

‘We’re Going to Make You into a Proper Woman’: Postfeminist Gender Performativity and the Supernatural in *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016)

Dina Pedro, University of Valencia

Abstract

Neo-Victorian Gothic fiction exploits the supernatural to achieve social and sexual emancipation for women, shaping the narrative into what Esther Saxey defines as the ‘liberation plot’ (2010). John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) explores how female characters transgress heteronormative gender roles with the assistance of supernatural forces. My main aim is to show how the series fails to grant the female protagonists a sense of feminist liberation, punishing them instead for their subversion of socially imposed gender acts. In applying Saxey’s (2010) and other supplementary approaches to gender emancipation, I analyse the female characters’ failed attempt at achieving it by unleashing their supernatural doubles. In doing so, I show that—in spite of *Penny Dreadful*’s apparent advocacy for female emancipation—its misogynistic vilification of vindictive women can be understood as part of the show’s postfeminist context of production.

Keywords: neo-Victorianism; doubling; liberation plot; postfeminism; gender acts; gender transgression

1. Introduction

Penny Dreadful (2014-2016) is a British-American horror TV series created for Showtime and Sky by John Logan, which ran for three seasons. The main cast includes Eva Green (Vanessa Ives), Josh Hartnett (Ethan Chandler), and Timothy Dalton (Malcolm Murray). *Penny Dreadful* is a neo-Victorian TV series that appropriates several characters from canonical nineteenth-century classics, including Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Myth of Prometheus* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Logan also incorporates into his narrative characters from Victorian popular culture—i.e. the sensationalist penny dreadfuls from which the show takes its name—and places them all alongside original characters in a reimagined Victorian London. The show distances itself from more conservative costume dramas, given that

Pedro, Dina. 2021. “‘We’re Going to Make You into a Proper Woman’: Postfeminist Gender Performativity and the Supernatural in *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016).” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 20(1): 194-214.

it embraces sensationalist and gore elements from TV horror, and tackles both contemporary and Victorian social concerns. According to Yvonne Griggs, '*Penny Dreadful* functions as a TV series that [...] explores a Victorian past in which unspoken taboos and unnamed anxieties are foregrounded within a made-for-screen context' (2018: 15). These anxieties include non-traditional forms of sexuality, the subversion of traditional gender roles, and new family models that challenge the Victorian nuclear household. In placing these current concerns in a nineteenth-century setting, the series establishes a temporal dialogue between them and us, allowing the audience to reflect on contemporary issues from a chronological distance.

In this article, I first offer an overview of neo-Victorianism. Drawing on Esther Saxey's approach to the liberation plot in neo-Victorian fiction (2010) and other supplementary approaches to gender, I question the potential of (neo-)Gothic elements to undermine gender stereotypes, using *Penny Dreadful* as a case study. Through a close reading of the three seasons of the series, and with a special focus on Vanessa Ives and Brona Croft—later reborn as Lily Frankenstein—I show that, despite the series' seemingly feminist agenda, their gothic doubles fail to achieve sexual and social emancipation. In doing so, I demonstrate that *Penny Dreadful* displays an antifeminist subtext, which can be framed in the present context of postfeminism.

2. Neo-Victorianism and Antifeminism

In recent decades, neo-Victorianism has been gathering momentum. This project establishes a chronological dialogue between the Victorians and us, exploring questions of ethics, identity politics and social anxieties from both periods (Boehm-Schnitker & Gruss 2014: 2). Indeed, neo-Victorian fiction might have a presentist agenda that caters to present and popular demands—rather than faithfully representing the Victorian past. Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons contend that historical fiction like neo-Victorianism is not only oriented to the past, but especially to the present and the future, and should be regarded as 'an act of memory,' whose purpose is to bring the past back to us in order 'to shape it for present purposes' (2013: 13).

Screen Victoriana have recently proliferated thanks to their incursion into streaming platforms (Louttit and Louttit 2018: 1), like Netflix, Hulu or HBO. This is the case of TV series—such as *Penny Dreadful* (2014-

2016), or *Frankenstein's Chronicles* (2015-2017)—and films, like Cary Fukunaga's *Jane Eyre* (2011) and Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015). This newfound interest in visual neo-Victorianism is also reflected at a scholarly level in the number of publications released on the topic (Sadoff 2010; Kleinecke-Bate 2014; and Primorac 2018).

Antonija Primorac underlines the unethical postfeminist representations of Victorian women on screen—where 'key feminist notions of empowerment and choice have been appropriated by the neo-liberal media' (2018: 5)—which show, in a disguised manner, antifeminist undertones. This trend in female-targeted media promotes the individual and consumerist empowerment of women, who feel fulfilled by choosing a liberated sexuality. Indeed, a number of screen Victoriana portray overt sexuality as a source of female empowerment in a deliberately repressed Victorian context (Primorac 2018: 14), as in the case of *Penny Dreadful*. Such juxtaposition of feminist and antifeminist traits creates a 'doubleness at work in postfeminist media discourse' (Primorac 2018: 32), which presents itself as undoubtedly feminist, while simultaneously implying that feminism has become obsolete.

