Techniques such as recursive adaptation, narrative hybridity and ensemble performance are now a tradition in fantasy screen drama, in both cinematic and serial mode, from the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) to *Agents of Shield* (2013), in which several popular culture sources are woven together to create a new evocation of themes, stories and identities. Set in late-Victorian London, the richly awarded TV series *Penny Dreadful* (2014) alludes to a host of precursor texts from nineteenth century Gothic and sensation fiction. Among the many interesting elements of this finely crafted series is the ways in which it recasts minor or supporting female characters from these stories as powerful leading figures. This discussion will discuss the portrayal of Lily Frankenstein, a crucial minor character, to show how *Penny Dreadful* portrays transformative female identity through a Gothic redefinition of the late-Victorian New Woman.

She bleeds but doesn’t die. She hungers but cannot love. She seeks companionship but rejects the companion for whom she was made. If the original Victor Frankenstein’s creature was a new Adam forged by early nineteenth century science at the hand of human hubris, monstrously self-liberated from his maker’s control, in *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky 2014–2016) his second successful creation is the recreated Lilith, a ‘new’ woman who asserts; “Never again will I kneel to any man. Now they shall kneel to me” (3.02). As this paper will show, the portrayal of Lily Frankenstein is one among several instances of how *Penny Dreadful* attempts to portray transformative female identity through a Gothic redefinition of the late-Victorian New Woman.

The New Narrative

Set against a fantastical portrait of late-Victorian London, the richly awarded TV series *Penny Dreadful* alludes to a host of precursor texts from nineteenth century Gothic and sensation fiction, which remain popular in transmedia forms, from film and television drama to video games. The series features themes and characters that appeared in the ‘penny dreadful’ novelettes of the day, referring directly to techniques of the popular fiction form to which its title refers; such as recursive adaptation, reinvention and narrative hybridity. Among the many fiction sources for the series are Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1814), Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* (1847), Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1895) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). By the third season, extended plot elements, new settings and characters reflect the changing generic flavours of fantasy narrative from the
Gothic through to the influence of late nineteenth century American Western frontier fiction. With the Gothic, the Western has been fertile ground for transmedia adaptation, from the novels by James Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey to American DC and Marvel Western Comics, a form of popular fiction that has been similarly adaptable to new contexts, tastes and social conditions, able to absorb and reanimate already popular story lines.

First published in the 1830s, ‘penny dreadfuls’ were the trash fiction of the nineteenth century, thrillers full of shock, adventure and awe. A penny dreadful installment was cheap at one penny and the story line ever-evolving until the readership faltered (Springhall). Authors cribbed story lines, plagiarized plots and cobbled story lines together from diverse sources and recycled popular stock characters endlessly. Moralists railed against them as having a pernicious influence on the young (Chisolm), but they continued to flourish. According to the celebrated nineteenth century journalist George Sala, who read them voraciously as a boy, they offered a world of dormant peerages, of murderour baronets, and ladies of title addicted to study of toxicology, of gypsies and brigand-chiefs, men with masks and women with daggers, of stolen children, withered hags, heartless gamblers, nefarious rakes, foreign princesses, Jesuit fathers, grave-diggers, resurrection-men, lunatics, and ghosts (148).

Produced by Sam Mendes and John Logan, the television series *Penny Dreadful* exploits many of the traditional narrative techniques used in Victorian Gothic fiction, reframed as film noir. This is far from a deferential costume drama or a literary recreation. *Penny Dreadful* takes familiar characters such as Dr Frankenstein and his Creature, the ageless Dorian Gray, and various witches, vampires and monsters and uses them to evoke the idea of a haunted past as a background against which to tell new stories of a world that is, like our own, on the brink of unimaginable change. The settings, costumes, historical references and cultural tropes situate the story largely within the British *Fin de Siècle*, a period associated with literary and artistic experimentation, sexual decadence, progressivism and the popularization of women’s rights movements. The characters of *Penny Dreadful* do not think or behave in the same way or hold the same beliefs as their fictional forebears once did, but they represent familiar social and cultural identities and positions from that time. Lee and King regard them as “cultural memes that continue to live in contemporary culture” (2015 n.p.). In various ways, the series engages actively with the discursive elements of its source materials, using the ideas and experiences of the characters as symbolic strands of influence for reweaving meaning and narrative.

