikingly similar to Moore's rendition of Mina Murray" (2016, 41) in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* rather than the female characters in Stoker's novel. This same assumption is shared by Dennis Schäfer who regards Vanessa's "monstrous nature" as an "instance of female agency" (2016, 43-44) and a cardinal function at the core of *Penny Dreadful*. In more comprehensive terms, Vanessa's character can be seen as the most recent offspring of a long literary genealogy dating back to Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*⁹ (1796) as they both appear to be fervent – and yet intimately torn – Catholics whose rebellious desire bounds them to become the source of attraction for demonic powers.

Since her very first appearance in S01E01, for example, we see Vanessa in front of a crucifix, prey to seizures, while reciting an *Ave Maria* in Latin. Barefoot and on her knees, she visibly evokes St Teresa of Avila, known as the founder of the Discalced Carmelites of the Virgin Mary and one of the most "disobedient, and stubborn *femina*"¹⁰ in Christian hagiography. The controversial Spanish mystique is indeed better known for her experiences of divine possession rather than a cloistered life of prayer and spiritual exercises. The iconography related to Teresa's ecstatic bouts famously inspired Bernini's sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* which explicitly connects godly possessions with an erotic experience of penetration. In their contiguity, and somewhat confusion, between epilepsy,¹¹ sexuality, and possession, Vanessa and St Teresa appear to share more than an indomitable temperament and tendency to levitation. In fact, they both belong to the realm of abjection due to their liminal status of possessed figures. This occurs when the boundaries between the self and others are physically and/or spiritually trespassed by another being. The transgression transfigures the body of the invaded subject into a site of abjection, as Vanessa's case, who is possessed by the female entity of Amunet while being violated in her flesh and soul by Lucifer. Quite interestingly, what seems to make Vanessa a privileged vessel

⁹ Lewis's *The Monk* is one of the most celebrated gothic novel of the so-called "german-wave" period. Its plot revolves around the monk Ambrosio's fall from grace, due to his hubris and failed struggle with carnal temptation. Firstly published between 1795 and 1796, the novel gained further popularity in its theatrical adaptations in Charles Farley and William Reeve's *Grand Ballet Pantomime Raymond and Agnes, or The Castle of Lindenberg* (1797) and James Boaden's *Aurelio and Miranda* (1798).

¹⁰ The full quote by a papal delegate goes "restless wanderer, disobedient, and stubborn *femina* who, under the title of devotion, invented bad doctrines, moving outside the cloister against the rules of the Council of Trent and her prelates; teaching as a master against Paul's orders that women should not teach" (Hsia 2004).

¹¹ The symptomatology at the basis of Teresa's ecstatic episodes have recently been accounted for in terms of temporal lobe epilepsy (Alvarez-Rodriguez 2007).

of the underworld in her prerogative of psychic seance, tarot reader, and designated victim of demonic possession, is her intemperate sexuality. In fact, by reiterating the traditional Victorian ideology that carnal appetite in respectable, middle-class women is unnatural, *Penny Dreadful* explicitly connects the origins of Vanessa's supernatural uniqueness to her sexual deviance. In particular, in S01E05, a long explanatory flashback with Vanessa's voice-over shows her, as a young woman, when she accidentally witnessed her mother's adultery with Sir Malcolm, the charming neighbor and father to her best-friend Mina. As she enters the literal and metaphorical maze in which the affair is consumed, Vanessa loses her center and direction in a labyrinth of complex, unbridled emotions.

My mother. Your father.

More than the shock, the sinfulness, the forbidden act, there was this.

I enjoyed it. Something whispered. I listened. Perhaps it has always been there, this thing, this demon inside me. Or behind my back, waiting for me to turn around.

[...] Perhaps I was just cherishing the secrecy of it as a hidden sin. But in me, there was a change. I marked it from that night in the hedge maze. Perhaps it was always there. Little acts of wickedness. Harmless, of course. Something any girl would do. I told myself it was no more than mischief. But I knew it was more. Of course I did. (S01E05)

Vanessa's voyeuristic enjoyment of the scene, likely derived from an oedipal identification with her mother fornicating with an elective fatherly figure, paves the way to Vanessa's loss of innocence. This is further highlighted during the same episode when Vanessa loses her virginity seducing Mina's fiancé the night before their wedding, leaving Vanessa at the mercy of demons which will torture her body and soul until the end of her days. In this respect, Lauren Rocha has stressed the gendered character of Vanessa's body, connecting "the manifestation of the demon during periods of sexual expression and the demon's intent to use Vanessa for procreative purposes" as the Mother of Evil (2016, 36). Similarly, Tim Posada has shown how "in *Penny Dreadful*, both Dracula and Satan are aware of the womb's power, continually vying for Vanessa's willing submission throughout all three seasons" (2020, 237). In this perspective, physicians of the late Victorian era share with supernatural monsters a common vision about women's bodies and their fearful wombs which become a symbol of the ultimate male limitation and must thus be exploited and controlled for patriarchal ends.