Likewise, Saxey asserts that neo-Victorian Gothic fiction usually explores female emancipation. For Sarah E. Maier and Benda Ayres, neo-Gothic fiction recuperates what is considered Gothic to convey present anxieties, although it does not usually provide any answers 'for the harried modern' (2020: 4). Gothicism entails a self-reflexive return to the past to underline the fears and concerns of each generation through fiction, so that the term 'neo-Gothic' would be 'doubly reflexive as it reflects on the reflections of the past' (Maier & Ayres 2020: 2). Differently from neo-Victorianism, neo-Gothic fiction portrays an insidious Other that can neither be contained nor controlled. This could be interpreted as a subversive representation of postmodern anxieties—including gender oppression and patriarchal violence—through familiar Gothic elements such as 'supernaturalism, excess or Medievalism' (Maier and Ayres 2020: 4). In fact, the Gothic has traditionally been employed by female writers as a history of sorts, which can 'simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion' (Wallace 2012: np) from patriarchal historiography, in a rather subversive manner.

Indeed, Saxey states that uncanny doubles can be emancipating for women in neo-Gothic fiction, as they can enable what has been silenced

and repressed to be spoken and experienced (2010: 58). Saxey defines this literary trope as a ‘liberation plot,’ which is exploited in fictions portraying nineteenth-century female oppression as something that can ultimately be overcome (2010: 60). However, most neo-Victorian works that exploit this trope tend to reinforce and exaggerate Victorian repression. Matthew Sweet argues that we tend to misrepresent the Victorians—especially in terms of sexuality—‘perhaps deliberately, in order to satisfy our sense of ourselves as liberated Moderns’ (2014: 1). This tendency appears to correlate with Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, in that Victorian sexuality is depicted as extremely prudish so that, by contrast, we can consider ourselves highly liberated (Foucault [1976] 1978).

Furthermore, in most neo-Victorian Gothic retellings, Freud’s uncanny ([1919] 2001) is revisited to explore the characters’ repressed traumas (Arias & Pulham 2010: xv). Among the different examples of uncanny phenomena, the double can be liberating for women (Saxey 2010), as it can allow them to transgress the traditional gender boundaries imposed on them by society (Butler 1988). In this article, I mostly concentrate on how uncanny doubles might allow Vanessa Ives and Lily Frankenstein to achieve female emancipation. However, it is worth noting that the concept of doubling is also exploited in *Penny Dreadful* at other levels—i.e. feminism and antifeminism; repression and liberation; or Victorian and neo-Victorian. Indeed, due to all this doubleness at work, the liberation plot is ultimately curtailed in the series, as both female characters are punished for their transgressions.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how *Penny Dreadful* contributes to the reconfiguration of both Victorian and contemporary gender politics by addressing feminist concerns through the exploitation of (neo-)Gothic elements, most notably doubling and the resurrection of Victorian ‘spectres’ that stand for both Victorian and contemporary gender anxieties. Indeed, the series is an especially rich object of study in terms of female liberation due to its Gothic qualities. However, in the end it fails to grant its protagonists female emancipation, as it actually embraces postfeminist assumptions by portraying the feminist cause as violent radicalism in the case of Lily, and by perpetuating the stigmatisation of women for actively exploiting their sexuality through the character of Vanessa.

3. *Sexual Liberation: Vanessa Ives*

Vanessa Ives is *Penny Dreadful*'s female protagonist—an independent woman who is sensitive to supernatural forces. She is convinced that there is a dark force inside her that makes her commit unspeakable acts. Such force could be interpreted as her uncanny double, who, according to Saxey, 'is typically a splitting of the hero,' and whilst '[o]ne aspect [...] remains socially respectable, the other commits (or urges) terrible acts' (2010: 67), especially when it comes to sexual transgressions. This double was presumably awakened when she was still an adolescent and caught her mother having sexual intercourse with Sir Malcolm Murray, a close family friend. Despite its social inappropriateness, this clandestine act triggered a sexual desire in Vanessa, who even confesses to be aroused by it to her friend Mina: '[m]y 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' (Logan & Giedroyc 2014a: 00:11:13). Saverio Tomaiuolo describes this turning point in Vanessa's life as a 'rite of passage' (2019: 156), since the daemonic force that was lying dormant inside her is now awakened. From that moment on, she is relentlessly pursued and tantalised by two fallen angels: Lucifer and his brother, Dracula. They try to seduce Vanessa in order to make her their queen in a world buried in perpetual darkness. In order to protect humanity from this dreadful fate, she rejects the evil brothers and tries to abstain from sex.