Techniques such as recursive adaptation, hybridity and ensemble performance are well established in fantasy screen drama, in both cinematic and serial mode, from 1940s Universal films, to the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003) to *Agents of Shield* (Billy Gierhart et al., 2013), in which several popular culture sources are woven together to create a new incarnation of longstanding themes, stories and identities. Hutcheon remarks that we “retell – and show again and interact anew with – stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same” (Hutcheon 177). As this paper argues, however, *Penny Dreadful* takes up key ideas that emerged with force during late-Victorian culture and connects them in ways that reveal underlying connections and disconnections. The evolving genre of transmedia fantasy fiction enables the series to create a new account of lasting issues and anxieties in Western culture; including the use of excessive power, mechanistic control over human creativity, the dangers of enchantment, the sufferings of the Other, and the struggle for women to transcend bodily and domestic confinement as autonomous rational beings.

**Recasting Women**

Among the many interesting elements of this finely crafted series is the way in which it recasts minor or supporting female characters from these stories as powerful leading figures. Its depiction of women is broadly coloured by historical conditions in which women lived during the late Victorian period. The series alludes to feminist advocacy for changing social roles at a time when women were excluded from universities, politics and the professions (3.01). Murphy has argued with reference to late Victorian fiction that the figure
of the New Woman emerges at moments of cultural anxiety and change (2016). Negotiations over changing attitudes to women went hand in hand with changes in other attitudes and beliefs. Acceptance of investigative science was just beginning to influence public discourse, as reflected in *Penny Dreadful* in the public lectures on evolution conducted by Christian Camargo’s attractively sinister appearance as Count Dracula in the guise of research scientist Dr Sweet during Season Three. New ways of thinking about selfhood were also becoming important, as is conveyed by the appearance of the character of Dr Seward (Patti LuPone) in Season Three: a revisioning of the character from Stoker’s *Dracula*. Just as the pages of the historical penny dreadful were peopled with clichés and archetypes – super heroes, mad scientists, magicians, vanquishers and villains – the characters of *Penny Dreadful* are larger than life, with magical or extra-natural powers that are sometimes beyond their own control. Its women are shown as capable agents of transformation, unconstrained by conventional Victorian social limitations; self-determined, articulate, desiring autonomy, or longevity or control. More interesting than their mere potential to nurture and harm, theirs is nevertheless a compromised power, inflected with darkness, uncertainty and threat.

Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), Evelyn Poole (Helen McCory) and Hecate Poole (Sarah Greene) are – or become – able to wreak supernatural forces, with powers to defend themselves and/or to control and recruit others. Their potency is, at the same time, limited by their relationship with more powerful male figures in their lives, whether human or inhuman. The witch or ‘nightcomer’ Evelyn Poole aligns herself with a mysterious Demon to achieve longevity and personal power but is destroyed by Vanessa and Ethan (2.09 and 2.10). Although in Seasons One and Two, Vanessa resists dominance by the same satanic figure who seeks to embrace and control her powers, she is consistently depicted as a figure of suffering resistance and recovery. In Season Three her promise as the Gothic New Woman is revealed when she begins to embrace her desire for Dr Sweet aka Count Dracula. She is ultimately portrayed as an acquiescent victim, rather than as an effectual force for good in the world (3.09). The character in *Penny Dreadful* which most clearly emblematises the Gothic New Woman is Lily Frankenstein. Only Lily expresses her desire for control in political terms: she rejects the idealism of the late-Victorian suffrage campaigners seeking equality with men, to assert a claim for a different kind of female power, literally the creation of a super race of women warriors bent on destroying the male “grasp” (3.01). Lily seizes agency and acts decisively to change her own circumstances and potentially those of others. Hers is a vision of a future in which female dominance is all and, as a force of destruction, she too is doomed to fail.