This is probably the lens through which we will read Vanessa's storyline of possession: another brick in the confining walls of the modern clinic.¹² The Banning Clinic, more specifically, is where Vanessa's inexplicable psychotic crises are treated as hysteria in a mixture of superstitious and pseudoscientific practices which include hydrotherapy, electroshock, and a proto-lobotomy brain surgery.¹³ But no amount of cold water or electroconvulsive therapy can cast out the demon

¹² Published in 1963, Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* is certainly one of the fundamental studies in the cultural and philosophical history of medical discourse. In his endeavor to trace "an archeology of medical perception", Foucault connects medical experience to the wider concept of gaze. This latter must thus be intended as everything that can be seen, heard, and felt when coming upon a person's signs, symptoms, and pathology. As "That which is not on the scale of the gaze falls outside the domain of possible knowledge" (166), Foucault explains the mechanisms through which the gaze determines the actual extent of medical knowledge while also warning about its ideological implications because "the gaze that sees is a gaze that dominates..." (39).

¹³ In S01E05 Doctor Christopher Banning had declared "Hysteria of a psychosexual nature can be treated. The treatments involve narcotics and escalating hydrotherapy. Cold water reduces circulation to the brain, thereby reducing the metabolism and motor activity. The agitation and mental trauma will slow and then cease. I've seen it work, Mr. Ives, you can have no doubt". These are the methods to make Vanessa " 'normal' again" (Primorac

residing in Vanessa. The extreme treatments she undergoes do nothing but reduce her to a catatonic state, heavily sedated, and thus ready to go home. Once there, bedridden and unresponsive, she is seized again by a much stronger fit of demonic possession which ends with a proper sexual intercourse with the Devil in the semblance of Sir Malcom. Alone, all naked, with her eyes rolled and white, lying on her back, thrusting her pelvis up and down, Vanessa is caught by her mother in the midst of the rapture. In the most stereotypical terms, Vanessa succeeds in her psychosexual competition with her mother as the latter is literally shocked to death by the vision of her possessed daughter who is satisfying her libidinal desires with her neighbor Sir Malcom who has the dual role of being both Vanessa's elective father and her mother's lover. As Barbara Creed states:

The possessed female subject is one who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order. Her protest is represented as a return to the pre-Oedipal [...]. The normal state of affairs, however, is reversed; the dyadic relationship is distinguished not by the marking out of the child's 'clean and proper body' but by a return of the unclean, untrained, unsymbolized body. Abjection is constructed as a rebellion of filthy, lustful, carnal, female flesh. (1993, 38)

Such a connection between Vanessa's erotic exertions and her bouts of demonic possession is further explored in S01E07. In fact, after she has a particularly intense intercourse with Dorian Gray, Vanessa experiences another episode of possession awakened by the repressed feelings of shame and guilt associated to her history of sexual misconduct. In this respect, when Sir Malcom asks Dr Frankenstein to examine Vanessa in order to find the cause and cure for her condition, the scientist cannot but interpret her symptoms within the common medical framework of women's disorders. Indeed, what Vanessa's previous doctor at the Banning Clinic labeled as "hysteria of a psychosexual nature" (S01E05) is rephrased by Dr Frankenstein as "psychosexual responsiveness" derived from "sexual trauma" (S01E07).

Victor: Has she experienced sexual trauma in her life? [...] Miss Ives is manifesting a deep psychosexual responsiveness. I would say the root of her condition lies there. In guilt. Something or someone has triggered it.

Sir Malcom: Well, last night she went out with a young man.

Victor: All right. Let's imagine this. She has an erotic encounter with this man. Perhaps her first, we don't know. And it evolves into some sort of sexual extremity or perversity that produces feelings of guilt or shame. That might stimulate a psychological break or dissociation with...