Vanessa's subversive behaviour could be traced back to a few years prior, when she was a little girl who had an uncanny fear of dolls. This sort of behaviour could have been considered divergent in a woman at the time, as it deviated from the social roles and expectations imposed on her gender. However, according to Judith Butler, gender is not an inborn identity, but socially constructed through an unconscious repetition of acts through time which are 'shared, historically constituted and [...] performative' (1988: 530). This reinforces binary distinctions between men and women, placing the latter in a subordinate position. As a result, gender transgression can only be achieved through a subversive repetition of those acts (1988: 520). Butler further states that gender performativity has a punitive component, and those who fail to perform their gender well are chastised (1988: 528). Indeed, Vanessa was afraid that her dolls would come to life, but played with them in front of her

parents nonetheless, so that they would not think that she was somehow 'abnormal' and punish her for it: 'I played with them. You had to, or they thought you were deviant in some dreadful way, but I never liked them'. However, every night before she went to bed, she 'ran around [her] room and knocked them over' (Logan & Kirk 2015, 00:16:05). As this excerpt shows, Vanessa was forced to perform and repeat the gender acts associated with femininity from a very early age, so as not to be deemed deviant by society. In the case of little girls, dolls were arguably meant to look like real babies to trigger maternal instincts in them and a desire for motherhood, a traditional female role. According to Butler, these gender acts 'originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward' (1988: 526), replicating pre-existing social norms at an individual level.

It is also worth noting that dolls figure prominently among Freud's uncanny phenomena, especially when the person 'doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate' ([1919] 2001: 5). Freud contends that this uncanny phenomenon might be rooted in our childhood, since in early games children are not yet able to differentiate between living and inanimate objects ([1919] 2001: 8), as in the case of Vanessa. Moreover, uncanny dolls are later used in the series by the coven of witches led by Evelyn Poole (also known as Madame Kali), an apparently harmless medium that performs at parties and séances, but who secretly plots against Vanessa to win the favour of Lucifer in the second season of the series. Mrs. Poole designs fetish dolls in other people's likeness in order to control, and, eventually, kill them. She creates a doll to subject Vanessa to her master, Lucifer, but both the doll and its mistress are vanquished at the end of the second season.

As Vanessa gets older, her gothic double takes hold of her, so that she finally gives in and commits a despicable act: she seduces her friend Mina's fiancé. Instead of repressing her carnal desires, as a woman of her class was expected to do, her gothic double compels her to tempt him into having sexual intercourse with her. This 'deviant' act could be interpreted as Vanessa's opportunity to subvert the gender acts associated with women—i.e. self-restraint, passivity and purity. However, it also seems to correlate with a current trend in screen neo-Victorianism that entails the 'sexing up of the proverbially prudish Victorians' (Primorac 2018: 32) as a way to achieve a superficial

liberation for women. Such a vain attempt at female emancipation ends up being counterproductive, since it only contributes to women's loss of agency, as they might be regarded as hypersexualised objects in the hands of men and in the eyes of male viewers, hence remaining in a subordinate position, without the capacity of exerting their agency in society. In these cases, neo-Victorian screen adaptations exaggerate Victorian sexual repression, so that the overexploitation of women's sexuality can be perceived as empowering and liberating. As mentioned above, this misrepresentation of the Victorians correlates with Foucault's repressive hypothesis, which contends that if we regard Victorian sexuality as repressed, 'then the fact that one is speaking about it [at present] has the appearance of a deliberate transgression' ([1976] 1978 :6), so that we see ourselves as freed from Victorian prudery. However, this illusive sexual emancipation is curtailed in the end, since women are usually punished for their transgressions, as in the case of Vanessa. Feminism and antifeminism becomes another level at which doubling functions in *Penny Dreadful*, given that the series appropriates feminist ideals of empowerment for antifeminist purposes, as well as sexualises female characters to make them look highly liberated, only to eventually chastise them for such transgressions. As discussed above, this insidious doubleness can be seen as part of the series' postfeminist context of production, which conveys—albeit in a disguised fashion—a sexist message to a female audience.

Furthermore, Vanessa's portrayal as a powerful medium serves as another common (neo-)Gothic trope through which women are constructed as a dangerous 'Other' that cannot be controlled. Spiritism arguably granted women an active role and a position of power in Victorian England (Owen 1989: x). These practices enabled them to develop an assertiveness and female agency that was sometimes feared by society, resulting in their forced domestication. This appears to be the case of Vanessa, who is eventually punished for exploring her sexuality and diagnosed with female hysteria,¹ although she actually seems to be

¹ Hysteria was an affliction linked to femininity, as it was thought to be caused by an irritation in the uterine system affecting the nervous system (Arias, 2005: 169). Its symptoms included 'fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing, paralysis —and the rapid passage from one to another suggested the [...] capriciousness traditionally associated with the feminine nature'

the victim of a daemonic possession. According to Elaine Showalter, madness has traditionally been the term used by heteropatriarchal authorities to refer to female rebellion (1987: 5). Hysteria could be considered in the specific nineteenth-century context as ‘an unconscious form of feminist protest, the counterpart of the attack on patriarchal values carried out by the women’s movement of the time’ (Showalter 1987: 5). The women who were characterized as hysterical were those who did not fit the patriarchal definition of femininity, which confined them to either be the Angel of the House or a fallen woman. According to Arias, supernatural activities like spiritualist trances were first labelled by Victorian doctors as hysteria (2005: 162) because they felt that their scientific endeavour was being threatened by them. They were replacing religion as an ‘antidote to the pessimism of the scientific materialism of the time’ and offered a hopeful view of life beyond death that contradicted rationalism (Arias 2005:164). These spiritualist practices were usually conducted by women since, ‘according to Victorian concepts of womanhood, they were prone to passivity, weakness and mental instability’ (Arias 2005: 165).