Lily’s references to a female super race are far from anachronistic post-hoc invention. Just at the time that the New Woman discourse emerged, the feminist Theosophist Frances Swiney was developing her vision of woman’s “cosmic progression” towards supreme being eclipsing all differences between men and women (Robb). Swiney turned the tables on the patriarchal establishment of evolutionary theory, as she saw it, to argue that biologically the male was a defective variant of the human species. A “preacher of the superiority of women” she argued for a new natural law based on the supremacy of woman (Gates 152-157). By the early twentieth century the idea that a woman, or a man, could be ‘made’ better, stronger, brighter, took hold in a new way as the ideas of Francis Galton found fruition in the work of the early twentieth century eugenistic movement with the notion of fostering human evolution through selective breeding (Galton 17 May 1904) – whose ugly implications would be realised with Hitlerian Facism. Lily offers a twist to this narrative – the spawning of a race of superwomen – that fails to bear fruit as the series draws to an end in the last episodes of Season Three and Lily is overcome by the rising power of institutionalised pseudo-science, represented by Dr Jekyll.

Unlike precursor accounts of the female ‘bride’ of Frankenstein’s monster – such as the short-lived female mate in *Frankenstein* (Shelley 1814/1980) or James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) who are pieced together from ragged human shards and then destroyed due to the reproductive implications of her survival – Lily is portrayed as a new product of industrial manufacture. She is created in the first episode of Season Two by a mixture of design and serendipity as Victor Frankenstein lines up his human-making machine to receive the lightning strike that will animate dead flesh and bones. Whereas his first attempts at animation were stitched together from body parts, this new female creature is made from the body of a whole woman, the consumptive street girl Brona Croft whom we
first meet as the lover of toothsome American adventurer Ethan Chandler in Season One (1.02). The scene of Lily’s birth captures the shadow of industrial Gothic that is cast across the series; a dusty dungeon, poorly lit and crammed with gigantic machines of ugly purpose. Here, the birth of Lily reflects the theme of unnatural disorder produced by mechanical technology. As Parker observes, with reference to some of the key texts upon which Penny Dreadful draws – Frankenstein, Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde and Dracula – nineteenth century industrial Gothic examines the “eruption of horrific fantasy into the everyday” in order to examine the vision of a brutally mechanized nineteenth century urban society with its institutions of overwhelming cruelty and power (156-159). This theme is further explored in the series, in its various scenes of female entrapment, for example when Vanessa Ives is locked in a Victorian madhouse because of her visions (1.05 and 3.04).

Lily rises from the forge of mechanical creation in perfect form, beautiful, seemingly innocent and born anew without memories of her past, and – as we discover – virtually impervious to destruction. She is manufactured by Victor to supply his first created progeny, the scarred Creature, with a mate to mitigate the burden of his loneliness: a classic allusion to the original story. But Lily recoils from the Creature, her promised husband, who calls himself John Clare after the self-made Romantic poet (1793—1864). Although she models herself on her maker, adopting his accent and politeness, gradually she does remember the brutality and suffering of her past life (2.07). Even more importantly, she realises that she now has supreme strength and power. Creed argues that women in screen drama are confronting not because they are monstrously other but because they are already fully formed and fearfully empowered (Creed 6). The female monster appears as a compelling figure of supernatural power partly because she is already beyond being human. In masculine terms, Creed observes, with reference to Lurie and Williams, the uncastrated female is a ‘freak’ of nature whose sexuality threatens to overwhelm and destroy (Creed 6).

Created by men, Lily refuses the modesty of covert sexuality and demands to be seen. She rejects her maker, Victor, and the romantic submission that John Clare proffers. Instead she is bent on revenge against man for the abuse suffered during her former life and conquest over the weak human race, and to make a new and pitiless world. She thus reconfigures the fin de siècle persona of the proto-modern New Woman to embody the far more forceful Gothic New Woman and become the harbinger of a world without men.