VANESSA SCREAMS. (S01E07)

Although Victor had previously professed his incapacity to understand or do something for Vanessa in light of the a-medical character of her affliction – "This is a bit beyond my usual practise" (*ibidem*) – as a man of science he is most inclined to reject any religious interpretation of Vanessa's hysteric symptomatology as a result of demonic possession. On the contrary, he would rather opt for a more grounded, somewhat anachronistic, Freudian theory of traumatic neurosis linked to the return of the repressed (Freud 1915, 154). The possible validity of such a diagnosis is nonetheless obscured by the violence of Vanessa's psychotic breakdown which challenges the modern empiricist paradigms of human physiology. On the critical front, one of

2018, 152). The long and articulated flashback on Vanessa's hospitalization into the Banning Clinic evokes a Biblical imagery of martyrdom and Christological mortification of the flesh which still fails to "clean" Vanessa's body of its fleshly weakness. Posada (2020) reflects on how this sequence might refer to the social epidemics of hysteria inflicted by the phallic power of medical discourse over Victorian women in order to restore their normalcy within gender-appropriate standards of docility and submission.

the most interesting readings of Vanessa's fits of demonic possession comes from post-feminist scholarship which interprets such episodes as a gendered embodiment of agency: "Vanessa's body is more than just the medium through which the demon channels the voices of the dead in order to torment her and disorient and upset Vanessa's helpers; it becomes the battlefield on which the struggle for Vanessa's agency is enacted" (Primorac 2018, 153). The metaphor of the body as a battlefield is quite matching with the heroine's status as abject. Transfigured, emaciated, filthy from bodily fluids, covered in bruises and scratches, Vanessa is shown to engage in a deathly fight both against the evil inside her and, most crucially, against those trying to save her. In more than one occasion Vanessa's possessed voice rebels against Sir Malcom's patriarchal brigade of helpers, which include Dr Frankenstein, Ethan Chandler and Sambene, taunting them with their darkest fears and shameful secrets.

Vanessa: Is the child killer back for more? No sons for you to kill here, Malcolm!
 Dr Frankenstein: Help me! Help me.
 Vanessa: Keep your hands off me, virgin doctor!
 Dr Frankenstein: Restrain her!
 (SNARLING) Leave her!
 Vanessa: (SPITS) You imbeciles! You men, you men, you men!
 SHOUTING IN ARABIC. (S01E07)

Only Ethan – Vanessa's closest friend and original love interest – will eventually be able to get closer and cast her demons out through a rudimental exorcism. Using a small medallion with an effigy of St. Judas, protector of the lost causes, Ethan touches Vanessa's forehead and intones a labored Latin chant which burns her skin and forces the demon out, leaving Vanessa almost dead on the floor. An attentive gothic reader can immediately recognize such a sequence as a literary, as well as cinematic, reference to the moment when professor Van Helsing attempts to free Mina Harker from the curse of the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*:

'On your forehead I touch this piece of Sacred Wafer in the name of the Father, the Son, and ...' There was a fearful scream which almost froze our hearts to hear. As he had placed the Wafer on Mina's forehead, it had seared it had burned into the flesh as though it had been a piece of white-hot metal. My poor darling's brain had told her the significance of the fact as quickly as her nerves received the pain of it; and the two so overwhelmed her that her overwrought nature had its voice in that dreadful scream. But the words to her thought came quickly; the echo of the scream had not ceased to roaring on the air when there came the reaction, and she sank on her knees on the floor in an agony of abasement. Pulling her beautiful hair over her face, as the leper of old his mantle, she wailed out: 'Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the Judgment Day'. (Stoker 2000, 246-47)

In Stoker's novel, the curse of the vampire is singularly associated to hyper-sensitive creatures such as women (Lucy and Mina) and maniacs (Reinfield). These characters, along with the fluid permeability of capitalist commerce (Moretti 1982), constitute the main portals through which Dracula penetrates and infects British society. The vampire's power thus lies in his capacity to awaken the "whore" that lurks inside every pure Victorian "angel" he seduces. Dracula calls women to him, puts them in a sort of unconscious trance and bites them. Once they are bitten, they are his, like the virginal Lucy who, on her deathbed, welcomes her fiancé in lascivious whispers:

When we came into the room she opened her eyes, and seeing him, whispered softly, 'Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come!' [...] So Arthur took her hand and knelt beside her, and she looked

her best, with all the soft lines matching the angelic beauty of her eyes. [...] And then insensibly there came the strange change which I had noticed in the night. Her breathing grew stertorous, the mouth opened, and the pale gums, drawn back, made the teeth look longer and sharper than ever. In a sort of sleep-waking, vague, unconscious way she opened her eyes, which were now dull and hard at once, and said in a soft, voluptuous voice, such as I had never heard from her lips, 'Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!' [...] I kept my eyes fixed on Lucy, as did Van Helsing, and we saw a spasm as of rage flit like a shadow over her face. The sharp teeth clamped together. Then her eyes closed, and she breathed heavily. (Stoker 2000, 133-34)

I will return to the ironic implications of what being bitten by Dracula actually means for Vanessa at the end of next paragraph. For now, I simply want to highlight how *Penny Dreadful* constructs Vanessa's entire narrative arc on Stoker's notion of the New Woman as a medium of contamination. Within this perspective, Vanessa's embodied experiences of spiritual and carnal passion expose her not just to emotional or sexual suffering, but to a more dangerous threat of passivity in its meaning of being enacted upon.¹⁴ If sex is what makes Vanessa vulnerable to the Master's assaults throughout season one, in season two and three abstinence will be her way to gain back control of her body in order to preserve her soul. As in the case of her predecessor female saints and mystiques, Vanessa's agency is thus linked to another, almost counterintuitive, form of sexual deviance, that is to say voluntary chastity, which alienates women from their sacred roles of mothers and wives within the worldview of patriarchal normativity.

3. *I Accept Myself: Celebrating Vanessa's Queerness as Uniqueness*

Penny Dreadful's Leitmotif lies in the acceptance of one's own queerness as a distinctive trait of individuality. This is explicitly declared by its creator and screenwriter, John Logan, who likens his personal experience of coming out as an embrace of his own monstrous self:

I've always been drawn to monsters. [...] [As] I grew older, I realized that what really attracted me to them was the very deep kinship I felt that has to do with growing up as a gay man. [...] [My] process of coming out was a process of accepting that the thing that made me alien and different and monstrous to some people is also the thing that empowered me and gave me a sense of confidence and *uniqueness* and a drive toward individuality. (Thomas 2014)

In such a perspective, we can understand why every season of *Penny Dreadful* finds its own closure in the clash between Vanessa's most authentic, queer, individuality, and her longing for an appealing normality. In the last episode of the first season, for example, Vanessa enters a church for the first time in many years and seeks help from a Catholic priest in order to be properly exorcised. The response of the holy minister, however, is shockingly contrary to what Vanessa, and the audience, would expect: "If you have been touched by the demon, it's like being touched by the backhand of God. Makes you sacred, in a way, makes you unique [...] Do you really want to be normal?" (S01E08).

This same appeal to normality is also the object of Vanessa's last temptation at the end of season two. In fact, after a variety of episodes focused on her sorcery apprenticeship with the Cut-Wife of Ballentree Moor, Vanessa is invited by the Master to submit to his will in exchange

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed has pointed out how the words passion and passive share the same p.i.e. root *pati (to endure), which can be found in the Latin *passio*, that is to say suffering (2014, 2). This evokes the traditional imagery of sufferance and passivity entailed in sexual coupling for women.

of the promise of a normal life; one that involves marrying Ethan Chandler and having children with him. While she is almost about to give in, Vanessa eventually rejects Satan's offer declaring that she does not want a normal life anymore ("I know who I am, do you?", S02E10). Then, while placing her hand on the face of her look-alike voodoo puppet, she snarls a counter-curse in the *Verbis Diablo*¹⁵ thus shattering the doll's head. She concludes with the words "Beloved, know your master" (*ibidem*) which finally seem to establish Vanessa's dominance over the corrupting forces of Evil. At the same time, as Ethan writes in his farewell letter, Vanessa's dark empowerment also dooms her to "walk alone" in a world most certainly abandoned by God.¹⁶

Failing to conquer her soul with the prospect of conformity, Satan leaves the task of subjecting Vanessa's body and heart to his earthly counterpart Dracula. In season three, in fact, the charismatic zoologist Dr Alexandre Sweet, a human disguise for Dracula, succeeds in making Vanessa fall in love with him through a reverse strategy of endorsement of her broken nature and monstrous uniqueness. The power relationship between Vanessa and Dr Sweet/Dracula is certainly one of the most interesting aspects of the series's narrative. Almost predictably, Vanessa breaks gendered conventions and initially invites him out to which he replies "I don't know that I've ever been asked out by a woman" (S03E02). Likewise, it is she who initiates their first sexual encounter in S03E07 and confronts Dr Sweet once his true identity is finally revealed. What Vanessa could not expect, however, was for Dracula to be genuinely in love with her as she is the reincarnation of his primordial companion, the Egyptian deity Amunet, to whom he has been seeking to reunite since the dawn of time.