Moreover, trances allowed mediums to claim a position of power ‘since séances provided them with some freedom of speech and action, as well as with possibilities of transgression’ (Arias 2005: 165). This is the case not only of Vanessa, whose supernatural abilities grant her the possibility of both social and sexual transgression, but also of Evelyn Poole. Evelyn is another instance of Victorian women who use the supernatural in order to reassert their female agency. She is an extremely powerful witch who renounced the precepts of purity, chastity and obedience that were deemed ideal for a Victorian woman, and embraced evil by selling her soul to Lucifer. Although she is never diagnosed with hysteria—as in the case of Vanessa—Mrs. Poole’s sexual and gender transgressions, supported by her supernatural and satanic powers, make her fit the definition of the Victorian hysterical woman perfectly. These two strong women ultimately fight over the favour of a male character, Lucifer, who has been using Evelyn to seduce Vanessa. However, the former is finally killed by Ethan Chandler, Vanessa’s suitor and a powerful werewolf. Consequently, a seemingly liberated female

(Showalter, 1987: 130). For Freud and Breuer (1895), hysterical patients were haunted by their repressed traumas, which usually had a sexual origin.

character like Mrs. Poole is reduced to being a tool at the hands of a man, and is finally punished and killed for her transgressions by another.

Whilst madness and supernatural possession might allow female characters to speak up against patriarchy and gender oppression, their criticism is usually undermined by other characters in the series, and society in general, as the ramblings of a madwoman. Neo-Victorian Gothicism exploits madness to allow female characters to explore 'female agency but cannot embrace it and ultimately demonizes it' (Saxey 2010: 78). When the orderly at the asylum tries to convince Vanessa that the treatments are meant to make her better, she realises that they are actually intended to turn her into what was considered to be a *proper woman* at the time: passive, docile and modest. She tells him that they are 'meant to make me normal. Like all the other women you know. Compliant, obedient. A cog in an intricate social machine and no more' (Logan & Fraser 2016: 00:16:06). However, the male authority dismisses this piece of criticism as madness and insists that she has to accept the treatments to go back to normalcy.

After she is discharged from the asylum, she tries to repress her sexual drives because she is afraid of giving in to her instincts and losing control. She physically struggles against her gothic double—scratching herself until she bleeds while her body twists and contorts—which leaves her body deeply scarred. Primorac points to Vanessa's celibacy as being key to her taking control over her own body, and to her agency being defined by her self-control and sexual abstinence (2018: 154). In fact, when Dorian Gray comments on her firm self-restraint, she admits that she could never relinquish it, lest she would unleash the dark force that lives inside her, fighting for dominance. She claims that if those 'things within us all' were to be set free, '[t]hey would consume us. We would cease to be and another would exit in our place without control' (Logan & Giedroyc 2014b: 00:34:31). By contrast, when discussing with Ethan what happens when they release their inner 'monsters,' she tells him: '[w]e're most who we are. Unrestrained. Ourselves' (Logan & Kirk 2015: 00:17:36), which seems to point, once again, to *Penny Dreadful's* liberation plot. In order to become her true self, Vanessa needs to stop repeating the gender acts that society imposes on her to repress her true identity. She needs to embrace her gothic double, which will enable her to transform these gender acts and recover her female agency. As stated

above, it is implied that the only way Vanessa can achieve female emancipation is through sexual liberation.

Consequently, Vanessa finally accepts Dracula, one of the fallen angels that had been chasing her throughout the series. She thinks that this demon is the only one who would accept her for what she really is; the only one who would not force her to be what is deemed to be normal by society: '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. [...] Why not be who you are instead?' (Logan & Cabezas 2016: 00:54:00). Vanessa takes him up on his offer, as she feels that she can be truly herself at last and become liberated through her union with him. Thus, due to *Penny Dreadful's* postfeminist agenda, female liberation can only be achieved through sex. Such simplification reduces the female character to a mere object of passion and denies her the possibility of becoming empowered without male assistance. Once Vanessa accepts her fate as 'the mother of evil,' the prophecy she has fought so hard to prevent is finally fulfilled and the Apocalypse starts. A pestilent fog covers the world and the creatures of the night now walk the earth without fear of being discovered.

Nonetheless, in the series finale, Vanessa decides to sacrifice her individual liberation in order to save humanity from perpetual night. She begs Ethan Chandler, her supernatural beloved, to execute her so that Dracula can be vanquished. Whilst Tomaiuolo asserts that her sacrifice can be understood as an act of self-acceptance and liberation—given that her death will put an end to her inner struggles (2019: 172)—I contend that the liberation plot is actually undermined, since her death is arguably a punishment for her lust and impropriety—two traits that were deemed unfeminine by society. The failure of the liberation plot demonstrates that the double cannot be emancipating, and instead 'generates a sense of the uncanny which becomes attached to acts of sexual transgression, making them more visible but also further demonizing them' (Saxey 2010: 79).