The Troubling New Woman

The New Woman of the 1890s emerged in the late nineteenth century as a trope of social and cultural change, one that was at once a sign of new possibility and of frightening upheaval. Within the public sphere, as women’s voices spoke up for female interests and concerns (Ledger 1-10), the New Woman appeared in literary and popular magazines, in novels, short fiction, essays and journalistic discussions of women’s role in society. Often the subject of cartoons, in the popular imagination of the day she was at first the mannish, bespectacled bluestocking, neglectful of wifely duty that was frequently pilloried in Punch (Shapiro) and eventually the sporty, bicycling Amazon (Heilmann 34-35). Her identity went hand in hand with the emergence of the women’s movement, from the 1860s through to late nineteenth century public campaigns for women’s property rights, suffrage, access to higher education, the professions and fashions that freed women from corsetry constraint (Purvis). She reflected the rising importance of female authorship and authority within a fast expanding publishing industry (Palmer ; Easley), and gave a face to the public voice for women’s interests.

On the one hand the New Woman was a triumphal figure – heralding in the new age of female opportunity and independence – and on the other she was regarded by the fierce purveyors of tradition as ‘improper’ and an easy target for marginalisation, fear and ridicule (Pykett). The New Woman sought education, independence and a role in public life. Emerging as the century drew to a close, the New Woman was enmeshed with the popular discourse of the ‘new’ and the cult of decadence with which Oscar Wilde and The Yellow Book writers and artists were associated (Ledger 94). Characterised as those who “abandoned the traditional sphere to lead more complex lives” (Nelson 6), she was thus regarded a threat to moral codes and social order, a harbinger of the decay of the phalanx of nineteenth century social institutions that loomed so large in the Victorian Gothic imagination. Wilde’s play Salome and the illustrations for its first published British edition by Aubrey Beardsley encapsulated the terrors and desires surrounded this vision of perfidious
feminine desire as she reaches for the dripping severed head of John the Baptist with greedily parted lips. As the Gothic New Woman Lily reanimates Salome’s ambition for revenge and like her is a spectacular object of desire with a voracious appetite to author her own ‘master’ narrative.

References to the New Woman began to emerge in the British and American press at a time when Victorian Gothic sensation fiction, intimations of sexual decadence, urban serial killers and other threats, as the demands of women for access to education and suffrage were characterised by some popular journals. As the satirical periodical Punch so often reminded its readers in various ways, “stern women are alarming” (20 July 1895). At this same moment the promisingly modern character of Mina Harker became famous as Dracula’s victim in Stoker’s classic novel (1897), to be safely settled into domestic maternity by its conclusion. As Dijkstra remarks, “what better surrogates could there be to take the role of the executioner in man’s masochistic fancies?” (374-75). Badged with feminist eccentricity, she was easy for some to dismiss as the inconsequential irritant of a dying century. The New Woman would have her legacy, however, in the next generation of women and their supporters, including the so-called Suffragettes, who lobbied successfully on the London streets, in town halls and in parliament for access to education and the suffrage (Holton).

The emergence of the Gothic New Woman can be seen as closely associated with the rise of mass print media consumption at the nineteenth century fin de siècle: a sustained cultural moment which contained the “transformation of the generic materials of the text into a motley fusion of speech and writing, recording and transcribing, image and typography” (Wicke 470). Although modes of narrative consumption have evolved and hybridised radically since that time, undoubtedly the diversification and delivery of dramatised narrative via small screen media has expanded its mass audience to achieve a global reach. The metaphor of consumption has special relevance in relation to the Gothic New Woman, as both an embodied figure of gendered difference and a subject of popular culture. The depiction of the late Victorian woman as voracious in her impetus for education, political and professional autonomy, shows the extent to which she was aligned in the public imagination with the personae of female destruction, the Eves, Liliths, Salomes and harpies of western cultural tradition (Dijkstra). In Penny Dreadful, however, the New Woman is Gothic not simply because she is associated with destruction but because she is associated with unending change.