Sweet: What has my life been? A series of shabby identities in vulgar worlds. From one tragic age to another. Always in search of that one thing I cannot attain! Have mercy, please! This is the only mercy I can offer you. Then do it. Better to die now than walk another day without you. [...]

We have been shunned in our time, Vanessa. The world turns away in horror. Why? Because we're different. Ugly. Exceptional. We're the lonely Night Creatures, are we not? The bat, the fox, the spider, the rat. The scorpion. The broken things. The unloved. There's one monster who loves you for who you really are. And here he stands. I don't want to make you good, I don't want you to be normal. I don't want you to be anything but who you truly are. You have tried for so long to be what everyone wants you to be. What you thought you ought to be. What your church and your family and your doctors said you must be. Why not be who you are instead?

Vanessa: Myself?

Sweet: You will never be alone again. I will love you till time has lost all meaning.

Vanessa: Yes.

Sweet: Do you accept me?

Vanessa: I accept myself. (S03E07)

These passionate lines are followed by the famous vampire kiss, i.e. Dracula's bite. However, this does not occur without Vanessa's consent as is the case of a long gothic tradition of swooning vamped heroines. On the contrary, Vanessa most willingly offers her neck to Dracula ultimately accepting his bite and, with it, her own true nature ("I accept myself"). The romantic dialogue is further heightened by the Miltonic tone of Dracula's statement "Better to die now than walk

¹⁵ *Verbis Diablo* is a constructed language (conlang) based on the juxtaposition of Latin and Greek invented by David J. Peterson who said, "It was supposed to be literally the Devil's corruption of language" (Wakim 2015).

¹⁶ The absence of God as a condition of possibility of the modern world is frequently reiterated throughout the series. The very existence of evil, exemplary embodied in Miss Pool's coven of witches, is justified as a reaction of God's betrayal of mankind; Miss Pool "I didn't turn from God. He turned from me. From all of us. Look around. You tell me, where is He... in this city of perpetual suffering? In this life? You tell me where" (S02E06).

another day without you”.¹⁷ Similarly, Dracula’s painful exposition of his quest “from one tragic age to another” in order to rejoin with Vanessa resounds in the ears of the viewers as Gary Oldman’s famous line in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 *Dracula* “I have crossed the Oceans of Time to find you”. Indeed, in its post-modern game of cinematic references, *Penny Dreadful* homages Coppola’s rendition of the vampire as a damned-for-love prince of darkness searching for his lost love Elizabeth, reincarnated in Mina Harker. At the same time, such an inspired tribute undergoes a deep manipulation which affects the closure of both Vanessa and Ethan’s narrative arc. Sadly enough, Vanessa’s acceptance of her role as Amunet, the apocalyptic Mother of Evil, reduces her to the only thing she never wanted to be: Dracula’s Victorian wife. Dressed in a white bridal gown and standing still in a bare room full of candles, she has dramatically returned to her captive iconography as an asylum inmate, subdued in a straight-jacket and a padded cell. Moreover, and just like at the Banning Clinic, Vanessa is now completely dependent on one man for her information and access to society, lacking any intellectual stimuli or projects of her own.

Vanessa: You must help me defeat the forces of darkness and deny them their prize for all time

Ethan: No

Vanessa: Please Ethan, Let it end, (SLOWLY) With a kiss.

Ethan: With love. Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come...

Both: Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us. (SNIFFLING) Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the Glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

(GUN FIRES)

Vanessa: (BREATHING HEAVILY) Oh, Ethan... I see... our Lord. (S03E09)

Unlike Coppola’s epilogue which features Mina Harker finishing Dracula in an act of mercy and selfless love, in *Penny Dreadful* it is actually Ethan who dispatches Vanessa to the eternal light she had long forsaken. In this way, by accepting her execution and executioner, Vanessa enacts her agency for the last time and chooses to die as God’s child rather than live as Dracula’s bride.¹⁸ In the same fashion, Ethan too resolves to put his own beastly double at God’s service and kill the woman he loves for the greater good.¹⁹ Their joint sacrifice as the Tarots’ “lovers”²⁰ fulfills their redemptional climax as protectors of the world while putting an end to the apocalyptic night that has fallen onto London.