Vanessa is therefore punished for subverting the social constraints imposed on women, as she has embraced carnal pleasures with Dracula, the Prince of Darkness. Even though she had already had 'improper' sexual intercourse with Dorian Gray and other men—and would thus be deemed a 'fallen woman' by Victorian standards—she is actually being

punished for her relationship with Dracula, a fallen angel, since such a union fulfils the prophecy of the end of the world that would subject humankind to the creatures of the night. Her final sacrifice, on the contrary, is an act associated with femininity and motherhood, thanks to which she can redeem herself and become a true woman again. Therefore, the sexualisation of the Victorian female characters in neo-Victorianism on screen does not seem to grant them a sense of individual empowerment or independence. As Primorac states, this oversexualisation promises a shallow liberation for women by foregrounding nudity and sexuality, yet ‘it comes nowhere close to acknowledging the agency and autonomy of the adapted Victorian heroine or allowing her a happy ending on her own terms’ (Primorac 2018: 45). Therefore, the liberation plot fails in the end, as it falsely associates women’s emancipation with sexual liberation, only to later punish them for exploring their sexuality and attempting to subvert imposed gender roles. In fact, by equating women’s overt sexuality to female emancipation, *Penny Dreadful* is not subverting the Victorian notion of the ‘fallen woman,’ but is actually reinforcing, or *doubling*, it.

4. Social Emancipation: Brona Croft/Lily Frankenstein

Lily is the last of Dr. Frankenstein’s creations. He originally resurrected her to be the bride of his first creature, John Clare, but eventually falls in love with her. Lily represents social oppression against women and how her uncanny double—i.e. her new immortal, resurrected self—might allow her to overcome the social obstacles and abuse she has had to endure because of her gender. Before her resurrection, Lily was Brona Croft, a tuberculous Irish prostitute working in London from a very early age. As an immortal, however, she refuses to play the obedient and submissive role that society expects from her, and adopts a subversive and rebellious stance against patriarchy instead. Her marginal past has left her scarred and traumatized, so that she now intends to use her supernatural strength to recruit an army of prostitutes to dominate all abusive men. As Tomaiuolo asserts, Lily becomes ‘an evolved species of “deviant” New Woman who—in her case—uses violence to claim her power’ (2019: 149). Thanks to her uncanny double, the prostitute can now climb the social ladder and become the mistress of those who abused her. According to Saxey, neo-Victorian fiction celebrates ‘those who escape or transgress these class distinctions,’ and their double

‘might be precisely the tool to bridge the gap between inner, psychological liberation and outer, social empowerment’ (2010: 60).

Lily’s radical feminism is hinted at during the first days of her new life, when she is trying on some new items of clothing that Dr. Frankenstein has bought specially for her. These clothes seem to have a double purpose: they are designed to be visually pleasant but also to keep women ‘corseted.’ In fact, when Lily describes the corset as oppressive, Dr. Frankenstein explains that many women wear it because they are supposed to ‘flatter the figure,’ and Lily replies that they do, ‘[t]o a man’s eye, anyway’ (Logan & Thomas 2015: 00.35.19). Butler asserts that we live in a world where ‘acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes [are] usually associated with gender’ (1988: 530). In this case, Lily questions the taken-for-granted assumption that a proper woman should wear constrictive clothing to please men. Patriarchal oppression through clothing is further reflected in Dr. Frankenstein’s paternalistic and misogynistic claim that women favour the corset because they are not meant to ‘exert themselves,’ otherwise they would ‘take over the world,’ so that men have to keep them ‘corseted, in theory... and in practice’ (Logan & Thomas 2015: 00.35.00). In spite of Lily’s apparent coyness and submission, her reply shows a critique of this patriarchal oppression and anticipates her later radicalism: ‘All we do is for men, isn’t it? Keep their houses... raise their children, flatter them with our pain’ (Logan & Thomas 2015: 00.35.25).

Later on, it becomes clear that she remembers her previous life, and that she has a split personality formed by the dead prostitute and Frankenstein’s immortal beloved. When John Clare reproaches her for going on a date with Dorian Gray, she drops her act as a coy and lady-like girlfriend and lashes out at him for trying to tame her. In the following excerpt, she remembers her past experiences of sexual trauma and how they have shaped her into the woman she is now. Moreover, it lays the foundation for her radicalism:

We flatter our men with our pain. We bow before them. We make ourselves dolls for their amusement. We lose our dignity in corsets and high shoes and gossip and the slavery of marriage! And our reward for this service? The back of the hand... The face turned to the pillow... [...] You drag us into the alleys, my lad, and cram yourselves into our mouths for two bob. When you’re not beaten us senseless! [...] Never again will I kneel to any man. Now they shall kneel to me. As you do, monster. (Logan & Skogland 2015: 00:41:39)