The connections between monstrosity, modernity, sexuality and the representation of the New Woman in fin de siècle Britain were rehearsed in the novels of Sarah Grand, George Meredith, Olive Schreiner, Kate Chopin, and in Beardsley’s illustrations of Salome (Cunningham; Showalter; Murphy). She had her precursors in the monstrous femme fatale figures of the 1860s and 1870s, Braddon’s Lady Audley, Rossetti’s rampant Lilith with their “outward purity and inward lust” and “seeming self-sufficiency” (Dijkstra 374). Reforging her new persona in the furnace of revenge, Lily Frankenstein adopts elements of the New Woman as a figure of triumphal independence and conquest. As the Gothic New Woman, she is darkly independent, seductively resistant to domination, brilliantly articulate, refusing the rules of femininity and feminism in favour of power’s bloodier embrace (2.07). She casts off the demure Victorian mantle of wifehood provided by Victor Frankenstein who dresses her in high necked lace gowns and constraining corsets. In this role she prepares his food and lives as his secret companion. Her wide eyes, girlish smiles and modest glances reinforce his insistence that she is too unformed and ‘unready’ for marriage to the Creature. Even when she turns to him sexually (2.06) Frankenstein refuses the idea that her desire can be for anyone or anything but himself. By now, however, Lily is awake to the memory of her former self. Stifled by the small dwelling where Frankenstein keeps her she seeks a life of her own, drawn back to the night life of the flaneur that she explores with the charming Dorian Gray (2.07). What appears to be a burgeoning story of Lily’s double life as wife and lover is radically and violently overturned when, instead of returning to her wifely abode, she seduces a man at a public house and strangles him in his bed at the moment of climax, a private orgy of sex and death which reveals her new found strength and aggression, contrasts markedly with the oppressive experiences of her previous consumptive existence and unleashes her drive to power (2.07).

Much more than the harbinger of doomful desire or the awkward figure of alterity that Punch
depicted when it lampooned the bluestocking women who fought for female suffrage and higher education, Lily Frankenstein is, rather, a new new woman; a Gothic redefinition of the late Victorian persona. Consider the moment when a group of suffrage advocates marches into the London square where Lily and Justine sit at a café. Lily dismisses their efforts as, so awfully clamorous, all this marching around in public and waving placards. It’s not it. How do you accomplish anything in this life? By craft. By stealth. By poison. By the throat… quietly slit in the dead of the night (3.03).

Remade by men, now Lily remakes herself. She rejects their attempts to romanticise their desire for her and dismisses the bargain they have between them about the purpose of her existence. As she says to John Clare at a key moment: “Shall we wander the pastures and recite your fucking poetry to the fucking cows? You are blind… like all other men” (2:08).

As indicated, Lily is not the only character in Penny Dreadful with whom the theme of new womanist horror resonates: the glamorous sufferings of Vanessa Ives, the dark predations of the witches and the mysterious Dr Seward all reflect the idea of the transformative feminine. But where Vanessa seeks to triumph over supernatural evil and liberate herself from the clutches of the dark master, Lily wants much more than a life of adventure and desire. She is determined to gain control, to establish a new race of superbeings and to destroy all that has gone before. In seeking visceral revenge for the harm she and other women have suffered, however, she takes her ambitions one step too far. She is drawn to Dorian Gray and his search to transcend the dullness of eternal existence through extreme excitation (2:08); but this will be a fatal alliance for her enterprise.

Lily is one of several female characters in the series who might be said to represent the persona of the Gothic New Woman, among them Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) and Hecate Poole (Sarah Greene) but the term applies particularly to Lily because her portrayal unites key tropes of the Victorian fin de siècle: decadent, embodiment of the new age of modern machine manufacture, advocate of visceral female empowerment, above all, a force of change. As a remade woman her reincarnation as Lily – the flower of rebirth – gives her the supernatural strength needed to accomplish dominance over the men who exploited her in her previous life as the prostitute Brona Croft. She is also uncanny because having been created by man she can never die in the usual way, or go back to existence as her former living self. She can only move forward with history, subject to its material conditions just as she also attempts to reshape them. In this sense she seems more human than humanity itself.