¹⁷ As Satan famously declares in *Paradise Lost*, “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (Book 1, l. 263).

¹⁸ Questioned about the tragic tone of the series’ finale, John Logan explained that ending Vanessa’s life was intended as a message for the contemporary audience. “[Vanessa’s] way to achieve apotheosis, to achieve God, was to die and go to Heaven, and find the peace of the grave. That seems appropriate to the tone of the show. What I find remarkable about the ending is that she gets what she wants, which is to die and go to Heaven and be with God. That’s a shocking message for 2016, to tell that story, but that’s what it is” (Ryan 2016).

¹⁹ Ethan’s acceptance of his own savage nature as a werewolf can still result in two opposite effects for the battle against Evil. He can either embrace his sins to rule the darkness – as the night-comer Hecate has always tried to persuade him throughout season two, or he can put his bloody nature at God’s service as Dracula’s only antagonist and impede his quest for Vanessa.

²⁰ *The Lovers* is the card which Ethan picks from Vanessa’s tarots deck at the end of their second meeting in S01E01. Traditional interpretations of this major arcan associate it to the realm of bonds and relationships as much as the one of ethical and spiritual dilemmas. On the one hand, the trust and unity of the lovers empower them in mutual strength; on the other hand, the fulfillment of such a potential often implies a difficult choice that requires a personal sacrifice (Waite 2005). In this respect, *The Lovers*’ card had already revealed both Ethan and Vanessa’s intertwined destiny based on their intimate identity quest from what they are to what they choose to be.

Conclusions

This article has shown how *Penny Dreadful* successfully conflates and then subverts different archetypes belonging to the Gothic imagery in order to develop its own transmedia narrative of neo-Victorian gendered-otherness. In particular, within the expanded narratological spectrum of televisive seriality, the series focuses on the character of Miss Vanessa Ives in order to problematize the stereotype of womanly evil in light of the most contemporary discourses of feminist emancipation, toxic patriarchal oppression, and social marginalization. Most crucially, in its exploration of the nature of otherness and transgression, Logan's production provocatively historicizes the notion of queerness in terms of uniqueness thus pushing towards a deconstruction of the traditional institute of the bourgeois nuclear family based on biological kinship.²¹ In this perspective, *Penny Dreadful* presents a model of elective queer bonds almost completely derived from a patrilineal choice which comes at the cost of womanhood, be it a sisterly or a mother-daughter relationship. This line of argument is confirmed by the fact that only male characters are allowed to express their transgressive alterity without repercussions to their physical wellbeing. On the contrary, such is not the case for the female characters in the series who are excruciatingly marked by their otherness which is expressed through their abjection resulting from the bodily exertion of their agency. In a world of men-administered identities and institutions,²² Vanessa's quest for empowerment thus entails the prospect of a global scale eschatological overthrow which simply cannot be. It cannot be shown, nor imagined, as it would mean the end of things as we, the viewers, know them. For this reason, within the appealing, as much as comforting, scheme of the Gothic's "femicidal plots" (Meyers 2001, 2), Vanessa must die in order to prevent the destruction of the entire human race. Her sacrifice, however, is ambiguously disguised as an exercise of gendered agency derived from the heroine's necessity to preserve her own true self through the patronizing embrace of Ethan, her righteous male redeemer. Thus terminates Vanessa's parable of feminine unconformity; safely sealed between the feverish Ave Maria at the beginning of season one and the phallogocentrism of Ethan's Lord's Prayer at the end of season three.

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²¹ In S01E08, for example, when Sir Malcom shoots his vamped daughter Mina, he acknowledges Vanessa as "the daughter that he deserves". Similarly, the man also acts as a father figure for Victor Frankenstein, whom he considers as a sort of new son in an act of compensation and repentance for the loss of his neglected one. In turn, Victor himself literally "fathers" a series of creatures such as Proteus, Caliban, and the dead prostitute Brona Croft, whom he revives with the new name of Lily. For an extensive analysis of *Penny Dreadful* as a deconstruction of traditional bourgeois relationship models, see Primorac 2018.

²² Rachel M. Friars and Brenda Ayres point out how "For the Victorians, madness was a social problem as well as an economic enterprise. The 'English malady' ran rampant in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with 80,000 known asylum inmates living in England by the *fin de siècle*, and the average asylum housing up to 1000 inmates, most of whom were women (2020, 57).

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