After this challenging speech, she leaves and, together with her lover Dorian Gray, starts recruiting an army of prostitutes to take on patriarchy. The radicalisation of Lily's feminist movement is reflected in the way she discards the suffragettes' fight for equality as insufficient, stating that what women must aspire to is actually 'mastery' over men through violence. She describes them as being 'so awfully clamorous,' since they are continuously 'marching around in public and waving placards.' Lily believes that the way they should fight patriarchy is '[b]y craft. By stealth. By poison. By the throat quietly slit in the dead of the night. By the careful and silent accumulation of power' (Logan & Thomas 2016b: 00:14:00). Butler rejects the idea that female subjugation is only caused by the individual perpetuation of acts of gender oppression, and stresses the need to acknowledge the social context and structures of power that allow these acts in the first place. In order to subvert gender power imbalance, we need to transform 'hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions' (1988: 525). Whilst Lily challenges patriarchal oppression, she attempts to reverse this social order through violence rather than through political activism, as the suffragettes do. Marie-Luise Kohlke states that these representations of Lily and her army of fallen women as radicals and monsters contradict *Penny Dreadful's* apparent feminist agenda and support for gender equality (2018: 8). In fact, it portrays feminists as violent men-haters who do not seek equality, but to enslave the opposite sex. Kohlke further argues that instead of subverting pre-existing derogatory stereotypes of feminist advocates, *Penny Dreadful* presents them as 'monstrous rather than promoting the public good and a more liberal, equal, and safer society—a fitting 21st-century misogynistic tribute to (and replay of) the 19th-century backlash against the New Woman' (2018: 9). Consequently, despite the show's seemingly feminist agenda, it contains sexist undertones in the way female empowerment is portrayed as aggressive and vengeful. Indeed, the gothic double is useless 'to the disenfranchised characters,' as it is prone to a violence that affects 'both the privileged and the disadvantaged' (Saxey 2010: 79). As a result, *Penny Dreadful* plays with the possibility of female liberation, only to eventually curtail it.

Curiously enough, the series' context of production coincides in time with current feminist movements and activism, such as #MeToo and Time's Up, which try to challenge 'the structures of inequality' (Clark-

Parsons 2019: 3) inherent to patriarchy, as well as to offer women and other collectives a platform to denounce patriarchal violence. This once again proves that the trope of doubling is exploited in *Penny Dreadful* through the dialogue between the Victorian and contemporary periods, but also between Gothic and neo-Gothic aspects. Neo-Victorianism looks back into our literary and historical past so as to ‘reanimate’ Victorian spectres representing Victorian anxieties—including incipient feminism, gender oppression or the fight for emancipation—to reflect on our postmodern ones. As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn assert, ‘just as the Victorian novelists sought a textual resolution for the industrial problems in their new cities, perhaps we seek a textual salvation in mimicking them as a salve to our (post)modern condition’ (2010: 2). Hence, in order to deal with current gender anxieties and patriarchal oppression, we look back to our Victorian predecessors to reflect on how they tackled their own gender issues. However, as Maier and Ayres contend, neo-Gothic fiction does not always provide answers for our modern anxieties (2020: 4), especially in the case of *Penny Dreadful*, whose postfeminist agenda hinders any kind of female emancipation for its protagonists.

Indeed, the language of spectrality, so characteristic of the Gothic, serves like no other to represent ‘the erasure of women in history’ (Wallace 2013: np) and to foreground their experience, constructing them as a polytemporal other. This aspect of the Gothic can also be exploited in neo-Gothic fiction, so as to recuperate and actualise historical ghostly traces of forgotten women in the present. This could be the case of Lily and her army of marginalised prostitutes who, during the Victorian period, would have been silenced and ignored for their condition as fallen women. As Maier and Ayres state, the neo-Victorian Gothic exploits aspects of the Gothic in order ‘[...] to address questions of memory, violence and traumatic experience, to investigate non-linear identities as well as spectral selves and to give voice to multifaceted cultural, scientific and artistic complexities in a time of complexity’ (2020: 4). In *Penny Dreadful*, the Gothic would arguably recuperate and tackle questions of memory, as well as bring to the fore gender violence and traumas from both the Victorian and contemporary periods through the character of Lily, a traumatised woman who suffered patriarchal violence and who now uses her power to denounce said violence,

alongside a sorority of women with whom she shares a similar traumatic experience.

However, Michelle Lazar claims that certain acts of gender transgression may contradictorily result 'in the reinforcement of the existing gender structure' (2005: 8), and she points to the masculinisation of women in power as an example. In dropping 'feminine' submission and passivity and becoming an abusive woman, Lily is assuming traditionally masculine traits, strengthening the gender asymmetry that she so strongly seems to oppose. Furthermore, Lily's narrative is constructed as a revenge plot, since she attempts to avenge abused women like herself by taking a violent stance against men, which only results in the vilification of the feminist movement. Kohlke also states that in *Penny Dreadful*, both contemporary and Victorian feminism is reduced to 'a misguided, misandrist, and megalomaniacal Gothic revenge fantasy' (2018: 9-10). In other words, in attempting to socially emancipate the Victorian prostitute through a tyrannical and aggressive form of feminism, the series is actually reinforcing—or doubling—the same antifeminist discourse it appears to criticize.