Being Supreme

Although the series Penny Dreadful is set at the turn of the nineteenth century in London, Lily Frankenstein’s liberty is not the progressive freedom espoused by late Victorian suffrage reformists. She seeks a far more radical form of transformation. Although created by Victor and the Creature to become ‘a proper woman’, and to serve their own interests, as Season Two draws to its conclusion, it is clear that Lily is determined to choose her own future. In a speech that poses a frightening manifesto for the risen dead, she poses a question to Victor’s first progeny, John Clare, “why do we exist? Why have we been chosen?” and after her first revenge killing (2.07) answers her own question;

We were created to rule, my love. And the blood of mankind will water our garden. We are the conquerors. We are the pure blood. We are steel and sinew, both. We are the next thousand years. We are the dead. (2.08)

At a devastatingly triumphant moment, the final scene of Season Two (2.10) Lily Frankenstein (Billy Piper) dances with Dorian Gray in the ballroom of his London mansion: her exquisite late Victorian gown swings out as the couple circles the room, blood dripping down their backs, leaving a red stream in their wake. As Victor Frankenstein stares at the dancers, appalled by the spectacle of deathless horror, Lily tells Dorian “let him live with what he’s created… a monster race.” Together they anticipate a new horror narrative of extreme supremacy (2.10). Two episodes into Season Three and the female monster has become a Superwoman ready to bathe the world in blood to achieve Liberty: the “bitch that
must be bedded on a mattress of corpses” (2.08). But the partnership with Dorian also leads Lily to the limit of her possibility. Her greatest obstacle as a force for resistance is, however, that she remains throughout an object of male desire.

The discussion is underpinned by the work of feminist cultural theorists who have interrogated the spectacular representation of the feminine in screen narrative as at once desirable and terrifying. Mulvey observes that the representation of the female body has been framed by “the mythology of the feminine … in which the woman became a phantasm and a symptom” (Mulvey xiii). Lily is created by Victor Frankenstein precisely out of male desire for possession of a feminine fantasy. Even before her creation, Lily is desired by John Clare as an ideal romantic companion with whom to share long walks and poetic thoughts (2.01). Once she is ‘born’, she is desired by her maker, Victor, who betrays his pact with John Clare (2.08 and 2.09). Victor attempts to clothe Lily in girlish Victorian lace dresses and a tight laced corset so that she can barely breathe (2.04). He tells her that women “wear corsets not to exert themselves. What would they do if they did?” She replies that “they’d take over the world” (2.04). After she leaves Victor, she is desired by Dorian Gray as a source of excitation and shared enterprise. Ultimately, however, Dorian sets her up and then betrays her just as the other figures of male power in her life have done.

In her discussion of the female revenant in fin de siècle writing, Liggins observes that it is often the excessive potency and fluidity of the female body that poses “the greatest threat” (40). For the men who have used Lily, both before and after her reanimation, it is “the spectacle of the aestheticized but horrific dead body of the female” (42) that appears most monstrous. One of the show’s most consistent tropes is its depiction of the human body as pushed to excess – always on the edge of being broken. In various ways, the female characters struggle with the attempt to seek empowerment, whether caused by enchantment, witches and demons that seek to inhabit their minds, or by institutional incursions and restraints. In the scenes in which Vanessa Ives is trapped in one way or another by possession, hallucination, or memory, her thin white body is marked brutally by her sufferings, and her shadow eyes are particularly haunting. Vanessa alludes to her position as a woman whose truth is unable to be heard (3.04); instead she is subjected to the institutionalised discipline of silence and conformity. She survives through mental determination, the force of will over physical suffering, whereas Lily Frankenstein chooses action through violent games and gestures of dominance.

A woman whose own body has been used by countless men and then reanimated in the service of male scientific achievement, Lily inverts the terms in which her body has been put to use, and sets out to instigate a ‘new’ technique of her own. Invoking Salome, she commissions her followers to bring her the severed hand of every man in London they can find (3:06). The focus on spectacular embodiment in particular shows this, for example as Lily Frankenstein first gains control of her own circumstances, testing her physical strength and psychological power and then seizing control over others through seduction and brutality.

These experiments in body technique can be seen, in part, as a manifestation of the hybrid transmedia environment that screen adaptations of the Fantastic mode entail. As characters are remade, recontextualised, relocated, so is their potential for narrative evolution. However, the attempts of Penny Dreadful to remake classic stories of the past and thus to revision the potentialities of its characters for the future are in practice constrained, both by the financial and ideological imperatives of mass screen entertainment. Although powerful, the women of Penny Dreadful repeatedly face visible and invisible forces greater than themselves. The confluence between an ethos of advanced mechanical production and scientific inquiry with the presence of vast and fearsome ancient forces serve to remind the viewer of the shifting dangers and precarious conditions with which its central characters confront the world, making and unmaking themselves as agents, destroyers and victims of powerful forces around them. The stories of Lily, Vanessa and the other female characters in this series seem to be little more than adaptive ways of telling the old story in which the Gothic New Woman must be contained. At the same time, they promise more: whether through sacrifice, determination, strategy, or even through emotional connection. At the end of Season Three, in episode eight Lily reveals her heartbreaking story to Frankenstein and he releases her from the threat of Jekyll’s numbing serum. Like the first Frankenstein’s monster she escapes the grip of her maker, offering the hope of return.
What possibilities, then, do Lily and *Penny Dreadful* suggest for the future stories of women in screen narrative? Schubart argues that the identity of the contemporary female screen hero must be regarded as complex and conflicted (113). Screen drama post-feminism portrays women who seek power and express desire, and refuse to sacrifice a sense of purpose for romance. With Vanessa Ives, several of the female characters in *Penny Dreadful* show us a similar reframing of the late nineteenth century female persona, as women in possession of autonomy, desire and a personal or supernatural potency that enables them to overcome resistance to male authority and societal expectation. It is the character of Lily Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein’s second successful progeny, created by the dark mysteries of nineteenth century industrial manufacture (2.01), whom speaks most strongly to these themes. A ‘made’ woman who seeks self-determination, she reframes the cultural trope of the nineteenth century new woman for a frighteningly modernist, revolutionary purpose – to seize control of the means of [human] production and take revenge on her exploiters. That she is also portrayed as a mother in her former life further complicates her significance.

Creed argues that “most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as ‘the clean and proper body’ and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form” (11). Owing its ‘debt to nature’, the maternal female body is inherently abject as a site of conflicted desire. “The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border which has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled” (Kristeva qtd in Oliver 231). As a ‘made’ woman, Lily is a supreme object of male desire, a commodity exchanged between men. However, Lily reauthors her own narrative and asserts her subjective will, transcending her status of object to achieve self-determination. Lily’s radical imperative is to overcome the ultimate abjection – death – to show the possibility of a race of women who are able to reproduce without reliance on male or female sexual organs and thus threaten to overtake the means of production. Arguably, she thus promises to overcome the idea of the abject mother, promising a new race of superwomen. Lily is in one sense the epitome of the “body without organs” (Deleuze & Guattari 9-10), in her impulse to appear wholly purposeful yet to break down convention and the mechanism of production and to proliferate her kind. Yet, she is also something more: she is the Gothic New Woman, a figure of triumph and change while yet subjected to abuse and repression, just as the historical new women of the late Victorian era were pilloried for their claims to equality. As the extreme conventionalists of the 1880s asserted, women were (or should be) slaves to their bodies. Their lot in life was to reproduce and to serve the family, not to pursue educational or political aims. Some went so far as to claim that gaining an education would irrevocably change a woman’s body, destroying her ‘femininity’:

> it would not be one whit more absurd to affirm that the antlers of the stag, the human beard, and the cock’s comb are effects of education; or that, by putting a girl to the same education as a boy, the female generative organize might be transformed into male organs … women whose ovaries and uterus remain from some cause in a state of complete inaction, approach the forms and habits of men. While woman preserves her sex she will necessarily be feebler than man, and, having her special bodily and mental characters, will have to a certain extent her own sphere of activity; where she has become thoroughly masculine in nature, or hermaphrodite in mind, – when, in fact, she has pretty well divested herself of her sex, – then she may take his ground, and do his work; but she will have lost her feminine attractions, and probably also her chief feminine functions (Maudesley 32).