Lily is captured at the end of the Third Season by two male authorities, Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll, who take her to Bedlam asylum to inject her with a serum that will 'split off her monstrous self, restoring the docile "Angel of the House" to perfect obeisance' (Kohlke 2018: 10). They intend to subdue Lily's gothic double, the one that allows her to speak up against the patriarchal system and seek social emancipation for women. The doctors see Lily's female rebellion as symptomatic of a terrible disease that needs to be cured, so that she can go back to being a compliant woman. Therefore, as in the case of Vanessa, she is diagnosed with an illness that can only be treated by male doctors who determine 'the concepts of normality and deviance that women perforce must accept' (Showalter 1987: 20). Dr. Frankenstein tells her that they are going to *cure* her, so that she can go back to being a complacent woman: 'Lily, we are going to try to make you healthy. Take away all your anger and pain and replace them with something much better [...] Calm, poise, serenity. We're going to make you into a proper woman' (Logan & Cabezas 2016: 00:45:30).

In the end, however, Dr. Frankenstein cannot bring himself to erase Lily's memories after she confesses that she feels responsible for her daughter's death. She was forced to leave her alone one freezing night

because prostitution was still her only source of income. She begs the doctor not to take her guilt and the memories of that child away from her, as they are part of her identity as a woman: '[s]he was cold when I lifted her. Cold as ice. She died alone. Her name was Sarah. Please, don't take her from me. Please' (Logan & Thomas 2016a: 00.34.33). Lily's memories and identity are spared in the end only because she abandons her radical feminism and presents herself as a mourning mother begging for empathy. As Kohlke states, Lily cannot convince him to set her free through her extremist feminism. He only gives in after she assumes a more submissive role, that of a 'suffering mother' (2018: 11). He no longer needs to turn her into a proper woman by neutralising her gothic double because, as in the case of Vanessa, she has atoned her transgressions by taking a maternal and self-sacrificing stance, more in line with the Victorian moral precepts imposed on women. Lily is, nevertheless, punished for radically challenging patriarchal hegemony by adopting an unfeminine and violent position. Her army of prostitutes is dismantled and she abandons her immortal lover, Dorian Gray, for betraying her, so that she is forced to spend eternity in complete solitude. This ending seems to suggest that, despite the potential of a supernatural agent to be liberating for female characters, there is no space in the narrative for a liberated prostitute. As Saxey asserts, the gothic double is useful to reflect the contradictory and hypocritical Victorian structures of 'class, gender, and sexuality' (2010: 80), but it ultimately fails to offer a truly emancipatory path for women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, neo-Gothic fiction can potentially be emancipating for women, as it exploits aspects of the Gothic to denounce, in a rather subversive way, the patriarchal oppression that they have traditionally suffered and to reinscribe their experience, which has been ignored by official historiography. Gothic doubles might allow female characters to transgress the scripted gender acts that society imposes on them. However, the liberation plot is usually undermined in neo-Victorian Gothic fiction and women are finally punished for these subversive transgressions. Vanessa Ives and Lily Frankenstein have struggled against social and sexual repression their whole lives and their gothic doubles allow them to escape these heteropatriarchal norms and embrace their true identities. In the case of Vanessa, her double enables her to

explore her sexuality, whilst Lily's uncanny self gives her the strength to right the wrongs that she suffered at the hands of abusive men when she was just a prostitute. Nevertheless, their attempts at subverting the gender acts that society associates with women are curtailed in the end, as Vanessa is forced to sacrifice herself in order to save humanity from perpetual darkness, whereas Lily has to give up her feminist fight.

Moreover, the liberation plot in neo-Victorian Gothic fiction reflects the creators' intention to represent contemporary societies as more open-minded in terms of sexuality and social progress than their Victorian counterpart. The liberation plot can, therefore, be understood as a self-glorification of our contemporary culture, given that it might oversimplify Victorian sexuality, by portraying it as highly repressive, in contradistinction to our seemingly more liberated one. In the present context of postfeminism, this might give female audiences the illusion that they have overcome the social obstacles experienced by Victorian women, so that the feminist cause is perceived as outdated and no longer necessary.

Penny Dreadful appears to subvert Victorian patriarchal ideology at first by placing Lily and Vanessa—who transgress the gender norms that society instils upon them—at the centre of the narrative. However, by equating female emancipation to sexual liberation and by portraying the feminist cause as radical and violent, the series shows misogynist and antifeminist undertones, which are clearly a consequence of the series' postfeminist context of production. Indeed, in misrepresenting overt sexuality as liberation the show ends up reinforcing—i.e. *doubling*—rather than challenging the Victorian notion of the 'fallen woman.' The show's chauvinist approach seems to be confirmed in the way the two female protagonists are punished for their gender transgressions; but also in the way their critique against the patriarchal system is discarded as a sign of madness. Consequently, the series perpetuates Victorian medical and patriarchal discourses that depict women as hysterical, and places them in a subordinate position at the mercy of male authorities. Both Vanessa and Lily are forced to drop their social and sexual transgressions and assume their social roles as women. In the end, both characters adopt traditional female traits, therefore becoming *proper women*.

Funding Information

Research for this article was conducted with the financial aid of a predoctoral grant funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Universities (Ref. FPU17/03064) and the “Orion” research project: “Orientation: Towards a Dynamic Understanding of Contemporary Fiction and Culture”, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (FFI2017-86417-P; PI: Prof. Rosario Arias).

References

- Arias, Rosario. 2005. Between spiritualism and hysteria: Science and Victorian mediumship in Michèle Roberts’ *In the red kitchen*. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 50: 161-180.
- Arias, Rosario, and Patricia Pulham. 2010. Introduction. In *Haunting and spectrality in Neo-Victorian fiction: Possessing the past*, edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, xi-xxv, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boehm-Schnitker, Nadine, and Susanne Gruss. 2014. Introduction. In *Neo-Victorian literature and culture: Immersions and revisitations*, edited by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss, 1-20. New York: Routledge.
- Breuer, Joseph, and Sigmund Freud. 1957 [1895]. *Studies on hysteria*. New York: Basic Books.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. Performative acts and gender construction: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4): 519-531.
- Clark-Parsons, Rosemary. 2019. “I SEE YOU, I BELIEVE YOU, I STAND WITH YOU”: #MeToo and the performance of networked feminist visibility. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19: 1-19.
- Del Toro, Guillermo. 2015. *Crimson peak* [film]. US: Legendary Pictures.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978 [1976]. *The history of sexuality. Volume I: An introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2001 [1919]. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, volume XVII (1917-1919): An infantile neurosis and other works*. London: Vintage.
- Fukunaga, Cary. 2011. *Jane Eyre* [film]. UK: BBC Films.
- Griggs, Yvonne. 2018. *Adaptable TV: Rewiring the text*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Kleinecke-Bate, Iris. 2014. *Victorians on screen: The nineteenth century on British television, 1994-2005*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise. 2018. The lures of neo-Victorianism presentism (with a feminist case study of *Penny Dreadful*). *Literature Compass*, 15(7): 1-14.
- Lazar, Michelle. 2005. Politicizing gender in discourse: Feminist critical discourse analysis as political perspective and praxis. In *Feminist critical discourse analysis. Gender, power and ideology in discourse*, edited by Michelle Lazar, 1-28. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn. 2010. *Neo-Victorianism. The Victorians in the twenty-first century, 1999-2009*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Paco Cabezas (Director). 2016. Ebb tide. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Toa Fraser (Director). 2016. A blade of glass. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Coky Giedroyc (Director). 2014a. Closer than sisters. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Coky Giedroyc (Director). 2014b. What death can join together. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Brian Kirk (Director). 2015. Little scorpion. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Damon Thomas (Director). 2016a. Perpetual night. [Television series episode] In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Damon Thomas (Director). 2016b. Good and evil braided be. [Television series episode]. In *Penny Dreadful*

- produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Damon Thomas (Director). 2015. Evil spirits in heavenly places. [Television series episode. In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Logan, John (Writer), and Kari Skogland (Director). 2015. Memento mori. [Television series episode] In *Penny Dreadful*, produced by John Logan. Dublin, Ireland; London, England (UK): Showtime; Sky Atlantic.
- Louttit, Chris and Erin Louttit. 2018. Introduction: Screening the Victorians in the twenty-first century. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 11(1): 1-14.
- Maier, Sarah E. and Brenda Ayres. 2020. Introduction: Neo-Gothicism: Persistent haunting of the past and horrors anew. In *Neo-Gothic narratives: Illusory allusions from the past*, edited by Sarah E. Maier and Brenda Ayres, 1-12. London and New York: Anthem Press.
- Mitchell, Kate and Nicola Parsons. Reading the represented past: History and fiction from 1700 to the present. 2013. *Reading historical fiction: The revenant and remembered past*, edited by Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons, 1-18. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Owen, Alex. 1989. *The darkened room. Women, power, and spiritualism in late Victorian England*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Primorac, Antonija. 2018. *Neo-Victorianism on screen: Postfeminism and contemporary adaptations of Victorian women*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ross, Benjamin and Barry Langford. 2015. *Frankenstein's chronicles* [Television Series]. UK: Rainmark Films.
- Saxey, Esther. 2010. The maid, the master, her ghost and his monster: *Alias Grace* and *Mary Reilly*. In *Neo-Victorian fiction: Possessing the past*, edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, 58-81. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sadoff, Diane F. 2010. *Victorian vogue: British novels on screen*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shelley, Mary. 1998 (1818). *Frankenstein, or, the modern Prometheus*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1987. *The female malady: Women, madness and English culture, 1830-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- Stevenson, Robert Louis. 1974 (1886). *The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. London: New English Library
- Stoker, Bram. 2003 (1897). *Dracula*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sweet, Matthew. 2014. *Inventing the Victorians*. London: St. Martin's Publishing Group.
- Tomaiuolo, Saverio. 2019. *Deviance in neo-Victorian culture: Canon, transgression, innovation*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wallace, Diana. 2003. *Female Gothic histories: Gender, history and the Gothic*. Whales: University of Whales Press.
- Whelehan, Imelda. 2012. Neo-Victorian adaptations. In *Blackwell companion to literature, film and adaptation*, edited by Deborah Cartmell, 272-292. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wilde, Oscar. 2003 (1890). *The picture of Dorian Gray*. New York: Penguin.