The series’ writer John Logan commented that the context of the late Victorian period was important for the writing and development of the series *Penny Dreadful*, with its emerging discourse of Darwinian evolution and its questions about what it mean to be human:

> the fact that they were on a cusp of a modern age is why I chose to set it then. I think we’re on the cusp of the same thing now, & it’s frightening & there’s dissonance & there’s excitement about uncharted waters (Radich).
Although *Penny Dreadful* is undoubtedly a contemporary remaking of Victorian Gothic tropes, its characters and stories speak to a host of twenty-first century screen narratives and perspectives. One of the most intriguing things about Lily as the Gothic New Woman is the way that she brings together themes and tropes currently at work in our contemporary global culture: from the popularization of the revenant or zombie in entertainment culture, and questions of reproductive and ‘nutri-genetic’ control to the framing and production of human tissue for material manufacture at a time when mass bodily destruction has never been greater.

The theme of mass production and consumption has particular resonances with the television series *Penny Dreadful*. Here layers of historicity are appropriated for compelling story-telling, using techniques such as recursive adaptation to produce contemporary iterations of familiar stories and archetypal characters that resurface time and time again in popular mass consumption. The series offers all the accoutrements of historicist fin de siécle proto-modernity to create a Gothic fantasy account of a past time and place in which women seek to transcend their female limits, whether through self-determination and/or supernatural transformation. Yet, the overriding narrative driver for each of the female characters of *Penny Dreadful* is uncertainty. They must each face the possibility that what they make of themselves is fuel for the work of others who seek to exploit them. Made by others, yet determined in her goals to become more than her design, Lily’s ambition is, above all, to seize control of the narrative that defines her. Her enterprise is ambitious but seemingly unachievable as the series draws to a close. In the last four episodes of the third and last season, Lily is captured and drugged by Dr Jekyll and Dorian Gray and chained to a chair in the laboratory of the Victorian Lunatic Asylum where Jekyll performs his experiments on the unfortunate.

The confluence between an ethos of advanced mechanical production and scientific inquiry with the presence of vast and fearsome ancient forces serve to remind the viewer of the shifting dangers and precarious conditions with which its central characters confront the world, making and unmaking themselves as agents, destroyers and victims of power. The ambitious predator of a new age of transformation, Lily Frankenstein is the artificially revivified female monster who promises a superhuman triumph: to possess autonomy and power and overcome injustice against women. Like the Promethean creature of Shelley’s original novel (1814/1980), she also reminds us of our own frail humanity, the sacrifice of visionary ideas to petty short-sighted cruelties and the dangers of striving for monstrous perfection.

**Works Cited**


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In Penny Dreadful, however, the New Woman is Gothic not simply because she is associated with destruction but because she is associated with unending change. The connections between monstrosity, modernity, sexuality and the representation of the New Woman in fin de siècle Britain were rehearsed in the novels of Sarah Grand, George Meredith, Olive Schreiner, Kate Chopin, and in Beardsley’s illustrations of Salome (Cunningham; Showalter; Murphy). Reforging her new persona in the furnace of revenge, Lily Frankenstein adopts elements of the New Woman as a figure of triumphal independence and conquest. ‘Lily Frankenstein: The Gothic New Woman in Penny Dreadful’. Article. Full-text available. Jun 2017. Stephanie Green. View. The Frankenstein Meme: Penny Dreadful and The Frankenstein Chronicles as Adaptations. It discusses palimpsestic appropriations used in these shows, their depiction of Frankenstein and his Creatures, and above all, the themes and their meanings which these twenty-first-century appropriations of Frankenstein offer. View. Show abstract. Re-fashioning Victorian Heroines and Relations: Tailoring and Shape-Shifting as Queer Adaptation and Appropriation. Chapter. Jan 2018. Antonija Primorac.